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Straight Talk From Recent Grads: Grant Writing Tips for New Investigators

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Academic Leadership Journal

Introduction

There is an increasing demand and critical importance for those in academic positions to be conducting high quality research in addition to teaching well and successfully obtaining grants is often necessary to fund such scientific inquiry (Shaw, 2002). Faculty members in academic or research positions are likely to be among those spending the most time on such efforts as successful grant writing to support both research and scholarly productivity is compulsory for flourishing in these jobs (Hasche, Perron & Proctor, 2009). In fact, most job announcements in the Chronicle of Higher Education list the ability to acquire external funding as a leading factor in hiring decisions among candidates. Successful grant writing is every bit as important for keeping a new job once it has been obtained as new faculty members failing to meet a high standard of funded research and scholarship are typically released from employment after a predetermined period of time (Cater, Lew, Smith, 2008). According to Inouye and Fiellin (2005), “the competition for funds to conduct clinical research is intense, and only a minority of grant proposals receive funding” (p. 274). Adding to the difficulty and pressure to secure extramural funding in a new research position, universities are currently receiving less federal and state funding and are relying more heavily on their faculty to obtain external grant money (Toews & Yazedjian, 2007).

Clearly, grant writing is an indispensable skill for a successful career as an academic researcher (Hasche, Perron & Proctor, 2009; LaRocco & Bruns, 2006), and should therefore be heavily emphasized in doctoral training programs. We found this to be the case in our experiences. Upon entering a doctoral program in 2002, we (the authors) were quickly immersed in theory, research methodology, and advanced statistical analysis procedures in our coursework. More importance was placed on these three elements in particular throughout the duration of our training to ensure that we gained the necessary skills to become independent and successful grant writers, investigators, and scholars once we graduated. Thankfully we did graduate in 2006 and 2007, and to this day we remain grateful to the professors and mentors who worked so tirelessly to teach us these critical skills. However, over the last several years in our faculty and research positions, we have since learned additional lessons specifically about successfully obtaining grants that we wish would have been included in our graduate training. These lessons would have greatly benefited us after we first graduated and were frantically seeking funding in our new academic and research positions. Thus, we are passing along these 10 simple lessons learned as tips from recent graduates in an attempt to promote the early success of other new investigators.

Simple Grant Writing Tips and Strategies

1. Build on your dissertation

Whether or not you are still interested in pursuing the same line of research that your dissertation focused on, we strongly encourage you to publish from it as soon as possible. Certainly we understand that you may be so sick of this research topic by the time you defend that you may never want to see or

write on it again, but that would be a huge mistake. Most grant applications require you to submit a current curriculum vitae (cv) with other required materials, and many applications include a specific section for you to list your publications. This is because funders want to know about your current and previous scholarship as it speaks to your ability to be successful with new funding in the future. Your dissertation can provide you with more than one new publication that you can list on your cv, thus strengthening your chances for quickly and successfully obtaining grant funding (Toews & Yazedjian, 2007). So submit those dissertation papers as soon as possible!

2. Small grants can result in a big payoff

Even a very modest award of \$2,000 to \$5,000 can become an important building block for your career. Little grants like this are typically *much* easier to obtain than some of the larger scale awards, and they have the potential to add significantly to your cv. For example, a small award can fund a pilot study that results in data that you can analyze and publish from. The results and publications from that small study will better position you for obtaining a larger award to further address the same research topic as you can show a track record of funded research and scholarship in this area (Devine, 2009; Toews & Yazedjian, 2007). Ultimately, even a meager award can provide support for very important accomplishments and stepping stones, and for a new faculty member these can position you well for meeting the funding, research, and scholarship accomplishments often required for obtaining tenure (McCormick & Barnes, 2008).

3. The benefits of foundation money

We often hear about federal grants and funding from national institutes as the most prestigious; because they often are. The folks who successfully obtain funding from those sources should absolutely be commended for their accomplishments, but it would be a significant oversight to rule out funding from a lesser-known foundation that would enable you to conduct the same research. More than \$8 billion is available from foundations in this country each year to support research (Devine, 2009), and foundation grants can just as easily fund scientifically sound studies that produce essential contributions to the knowledge base in our field. Moreover, many foundations require substantially less effort in terms of the application process and often have a quicker turnaround time for award decisions.

Two foundations that have previously funded education-focused research across the nation include The William T. Grant Foundation and The Annie E. Casey Foundation. Please note that some foundations are only interested in supporting projects within certain cities or states (i.e., The Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation). The key is to be aware of which institutions are interested in funding the type of research that you want to conduct in a geographic location that works for all stakeholders. Because funders can change their research focus often, a thorough review of existing foundations and their current interests will be beneficial to your application planning.

4. Seek a good mentor for feedback

Whether you choose a new colleague or a former committee member from your previous institution, finding a mentor with a prosperous and strong history of grant support to guide you through the critical steps of obtaining extramural funding will be invaluable to your success (McCormick & Barnes, 2008). By identifying a mentor for these purposes early on in the application process, you can more readily access them if problems arise. A mentor who is an active researcher may be able to identify grant and

funding opportunities for you that you are unaware of (Langhorst & Svikis, 2007). Additionally, a mentor with an established history of funding may allow you to serve as an investigator or even as a co-principal investigator on a project to get you in the door with a particular funder (Devine, 2009). For example, if you are interested in applying to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), you may be far more likely to receive funding from them by working with a senior and experienced researcher who has successfully obtained an NIMH grant in the past. Finally, let's not underestimate how important it is to have someone be your cheerleader ("You can do it!"), your accountability ("Do it now!"), or your editor ("This is not good. Re-do it!"), and a mentor can serve as all three making your finished product a stronger application.

5. Mentally move your deadline up by 2 weeks

We cannot express how helpful it is to mentally move the deadline for your grants forward by two weeks. Unexpected problems do (and will) come up that can drastically delay your originally conceived timeline for writing and preparing the application materials. A great deal of your application will likely need to be prepared in collaboration with other people (i.e., letters of support and recommendation, the budget, a review by a university office for fiscal compliance), and since you can never predict unrelated problems such as illness or loss of child care that may delay work on the grant for you or your colleagues-you are better off to work from a self imposed earlier deadline to provide a buffer of time. Additionally, if this is your first big grant application, you are likely to underestimate how much time it will actually require to develop, edit, and finalize the required materials, so adding a two-week cushion to your deadline may be the difference between successfully submitting on time and having to wait for the next opportunity to apply.

If you cannot manage to implement this two-week safeguard, we suggest at a minimum that you make every attempt not to submit on the final day proposals are being accepted by the potential funder. It is tragic to hear stories of colleagues who missed their grant application deadlines by minutes due to computer error or were unable to obtain the required postmark date on their application because the post office was already closed when they arrived?! Don't let that happen to you. Submit the application early if at all possible-even by one day. You will sleep better having done so.

6. Be kind to your business office

The level of initial and continued involvement of the university/institution business office may surprise many first time grant writers. Employees of the business office will be instrumental for calculating budget details for your application proposal that you may know nothing about (i.e., fringe benefits and overhead costs). Then, when your proposal is successfully funded, the business office will continue to manage your budget and accounts for the duration of the project. They will know to account for important factors like changes in costs or benefits that may seem incidental but can have a significant impact on your budget. You will need the business office in order to submit grants and manage your research budgets; a little kindness can go a long way toward promoting a successful partnership. Additionally, some research focused schools and universities have their own grant development offices and offices of sponsored research that can also greatly facilitate the processes of grant development and submission-be kind to them as well, they can be instrumental in the process of successfully applying for and obtaining grant funding (Shaw, 2002).

7. Sell your proposal, sell yourself

Just like during an interview, it can be awkward to sing your own praises and openly discuss why you are the best candidate for a job-but it is necessary. It is equally important to sell your proposal and yourself in a grant application. Remember that you are trying to convince someone that your proposal is the most important, and that you are the best person to be awarded this money. To do this, you have to describe your research agenda as absolutely essential for effectively addressing the education challenge of interest to you. Then, you must demonstrate your expertise and describe your unique skills and experiences that position you (more so than anyone else) for success. You want funders to be convinced that *you* will use the award to make the biggest impact and largest contribution to the field so that they will choose your application to support. So sell your proposal and yourself well in the application....this application could be your ticket to actually conduct the research you are passionate about, so make the most of it! In all fairness though, it is a fine line between confidence and arrogance, so if you have concerns about whether or not you have crossed that line, ask your mentor (#4) for specific feedback.

8. Collaborate when you can

You are likely aware of both your strengths and challenges (weaknesses) in terms of writing and research at this point in your doctoral training or career (if not, this is another good topic for conversation with your identified mentor described in #4). The good news is that you can greatly enhance your grant funding chances by collaborating with others who have skills that compliment your own (McCormick & Barnes, 2008). For example, one of the authors was a previous school-based practitioner and can more easily identify and describe the potential barriers and implications for practice for a proposed research study. Conversely, the other author is a superior methodologist and can develop appropriate methods and a plan for data analysis to effectively answer the research question for a grant proposal. By collaborating together, the authors can combine their unique and complementary strengths to better develop a stronger grant application. A successful partnership like this one is also likely to serve you well when writing papers to disseminate results after the research has concluded.

For some larger scale and federal grant applications proposals, collaboration is almost mandatory! You need to have a statistical expert as well as a strong multidisciplinary team to demonstrate the potential of your research to work across disciplinary and professional boundaries. Good collaboration with a team like this will also be beneficial in the initial stages of grant writing as developing some large proposals can be an undertaking that would be easy to underestimate as a newer investigator.

9. Have someone review the application with fresh eyes

Once you have a good working draft of your grant proposal, try to convince someone else who is not involved in the research agenda to read it carefully through. You are keenly aware of what you are trying to say in the application, so much so that you may be unaware of sections that are too vague or would be unclear to someone who is not an expert in this topical area. By having someone with fresh eyes review your application, you will likely catch some of these problems and clarify your points, and “clarity matters” in grant proposals (Langhorst & Svikis, 2007 p. 419). NOW is the time to identify any problems within the proposal, you will kick yourself if you find the mistakes *after* you have submitted it!

10. If you don' get the award, all is not lost

It is always tough to find out that you did not get the grant you applied for. Often it seems as if blood, sweat and tears go into these proposals, so a brief pity party should be allowed. Then it will behoove you to make the most of your previous efforts and try again. There are many options for resubmitting a grant and making the most of your work, so you can decide which provide the best opportunities for you and your proposal. You can always consider a different funding source from the original that you first applied to, and submit it someplace new. Or, you can incorporate the feedback that you received when the application was rejected originally, and reapply to the same institution during the next funding cycle. If you wrote a larger grant to begin with, you may be able to reduce that proposal into several smaller studies and submit them separately to multiple funders. Additionally, if you wrote a substantial amount of new text for your grant proposal, you may be able to publish that writing as a literature review in a scholarly journal.

Conclusion

There is a clear need for grant writing skills to successfully pursue a career in academic research (Hasche, Perron & Proctor, 2009; Shaw, 2002). While new investigators will certainly need a solid foundation in theory, research methods, and statistical analysis to help them in these endeavors, we present these additional ten simple tips to further encourage and promote the successful attainment of extramural funding. These tips are in no way comprehensive, but we do have anecdotal evidence from our own past experiences. As a result, we actively adhere to these strategies now in our own grant writing efforts and wish we have known about them when first starting as new investigators after graduation from the doctoral program. We hope that these lessons help you in your future grant efforts and that you are successful in getting your applications funded as new investigators.

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