Research Management Review, Volume 17, Issue 1
Fall/Winter 2009

Can We Talk?
Contacting Grant Program Officers

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ABSTRACT

For success in grantseeking, solid writing skills are necessary but not sufficient. In addition to *compositional* excellence, researchers must master the *relational* demands of external funding. Chief among these is the need to establish an effective line of communication with an appropriate grant program officer in the funding agency. This paper presents the rationale for initiating contact with a program officer and describes a sequential set of activities designed to assure a productive dialogue. It concludes with a sample coaching script research administrators can use to assist investigators in this critical process. The time taken to do this, *prior to writing the proposal*, will be the best possible investment new researchers can make in the grantseeking aspect of their academic careers.

INTRODUCTION

"A sound concept, but it does not fit our current funding priorities." Each year, disappointed grant writers will read comments like this on the reviews that accompany notices of proposal rejection. Successful grant writers know that early contact with a program officer before deciding to write a proposal is key to avoiding this distressing outcome (Porter, 2005). Preproposal communications can have a powerful impact on the researcher's thinking, from reshaping the research design to rethinking where the proposal should be submitted, or if it should be written at all. Most grant writing texts mention the importance of early and effective communications with grant officers, but few offer specific advice. The most helpful materials have been published by New and Quick (1998) and Blackburn (2003). This paper presents an extension of their work, emphasizing the research administrator's role as coach and mentor to inexperienced investigators.

BACKGROUND

This article is based on interviews with sixteen senior researchers at Virginia Tech that were the basis for a 2005 paper published in *The Journal of Research Administration*, "What Do Grant Reviewers Really Want, Anyway?" All had strong track records in sponsored research, served on multiple review panels, and interacted with numerous grant program officers. Further insight has been gained as the author designed and directed an annual Grant Writing Institute at the university, which involved a series of intensive summer sessions over a three-year period from 2006 to 2008 that included a "Day in DC," where a total of thirty-four faculty members met with program officers at several funding agencies. In debriefing Institute participants after such meetings, the author noted important lessons learned, especially where program officers imparted critical information that was not apparent from their grant programs' printed materials or the agencies' web sites.

SKILL SETS FOR SUCCESS

Creative scholarly expertise drives sponsored research in all disciplines, and strong grant writing skills are a recognized prerequisite for success. Less widely appreciated is a second skill set—the relational skills needed for positive interactions with a sponsor agency (Figure 1).

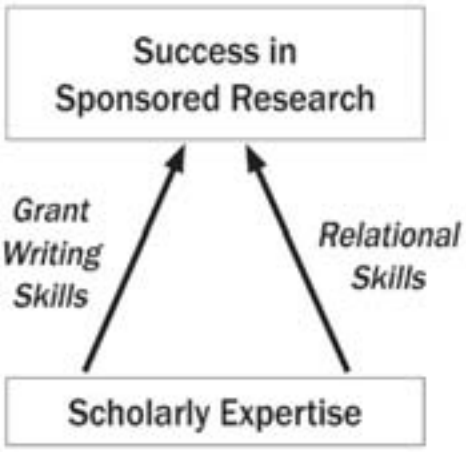

Figure 1. Skill Sets for Success

At the outset, the most important relational skill needed by researchers is the ability to initiate and maintain contact with an appropriate grant program officer, a dialogue that aims to: a) determine whether the researcher's basic concept is a good fit with the program's goals and objectives; b) seek advice concerning project design and appropriate funding track; c) ascertain trends in preferred research methodologies; and d) identify possible limits in project duration and budget.

While several senior investigators commented on the importance of relationship-building, one senior researcher with an impressive funding history credited this skill as key to his success:

> As a PI or co-PI you need to have a relationship with the program manager. Your job in writing the proposal is to help the program manager be successful. I really believe that. So if the program manager says, "Look, I want to develop the next XYZ," your job is to help him or her be successful by doing just that. That's the truth. Your job is to help that manager establish that XYZ

> program. You do it by showing a 2 or 3 page white paper and asking "How about this, does this fit your program?" It's very important to strike up a relationship with the program manager in a somewhat personal way. I mean go visit face-to-face first: You don't want to send a white paper out of the blue, you want to go up to DC and meet these people (T. Long, personal communication, May 20, 2004).

A QUESTION OF FIT

Starting to write a proposal without assurance of how well it matches what the sponsor wants to fund is a bad gamble indeed. New and Quick (1998) have estimated that up to 60% of all proposals are eliminated on first reading because the writer had not made an adequate project match or failed to follow directions. Where there is a poor fit, grant writers squander a good deal of their most precious resource—time—developing, revising and polishing documents that have little or no chance for success. Why do many bright people make such a fundamental mistake? The answer could lie in longstanding traditions of academe. From sending off papers to refereed journals to applying for jobs, academics are accustomed to parsing meaning from written materials, expressing their best thinking in written form, and then awaiting the judgment call. Writing or phoning to inquire if the paper will be published or the job will be offered is considered gauche, if not *verboten*. In the absence of coaching to the contrary, they reflexively apply the same habits to grant funding agencies, not realizing that winners in sponsored research play by different rules altogether.

TIP OF THE ICEBERG

Young investigators are prone to plunge into proposal writing based on what they read in the program solicitation. But this information is like the tip of an iceberg. Much of what needs to be known about that program—the critical success factors—is hidden beneath the surface and cannot be gleaned from the most careful study of published information. Following are core findings from interviews with seasoned investigators, as well as numerous meetings with program officers as reported by less experienced researchers in Virginia Tech's Grant Writing Institute:

1. Published material should be viewed as just the "official line" for the grant program, and may not reflect underlying considerations that determine which proposals are likely to be successful.
2. Program officers and their review panels can develop distinct preferences and dislikes over time; these rarely find their way into print.
3. Program priorities can shift over time, sometimes substantially, while published materials remain unchanged.
4. A PO's candid, informal response to the proposal's core theme is the best predictor of success, even though no guarantee is expressed or implied.
5. PO's can and often do give valuable advice on matters related to program track, budget, collaborations, and project structure.
6. Finally, if the proposed project is not a good fit with the identified program, the PO can often suggest better alternatives.

In short, the unofficial "rules of the game" can separate winners from losers, and these are best learned at the outset. Finally, it is well to remember that the part of the iceberg that sank the Titanic was below the water.

WHY PROGRAM OFFICERS WELCOME INQUIRIES

For investigators who are new to sponsored research, the prospect of initiating contact with an official in a funding agency can be daunting. *How will I be received? Is it really legitimate to discuss my project before I've submitted a proposal? Can I be specific enough to be credible?* Unanswered, questions like these can freeze a young investigator's initial apprehension into a state of permanent inaction, needlessly. In fact, most program officers welcome such contacts for a variety of reasons.

First and foremost, as Blackburn noted, talking to researchers is one of the most important responsibilities assigned to PO's, especially by the federal agencies, so we should help them do their jobs. They are supposed to give away money, not hold on to it. Also, it is well to keep in mind that most PO's are former academics; many were successful in their research careers prior to joining the agency, and they enjoy opportunities to reconnect with their academic counterparts. For a deskbound bureaucrat, talking over fresh ideas is a pleasant way to keep up with the field and track future directions. Two other motives have a more practical bent: First, if the core idea is not likely to be funded, the PO can reduce the office workload by discouraging the submission. Conversely, if the PO finds the idea intriguing, s/he might provide helpful hints on how to shape the proposal in ways that will result in a more positive review. Finally, key federal agencies—the National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health, Department of Energy, National Endowment for the Humanities—engage grant reviewers by the tens of thousands each year and are constantly on the lookout for fresh talent. A young investigator should never hesitate to express a desire to serve on a review panel; it will be a graduate education in grant writing (Member, 2003, Porter, 2005).

A SAMPLE COACHING SCRIPT FOR THE RESEARCH ADMINISTRATOR

Apprehensive young investigators will benefit from coaching on how to arrange a successful encounter with a program officer. The following is a sample coaching script for the research administrator, written as advice to the researcher:

1. Identify the grant program(s) whose objectives most closely match the core themes of your proposed research. Study the mission statement of the program office and parse any relevant program solicitation. Be prepared to modify your ideas somewhat to assure a good fit, as long as you stay within your proven expertise. Look up recent awards to see how your work will make a contribution or fill a gap. From the staff directory, identify an officer who has responsibility for that program.

2. Write a brief pre-abstract summarizing your proposed project. Using accessible language with a minimum of specialized terminology, describe your project in concise, concrete terms. List your main objective(s), methods, and expected outcomes. Stress the project's uniqueness and how the outcome(s) will address an important problem or contribute to the field. The PO does not need much detail to give you an initial reading, so do not write more than half a page. Rehearse it until you can recite it easily and without hesitation. Think of this as an "elevator speech," as it helps to envision a personal, time-limited encounter with a PO. A sample pre-abstract is included here as Appendix A.

3. Start with an e-mail. In your pre-abstract, indicate why you think your project will achieve the grant program's objectives. End by asking if your work is the kind the program might consider funding. You should get a response within a day or two—study it for tone and nuance as well as its direct message. You might get a recommendation to contact a completely different program office. There might be hints about

how to strengthen your proposal. Some PO's will ask to see a longer description of your project—usually a positive sign. If there is encouragement of any kind, go to the next step.

4. Make the call. Once there has been an exchange of e-mails, you have a relatively easy way to begin the conversation. Describe your project again, and then say you would like to discuss some issues the PO raised in the e-mail. If it is a federal agency and you happen to be within reasonable travel distance to Washington, ask if you could meet within the next couple of weeks. One way is to suggest that you are planning a trip to the DC area and it would be convenient to stop by. If the PO agrees to a meeting (and many will), you should expand your pre-abstract into a short (1–2 pages) white paper and send it first. For researchers applying to the National Science Foundation, the Office of Proposal Development at Texas A&M University has published a particularly helpful guide to preparing for a face-to-face meeting (Nader, 2009).

5. Take advantage of professional meetings. In addition to contacting PO's in their offices, researchers in most disciplines have opportunities to interact with program officers at regularly scheduled academic and scientific conferences. PO's attend these events to keep abreast with current and emerging developments in their fields, and often to present topics of their own.

Additionally, NSF and NIH hold regional grants conferences at locations around the country (National Science Foundation, 2010a; National Institutes of Health, 2010). Attended by numerous program officers, these events are specifically designed to update researchers and research administrators on agency policies, changes in the grant application and review processes, as well as developments in funding priorities. Of special interest to less experienced researchers are the NSF Days, hosted several times a year by sponsoring colleges and universities (National Science Foundation, 2010b). As members of National Council of University Research Administrators and the Society of Research Administrators know, their national and regional meetings typically feature presentations by program officers from several federal agencies.

6. Conducting a successful conversation. Whether by phone or in person, remember you are using this as an opportunity to obtain "between the lines" information to decide: a) whether to write a proposal for this program; and b) how to shape it in such a way to get a favorable review. In the course of the conversation, seek answers to the following:

Does my project fall within your current priorities?
If it does not, explore different objectives that might yield a better fit or ask for suggestions of other programs that might be interested in your project.

What would you recommend to improve my chances for a favorable review?
Do not be bashful about asking this question—the PO knows this is the main reason for your call!

What is the anticipated proposal success ratio?
Success ratios are your statistical odds for success. Rates are highly variable among grant programs, ranging from 5% to 40%, with most in the 10–20% range. First-time submissions have lower rates; resubmissions are higher.

Do you expect last year's average award amount to change this year?
This answer should help you determine your project's budget size.

What are some of the common reasons for proposal rejections?
This will help you understand likes and dislikes of review panels that do not show up in the program's written materials.

Throughout the discussion, listen carefully for helpful hints about proposal structure and content. Do you hear any "buying signals," i.e., signs that the PO is intrigued by your idea? Conversely, be on the lookout for hints that the PO does not think you have much of a chance. (Sometimes they hesitate to come right out and say it.)

7. Follow up. A short "thank you" note is more than good manners—it is a way to keep the line of communication open and fresh for both parties, especially if you summarize the key points you heard in the conversation. It is also a good idea to repeat your desire to serve as a reviewer, and attach a one-page CV with your picture on it. Sponsor agencies seek to enhance the diversity of their panels, and some, like the National Science Foundation, will engage young investigators before they write their first proposals. Others, like the National Institutes of Health, typically issue an invitation after the first award is made.

CONCLUSION

Even if they are new to sponsored research, investigators should not hesitate to initiate contact with program officers. PO's are accustomed to these inquiries, and most will do their best to be helpful. As stressed repeatedly by National Science Foundation officials at a regional grants conference: "Ask early, ask often!" (National Science Foundation, 2007). The time taken to do this will be the best possible investment inexperienced researchers can make in the grantseeking aspect of their careers.

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APPENDIX A

Sample Pre-abstract

TO: Director, Green Infrastructure Grant Program

I am writing to inquire if our research project is suitable for funding by the Green Infrastructure program. Its title is "Green Infrastructure: Collaborative Networking for Sustainable Water Systems," and our major goal is to demonstrate how this concept can be implemented at the local and regional levels by forming effective working relationships among academic researchers and community leaders.

While the significant environmental and economic advantages of decentralized water distribution systems are well known, communities in the U.S. have been reluctant to adopt them. We propose to utilize a community capacity-building model to inform community leaders of the long-term advantages of current technologies, while providing educational and technical assistance to encourage their adoption. Our interdisciplinary team includes specialists in the technology of sustainable water systems, environmental design, organizational change, and building community capacity.

Our project outcome will be a model program that showcases the merits of local sustainable water management systems, with a strong potential for national and even global impact. To accomplish this we will: 1) Form a consortium of local governments, regional planning commissions, and state agencies; 2) Develop an electronic manual for planning and implementing decentralized, sustainable water systems; 3) Offer workshops on sustainable systems to target audiences; 4) Develop an interactive web site that will facilitate networking and decision making; and 5) Develop video clips, exhibits and brochures for broader impact. Project assessment will be undertaken by an external evaluator with national experience in this field.

Is this project a suitable fit with your program? If so, we would appreciate your advice about how to proceed with proposal development.

Sincerely,

Aqua Vita, Ph.D., Director
Water Resources Research Center
Alpha University

About the Author

Robert Porter, Ph.D., is Director of Research Development at the University of Tennessee, where he works with faculty to enhance their grant writing skills. With thirty years experience as a tenured professor, private consultant, and research administrator, his proposals have won major awards from government agencies and private foundations. Dr. Porter has presented papers and workshops on grant writing at national conferences and has published prize-winning articles on this subject. In addition to working with University of Tennessee faculty, he has conducted grant writing workshops at leading universities and medical schools nationally.