General Guidance for Spencer Foundation Proposals

The guidance below is drawn from feedback on previously submitted applications to the Spencer Foundation's Small Grants Program. In addition, pages 3 and 4 of this document, provide general tips to support applicants in developing their proposals."

1. Significance of Research Questions

- Frame research questions around critical and timely issues in education or learning, broadly conceived.
- Clearly articulate why these questions matter to the field, highlighting gaps in current knowledge.
- Ensure that your inquiry is both compelling and specific, with attention to equity, inclusion, and cultural context where relevant.
- Strengthen your proposal by explicitly connecting research questions to policy, practice, or systemic change.

2. Connection to Research and Theory

- Demonstrate a strong grounding in relevant literature to justify the need for the proposed work.
- Clearly identify what gaps in existing knowledge your project addresses.
- Explain how your chosen theoretical framework will guide the research design, data analysis, and interpretation.
- Be explicit about how theory will contribute to or challenge existing understandings of education.
- Where multiple frameworks are used, clarify their alignment and how each contributes to the project.

3. Research Design

- Provide clear and detailed descriptions of research sites, contexts, and participants, including access and sampling strategies.
- Justify your data sources and collection methods, ensuring alignment with your research questions.
- Clearly explain your analytic methods and how they will answer your research questions.
- Ensure that your research design reflects your theoretical framework and values (e.g., inclusion of voices of participants with lived experience when relevant).
- Avoid overambition; ensure the project's scope is realistic given resources, time, and personnel.

4. Budget and Timeline

- Present a budget that is realistic, transparent, and well-justified in relation to your activities.
- Provide a clear rationale for significant costs (e.g., travel, transcription, staffing).
- Ensure the timeline aligns with the scope of activities and demonstrates feasibility.
- Where possible, include plans for dissemination beyond academic audiences (e.g., stakeholders, policymakers, practitioners).

5. Potential of the Research Team

- Highlight the expertise and experience of all team members, especially in areas directly relevant to the project.
- Ensure the team has complementary skills (e.g., research expertise, methodological knowledge, subject matter expertise, program evaluation capacity).
- Consider bringing in additional collaborators if certain types of expertise are missing.

6. Broader Recommendations

- Strengthen your proposal by showing how the work contributes to systemic or cultural change, not only local interventions.
- Explicitly address contextual factors such as culture, race, socioeconomic status, or geographic setting where they shape access or educational outcomes.
- Provide a clear plan for sustainability or for building coalitions among stakeholders.
- Show awareness of similar or related studies and explain how your project builds on or differs from them.

Application Tips

1. Program Fit

- Ensure the project **contributes to the improvement of education**, broadly defined.
- Proposals must be **research-focused** (not program implementation, curriculum development, or evaluation without a research component).
- Projects can span **1–5 years** with budgets up to **$50,000** (plus up to $10,000 for optional course release).

2. Proposal Narrative (max 1800 words)

This is the most critical section. It must include:

- **Project description & significance** – Clearly state the central research question(s) and why the project matters.
- **Rationale & literature review** – Situate the study in existing scholarship and show the **new knowledge or contribution** it will bring.
- **Conceptual framework** – Explain the theory guiding your research and how your work builds on or challenges it.
- **Research methods** – Provide detailed methodology including:
    - Participants/sample & selection procedures
    - Data sources and instruments
    - Research design & context
    - Data collection and analysis procedures

Must end with a word count.
References don't count toward the limit.
Use APA style; double-spaced, 12-point font.

3. Budget & Justification

- Up to **$50,000** (no indirect costs allowed).
- Include salaries, benefits, consultants, travel, equipment/software, supplies, participant costs, etc.
- Provide a **clear budget narrative** for each expense.

4. Additional Required Documents

- **Project Summary**: Title, dates, research questions, and a **200-word summary**.
- **Project Timeline (1 page)**: Start/end dates, milestones, and major activities.
- **Project Team (max 250 words)**: Roles, responsibilities, and expertise of PI/Co-PIs and team members. Mention collaboration with research sites if relevant.
- **CVs** of PI and Co-PIs.
- **AI Agreement**: Applicants must acknowledge Spencer's guidelines on responsible AI use.

5. Optional: Supplemental Course Release (up to $10,000)

If applicable, include:

- Request and justification in the budget.
- **250-word rationale statement** explaining impact on the project.
- **Dean/Chair supporting letter** confirming eligibility (6+ course load, release approval, and rate).

6. Compliance & Restrictions

- PIs/Co-PIs must hold a doctorate.
- Must be affiliated with a **non-profit or public institution** (universities, NGOs, school districts, etc.).
- Only **one active Spencer research grant** per PI/Co-PI at a time.
- Proposal must be in **English** and **budget in USD**.

7. Deadlines

- **Applications open**: September 17, 2025
- **Full proposal deadline**: December 15, 2025, 12:00 pm (noon, Central Time).

8. In summary

Strong proposals **frame a compelling educational research question**, demonstrate **theoretical and methodological rigor**, highlight the **significance and contribution** to the field, and present a **clear, feasible plan** with justified costs.