Some Thoughts on Writing and Submitting Proposals for Scholarly Conferences (and also Professional Conferences, but mostly Scholarly) [HALE Brown Bag – March 23, 2011]

In General

1. Don't be afraid to submit a proposal. As Wayne Gretsky said, "You miss all of the shots you don't take." The process of writing a proposal will move your thinking ahead, even if your proposal isn't accepted. All of us have proposals rejected sometimes. Learning to deal with that disappointment is part of being a scholar.

2. A rejected proposal is never fun, but even if your proposal gets rejected, you get valuable feedback from reviewers. Take a breath, pay careful attention to each comment, then use it to improve your next proposal.

3. Take a step back and place proposal writing in a larger context. Consider how a particular conference presentation will both advance and improve your research agenda or professional goals.

4. Take one step at a time. Think of each conference presentation as a link in an evolutionary chain. View it as a way to evolve and adapt your ideas. Posters and roundtables are helpful in the early stages. Paper presentations get extensive written feedback from the discussant which is helpful in identifying major issues before advancing towards publication.

Where and What to Submit

5. For ASHE and AERA, don't worry about "gaming" the system in terms of in which section you submit your proposal. Presentation slots are assigned proportionally to the number of proposals in each section, so your odds of getting into one section are the same as any other. Pick the section that seems like it will have reviewers most familiar with your topic and method.

6. For ASHE and a symposium, just because you have influential or noteworthy researchers listed as panelists, etc., do not assume the proposal will be accepted. There must be substance and a well spelled out process for the symposium.

7. If you are proposing to present a class project, submit it as a poster. The limited amount of data you were able to collect during one semester is very unlikely to justify a full paper presentation (no matter what students from other institutions do...).

8. Honestly self-assess what's reasonable to propose based on the current development of your research. Don't just pick all three types of presentations (poster, roundtable, and presentation) hoping to get lucky. Pick the session type that is best for where you are and how you hope the experience enriches your work.

9. On the other hand, DO indicate all formats in which you would be WILLING to present. If you are rejected from your first choice, would you rather present in 2nd or 3rd choice format than not at all? Conference committees will not offer you an alternative if you have not indicated it as acceptable.

10. If you are in the middle of your dissertation, go for a poster ... even if you are not done or have yet to defend by the conference, you can present the data and obtain feedback (A great way to have others validate and question your initial findings).

11. If you haven't collected any data yet, do not submit a proposal on that project. It's unprofessional to show up at the conference and present a lit review because you ran into unanticipated glitches with data collection.

12. If you are in the middle of the study, lay out the timeline for when you will be done with analyzing and writing up the data. But, you should include a few findings in your proposal (e.g., demographic, a few themes) to show the reviewer that you are committed to the study and will complete it.

What to Include/Politics

13. If you are submitting to ASHE or Div J of AERA, you don't have to worry too much about convincing the reviewers that a higher ed topic is worthwhile. But if you're submitting to another AERA division (e.g., History), don't assume that your reviewers know much about or appreciate the value of higher ed research. We are greatly outnumbered (mostly by teacher ed) in AERA.

14. If making a long presentation (60-90 minutes), be specific about how you will spend the session time and how it relates to the review criteria, e.g. AAC&U likes multi-institutional presentations with a clear plan for audience interaction.

15. Use appendices effectively (and sparingly) so important details do not take up limited and valuable proposal word limit space. The proposal should address the major criteria then refer to appendices that provide the reviewers with critical information related to your research so they can assess the quality of your design, credibility of findings, and reasonableness of conclusions.

16. Never forget, the reviewers may very well include the authors you are citing. Cite them carefully and accurately.

17. Think about the theme of the conference and how it plays out in your proposal. Less important for scholarly conferences, critical for professional conferences.

18. Address all sections that are requested in the proposal (e.g., theoretical framework, methodology, recommendations).

19. For a research paper, include a couple of recommendations for further studies, policy, etc.

20. Have a solid methodology section ... Reviewers want to fully understand how a researcher determined how to go about the research design, including data gathering and analyses.

21. Get all the editing right. A sloppy proposal makes a reviewer wonder if the researcher is also a sloppy thinker, and makes reviewers cringe to think about the final paper. Reviewers are extraordinarily busy people. Clear writing is essential. Grammar matters. Syntax sends a message. Don’t trust your word processor’s spelling checker to catch everything.

22. Seek outside review before submitting a proposal and take the critiques seriously.

23. State delimitations and limitations, especially for small research projects. Anticipate criticisms and provide evidence that you are appropriately self-critical of your own work.

24. Know what really counts in the review process, e.g. ASHE: important topic, original work, quality framework, reasonable conclusions and likelihood of completion. Yes, all five matter.

25. Know the audience for whom you are writing ... if another division of AERA then you have to write differently than if for AERA-J. Or, if writing for AIR, you better have a strong methodology section.

Additional Advice

26. Volunteer to review. It's one of the best ways to get better at writing proposals.

27. Do not wait until the 11th hour to submit your proposal. And don’t miss the deadline!