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Strength In Numbers

Megan Saunders
Kansas State University

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Strength in numbers

Early-career faculty find connections, confidence during research funding trip

Kansas State University researchers recently visited the nation's capital to pull back the curtain on what is often an intimidating process — obtaining research funding. Faculty and administrators left a lasting impression on federal funding agencies in Washington, D.C., while making valuable connections.

Noel Schulz, associate dean for research and graduate programs in the university's College of Engineering, was one of the organizers of the 2013 pilot trip. In April 2014, more than 50 faculty members traveled to the District for the second time to increase funded research at the university and encourage faculty to apply for funding.

"Early-career faculty have a chance to see that funding agency program officers are real people," Schulz said. "Researchers go from 'if I get funding' to 'when I get funding.' These trips create an excellent peer network for our early-career faculty with colleagues across campus."

Beth Montelone, associate dean of the College of Arts & Sciences, helped organize the trip. She said it is important to increase funded research at all levels to achieve Kansas State University President Kirk Schulz's goal of becoming a Top 50 public research university by 2025.

"We wanted to demonstrate that funding agencies are not intimidating or complex," Montelone said. "As administrators, we prepared the faculty to represent their research interests in a concise manner."

Faculty members from seven Kansas State University colleges met with agency representatives from the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, and the U.S. departments of Agriculture, Energy and Defense. Ernie Minton, associate director of the Agriculture Experiment Station and trip organizer, said these visits showcased the university's commitment to research.

"When you have to find a meeting room for 50 people at the

National Science Foundation, you can't help but give the impression that this institution is very serious about competing for federal research funding," said Minton.

Participants from the 2013 trip also were offered opportunities to serve on funding review boards to gain an understanding of what agencies are looking for in the review process. This year, some faculty members were even invited to serve on panels while on the NSF visit.

"We're focused on changing the research culture at Kansas State University," Minton said. "It's imperative to provide faculty with the tools they need to be successful in a competitive federal grant environment."

Linda Thurston, associate dean for the College of Education, was another primary organizer of both the pilot and secondary trips. As a former NSF program officer, she assisted faculty members and provided guidance in arranging meetings.

While data from the 2014 trip will not be compiled until 2015, Thurston's data from the pilot trip found that 85 percent of the group submitted proposals following the trip, and 20 percent of those proposals were successfully funded. More than 90 percent of the group continued to meet about research and proposals with colleagues, while 44 percent reported collaborative proposals or research. She added that several faculty members commented that meeting colleagues from other colleges was extremely beneficial from a mentoring perspective, as well.

"Participants reported significant increases in confidence, knowledge and enthusiasm for seeking external funding for their research," Thurston said. "This data demonstrate the positive effect of the trip in developing proposals for external funding, as well as the opportunity to get to know their Kansas State University colleagues."

— By Megan Saunders, Division of Communications and Marketing