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Writing Successful Grant Proposals: A few "rules" to guide your effort

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An important step in building an academic career is establishing and implementing an active research program. Securing funds to support research activities associated with data collection, analysis and dissemination of findings is a critical piece of this process. Research costs may include field research, secondary data acquisition, software, equipment, user fees, research support personnel, travel to conferences, and publication costs. Although many universities may provide project start-up funds and/or make available other internal sources of funds for research, increasingly scholars need to look to external funding agencies to support their research programs. So, what are the keys to success in obtaining grants for research?

Rule #1: Give yourself plenty of **TIME**.

Writing a successful grant proposal requires a lot of preparation and care, and you will want to make sure you have sufficient time to adequately prepare a solid proposal. This is particularly important since funding success rates at many agencies are remarkably low as a result of strong competition and limited funds.

Rule #2: Purposefully target appropriate funding agencies and do your proposal preparation homework.

A wide variety of funding agencies and organizations exists in both the public and private sphere and at various geographic scales (local, state, national, international). Some of these agencies have broad interests; others are more focused. It is important to understand the mission, priorities, and strategic objectives of particular funding agencies that may support your research. For example, while the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF) primarily funds basic science research, other organizations, such as the American Institute of Indian Studies are interested in areas studies research, i.e., research or creative activities related to particular geographic regions. Still others have more focused interests such as the National Institute of Health (NIH). However, even organizations that seem highly focused may in fact entertain proposals on diverse topics, and often organizations' strategic plans, and the research portfolios they support, change over time.

Thus, you should spend time reading proposal solicitations and reviewing lists of recent awards. Gather information about the agency or organization you are targeting, and then ask questions. Program officers at most agencies and organizations welcome inquiries and requests for information. Remember, they have funds to disburse and want to support highly worthy projects. So, do not feel shy about contacting individuals who oversee grant programs. However, be sure to do your homework first. Do NOT ask for information that is readily available in organization documents or on agency websites. Instead, once you have familiarized yourself with all of the information that is readily available, ask more targeted and project specific questions to help you determine the appropriateness of your project, learn about the proposal review process, and so on.

When writing your proposal, speak to priorities or interests of the funding agencies. Demonstrate how your project will contribute to the knowledge base associated with the agency's particular priorities. Within agencies that have multiple programs, make sure you understand and speak to the particular program's focus. If you decide to target multiple agencies or organizations to fund the same project, make sure you rework the proposal to fit the agency. Do not write a proposal with one agency in mind and then submit the exact same proposal to another agency that may be appropriate but have a different orientation.

Rule #3: Design a research project with significance and intellectual merit.

First, a strong research proposal starts with compelling research questions that address a significant problem and will yield results that advance knowledge in a potentially transformative way. The project should be grounded in a robust theoretical framework informed by a relevant body of literature and utilize scientifically sound methods. Questions to ask yourself include: Why is this an important problem? Who is likely to find the research interesting or useful? Does this interest community align with those served by the targeted funding agency? What is the current state of knowledge about this problem, and how will your research build on and contribute to this body of knowledge? What methods are most suitable for investigating this problem?

Unless a funding agency has a particular "niche focus", generally the most competitive proposals are those that will deliver broad interest results that will make a significant contribution to one or more disciplines or subfields as a whole or will be broadly applicable to a social problem or issue. If your research topic and questions are appealing to only a small number of people or have limited relevance outside a particular disciplinary subfield, a proposal on that topic may not be very successful in a funding agency or organization interested in broad issues.

Second, it is important to understand that proposals get declined for a number of reasons. Sometimes proposals fail to address the interests and priorities of the funding organization. Or, they fail to address a problem deemed relevant and important by the relevant research community. Often proposals fail to establish a sound theoretical framework or are poorly related to relevant literature. Another problem is that they fail to articulate research methods in sufficient detail or present a flawed research plan. Or, the theoretical framework and research plan may each be sound and solid, but they do not align with each other. Finally, the proposal is poorly prepared and written.

Rule #4: Prepare and submit a well-written strong, solid proposal

After you have designed a solid research project, you are now ready to prepare the actual grant proposal. First, **read** the proposal guidelines and **adhere to formatting requirements**. I have seen many proposals declined immediately because they did not conform to the specified format. Include all required information and documents; do not include documents that are disallowed or not required.

Second, make sure you understand the review criteria, the review process and who the audience of reviewers will be: disciplinary specialists, disciplinary generalists, or reviewers from multiple disciplines? Proposals for university sources of funding usually represent a wide range of disciplines or departments. Agencies with more specific missions, such as the NSF or NIH, tend to rely on reviewers from specific disciplines, but not all of the reviewers will necessarily have

specialized expertise in your research topic. Private foundations may utilize a review committee comprised of both academic and non-academic representatives. Try to think like a reviewer, and speak to your audience!

Bearing in mind the likely review audience, minimize the use of jargon and overly technical language unless you can provide definitions of terms. Provide clear statements of expected outcomes and contributions – don't make reviewers guess or infer what these might be. Demonstrate awareness of the possible limitations of your planned approach and indicate how you will account for these limitations. If multiple investigators are involved in the project, make clear what each team member will contribute to the investigation. With respect to a project budget, provide reasonable estimates of actual costs within allowable expenses. Be aware of agency or program guidelines for award funding levels and what types of expenses are allowed. Do not artificially inflate your budget in anticipation that it will be "cut" by the agency. But, do not underestimate what the expenses of conducting the proposed research will be.

Finally, edit the proposal for spelling and grammatical errors. Ask colleagues from both within and outside your discipline to read the proposal to ensure it is easily comprehended and presents a compelling case. Consider employing the assistance of a professional editor if you are not a highly skilled writer in the language of the funding organization. Remember that reviewing proposals for funding agencies requires a significant commitment of time and effort on the part of fellow members of your research community. Do not make the task difficult and unpleasant for them by submitting a poorly prepared proposal.

Rule #5: If at first you don't succeed, REVISE and submit again.

Although it is easy to get discouraged (or angry) when a proposal fails to be awarded, a decline does not necessarily mean the idea was not good or the project is not worth pursuing. Respect the review process and bear in mind that a lot of worthy proposals do not get funded due to limited funds or other kinds of constraints. Read reviews and other forms of feedback carefully. Seek out additional information from grant program personnel about what the proposal's shortcomings were and what the prospect might be for reworking and submitting a new proposal. Then re-work the proposal in a way that accounts for and addresses the shortcomings or weaknesses identified by reviewers. Depending on how your proposal was received by the reviewers, it may be a much more efficient and productive use of your time and effort to rework and re-submit a proposal that has merit but a few shortcomings rather than scratch it completely and take up an entirely different project. On the other hand, if reviewers identified significant flaws in your proposal, you may want to consider different lines of inquiry.