

Can We Talk? Contacting

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).

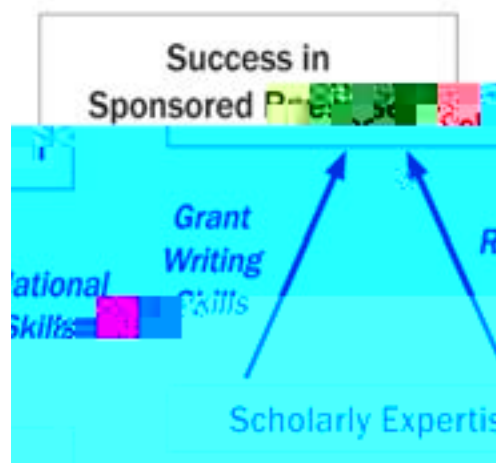


Figure 1. Skill Sets for Success

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

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 federalstos, impor1 tigt, as B172(f)-2(2d23(ons)-3(o P6(i)11(1)8(w3s48t)-3(o Pi)8(m)

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 a reasonable travel distance

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 eapTc -0.ene0.004d2ot.

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 wr