Preparing for PCORI Applications

The key to getting your proposal through a review process is to write for your reviewers. It is important to know who is reading what you submit and what they are looking for when they read your submission. You don’t want to write something highly technical for an audience who might be put off by all the jargon and details. Conversely, you don’t want to over simplify things for an audience who might be looking for details to support your plans. In an effort to help you understand who will review your submissions to PCORI, we spoke with Project Officers at PCORI and learned some great tips that we hope will help.

First, take the time to research and understand the review process at PCORI: <http://www.pcori.org/funding-opportunities/merit-review-process>. They are very transparent about their process and include a wealth of good information about how your Letters of Intent (LOI) and applications will be reviewed. Pay attention to all of the elements and requirements in the PCORI Funding Announcement (PFA) that you respond to. Remember that PCORI receives hundreds of applications and they can’t spend a lot of time trying to decide if your application is a good fit. Make sure your application doesn’t get the boot just because you didn’t know what the rules were or what PCORI was looking for.

Second, build a relationship with the right Program Officer at PCORI. Start by emailing sciencequestions@pcori.org and letting them know that you are interested in applying to PCORI and would like to work with a Program Officer to find the best fit for your work. Include the basics of your project like your CER question and which LOI opportunity you are interested in. Be prepared for a little bouncing around as PCORI attempts to answer your question and find the best person to work with you. Be persistent! If emailing doesn’t get you what you need, ask for a phone call. The Program Officers at PCORI really do want to help, and in the best way they can. Sometimes it just takes a little while to get on the same page.

Third, use your PAPO staff to help. Since we get to work with so many of you, we can identify themes and trends that we can share with your or with PCORI to help improve the application process on both sides. We can also provide an outsider perspective to review your submissions. We can also help to move your conversation with PCORI Program Officers along if you feel like you are stuck.

Recently, we had a conversation with PCORI and learned a little more about who reviews LOIs and full applications at PCORI to help you understand who you are writing for throughout the application process. Our questions and PCORI’s answers are below.

**CFPHE:** The website says that committees of PCORI staff screen the LOIs based on the criteria outlined in the PFA.  Do you use a mix of staff from different departments (Engagement, Science, etc.)?  And does the staff committee represent multiple levels of staff or is it typically just program officers?

**PCORI:** The committee consists of Program Officers and Program Associates from the program the LOI is submitted to. The committee is looking at the CER questions and comparators to make sure they are appropriate for PCORI and the specific PFA. They are also looking at the study in general to see if it is a good fit for the program in general.

***NOTES:*** *This is why it can be so helpful to build a relationship with the right Program Officer at PCORI. They know what they are looking for when they review LOIs. You can also start to learn more about the audience who reviews your LOI.*

**CFPHE:** We notice that your Merit Reviewer Resources are written for a scientific audience but that you assign Merit Reviewers with non-scientific backgrounds to review applications.  Do your patient or community merit reviewers get training to help them understand what might qualify as “rigorous data analysis” (for example)? Or do you ask reviewers to only focus on their areas of expertise (for example, scientists review study designs and patients review engagement plans)?

**PCORI:** Merit reviewers get some training but patients and stakeholder reviewers focus on non-science sections of the application. In other words, scientists focus their review on the science and patients and stakeholders focus their review on everything else. Any reviewer can review any section of an application, but the level of their scores take their expertise into consideration.

***NOTES:*** *PCORI is revamping their methodology review. The methods team is also available for conversations with P2P awardees. Just email* *sciencequestions@pcori.org* *and ask to talk to someone in Methods. Or ask the PCORI Program Officer you have been working with to connect you with someone in their Methods department.*