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Peer Reviewers Describe Success in Grant Writing

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COMMENTARY

Peer Reviewers Describe Success in Grant Writing

Relevant, feasible, and a reasonable time frame

JAMES POKRYWCZYNSKI

According to a survey of 92 administrators of mass communication programs by John Schweitzer published in *Journalism Educator* (1989), successful grant applications rank in the top 10 in importance to successful faculty performance. This activity ranks high especially in institutions granting doctoral degrees.

At the same time, disposable funds within universities to support faculty research are dwindling, forcing faculty to obtain extramural funding for research. This leads to increased competition for grant dollars , even from small institutions, at a time when grant funding, especially from the government, is barely returning to levels in the early 1980s, when cuts as large as 75 percent began.

Proposal writing can be a time-consuming activity, although this varies greatly depending on the grant-sponsoring organization targeted. For example, proposals to government organizations like the National Science Foundation require 12 separate sections, including everything from detailed backgrounds on the principal researchers involved to an itemized budget that includes estimated costs for fringe benefits as well as salaries for employees. Several months can be devoted to developing such proposals, making it imperative that researchers experience a reasonable "success rate" to avoid the situation of "proposing" but "never doing.'

To increase the "success rate" of grant proposals, many universities hold faculty seminars with representatives from a "research support" or "graduate studies" office making presentations. Numerous books and pamphlets have been written on the subject. The common problem with these resources is they provide general guidelines on proposal development, but fall short of providing the keys to making a grant proposal for a specific organization acceptable.

The objective of my efforts was to obtain specific criteria on acceptable grant proposals from the people who review proposals in mass communication research. Organizations with

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formal grant review processes were first identified, contacted, and asked to provide the names of several recent reviewers of proposals. Telephone conversations were conducted with reviewers. These reviewers were asked to provide names of additional reviewers they knew (the "snowball" technique of sampling) who had performed this task either for the same organization or a different one.

Experience in reviewing from those contacted ranged from reviewing 3-4 proposals annually to about 250 (this from the full-time executive director of the Marketing Science Institute). These respondents reviewed research proposals in advertising, broadcasting, journalism, marketing, and public relations as well as affiliated communication fields (graphic arts) for such organizations as the American Academy of Advertising, the National Association of Broadcasters, the Freedom Forum, the Marketing Science Institute (MSI), thè National Science Foundation (NSF), as well as internal grant sources within some universities. Both academic and practitioner viewpoints were solicited.

Types of studies proposed

According to reviewers, grant proposals in the communication area are almost exclusively quantitative. Most have solid theoretical grounding in the literature. Proposals tend to vary on the sophistication level of theory employed in the proposal and the ability to have a realistic link between theory and concepts.

Some granting organizations have a specific set of topics they want researchers to address. For example, the Marketing Science Institute included in its two-year (1990-92) list of advertising research priorities:

1. Measures of advertising effects.
2. Theories and measures of ad impact on individuals.

3. Advertising targeting decisions.

In organizations with less formally stated topic directives, no particular type of topic emerged. Some reviewers look for "how up-to-date people are" with regard to proposal topics.

Types of studies desired

Most reviewers said they would like to see more qualitative studies proposed in grant applications, and favored innovative measurement or methodological designs in recommending funding. One reviewer cited a specific example of measuring emotions related to communication with methods other than paper and pencil tests (e.g., observation of nonverbal or physiological measures).

Topics mentioned on a "wish list" of studies they'd like to see included: investigations of return on advertising investments, greater efforts to link communication and social science, work on public policy and regulation, symbolic impact in various forms of communication, cross-cultural communication, especially in regards to Europe, advertising/public relations tradeoffs in marketing a product, and anything related to radio. Many of these topics reflect reviewers' interests in funding non-empirical as well as empirical studies.

A distinct difference emerged between academic and practitioner reviewers on the importance of "real life" applications for the funded research, especially in the advertising and marketing areas. As expected, practitioners evaluated all parts or the proposal (e.g., sampling, method) with an emphasis on how the research would personify reality with a great deal of validity. One reviewer used the barometer, "will the study match a particular industry's interests."

Common weaknesses

The most often mentioned factor leading to rejection of a proposal is a

lack of justification for the theoretical link to the concept(s) of interest. Weak arguments often clearly show the researcher's lack of understanding of the theory or an artificial theoretical link done simply for the sake of needing theoretical grounding.

A second common area of concern is methodology. Reviewers comments focused on the validity of the method and its ties to the research objectives, failure to address uncontrolled variation, and lack of a control group. Practitioners were especially wary of experimental designs and voiced concerns about insufficient sample sizes. According to reviewers, these methodological flaws often extend to other sections of the proposal where authors attempt to overgeneralize from their sample or lack feasibility in predicting the time frame and money needed to accomplish the proposed project.

Often a rejected proposal fails to establish a clear contribution from the study, one that addresses relevant questions for members of the sponsoring organization. However, organizations vary in outlining what they believe to be the relevant questions.

Common strengths

Reviewers frequently mentioned that proposals were generally well-written. Reviewers agreed that well-written proposals should be a given, and the exception to this rule should be immediate cause for rejection. Some reviewers also felt proposals were generally too long, placing a premium on conciseness.

One reviewer cited a recently funded grant on irritating radio commercials as an example of a sufficiently detailed proposal. The experiment was carefully described, explained how respondents would be selected, exposed to the disguised test, measured, and debriefed. The timetable was feasible and the budget seemed efficiently allocated.

Another common strength was how "well-read" most proposal writers seemed to be, with an impressive breadth of literature tapped in developing the proposal. This breadth is likely to be directly linked to researchers expanded access to articles via on-line catalogs.

Other criteria

The importance of the following specific factors in judging proposals varied depending on the background of the reviewer.

1. **Principal investigator's research background**. Reviewers with academic backgrounds by and large felt this was not very important, while practitioners felt it provided credibility and evidence of the person's ability to carry out the study. Some reviewers encouraged junior faculty to team with senior faculty on proposals. One reviewer said, "we invest in people not ideas.'

2. **Topic area**. Ratings ranged from not important to neutral. One reviewer favored "true breakthroughs" in assessing topics, citing studies that applied an existing theory in a new area or studies that addressed previously untouched areas.

3. **Researcher's institution or rank**. Both were generally regarded as unimportant by academics, except when the grants specify support for junior researchers. Again, practitioners looked to institution and rank for assurance the research could be completed as proposed.

In general, factors 1 and 2 become influential because most grant proposal are not blind reviewed. This would seem to suggest that either the blind review process be instituted, especially when practitioners reviewers are involved or the selection of proposal reviewers be done carefully, with an eye toward representing a diversity of views and preferences.

Recommendations

Several key phrases emerged among the conversations with grant proposal reviewers that may be worth noting for future proposal writing.

First, whether the subject is *relevant* was commonly mentioned by reviewers. This phrase probably has limited value to guide researchers because it is doubtful anyone proposes a study that they themselves feel is irrelevant. The key here seems to be persuasion, or the ability to sell the relevance of a proposal to reviewers. However, this strategy is confounded by the proposal writer's lack of knowledge in advance concerning who the reviewers are and their research preferences and biases.

This problem is compounded by the practice of reviewers, who find themselves lacking expertise in an area addressed by a grant proposal, to consult colleagues with the proper expertise. Even if reviewers were identified in advance, this practice inhibits the grant writers' attempts to tailor their writing to the audience. Reviewers who don't have expert colleagues available are instructed to judge the proposal based on the way it is written, the types of sources or authors cited in references and dates of citations. This again places emphasis on good writing and a solid grounding in the literature.

Second, whether the proposal is *feasible* was often mentioned. Feasibility was involved in a number of key components of the proposal: method, budget and timetable. Probably most important to reviewers, especially those with an industry background, was the ability of the proposed research method to answer the question in a valid and reliable way. Some organizations refuse to fund studies involving student samples and generally make that clear in the directives. Other organizations do not clearly spell this out, but the prevailing attitude seemed to be that student convenience samples face difficult odds in achieving funding.

Although clearly secondary in concern to most reviewers, feasibility of the budget and timing of the proposed study also weigh in the final evaluation. Efficient and creative budgeting of grant money catches reviewers' attention. Some organizations refuse to support faculty salaries with grant money, while others refuse to pay for permanent equipment (e.g., computers). Care must be taken to understand these stipulations before outlining a budget.

A reasonable time frame, one that is neither too optimistic nor overextended, also is scrutinized closely by reviewers. Most grant sponsoring organizations in the communication area are reluctant to fund projects that extend beyond two years.

These insights would suggest that improvements can be made on both sides of the grant proposal process. Sponsoring organizations may greatly enhance the quality of proposals received by clearly outlining the goals for funding research, identifying the makeup of the review board and establishing guidelines reviewers can use to help make the evaluation process consistent. Grant writers need to focus on the application of the problem and method they propose, being certain that a sound theoretical link (if there is one) is established in the proposal. Finally, the description of the project must be clear and precise as well as being concise. ❏