Developing a project that meets NSF’s expectations, yet isn’t unrealistically ambitious, can be challenging. Program officers are there to help, and NSF strongly encourages CAREER proposers to communicate with a program officer early in the proposal development process. Here are some simple steps for making the most of your contact with a program officer.

**Prepare a one-page abstract** that includes rationale, goals, specific objectives, and expected outcomes and deliverables for both the research and education components of your project. Explain how your research and education plans are complementary and integrated.

**Identify “the right” program officer.** A list of Division CAREER contacts can be found on the [CAREER program page](https://www.nsf.gov/awardsearch). Alternately you may wish to contact a program officer who manages projects similar to yours. You can do this via NSF’s Advanced Search Tool:

- Navigate to the Search Tool ([nsf.gov/awardsearch/advancedSearch.jsp](https://www.nsf.gov/awardsearch/advancedSearch.jsp)).
- Under “Element Code,” type 1045 (the CAREER code), and make sure the “Active Awards” box is checked. Scroll to the bottom of the page and click “search.”
- Once the search has been performed, export results to Excel and sort records by Directorate, NSF Organization (division), and Program, in that order.

The results will now be grouped to make it easier to find clusters of similar projects to yours. This will allow you to review abstracts to identify projects similar to yours as well as the program managers who are assigned to them.

**Schedule a meeting.** Send the officer of your choice a short email introducing yourself and requesting a phone consultation to discuss your ideas; suggest several dates/times that you are available, and attach your abstract. Alternately, if you’re planning a trip to Washington DC, consider scheduling an in-person meeting with the program officer while you’re there.

**Before & after the meeting.** Hone your ideas and prepare a short “elevator pitch” and a set of questions before the meeting. During the meeting, listen carefully, ask relevant questions, take notes, and thank the program officer for his/her time. After the meeting, send a thank you email and include any follow up questions.

**A program officer can:**

- Identify the proper “home” (i.e. directorate/division/cluster) within NSF for your research, or confirm that the one you’ve selected is the right fit;
- Provide insight into how and by whom your proposal will be reviewed in the directorate (i.e. panel or ad hoc, types of proposals that will be reviewed with yours, composition of reviewers);
- Offer feedback on your research/education summary;
- Help you understand a review of a previous CAREER proposal.
**Do ask:**
- Is my proposed project a good fit for this directorate/div/cluster?
- How will my proposal be reviewed in this directorate?
- Does my proposed project meet the expectations of the discipline?
- Is there sufficient integration between the research and education plans?
- Is the scope of my project appropriate and realistic for the five-year project period?
- What is the typical amount of funding for this division?

**Don’t ask:**
- So, will you fund my research?
- Is this a good research topic?
- What research topic do you think I should work on?
- What are my odds?
- If I send a copy of my proposal to you, will you tell me what you think of it?

*Parting words: It’s always better to ask before you submit a proposal than after you get the reviews.*