

When it comes to developing your proposal, the program officers can provide invaluable information. Moreover, they have every reason to want you to be on track and to succeed; *this is not an adversarial process*. After you have done the necessary legwork (described in many of the earlier sections in this chapter), contact a program officer (I suggest e-mail for this purpose), lay out the most basic elements of your proposal, and ask if this is a study that the I/C might be interested in funding.

Here is one possible example of an e-mail that an investigator might send to a program officer:

Dear Dr. Jones:

My friend Roberta Smith [a researcher with whom the program officer will presumably be familiar] suggested I contact you to request a bit of guidance concerning a proposal I would like to submit to the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI).

I am a new investigator, interested in studying the effect of an exercise intervention that has been found to be effective in post-acute coronary syndrome (ACS) patients and on improvement of symptoms in African American patients with congestive heart failure (CHF). The exercise intervention is somewhat novel in that it incorporates aspects of tai chi, which uses low-impact, moderate exercise (found to be well-tolerated in elderly populations) with an aerobic training program. In addition to the clinical outcome (CHF severity), I am also interested in examining one possible mechanism by which this intervention might operate, which is the improvement in endothelial function and release of nitric oxide. My colleague, Dr. Jeffrey Arnaz, is a cardiologist who has specialized in the assessment of endothelial function, and he would serve as a co-investigator on the project.

I would like to know if you think this is a topic in which NHLBI would be interested and if you have any specific suggestions concerning the development of the proposal. I would appreciate any guidance you can provide on this. Thanks in advance for your help.

Sincerely,

James Johnson

Note that the message provides just enough information to give a broad picture of what the investigator would like to propose. Specific features—such as the amount of time until follow-up, for example—are not mentioned (and should not be, unless one is an outstanding feature of the proposal: for example, because it is an especially long period) or what instrument the investigator plans to use to assess severity of symptoms. This level of detail would be inappropriate to discuss at this stage. On the other hand, the investigator has not given such a broad outline (e.g., “I am interested in studying congestive heart failure in African Americans”) that the program officer could not possibly be expected to comment.

One thing you might keep in mind is that you may regard yourself purely as a applicant to the NIH; however, the NIH does not see you as such. You have something of value to offer, and it is in the interest of the program officer to help you stay on the right track. You will of course run into NIH staff members who are less helpful—the distribution of personality factors is much the same at the NIH as anywhere else—but if that occurs, you look some more until you find someone who will be willing to provide guidance.

