Essentials of Competitive Proposals

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Essentials of Competitive Proposals

- Know the landscape.
- Set the stage for competitive grantseeking.
- Develop and submit compelling proposals.
- Resources for Grantseeking

Webinar Logistics

- Feel free to ask questions on the phone or via the chat box.
- There will be time for questions after the presentation as well.

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What is a grant?

A grant is a contract to perform work that advances the funder's mission.

A grantmaker pays a grantee to ***produce something of value*** *to the grantmaking organization. For example:*

- A change in the world
- A solution to a problem
- A service to a community
- A new or better way to accomplish something
- Publicity or enhanced reputation for the funder

Grantmakers don't award grants just because they like you: a grant is a transaction in which a grantmaker pays for a product or result.

Know the Landscape: Your Field of Work

To set yourself up for grant success, you have to know the lay of the land—first, in your own field of work.

- What are the current trends in the field overall, and in your subfield?
- What are the key gaps in knowledge that are hindering the advancement of the field?
- How might these gaps be filled?
- What work is currently addressing these gaps?
- What would be the impact of filling these gaps?

Taking a "40,000 foot" view of your field is key first step in a competitive grantseeking process.

Know the Landscape: Funding in Your Field

With the overall field in mind, survey the funding landscape.

- Who are the key funders in your field?
  - Federal, state, foundation, corporate
- What are their priorities?
  - Stated and unstated
- What are the overall funding trends in the field?
- Are their potential untapped sources of funding in your field?

Orient yourself to the funders in your field, and keep an eye on changes and trends.

Know the Landscape: Long-Term Strategy

Design a long-term strategy to make grants work for you.

- Identify individuals (or institutions) in your field who have had exceptional success with grant funding.
  - Retrace their steps: what contributed to their success?
  - Establish mentoring relationships if possible.
- Given the lay of the land in your field, map out an ideal funding trajectory.
  - Identify long-term targets. What grants will you need to get in the short- and medium-term in order to be competitive for these key opportunities?
- Create a concrete plan with action steps; implement it.
  - Revisit and revise this plan regularly.

Remember that one grant leads to another.

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Concept Development: What do you want to do?

Grants are discrete projects, judged on their structure and coherence.

If you clearly define your project's parameters before beginning the grant development process, you increase your chances of grant success.

With a clearly defined project, you are more likely to:

- Find and pursue appropriate funding opportunities
- Develop strong and competitive grant proposals
- Implement an effective grant-funded project

Taking the time to think through your project at the outset can save you significant time in the long term.

Concept Development: Build a strong concept.

Grants are transactional: you have to have something to sell. We call that something a "concept."

A grant concept includes:

- A clear product
  - Relevant to the funder's interests and priorities
  - Impactful and exciting in the context of your field
- A logical plan
  - A clear, basic sketch of how you will get from A to B
  - Answers to key questions about feasibility

A strong concept makes the funder say "Let's do this!"

Concept Development: Create the concept.

Create the concept before you try to sell it.

- Depending on the landscape in your field, you may or may not have a specific funder in mind at the concept development stage.
- Ideally, a concept should be flexible so you can “shop” it to multiple funders.
- Keep general funder priorities and funding trends in mind when choosing a concept to develop.
- Have one or more strong concepts developed before you begin reaching out to funders.

A strong concept makes you look capable and professional to funders.

Align the Concept: Fill a gap.

The first step in concept development is to select a key gap in the field that your work will address.

- What is the key gap (in knowledge, programs, tools, services) in your field that you would like to address?
- How will you address the selected gap?
- What specific results of your work will fill the gap?
- How is this work different from work already underway?
- What concrete impact will your work have on the field?

Starting with an existing gap will make your concept relevant and impactful.

The Product: Articulate a goal.

Articulate an overarching goal that shows how your work will fill the gap.

The overall goal will be presented differently in different fields.

- To fill a gap in knowledge, articulate a clear, specific research question.
- To fill another type of gap, clearly articulate the intended impact, and the product that will lead to that impact.
- Always make sure that the achievement of the goal will lead directly to filling the identified gap in the field.

The goal should be interesting and exciting to those knowledgeable about your field.

Structure: How will you reach your goal?

Good structure makes a project competitive.

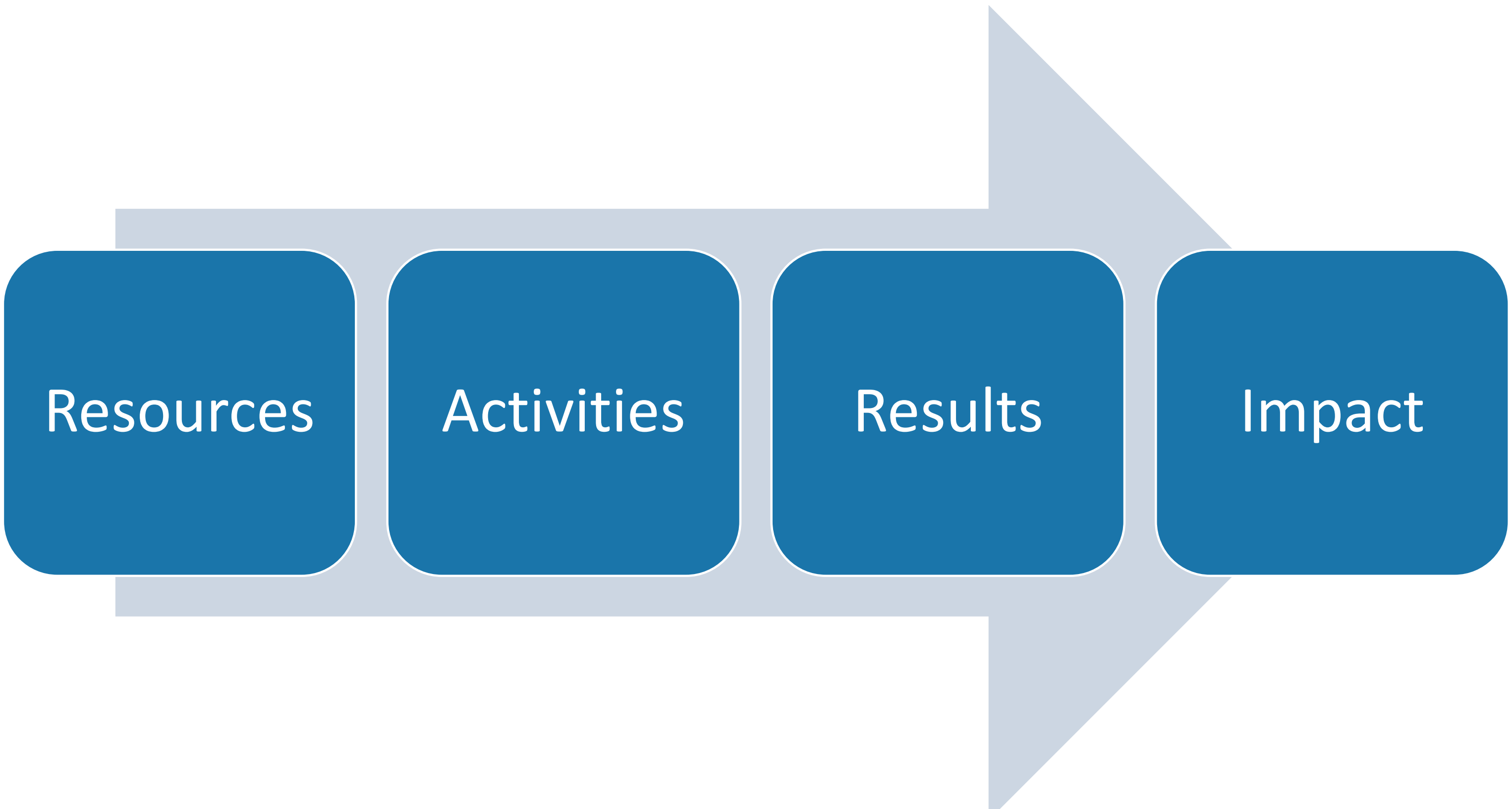
Answer the following questions, in general terms:

- What resources will you need to accomplish the goal?
- Who will work on the project?
- What will you do?
- What results do you expect?
- What impact do you hope to have if you accomplish your goal?

Put the answers in a table or chart to show how the project logically flows.

Structure: The Logic Model

A logic model is a visual demonstration of project structure.



Structure: The Outcomes-Driven Logic Model

Build a logic model beginning at the end, with impact.

- What impact do you want your project to have?
- Given the impact you want to have, what results will you need?
- What activities will create those results?
- What resources will you need to conduct those activities?

Resources	Activities	Results	Impact

Craft a Compelling Pitch

Once you have a concept, you need to sell it to funders.

- There is a misconception among grantseekers that selling happens primarily at the proposal stage. **This misconception leads to innumerable failed proposals and frustrated grantseekers.**
- Many funders prefer to provide feedback and **help guide the project development process well in advance of proposal submission**.
- In most cases, you need to sell your project to the funder before you submit a proposal. The proposal provides details and allows for thorough review, but (with key exceptions) **a full proposal should not be the first a funder hears of your project.**

A concept paper allows you to introduce your project to funders.

Paper Pitch: The Concept Paper

To sell your project to funders, develop a short concept paper.

- A concept paper may be generic or tailored to a particular funder.
  - If you are targeting a major funder (e.g., a federal agency or large foundation), tailor the concept paper to the funder's structures and styles.
  - If you plan to shop your project to multiple smaller funders (e.g., smaller foundations or corporate funders), create a short, generic concept paper to serve as a basis for outreach and letters of inquiry (LOIs).
- Depending on the project and funder, a concept paper may be 1-5 pages.

Remember that the concept paper is a starting point for conversation with funders.

Paper Pitch: The Generic Foundation Concept Paper

To introduce your project to smaller funders, keep it short and sweet.

Create a 1-3 page document including the following sections:

- Summary (1-2 sentences)
- Need for the Work (1-2 paragraphs)
- Goals and Objectives (list)
- Activities (1-2 paragraphs)
- Impact (1-2 paragraphs)
- Qualifications (1 short paragraph)

The concept paper can be used as the basis for a Letter of Inquiry (LOI) or as a starting point for conversation with foundation staff.

Paper Pitch: The Federal Agency Concept Paper

For a federal agency, follow the outline of the funder's requirements or their usual proposal structure.

If no structure is provided, we recommend the following key components:

- Introduction
- Purpose/Need
- Project Description
- Goals/Objectives/Aims/Research Questions
- Methods
- Timeline
- Expected Outcomes/Benefits (may include Evaluation)
- Budget/Needs & Requested Support
- Contact Information

Paper Pitch: Tips for an Effective Concept Paper

A concept paper is an "elevator speech"—pique the funder's interest!

Tips for a successful concept paper:

- Highlight key areas that are likely to capture a funder's attention.
- Focus on need and impact.
- Include just enough detail that the funder knows you are serious.
- Balance selling and telling: the ratio of selling to telling will be higher in a concept paper than in a final grant proposal.
- Especially for smaller funders, use emphasis (**bold**, <u>underline</u>, *italic*) judiciously to bring the reader's attention to key elements—funders often scan concept papers and letters of inquiry quickly!

Set the stage: Contact prospective grantmakers.

Discuss your work with Program Officers from priority grantmakers. ***This is an essential step: <u>for many opportunities, it is not worth submitting a proposal if you have not first connected with a Program Officer</u>.***

Connecting with a funder at the concept stage allows you to:

- Introduce yourself, your work, and your concept.
- Solicit feedback on project alignment and funder interest.
- Verify funder priorities and preferences.
- Build your reputation with the funding agency or organization.
- Develop a long-term relationship to facilitate future funding.

Note that some funders prefer not to have contact before a formal proposal or letter of inquiry—always respect funder communication preferences.

Connect with Public Funders

Connecting with a Program Officer at a public funder (e.g., a federal agency) is a fairly straightforward process.

Always follow the agency's preferred practice. A general guide:

- Reach out and introduce yourself via email first.
- Ask for a phone meeting.
- If the PO prefers to answer questions via email, go with that.

Keep your communication with the PO professional and respectful: remember, you are building your reputation.

Connect: Emailing a Program Officer

Sample email to a Program Officer:

Subject: Request for call to discuss XXX due on DATE

Dear Dr. X:

I am interested in submitting a proposal for RFA #XXX “RFA Title” and would like to schedule a call with you to discuss whether my research is appropriate for this opportunity. [If your request is urgent, indicate that here and explain why.]

[Briefly describe your proposed work and why you think it is a good fit.] If it would be helpful, I can provide a [brief concept paper / project summary / specific aims] for you to review prior to our call. [If you have specific questions that you want the PO to consider, include them here.]

[Provide possible days/times *or* indicate that you can be available at the PO’s convenience.]

Thank you in advance for your assistance. I look forward to talking with you soon.

Contact Information

Connect: Meeting with a Program Officer

Always prepare questions before your meeting with the Program Officer.

Common questions:

- Is this project a good fit / competitive for this opportunity / your funding priorities?
- Are there other opportunities that would be a better fit?
- What are your recommendations for improving the fit / competitiveness?
- What other recommendations do you have?
- What are the most common causes for proposals being declined for this opportunity?
- What are the usual success rates for this program?
- What is your preferred method for me to contact you if I have additional questions?

Remember to <u>spend as much time listening as talking</u>: POs can provide very valuable feedback and guidance. They know what they're talking about!

Connect: Continued PO Communication

Always follow up after meeting with a PO, and send questions as soon as they arise in the proposal development process.

- Follow up with an email thanking the PO for their time and summarizing the key points you took away from the call.
- In any future communication about this opportunity, reference your call.
- Use the subject line of your email to reflect the purpose and urgency of the request.

Remember that Program Officers are very busy: make things easy for them with <u>clear, specific, actionable communication</u> and a courteous tone.

Connect with Private Funders

Connecting with private funders (e.g., foundations, corporations) can be a bit "stickier" than connecting with public funders, but it is no less important.

- Private funders are not required to be transparent or straightforward about their processes.
- Private funders often say one thing and do another.
- Private funders are much <u>more likely to award funding to an individual or entity that they know and trust</u>.

In most cases, it is very important to carefully cultivate private funders before applying for a grant.

Cultivate Private Funders

To prepare for cultivation, assess and analyze your connections and potential connections to the target funder and its personnel, as well as opportunities for building additional connections.

- Research organization and PI history with the funder.
- Identify organization or PI connections to the funder, funder personnel, or people and organizations connected to the funder.
- Gather intelligence and/or request introductions from connections.
- Identify online and in-person connection opportunities.

Analyze connection opportunities: What is the best way to build a relationship with this funder?

Cultivate Private Funders

Develop and implement a cultivation strategy for each target funder.

- Reach out to the funder, either through connections or "cold."
- Introduce yourself and your work.
- Gather information on funder priorities and preferences.
- Ask how you might work together.
- Continue the conversation.

Note that for funders with heavy communication barriers, it may be necessary to proceed to a "cold" LOI as a first step in the relationship development process. In these cases, the LOI is intended to open the conversation with the funder. It will likely be declined, but this decline provides an opportunity for communication (e.g., a phone call to ask for feedback on the reasons for the decline), and begins the relationship.

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Compelling proposals: Review grantmaker materials.

Start by carefully reviewing all grantmaker materials.

Review:

- Grantmaker guidance (e.g., NSF Grant Proposal Guide)
- Solicitation
- Funded grants (if possible)

Confirm:

- Eligibility
- Deadlines
- Submission process and method

Compelling proposals: Review your project design.

After reviewing all grantmaker guidance, assess:

- What are the funder's aims?
- How does your project accomplish these aims?

Refine your project design with funder aims, Program Officer guidance, and RFP requirements in mind.

- Make any necessary adjustments to the overall goals, objectives, and activities articulated in your concept paper.
- Plan the details of your project: What will be done? Who will do it? Where? How? How will you know if the project is successful?
- Ensure that your project plan follows funder requirements, and that your project's outcomes accomplish the funder's aims.

For a strong project, use a logic model to guide the design process.

Compelling proposals: Make a grant development plan.

Map out your strategy to develop and submit the proposal on time.

Create:

- **Checklist** of all required proposal elements
- **Timeline** for proposal development, including key dates
  - Note deadline for Letter of Intent or pre-proposal, as well as proposal deadline.
  - Allow time to get internal approval before submission.
- **Narrative Outline** based on the scoring rubric or key section headings
  - Note character-, word-, and page-limits, as well as formatting requirements.

Always allow time for derailments: plan to submit well before the deadline.

Compelling proposals: Outline the narrative.

Strong narratives have similar core elements:

- Statement of the Problem
- Literature Review
- Conceptual Framework
- Hypotheses or Research Questions
- Methodology/Strategy
- Scope of Work
- Management Plan
- Staff and Institutional Qualifications

Note that each solicitation will require information to be presented in specific ways.

Compelling proposals: Write the narrative.

What makes a compelling narrative?

Good proposals come from good concepts.

Strong narratives answer core questions clearly and succinctly:

- What do you want to do, how much will it cost, and how much time will it take?
- How does the proposed project relate to the sponsor's interests?
- What difference will the project make to your institution, your students, your discipline, the state, the nation, and other stakeholders?
- What has already been done, and how will your project advance that work?
- How do you plan to implement and accomplish project goals and outcomes?
- How will the results be evaluated?
- Why should you, rather than someone else, be selected to do this project?

The best proposals make the reviewers say "I wish I had thought of that!"

Compelling proposals: Refine the narrative.

Your narrative should communicate your project clearly and appropriately.

Tips for narrative development:

- Know your audience.
- Write clearly and in an appropriate style.
- Use SMART goals.
- Provide logic models where appropriate.
- Present information in tables and figures where appropriate.
- Use skillful repetition.
- Seek feedback from peers and grant professionals.
- Refine and edit.

Compelling proposals: A note on evaluation.

Evaluation is how you—and your funder—know whether you've succeeded.

- Most program grants, and some research grants, require independent evaluation.
- An independent evaluator should be independent of the project, and may also need to be independent of your institution, depending on funder requirements.
- The independent evaluator should be **involved in the development of the evaluation plan at the proposal stage.**

A thorough evaluation should include:

- **Summative evaluation:** What did you accomplish?
- **Formative evaluation:** How did the process go?
- **Feedback mechanisms** that allow you to make course corrections based on mid-project evaluation results.

Evaluation plans should reflect activities, outputs, and outcomes in the logic model.

Compelling proposals: Develop the budget.

Typical budget lines include:

- Personnel
- Fringe Benefits (standard rates)
- Travel
- Equipment (durable, long-lasting, costs more than $5,000 each)
- Supplies (expendable, short-term)
- Contractual
- Construction
- Indirect Costs (note limitations)
- Other

It is often helpful to develop the budget in a separate spreadsheet using categories that make sense internally, and only "translate" to the grantmaker's required form after the budget is final. Make use of UConn's Budgeting and Costing Guide as necessary.

Compelling proposals: Write the budget narrative.

The budget narrative must be consistent with the project narrative.

Tips for budget narrative development:

- Show a clear method of calculation for each item.
- Link each item back to grant activities and grantmaker goals.
- Use the same terminology that you used in the project narrative.
- A table can make the information easier to digest, even in the budget narrative.

Be specific!

Vague: The University will subcontract with a program evaluation company. Funding is requested at $25,000.

Specific: The University will contract with an independent professional evaluation service to conduct a rigorous program evaluation to verify impact and results as outlined in the Evaluation Plan. This cost is estimated at $100/hour and includes 200 hours of work plus $5,000 in travel costs associated with two site visits during the grant term. Total: $25,000.

Compelling proposals: Create attachments.

Attachments vary by funder and solicitation, but often include:

- Abstract / Project Summary *(Write it last!)*
- Biosketches / CVs
- Quotations or documentation for specific budget items
- Detailed project timelines
- Letters of commitment or Memoranda of Understanding
- Agency-specific documents (e.g., NSF's Current and Pending Support)

Keep careful track of all your attachments!

Compelling proposals: Assemble package and submit.

After each element of the proposal is complete, assemble the final package.

- Review the package as a whole:
  - Is it internally consistent?
  - Does it follow all funder guidelines?
  - Will a reviewer be able to find what s/he needs in the package?
  - Will a reviewer who doesn't know you, your institution, or your work need any additional information to understand your project?
- Double check to make sure the package is complete.
- Obtain internal approval for submission.
- Submit the package **before the deadline date** if at all possible.

Compelling proposals: Learn from the process.

Grantseeking is a competitive, iterative process.

- Many grants aren't funded on the first submission.
  - For some opportunities, the expectation of resubmission is built in.
- Learn as much as you can from each grantseeking process.
- Reviewers' comments are very valuable: pay attention.
- A grant decline can be the opening step in funder relationship development.

Compelling proposals: Learn from the process.

Reviewer comments are extremely valuable.

- Review comments show how your proposal came across.
- Read them multiple times.
- Give yourself a break to blow off steam if necessary, then come back.
- Look critically at the proposal from the perspective of that reviewer.
- If there is a misunderstanding, consider how it could be avoided in the future.
- Are there structural or language changes that would help reviewers understand your project?
- If all your reviewers point to the same issues, pay attention!

The best way to understand reviewers, review comments, and the review process, is to serve as a reviewer yourself.

Compelling proposals: Learn from the process.

To survive and thrive in the grant process:

- Start early.
- Keep checklists and refer to them often.
- Stay connected with SPS staff.
- Stay connected with Program Officers.
- Get outside feedback from peers and professionals.
- Remember: your skills and savvy will improve with each grant.

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Resources: Funding Sources

Resources for finding grant opportunities:

- COS Pivot is a powerful tool for finding both public and private funders.
- Grants.gov is a clearinghouse for information on federal grants.
- NSF Award Search and the NEH Funded Projects Query Form are good resources for information on previous funding and trends.
- The US Department of Education Grants Forecast provides information on upcoming DoE competitions (note that it is not always up to date).
- Foundation Directory Online provides a database of foundation funders. (Many public libraries subscribe to the paid portions of the database.)
- Simple google searches for keywords can often uncover private funding sources, particularly corporate funding.

Resources: Proposal Development

Resources for proposal development:

- The **National Organization for Research Development Professionals (NORDP)** maintains a Writing a Grant 101 page, which includes links to many useful guides, as well as a more general Resources page.
- The **Foundation Center** provides a Proposal Writing Short Course tutorial, focused more on private grants.
- The **NSF** Proposal and Award Policy and Procedures Guide is indispensable.
- The UConn **Office of the Vice President for Research** provides detailed proposal preparation guidelines for grantseekers.

Resources for logic model development:

- The **University of Wisconsin – Extension Program Development and Evaluation Unit** maintains a Logic Model site, including templates and development guides.
- For private grants, the **W.K. Kellogg Foundation** **Logic Model Development Guide** is a key resource.

Resources: Evaluation

Resources for evaluation planning:

- The **US Government Accountability Office's** Designing Evaluations publication provides an introduction to program evaluation design.
- The **Institute of Museum and Library Services** keeps a list of evaluation resources.
- The **US Department of Education Institute for Education Sciences (IES)** maintains the What Works Clearinghouse, which includes specific standards that apply to many DoE-funded grant evaluations.

Resources for finding an evaluator:

- The **National Organization for Research Development Professionals (NORDP)** maintains a list of program evaluators.
- The **American Evaluation Association** maintains a database of member evaluators.

Hanover Research

Hanover Research supports UConn faculty and staff members throughout the grant development process. We work on one project at a time, with the following core capabilities:

Proposal Revision

We lead the proposal revision process by reshaping a previous submission to incorporate new project elements, responding to reviewer comments and heightening the proposal's responsiveness to the solicitation. *Timeline: 8 weeks*

Proposal Support

We supplement the work of project teams by providing partial proposal writing support and consultative grant narrative editing and review. These services vary based on client needs and submission deadlines. *Timeline: 6 weeks*

Proposal Review

We provide a strong review, edit, and critique of client-drafted narrative materials, helping the project team ensure compliance with submission guidelines to heighten the competitiveness of their proposal. *Timeline: 3 weeks*

Contact the OVPR at research@uconn.edu to request Hanover support.

QUESTIONS?

Rebecca Huenink

Rebecca joined Hanover as a Grants Consultant in 2013. She has more than a dozen years of experience developing winning projects and proposals to help educational institutions and public benefit organizations succeed. Her experience includes project design, fundraising, and grant development for individuals and organizations across the United States. Rebecca has a special focus on helping clients build and cultivate fruitful long-term relationships with funders.

HANOVER RESEARCH

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