

## **International Research Proposal Strategies — A Brief Guide, especially for CIS Summer Research Grants for MIT PhD Students**

By Evan Lieberman and Gabriella Carolini (and based on useful insights from [Adam Przeworski SSRC](#))

### **1) Big picture: Why do international fieldwork?**

- High-quality, original data, often in data scarce environments. Fieldwork allows you to generate evidence others can't.
- Professional networks. Fieldwork builds collaborators, local partners, and future research ties.
- Policy relevance. Grounded work often reveals practical problems and solutions policymakers care about.
  - But ask: Is fieldwork necessary for your question and are you able to spend enough time on the ground to gather new data? If not, don't force it. Funders pay for clearly justified, implementable field projects.

### **2) What makes applications competitive?**

- Compelling opening: A clear research question that makes the reviewer care in the first paragraph.
- Clear focus: Detail / focus on the specific project you will do (not the whole dissertation).
- Concrete methods: How are you going to collect and analyze your data.
- Operational readiness: Local partner(s), language ability, letters of support, and a realistic timeline.
- Ethically sound: IRB/Human Subjects plan and other relevant concerns
- Budget realism: Itemized, defensible costs (travel, lodging, RAs, transcription).
- Fit to funder: Tailor emphasis to the funder's mission; don't copy-paste identical text across applications.
- Strong LORs: Advisors should read drafts and speak to the project's promise and your capacity.

### **3) Write for a non-specialist reader**

- No jargon. Explain the question so a smart non-expert understands.
- Make the stakes obvious. Why should anyone apart from an area or topic expert care about the research?
- Be concise. If word limits are tight, prioritize: (1) the question and importance, (2) methods/readiness, (3) fit/impact.



#### 4) **Proposal shape: a short structure**

- Hook: 1-2 crisp sentences stating the question and why it matters.
- Context & novelty: Situate the case; identify a few central references; state the puzzle or gap.
- Methods & plan: Where, who, sampling, instruments, pilot, timeline (dates/duration), local partners, day-one plan.
- Capacity & ethics: Language ability, partnerships, prior experience, IRB plan.
- Products & impact: Expected outputs and broader practical or intellectual relevance.

#### 5) **Methods: be explicit (especially for more detailed / longer proposals)**

- Target population & sampling frame. (e.g., households in X neighborhood; stratified by income.)
- Sample size / N interviews. Give numeric targets and justify “when enough.”
- Instruments. Attach sample survey / interview guide in appendix if allowed.
- Archives. How will you approach? Demonstrate that you have a plan / e.g., which boxes you will review and how.
- Analysis plan. What will you do with the data to test / develop conclusions

#### 6) **Operational readiness & partnerships**

- Language: If you’re fluent, say so; if not, name translators/partners and how you’ll validate translations.
- Local partners / university contacts: Provide names or explain outreach already done (including, for example, a local IRB process you’ve engaged). Funders want evidence you won’t “just show up.”
- Hit-the-ground-running plan: Example: “Interviews X, Y, Z scheduled with contacts A–C; RA training in week 1; household survey pilot week 2.”
- Positionality: Describe advantages / limits.

#### 7) **Budget & timing (practical rules)**

- Be realistic and defensible. Check flight costs, local lodging (Airbnb or modest guesthouse), local travel, local RA wages, visa fees, transcription, and contingency.
- **Typical CIS benchmarks: Standard grant ≈ \$5,000 (for several week trips/interviews/surveys/archives); Trailblazer up to \$15,000 for more ambitious projects.**
- CIS uses ~25% of State Dept per diem as a guide.
- Minimum field time: Funders (including CIS) prefer longer stays ~6 weeks minimum recommended for meaningful fieldwork. Two-week trips are unlikely to be competitive.
- Timeline clarity: State when you’ll travel, collect data, and finish analysis.

## 8) Ethics, deliverables, and funder fit

- Human Subjects: Describe IRB strategy, consent procedures, and data security.
- Deliverables: Some funders ask for talks or acknowledgments; CIS generally does not require specific deliverables but expects accounting of spending and contribution to community.
- Funder fit: Read funder mission pages. Emphasize relevance (e.g., educational policy, urban infrastructure) to match priorities.

## 9) CIS grant specifics (practical reminders)

- **Two grant types:** Standard ( $\approx \$5k$ ) and Trailblazer (up to  $\approx \$15k$ ).
- Check application deadline on website.
- Reapplication / multiple awards: CIS has given multiple grants to students in the past but prioritizes distributing funds equitably; don't count on repeat awards.

## Final tips

- Draft early, iterate constantly. Show drafts to advisors and letter writers well before deadlines.
- Include appendices if allowed: sample survey, interview guide, timeline, and power calculations.
- Be honest and specific. Reviewers want to fund promising, feasible projects — and they can spot hand-waving.
- Make the world care. Start strong and keep the narrative focused on why this project matters beyond the case.