DearAuthors,

The narrative proposal for your grant application for a Spenser Foundation small grant requires significant reworking in order to match the funder’s specifications. In its current state, the document lacks focus and structure. It is scattered and does not make your ambitions clear to the funders. It is very important that a grant application respond exactly to the goals of the fund. The foundation also notes in its guidelines that, “We seek to support scholarship that develops new foundational knowledge that may have a lasting impact on educational discourse”. Asking for funding to pilot a study that will contribute to creating a lab and an MA program at your university doesn’t really respond to this. You would need to indicate how this research could have an impact on knowledge and practice in the field. Focusing and strengthening your literature review and closely articulating the goals of your study within this would go a long way. This extract from the funder’s guidelines underlines how critically important the above points are:

Persuasive proposals have a clear focus of inquiry, with specific research questions and/or hypotheses. Proposed research projects must focus on topics or issues related to learning or education. These topics and issues should have critical significance to education, broadly conceived. Additionally, there should be a clear and compelling set of research questions or line of inquiry related to these topics and issues.

There is a fundamental issue with your proposal in that at times it appears as though you have already conducted the research. You seem to be presenting results at times and making conclusions. The proposal is a plan to conduct a future piece of research. If the research has already been done then the funders will not fund it. If you have done a pilot study which you want to expand this is an excellent way to show the funders what it is you want to do and how you will go about it but you need to make this clear. Hypotheses and expected results do not really serve you here. Indeed, at times it feels like you are looking for confirmation of foregone conclusions as opposed to proposing an exploration of the topic. Try and avoid prescriptive statements, remain objective, and keep an open mind. If you are trying to ascertain opinions of the place of SEL in higher education based on interviews with stakeholders, this could be a project you could sell to the funders. If you are doing a piece of curriculum design research for the creation of an MA program in SEL instructor training, this is something you could sell. However, trying to do both makes the project appear too diffuse. It is not impossible but you would need to tighten up the link between the two in this proposal. It is also not clear why this project needs funding at all. You will have explained this in your budget but a few very subtle nods to this in your explanation of your research design would go a long way.

As it stands it is very hard to make out what you are trying to do with the intended piece of research. You need to take the reader through your plan step-by-step. Think about “what, why, and how” as the core of the structure of the proposal. What will the intended research examine? (background, problem statement, aims, research questions etc.); why is this important for the discipline as a whole (rationale, literature review); what sort of data will serve us best in trying to answer our research questions and how will we go about gathering and analyzing this data (instruments and analytical model). See the below from the foundation’s guidelines:

Regardless of topic, it is important to cue readers to the centrality of education in your proposal by writing about how the topic or issue is represented in educational research literature, or how knowing more about the topic or issue may inform educational practice or policy, confirming or disconfirming existing paradigms or conventional assumptions. The significance of the topic or issue depends upon the extent to which the research question or line of inquiry advances knowledge on related research and theory.

The small grant application has a word limit of 1800 words and reducing your text provides you with an opportunity to also radically rework it so that it matches the funder’s requirements while forcing you to synthesize and clarify what it is you want to do with this ambitious project. I have extracted a paragraph from the documentation provided by the fund to prospective grantees below. Here the funders explicitly state what they want to see in a grant application and how it should be structured. Adhering to this structure will drastically increase your chances at achieving a successful application and make the process of reworking your proposal relatively straightforward.

Proposal Narrative - You are expected to upload a proposal narrative pdf that includes the following: A description of the project, the central research question(s), and the project’s significance. A rationale for the project. This includes (a) summary of the relevant literature, the relationship of the proposed research to that literature, and the new knowledge or contribution to the improvement of education expected to result from the proposed research; and (b) a summary of the conceptual framework or theory guiding the project and how the project utilizes or builds on this framework of theory. A description of the proposed research methods, description of participants, data collection instruments, and modes of analysis the project will employ. If applicable to the proposed methods, please include (a) information about the proposed sample/case definition and selection procedures; (b) research design, including when appropriate a description of the context of the study; (c) description of key constructs, measures and data sources; (d) procedures for data collection; and (e) procedures for data analysis. This narrative may not exceed 1800 words and at the conclusion should include the word count in parentheses. Your reference list should follow your narrative in the same pdf file and will not count toward the 1800-word limit. The text should be double–spaced and in 12-point font. APA style is preferred.

Based on the above description, I would suggest you organize your proposal as follows:

**Title**

Your proposal needs a title. This already goes a long way in helping you focus your piece as well as preparing the reader (e.g. *Social-Emotional Learning in Higher Education: Designing and Constructing an MA program* or *Stakeholder Opinions on the place of Social-Emotional Learning in Higher Education*).

**Summary** (±150 words)

Include a summary of your proposed research project. You should explain from the outset that you are doing a pilot study to prepare the groundwork for the creation of an SEL lab and an MA in program in educational counseling. You should describe your research methodology. Hypotheses or expected results are not really helpful because this study is an exploratory case study. Also very important at this stage is to note how the research contributes to existing knowledge or practice in the field.

**Background** (±200 words)

You may want to include some specifics about the university setting you are working in and how this proposed MA will articulate with other programs, where the impetus has come from, if it is supported at faculty level, has the support of the Dean or other members of the hierarchy, if it fits in with any other developments of its kind in the university. Some context is sorely needed in this proposal. You should start making allusions to how your intended research will contribute to the existing literature at this point by explaining what SEL is etc. The proposal needs to short so keep any definitions extremely focused and contextualized and make ample use of references so the funders can see that your points, while not hugely detailed at this point, have a basis in the existing literature and will be fleshed out in the full study.

**Research Objectives (**±150 words)

Here you should clearly lay out the research questions and aims of your project. It is very important to keep focus here so that the funders know exactly what it is you will be doing. This will help them judge the value and feasibility of the project. The extract below should guide you in elaborating this section:

This program is “field-initiated” in that proposal submissions are not in response to a specific request for a particular research topic, discipline, design, or method. Our goal for this program is to support rigorous, intellectually ambitious and technically sound research that is relevant to the most pressing questions and compelling opportunities in education. We seek to support scholarship that develops new foundational knowledge that may have a lasting impact on educational discourse.

**Rationale and Literature Review** (±900 words)

This section is the core of the proposal and is vitally important given the funder’s objectives. It should make up the bulk of the proposal. Here you will very clearly and incisively indicate to the researchers what the value of your proposed study is in terms of enriching our current understanding of the field you are working in. You should describe what other scholars have said in terms of SEL in higher education but always bring it back to how your study will contribute to the existing knowledge. Highlighting an existing gap and focusing on how your project works towards filling this gap is important. The extract below should guide you:

Persuasive proposals make a compelling rationale for the study, situating the project in relevant research literature. An incisive and concise literature review should provide an overview of what is already known and indicate what we still need to learn or accomplish – thus, carving out your anticipated contribution to educational research. To this end, a succinct literature review should present a discussion of relevant research studies and theoretical frameworks that are most closely related to the topic, highlighting important gaps or disagreements in current knowledge that warrant further study, to identify how the proposed study will offer a contribution—a scholarly intervention or advancement to the field.

In an interdisciplinary field like education research, multiple literatures are often pertinent and necessary to acknowledge, thus presenting a challenge for organizing a discussion of relevant research and theory. One approach is to focus on bodies of literature, schools of thought, and authors that are most centrally related to the proposed study research topic. Use less space on studies and perspectives that, while they may inform work somewhat, are less crucial to it than studies and perspectives that receive primary emphasis in the discussion. The review of literature should be selective, showing clearly what is central to the proposal and what is more peripheral.

**Method** (±300 words)

This section is vitally important because the funders will be very interested to evaluate the empirical validity and feasibility of the study. You need to very clearly explain your research design, instruments, interpretative framework, and any ethical considerations. It should be very clear how the research methods correspond to your research questions.

**Reference List and Proposed Bibliography**

In a proposal it is a good idea to go beyond just including a reference list to those works cited in the proposal itself. You may also include a more comprehensive list of titles that you aim to read to enrich the final study.

Further more specific notes are included in the edit of your proposal and I would encourage you to read the attached guides.

Best of luck with your funding application.

Sincerely

Christopher Fotheringham