**IDENTIFYING AND DEVELOPING A RESEARCH PROJECT OVERSEAS**
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*This document was presented at the IHMEC Conference that was sponsored in conjunction with the Massachusetts Medical Society and Harvard Medical School on February 8, 2003. It has been adapted for use with the permission of the authors. The process described in the Pre-Writing Phase is intended to help medical students identify possibilities for a research project overseas through contacts and referrals. The Writing Phase is useful if and when it is necessary for a student to create and fund his or her own research. In either case, the stages of proposal development described in the Writing Phase are integral to the success of a project, as this process forces the researcher to thoroughly plan the project.*

**Pre-Writing Phase**
**A. Self-Assessment**
1. Determine the *what* and the *where*
   - What do you want to do (type/topic of research)
   - Where do you want to be (geography, village or city)

2. Identify your skills
   - Language skills
   - Research skills (social science, quantitative/qualitative analysis)
   - Program design/evaluation
   - Teaching skills
   - Computer skills

3. List your experiences
   - Job skills, overseas opportunities, experiences using the skills listed above, etc.

4. Write a letter of introduction to a contact
   - Explain your connection to this person (how you got their name and what you are asking for)
   - Your interest (what do you want to do and where/what country or geographic region do you want to travel to)
   - Your experience and skills
   - Give a timeframe with your solicitation and invite their general input, for instance: *any advice you have for me would be welcome*
   - Thank them

5. Update your resume/Curriculum Vitae

**B. Find a Mentor**
1. Look for a mentor who matches your interest (type of work/research, geographic location, similar interests)

2. Begin with people you know; start locally, then expand out to referrals
   - Medical schools
   - Schools of public health
   - Classmates and referrals

3. Thank everyone you talk/email with and ask for further referrals

**C. Find a Funder**
1. Investigate the following sources:
   - Your school's international program
   - Your mentors
   - Churches, foundations, NGOs
   - Websites

- Consider raising funds yourself

2. Use the Global Medicine Website (http://www.globalmedicine.org)
   This is a great database for anyone (med or grad student) interested in International Health; it is free and students can search for and find:
   - People that have experience and contacts in every country in the world
   - Organizations that are working here and abroad
   - Scientists looking for collaborators
   - Upcoming conferences on international health
   - Individuals and organizations that either have or want medicines, books, and medical equipment

## Writing Phase
## A. Convincing Others to Fund You

1. Get a copy of a grant to use as a model. Obtain a copy of an application which was funded the previous year and use it as a guide. If you are working with a mentor, read a copy of their original grant.

2. Be prepared to provide the following information:
   ### a. Objectives and Rationale
   Present the research question to be addressed (one sentence question) and describe your specific aims (to do x, y, and z) in one line each.

   ### b. Background
   This should be a longer section which demonstrates that you have researched the field and know the literature surrounding your question of interest. What's known about your topic? What's known about your topic in the place you propose to work? What will your project add? How are you personally preparing for the experience?

   ### c. Research Methods
   Describe your methodology. How will you explore the questions laid out in a.? Do you have any experience with these methods or in this location? Provide a critical assessment and limitations of your proposed methods. Anticipate questions about the logistical difficulties involved with research in low-resource settings. What could go wrong? What alternatives have you considered?

   ### d. Personal Statement
   Include any relevant previous experience. Have you worked with this methodology before? Have you done any research or work of this kind before? Have you worked or lived in this country before? Have you lived or worked abroad ever before? How will this project affect your personal and/or professional development? How will it continue to be relevant once you are done? Include how this research may affect the field AND how it will affect you and your future after you finish.

   ### e. Ethical Statement
   Discuss human subject concerns. Is there any potential for harm to your human subjects? Will participants receive adequate compensation? Do you expect them to benefit in non-monetary ways? Will you pay translators? Have you cleared this project with your university's Institutional Review Board? Who will benefit from the project? How will you contribute to or support your hosts? How will you ensure you are behaving in culturally sensitive and appropriate ways? Offer to share information, provide English translation, and produce documents for their organization/community if possible.

   ### f. Budget
   Include airfare, housing, food, project supplies, prophylaxis you may need (e.g. anti-malarial medications), vaccines, visas, local transportation, and any translational

services you may need. Check out the U.S. State Department's recommendation for per diem rates to see what the government pays their employees per day spent in the country you plan to work in. These values are probably too high, but they'll give you a sense of the cost of living there. Ask your mentor for advice regarding housing and food costs. Beware of using old applicants' budget numbers, they may be drastically outdated.

### g.  References
Provide references for the background section.

### h.  Letters of Support
Most applications ask for a letter of support from your local mentor (confirm ahead of time if email is acceptable). You may also need a letter from your medical school mentor.

### i.  Resume

## Tips

- **Give yourself adequate time**
  Putting a project together takes a long time. You will send hundreds of emails, jump through many hoops, and encounter many dead-ends. You should expect this.  One way to manage the process is to schedule a regular time to work on your international project. This will ensure that you will be making consistent effort without spending all of your time on your project.

- **Work with a friend**
  Find a friend who is also putting together a project and schedule a time together when you're both committed to working on your projects. Create external motivation and keep each other productive.

- **Write an Introductory Letter template**
  Having a well-written Introductory Letter template that can be used repeatedly will save you a great deal of time. Modify it for each referral so that it does not have a form-letter feel.

- **Be persistent**
  If you do not receive a reply to your first email after one week, resend the original email with an introduction explaining why you're resending the letter.

- **Meet people on the funding committee ahead of time**
  If you have access to the members of the funding committee you are applying to (at your medical school, for example), solicit their help throughout the process. Give them the opportunity to get to know you and your project, and to hear your concerns and questions. Be sure you address their concerns in the final application. Do not forget that these people are evaluating you. Behave accordingly — be self-aware and considerate.