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Research-Practice Partnerships Draft Writing Guide



A Guide from
SPENCER
FOUNDATION

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1.0

Overview

Research-Practice Partnerships are long-term, intentionally organized, and mutually beneficial collaborations that seek to improve education across the lifespan, broadly defined.

They involve the participation of a wide variety of practitioners and policy makers (e.g., educators in informal institutions, K-12 schools, and community-based organizations, higher education administrators, families) and researchers working in an assortment of configurations, contexts, and institutions. Research-Practice Partnerships involve local, mutually constructed goals, a focus on important problems of practice and/or policy identified by partnership stakeholders, and the co-generation of knowledge using a variety of research approaches in service of equitable education-related practice and/or policy.

This writing guide focuses on The Spencer Foundation's Research-Practice-Partnership (RPP) Grants Program. The guide serves several purposes. First, we provide details on the defining features of The Spencer Foundation's Research-Practice Partnership (RPP) Grants Program and what the Foundation seeks to accomplish with this program. Second, we articulate common missteps that we see in proposals. While we cannot guarantee that project teams using this guide to craft their proposals will receive funding, we hope that the information we provide is useful and helps project teams understand what reviewers are looking for in research-practice partnership grant proposals submitted to The Spencer Foundation.

As a reminder, the Request for Proposals is available on the Spencer Foundation's website: https://www.spencer.org/grant_types/research-practice-partnerships. Other writing guides are also available on our website: <https://www.spencer.org/for-applicants/category/how-to-guides>. These include Writing a Successful Research Grant Proposal, Communicating Your Qualitative Research Design, and A Guide to Quantitative Research Proposals. Depending on the type of project articulated in the proposal, projects teams might consider consulting one or more of these available writing guides.

Lastly, for anyone interested in exploring The Spencer Foundation's annual reports, which overview what we have funded in any given year, as well as trends in our funding, please visit the Foundation's annual report page: <https://www.spencer.org/annual-reports>.

2.0

Defining Features of The Spencer Foundation's Research- Practice Partnership Grants Program



2.0 Defining Features of The Spencer Foundation's Research-Practice Partnership Grants Program

The Spencer Foundation's Research-Practice Partnership Grants Program is intended to support education research projects that engage in collaborative and participatory partnerships with project budgets up to \$400,000 and durations of up to three years. We view partnerships as an important approach to knowledge generation and the improvement of education, broadly construed. Rigorous partnership work is intentionally organized to engage diverse forms of expertise and perspectives, involving practitioners, families, policy makers, or community members as well as scholars and disciplines, in knowledge generation around pressing problems of practice. Further, Research-Practice Partnerships can facilitate the long-term accumulation of knowledge and practice in new ways as partners work together to ask practice-relevant questions on key topics in specific settings over time. Many key problems of practice are historically saturated and require multiple perspectives and long-term engagement if sustainable and systemic change is to occur.

PreK-12 schools and school systems are important sites for partnership work. With that said, we also encourage Research-Practice Partnerships from other contexts, like those partnerships situated in higher education, in governmental and non-governmental organizations, in communities, and in workplaces. Additionally, partners and partnerships do not have to be located in the United States.

Like our other research grant programs, The Spencer Foundation's Research-Practice Partnership Grants program is field-initiated. In the case of Research-Practice Partnerships this means that we do not specify the type of partnership and collaboration, the types of partners, the problem(s) of practice and/or policy on which to focus and the related research question(s), the research method(s) that the partnership will use to explore and investigate the stated problem of practice(s), etc. With this said, we do articulate defining features that we look for in any Research-Practice Partnership grant proposal that we fund. These include:

An Explicit Focus on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

All Research-Practice Partnerships funded by The Spencer Foundation are explicitly focused on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. In other words, diversity, equity, and inclusion are central to partnerships and not an afterthought. How that focus manifests itself depends on the partnership's contexts, who the partners and other collaborators are, the focal problem(s) of practice, and the specifics of the proposed project. Successful proposals explicitly and clearly articulate this focus and why it is important to the partnership itself and the proposed

project discussed in the proposal. While we recognize the importance of documenting inequalities, we also recognize the critical need for partnership work that is focused on transforming inequitable systems, practices, and policies.

Evidence of an Established Partnership

The Spencer Foundation does not provide funding for practitioners and scholars to start Research-Practice Partnerships. All partnerships funded by Spencer are established. Successful proposals detail histories of partnerships, and provide evidence of important achievements. What that evidence is depends on the partnership. Examples could include evidence of research projects that have been completed by the partnership, solutions that the partnership has helped develop, data sharing agreements, and/or details of long-standing relationships that have been developed. The partnerships do not have to be solely focused on research but there must be a history of relationship between the partners involved.

An Explicit Focus on Building the Capacity of the Partnership to Make Educational Change

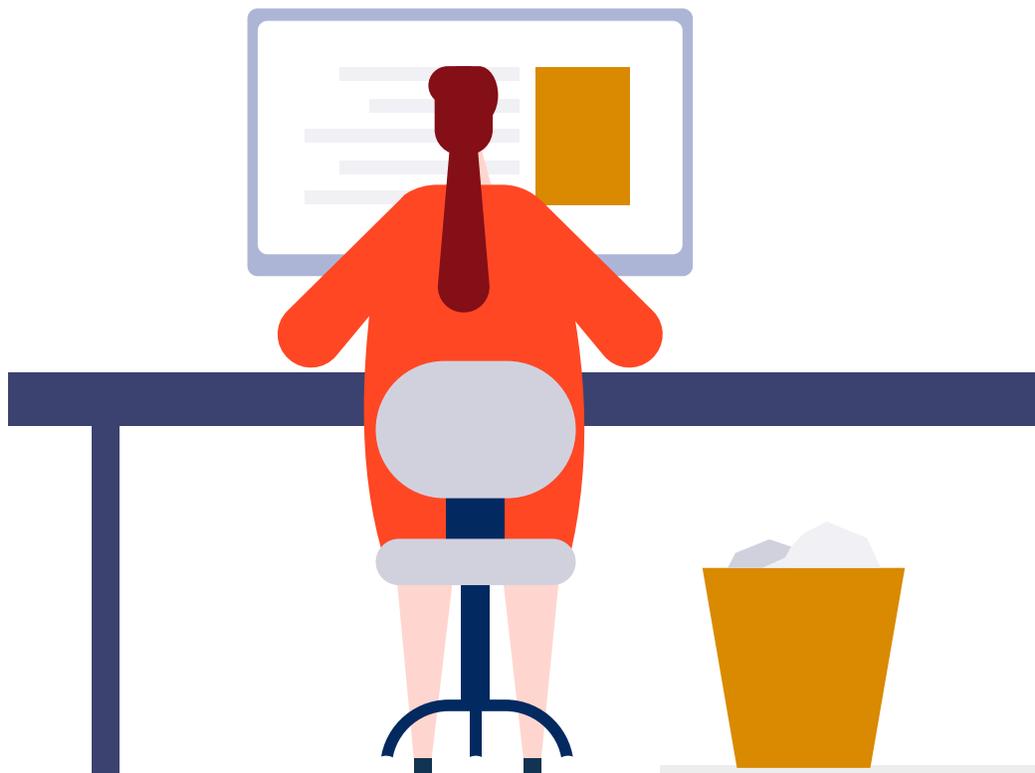
The Spencer Foundation is interested in funding established Research-Practice Partnerships that are intent on building partnerships' capacity to create educational change and have the potential to transform existing educational systems. Again, what this looks like in practice will depend on the partnership and its goals, the context(s) in which the partnership is situated, and the partners and other collaborators involved. Successful proposals discuss capacity building explicitly and provide details of how the partners are thinking about this and what specific activities they will launch, continue, etc. Examples include how partners might be thinking about mentoring the next generation of practitioners and scholars. Examples could also include how partners are thinking about and working on building and/or expanding systems to support the use of research evidence and/or how they are thinking about and working on methods and practices for pushing the edges of what we know about how to conduct better practice-driven and policy research. Successful proposals are clear about how the partnership intends to grow and develop after the grant period has ended.

Detailed Discussions of Outreach, Communications, and Relationship-Building

While we recognize that any Research-Practice Partnership is situated in a specific context with specific goals, collaborators, and activities, successful proposals articulate how partnerships plan to share what they are learning with the broader field. This includes learnings that are useful for the partnership related to the specific project proposed in

the proposal and it also includes learnings about Research-Practice Partnerships themselves. Successful proposals explicitly discuss how they are innovatively thinking about and working on details of outreach, communications, and relationship-building. Thus, successful proposals go well beyond discussions of publishing articles in academic journals and presenting at academic conferences.

The Research-Practice Partnership grant proposal is a challenging proposal to write because partners must focus on elements of the partnership itself, as well as describe the proposed research-related project and activities that the grant will fund. As a reminder, please read and consult the Request for Proposals found on our website: https://www.spencer.org/grant_types/research-practice-partnerships. The Request for Proposals contains detailed information about the Research-Practice Partnership Grants program, including the various elements of the proposal, as well as frequently asked questions. There is also a dedicated email address for proposers to use should they have questions while they are conceptualizing and writing their proposal: research-practice-partnership@spencer.org. As is the case with any of our grant programs, Spencer Foundation staff are not able to read and provide feedback on proposals before they are submitted.



3.0

Common Missteps



3.0 Common Missteps

There are some common missteps that we tend to see in proposals submitted to The Spencer Foundation's Research-Practice Partnership Grants program. We articulate them here in hopes that they will provide additional information about the defining features of Spencer's Research-Practice Partnership Grants program.

- *Partnerships are not yet in existence.* As we have noted, The Spencer Foundation does not provide money to launch new partnerships. Each proposal must contain strong evidence of an existing partnership.
- *There is no discernable focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion and/or discussions stem from deficit perspectives of practitioners, families, communities, learners, etc.* As we have noted, successful proposals articulate a specific, central focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion and provide rationale for why that focus is important given the partnership, its goals, its contexts, and the proposed project discussed in the proposal. In addition, successful proposals use strengths-based stances, frames, examples, and language related to practitioners, families, learners, communities, etc. (whatever the case may be depending on each partnership), as opposed to using deficit-based stances, frames, examples, and language.
- *The leadership of the Research-Practice Partnership does not reflect practitioners or families or community members as well as scholars and/or the leadership's collective expertise does not appear to align with the proposed project.* Sometimes we receive proposals that do not include practitioners as project leadership (Principal Investigator or Co-Principal Investigator[s]). As a reminder, the RPP Request for Proposals document states that the PI associated with the administering organization for this grant could be either the practitioner or the researcher of the partnership, and at least one Co-PI should be from the other member organization(s). Successful proposals include both practitioners and researchers as one way that partners seek to make a case that they are deeply thinking about and working on shared power with respect to governance, decision-making, research and capacity building. In addition, we are sometimes unclear if the leadership and other collaborators have the necessary experience and expertise to deeply engage with the proposed project outlined in the proposal. Successful proposals make that experience and expertise visible, for example, in the project team document, and showcase the alignment amongst the team's experience and expertise, and then the proposed project.
- *The project proposed does not outline research activities.* Research is fundamental to any Research-Practice Partnership. The Spencer Foundation's Research-Practice Partnership Grants program is one of Spencer's research grant programs, and successful proposals center research activities that seek to generate new knowledge, systems, and/or practices in service of the improvement of education, broadly conceived. In addition, successful proposals outline a theory of action that guides the partnership's use of research in exploring the articulated problem of practice in the proposal toward educational improvement and/or systems transformation. In other words, partners should articulate how they plan to make use of research activities and evidence to make progress on the problem(s) of practice and/or policy they discuss in the proposal.
- *The proposal only articulates a research project.* Sometimes we receive proposals that only articulate a research project without also attending to the history of the partnership and its accomplishments to date, governance, capacity building, relational conditions, power sharing, innovative outreach and communication activities, etc. If partners are interested in a research-only proposal, we invite them to explore one of our other grants programs, such as Research Grants on Education: Small or Research Grants on Education: Large.
- *The project proposed is not well-situated in applicable, existing scholarship.* Because research activities are central to successful Research-Practice Partnerships, successful proposals are grounded in applicable, existing scholarship and it is clear how the partners are situating the proposed project in that scholarship and why they are doing so. We do not expect proposals to contain a full literature review but it must be clear that partners are knowledgeable about existing scholarship that is related to their proposed project.

4.0

Other Example Resources to Explore

4.0 Other Example Resources to Explore

The following are recent, example resources that outline more details about Research-Practice Partnerships and their histories.

Farrell, C.C., Penuel, W.R., Coburn, C.E., Daniel, J., & Steup, L. (2021). *Research-practice partnerships in education: The state of the field*. William T. Grant Foundation.
URL (downloadable for free): <http://wtgrantfoundation.org/research-practice-partnerships-in-education-the-state-of-the-field>

This report is an extension of, and an elaboration on, the white paper written by Coburn, Penuel, and Geil in 2013 titled Research-practice partnerships: A strategy for leveraging research for educational improvement in school districts.

The Farrell et al. report was released with three commentaries.

Diamond, J.B. (2021). *Racial equity and research practice partnerships 2.0: A critical reflection*. William T. Grant Foundation.
URL: <http://wtgrantfoundation.org/racial-equity-and-research-practice-partnerships-2-0-a-critical-reflection>

Easton, J., & Bates, M. (2021). *Partnerships in action: A new RPP highlights the field's evolution*. William T. Grant Foundation.
URL: <http://wtgrantfoundation.org/partnerships-in-action-a-new-rpp-highlights-the-fields-evolution>

Wilson, C.M. (2021). *Research-practice partnerships for racially just school communities*. William T. Grant Foundation.
URL: <http://wtgrantfoundation.org/research-practice-partnerships-for-racially-just-school-communities>

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