Tips for Writing a Successful Proposal

Your proposal to access data in the Census Research Data Centers must consist of three documents: an abstract, a project description, and a benefit to the Bureau statement. Keep in mind that your audience consists of social scientists not necessarily in your field.

I. Abstract

The abstract must address both the scientific merit of your project and the benefits to the Bureau. Your abstract may be two paragraphs to describe each of these elements independently.

II. Project Description

The project description should be fairly detailed (but no more than 15 pages single-spaced or 30 pages double-spaced, including references) and should include the following elements. They do not necessarily have to be addressed in the order below.

Keep in mind throughout your proposal that your goal in writing the proposal is to convince the reader that your project is interesting and that accessing non-public data is essential to your project.

A. Introduction

By the end of this section you should have motivated interest in your project, made a clear statement about specifically what you will do, and made a clear statement about why you need access to non-public data.

B. Literature Review

This section should summarize the literature relevant to your project. Your proposal should make clear the contribution your work will be making to the literature.

C. Methodology

You should describe in detail your empirical methodology, including the equations you will estimate. The relationship between your specification and the data should be clear. What are your hypotheses of interest? What are your coefficients of interest and how do they relate to your stated hypotheses?

Be clear about whether you are doing a longitudinal or cross-sectional analysis. If you are doing a longitudinal analysis, how will you be linking data together? What is your unit of analysis? Are you estimating your equations at the individual or household level, or at some aggregated level?

D. Data Sources

This section should contain a detailed description of your data sources, including public-use data sources and the internal data you wish to access. Including a bulleted list of internal data with years specified and a list of external data (with years) is recommended. You must make clear why you need the non-public data to complete your project. If you are bringing in external data, sources and permissions (if not public-use) should be specified. Describe how the separate data sources will be linked, if applicable. For example, are you linking variables by 4-digit SIC code or by county?

E. Output/Disclosure Risk

In this section you should describe the output you wish to take out of the RDC. Typically, researchers disclose
limited descriptive statistics to characterize their sample and regression coefficients and standard errors. You should list the various descriptive statistics, regression coefficients/standard errors, and other items you envision submitting for disclosure analysis, referring back to your methodology section. Be clear in describing the samples you will be using for each of your analyses. Are you using only certain industries or demographic groups? Your work will only be cleared for release if it passes certain parameter restrictions. That is, your samples must be fairly large and cutting your samples narrowly may lead to disclosure problems.

We discourage the release of intermediate output (i.e., output that will not appear in a presentation or paper). Graduate students should thus ensure that their advisors are willing to obtain Special Sworn Status and view your intermediate work at the RDC. If this is the case, you should indicate so in this section.

F. Proposed Duration

In this section, you should state the proposed duration of the project in absolute amounts of time (e.g., 24 months), a desired starting date, and the intensity of RDC lab use (i.e., 15 hours per week). Because researchers often discover that it takes longer than anticipated to both open and close a project, researchers should be generous in their proposed project duration.

G. References

III. Predominant Purpose Statement (i.e., Benefit to the Bureau Statement)

Your project must provide some benefit to the Census Bureau as outlined in the "IRS Criteria Document" available on CES' webpage. The benefit statement should list each criterion verbatim that your proposal fulfills as a heading, and provide an explanation for how your project will do this beneath it. Your project should include a minimum of two benefits. There is no page limit but brevity and concise presentation are encouraged.

The file “Writing Benefit Statements for Projects Accessing Confidential Data” on the CES website provides detailed and helpful information on writing benefit criteria.

In a separate section, this statement should also contain a detailed list of Federal Tax Return Information (FTI) items that will be needed from each Census data file.

Acknowledgement: These tips were created by Michelle Danis of the Triangle Research Data Center and updated by Melissa Ruby Banzhaf.