**SCRIPT FOR TALKING TO A PROGRAM OFFICER**

The following is a sample coaching script written as advice to the researcher:

**1. Identify the grant program(s)** whose objectives most closely match the core themes of your proposed research. Study the mission statement of the program office and parse any relevant program solicitation. Be prepared to modify your ideas somewhat to assure a good fit, as long as you stay within your proven expertise. Look up recent awards to see how your work will make a contribution or fill a gap. From the staff directory, identify an officer who has responsibility for that program.

**2. Write a brief pre-abstract** summarizing your proposed project. Using accessible language with a minimum of specialized terminology, describe your project in concise, concrete terms. List your main objective(s), methods, and expected outcomes. Stress the project’s uniqueness and how the outcome(s) will address an important problem or contribute to the field. The PO does not need much detail to give you an initial reading, so do not write more than half a page. Rehearse it until

you can recite it easily and without hesitation. Think of this as an “elevator speech,” as it helps to envision a personal, time-limited encounter with a PO. A sample pre-abstract is included here as Appendix A.

**3. Start with an e-mail.** In your pre-abstract, indicate why you think your project

will achieve the grant program’s objectives. End by asking if your work is the kind the program might consider funding. You should get a response within a day or two—study it for tone and nuance as well as its direct message. You might get a recommendation to contact a completely different program office. There might be hints about how to strengthen your proposal. Some PO’s will ask to see a longer description of your project—usually a positive sign. If there is encouragement of any kind, go to the next step.

**4. Make the call.** Once there has been an exchange of e-mails, you have a relatively easy way to begin the conversation. Describe your project again, and then say you would like to discuss some issues the PO raised in the e-mail. If it is a federal agency and you happen to be within reasonable travel distance to Washington, ask if you could meet within the next couple of weeks. One way is to suggest that you are planning a trip to the DC area and it would be convenient to stop by. If the PO agrees to a meeting (and many will), you should expand your pre-abstract into a short (1–2 pages) white paper and send it first. For researchers applying to the National Science Foundation, the Office of Proposal Development at Texas A&M University has published a particularly helpful guide to preparing for a face-to-face meeting (Nader, 2009).

**5. Take advantage of professional meetings.** In addition to contacting PO’s in their offices, researchers in most disciplines have opportunities to interact with program officers at regularly scheduled academic and scientific conferences. PO’s attend these events to keep abreast with current and emerging developments in their fields, and often to present topics of their own. Additionally, NSF and NIH hold regional grants conferences at locations around the country (National Science Foundation, 2010a; National Institutes of Health, 2010). Attended by numerous program officers, these events are specifically designed to update researchers and research administrators on agency policies, changes in the grant application and review processes, as well as developments in funding priorities. Of special interest to less experienced researchers are the NSF Days, hosted several times a year by sponsoring colleges and universities (National Science Foundation, 2010b). As members of National Council of University Research Administrators and the Society of Research Administrators know, their national and regional meetings typically feature presentations by program officers from several federal agencies.

**6. Conducting a successful conversation.** Whether by phone or in person, remember you are using this as an opportunity to obtain “between the lines” information to decide: a) whether to write a proposal for this program; and b) how to shape it in such a way to get a favorable review. In the course of the conversation, seek answers to the following:

* ***Does my project fall within your current priorities?***

If it does not, explore different objectives that might yield a better fit or ask for suggestions of other programs that might be interested in your project.

* ***What would you recommend to improve my chances for a favorable review?***

Do not be bashful about asking this question—the PO knows this is the main reason for your call!

* ***What is the anticipated proposal success ratio?***

Success ratios are your statistical odds for success. Rates are highly variable among grant programs, ranging from 5% to 40%, with most in the 10–20% range. First-time submissions have lower rates; resubmissions are higher.

* ***Do you expect last year’s average award amount to change this year?***

This answer should help you determine your project’s budget size.

* ***What are some of the common reasons for proposal rejections?***

This will help you understand likes and dislikes of review panels that do not show up in the program’s written materials.

Throughout the discussion, listen carefully for helpful hints about proposal structure and content. Do you hear any “buying signals,” i.e., signs that the PO is intrigued by your idea? Conversely, be on the lookout for hints that the PO does not think you have much of a chance. (Sometimes they hesitate to come right out and say it.)

**7. Follow up.** A short “thank you” note is more than good manners—it is a way to keep the line of communication open and fresh for both parties, especially if you summarize the key points you heard in the conversation. It is also a good idea to repeat your desire to serve as a reviewer, and attach a one-page CV with your picture on it. Sponsor agencies seek to enhance the diversity of their panels, and some, like the National Science Foundation, will engage young investigators before they write their first proposals. Others, like the National Institutes of Health, typically issue an invitation after the first award is made.