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A Guide to Writing Proposals That Engage Research With Youth, Families, and Community-Based Organizations



A Guide from
SPENCER
FOUNDATION

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1.0

Overview

Increasingly, research in education takes seriously the role of youth, families, and community-based organizations (CBOs) as partners in the research process. We have seen a welcome increase in proposals that feature partnerships with communities, families, and youth, and that honor their voices, perspectives, and expertise. This increase speaks to the growing recognition among scholars that schools are but one aspect of a complex social ecology, existing amid an array of familial and community relationships, and that youth, families and communities have critical insights and expertise to contribute to the research process.

The Spencer Foundation supports research on learning wherever it occurs, across the lifespan. To that end, Spencer supports educational research that extends beyond school-based paradigms—in communities, with families, and in other out-of-school settings, such as museums, workplaces, and parks. Research across diverse settings elucidates the various ways learners engage, and the range of skillsets, mindsets, and assets learners bring to learning environments.

This guide is motivated in part by our deep commitment to supporting strengths-based research, in which youth, families, and communities are seen as sources of ingenuity and ideas. Centering a strengths-based perspective, and being in partnership with youth, families, and/or community-based organizations, requires researchers to attend to power dynamics within the partnership, to be mindful of researcher positionality, and to navigate other historicized community and power-laden tensions.

We offer this guide with the intention of supporting the development of high-quality proposals. It is meant to be illustrative and descriptive, and not prescriptive; in other words, we offer some grounding ideas and suggestions, not a specific formula for how to write successful community-engaged proposals. We organize our discussion around three key issues: (1) High-quality proposals intentionally attend to power dynamics by engaging a multiplicity of perspectives, theories of change, and explanations of inequalities and by explicitly discussing how power dynamics will be attended to in the collaboration. (2) High-quality proposals articulate how researchers have built, or will build, rapport, so that partnerships are grounded in relational connection and trust. (3) High-quality proposals utilize strengths-based perspectives and prioritize the needs and values of partners throughout the collaborative process and over the life of the project.

2.0

High-Quality Proposals Attend Explicitly to Power Dynamics

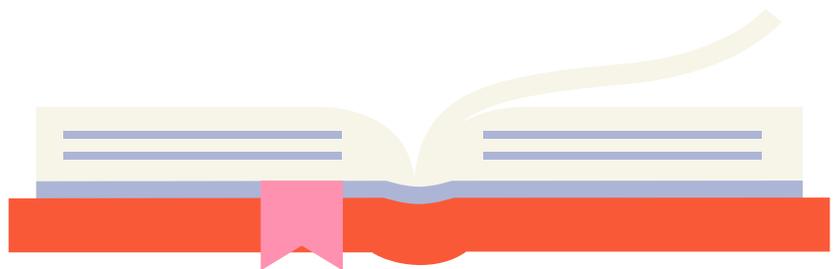


2.0 High-Quality Proposals Attend Explicitly to Power Dynamics

Understanding issues of power and how power is distributed within and across members of a partnership is important in all research, but especially when partnering with youth, families, and community-based organizations. High-quality proposals explicitly attend to issues of power. When collaborating with youth specifically, high-quality proposals outline how partnerships will ensure youths' agency as genuine collaborators and how they will be centered in the work. These proposals describe how researchers will engage community members in ways that are congruent with their skillsets and desires and how researchers will navigate political tensions and power imbalances. High-quality proposals also describe the details about project team governance and accountability structures, distribution of responsibilities, resource allocation (including compensation and which organization holds the grant), and negotiation plans related to dissemination, authorship, and privileges (e.g., priority of articles v. papers needed for the partner). A key point here is that not only are the range of potential challenges and issues related to power recognized, but that they are explicitly discussed among partners, and addressed in the proposal. This also includes addressing a process for raising new issues related to power dynamics over the life of the project and having routine processes and practices for surfacing and resolving such issues.

Questions for Reflection

- Does the proposal consider the possible power differentials that might exist in the partnership and how they might be attended to?
- Does the proposal attend to power imbalances in ways that reflect the needs and perspectives of youth, families, and community-based organizations?
- Does the proposal articulate how the project team will make decisions with youth, families, and/or community-based organizations?



3.0

High-Quality Proposals Articulate How Researchers Have Built, or Will Build, Rapport



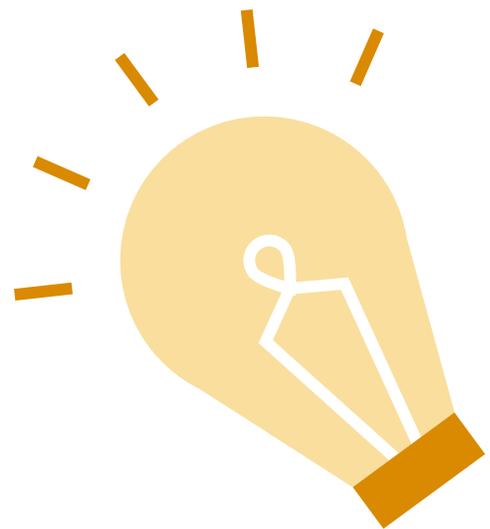
3.0 High-Quality Proposals Articulate How Researchers Have Built, or Will Build, Rapport

The quality of rapport and partnerships between research teams and communities is often difficult to define, quantify, and assess in proposals. Working in partnership with youth, families, and communities toward shared goals requires a deep commitment to, and specific practices related to, building rapport. High-quality proposals are clear about how genuine rapport has been or will be cultivated and how that rapport will continue to be nurtured. Examples of building rapport could include volunteering in capacities that fit researchers' skillsets or connecting youth, families or communities with existing services (i.e., college statement workshops, sharing networks, etc.). Important here is providing support to community members without asking for additional labor from youth, families, and/or community-based organizations.

Additionally, strong proposals meaningfully address dimensions of researcher positionality in ways that directly relate to the proposed work. These proposals consider questions such as "How does the researcher relate to the community and/or the youth partners, identity-based or otherwise?", "Is there a history of collaboration between the researcher and partners?", and "Do they have shared experiences?" This kind of sincere grappling with the implications of positionality is required for authentic connection, and for researchers to successfully navigate potential challenges related to positionality in ways that build rapport.

Questions for Reflection

- If rapport is already established, does the proposal elaborate on the history of relationships among partners and project team members? Does it discuss how an existing relationship might impact the proposed project or what new partners might be needed to support stronger relational connections and/or rapport?
- If rapport is not already established, does the proposal address how genuine rapport with youth, families, and/or the community will be built? Does the proposal explicitly discuss how trust will be authentically cultivated with youth, families, and communities?
- Does the proposal clearly communicate the goals of the partnership and the proposed project? Does it discuss how these goals were designed in collaboration with youth, families, and/or community-based organizations?



4.0

High-Quality Proposals Utilize Strengths-Based Perspectives



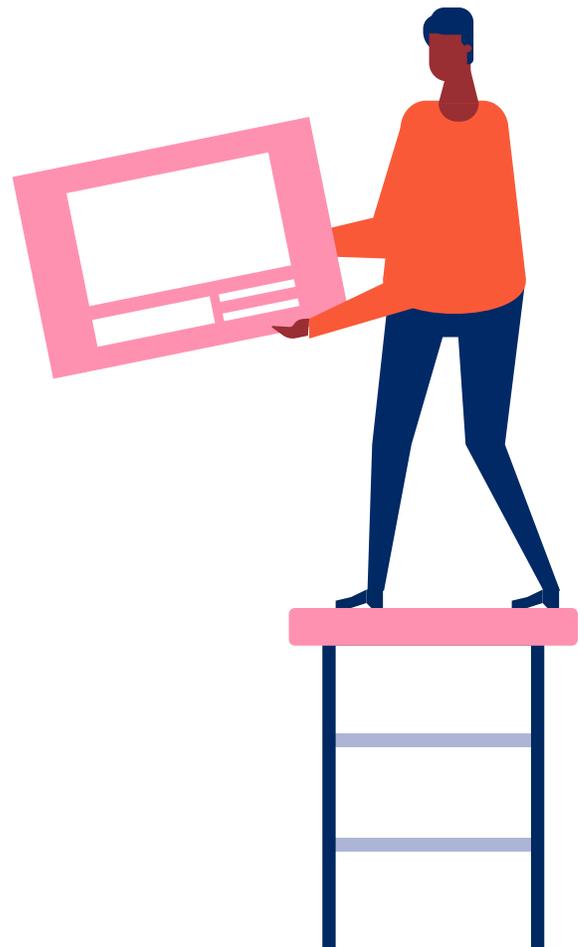
4.0 High-Quality Proposals Utilize Strengths-Based Perspectives

High-quality proposals are intentional about how youth, families, and communities are framed. These proposals do not position youth, families, and communities within deficit frameworks, or view them as being in need of intervention or fixing. Instead, these proposals position collaborators in strengths-based ways that highlight their wisdom, experience and expertise, and points of view. They elucidate how the research is enriched through building on the strengths of youth, families, and/or communities, which allows for more nuanced research questions, innovative methods, and approaches that support the agency of communities.

Engaging in collaboration with youth, families, and communities means centering not only the researchers' goals and desires for the work, but also attending to what youth, families and/or community-based organizations want from the project and how the proposed project will ensure that their objectives are met. High-quality proposals explicitly detail how researchers, youth, families, and/or communities are building the project together—from crafting the research questions, to determining data sources, to analysis and dissemination. This can be facilitated by resource allocation that honors partners' time and technology or equipment needs and by explicit agreements about and processes for collaborative analysis and authorship. This mutual collaboration might also be facilitated by developing reports for the sole use of a youth organization or supporting their goals and work in other ways. This kind of authentic and ethical engagement and collaboration with youth, families, and communities goes beyond the basic requirements outlined by universities' Institutional Review Board (IRB) policies and practices. This includes grappling with questions of how and if partnership relationships will be sustained, and what, if any, long-term commitments there might be.

Questions for Reflection

- How does the proposal frame youth, families and/or communities? Does it describe the strengths that they bring to the project?
- Does the proposal address how the strengths and skillsets of partners will be incorporated at the various stages of the research process? Does the proposal discuss the time horizon for the collaboration?
- How will researchers exit communities and what explicit agreements have been made about this?



5.0

Which Spencer Programs Are Well-Suited to Youth, Families, and/or Community-Based Collaborations?

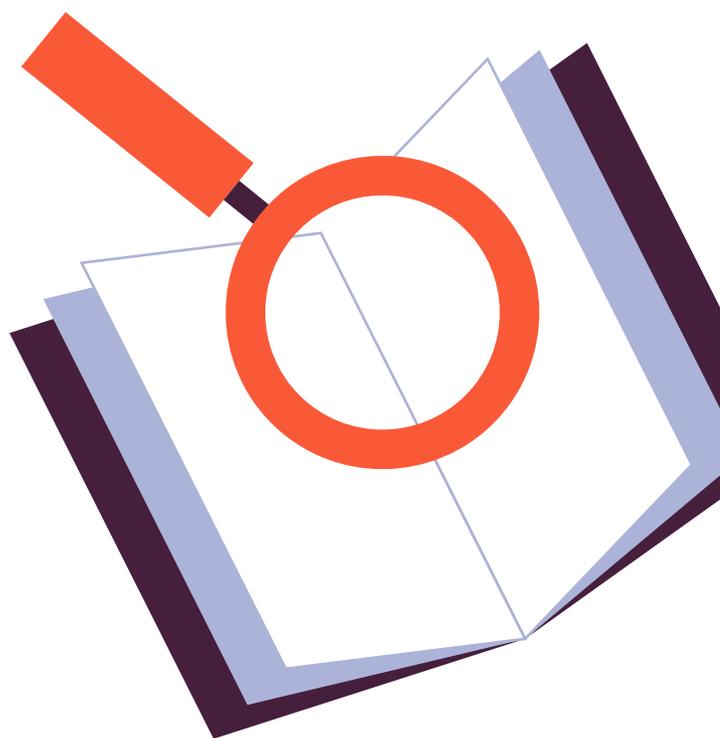


5.0 Which Spencer Programs Are Well-Suited to Youth, Families, and/or Community-Based Collaborations?

We are often asked which of our funding programs are well-suited to youth, family, and community-based collaborations. Our answer is that any of them are appropriate! Our Research-Practice Partnerships program is perhaps the most obvious fit, but we often see projects involving researchers and youth, families, and/or community-based collaborations in all our programs, including Small Grant, Large Grant, Vision Grants, and the Racial Equity Grant programs.

When deciding which program might be most appropriate, teams might carefully consider the proposed project's budget, timeline, and goals. For example, if teams plan to compensate youth, families, and/or community-based organizations for their time and expertise as part of the proposed project, then that will have budget implications that should be taken into account. Teams should consider how much time each aspect of the proposal, including rapport- and community-building, will be necessary to accomplish the proposed project's goals, as well as the goals that youth, families, and CBOs have for the collaboration. These considerations will help project teams decide which Spencer grant program might be best for them. We also suggest that prospective PI's read the Request for Proposals (RFP), found on The Spencer Foundation website, for Spencer grant programs they are considering. If project teams think it would be useful to their decision-making processes to discuss their proposed project with a Spencer Program Officer, we welcome the opportunity to meet. Teams can sign up for what we call an "office hours" appointment with a program officer through our website: <https://www.spencer.org/virtual-office>.

Lastly, for proposals that involve partnerships with youth, families, and/or community-based organizations, an optional appendix in our grant applications allows teams to elaborate on the methodological approach, the theoretical underpinnings, and/or partnership structures. Thus, project teams can provide these necessary details while still being able to include other pertinent information about the proposed project in the proposal narrative. For questions about Spencer Foundation policies, please consult the Applicant Information and Policies section of our website: <https://www.spencer.org/resources/Applicant-Information-and-Policies>.



6.0

Conclusion

We hope this guide illuminates key aspects of proposals that foster and describe strength-based, community-engaged research. Our goal is to offer prospective project teams guidance in proposal development as they seed new research collaborations or continue existing partnerships. At the core of this work is attending to issues of power, centering the importance of relationships and rapport in collaborations, viewing partners from a strengths-based lens, and acknowledging and making space in the research for the wisdom and expertise of youth, families, and communities. We hope that this work will not only create more space for the perspectives of families, youth, and communities in the research literature, but also be more impactful due to deep, authentic collaboration.

7.0

Additional Resources



7.0 Additional Resources

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