

THE GRANTSMANSHIP CHALLENGE

Building the Perfect Beast

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I have spent the last 10 years in Washington, DC, at what is now called the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). My duties vary. I serve as a

liaison to multistate committees that address collaborative approaches to research and extension on various topics (in case you didn't realize that was what you were doing on those committees). I provide technical support in guiding budgetary decisions. I advise politically appointed officials (when asked). I manage capacity funds (Hatch, Smith-Lever, etc.). I work to find efficiencies in government processes (really...that's not a joke). I speak as loudly as I can for the full spectrum of the land-grant portfolio, refusing to allow NIFA's mission to reflect only research.

Perhaps the single effort that winds up taking the majority of my time is managing competitively awarded grant funds. Developing the concept; working in teams to design the request for applications (RFA); recruiting a respected and neutral panel manager; building a sufficiently diverse and technically representative peer-review panel; planning the panel; reading applications; assigning reviews (with the panel manager); monitoring reviewer's progress; conducting the peer panel; moving the recommendations of the panel through the approval process; contacting the applicants who were recommended for award; preparing the recommendation to award; monitoring progress on the planned work; reading reports; and on it goes...competitive programs don't just happen. Yet sometimes I think the applicant sees a big chain to pull and money falls in their lap. Many of these programs are *very* competitive. Especially for young faculty, it is important to understand that *good* proposals get funded! *Well-conceived* and *well-written* proposals (applications) get funded! You can do yourself a favor or three. Here are my tips to the first-time grant writer and the grant writer who has not had the success they think they should have.

Be honest with yourself. Start early. Focus on relevant concerns. Build a coalition with your colleagues and key stakeholders.

Mentoring—Everyone needs a mentor. Sometimes that is simply your accountability partner. Sometimes that mentor is formal. Other times it is an informal but understood relationship. Also, as you think about being mentored, think about mentoring. Start by being your own mentor. Mentor yourself with realism. There are things you can do for yourself that will put you at an advantage. Start by being honest with yourself. Consider the following items.

Talk to your national program leader/director for the competitive program you wish to apply to—You need to have a clear understanding of the program. An RFA is an imperfect document. It is often less informative than I wish it was, but a fully informative RFA gets long and unwieldy and is also criticized. The sweet spot of being concise is tricky. The people responsible for the programs can guide you as to how your idea fits and they may direct you to a related program where you have a better fit...but read the RFA before you call them. Don't make it a cold call. Set up a time for a call so you are sure to get the time you need for the discussion.

Don't compete against yourself—Pick a project and present it well. You should *never* submit two applications to the same program. That does not increase your chances of funding. It actually decreases your chances and makes you seem like you lack direction. Do only one application and do it exceptionally well.

Build effective teams—Many projects require varied expertise. Make sure you have that expertise represented. If you are concerned that adding appropriate expertise will dilute your budget to the point you can't do the work, then rethink your scope. You may be trying to do too much in the time you have and with the personnel you are committing to the project. If the RFA says you should include stakeholders, include stakeholders!

Build on real issues; don't create a problem that doesn't exist—You should be able to justify what you intend to do. It should be based on real concerns and supported by commodities or other stakeholders who are connected to the science or the products that might result.

Allow plenty of time for team recruitment, writing, and edits—Don't write it the night before it's due! Maybe this is an old cliché, but too many proposals read like it really happens. A late night and a pot of coffee won't make for a competitive proposal. A related concern is to make sure you put your sponsored program's office on your side. Work with them early on. Let them know you will have an application coming. Allow them to be your ally. Don't force them to work against the clock.

Spell check, grammar check—Doesn't this seem intuitive? When Word underlines a misspelling, correct it. Let someone else read your proposal before submission. They can help tell you if your approach makes sense.

Submit early—Submitting your application to the granting agency the day before it is due is a good policy. That allows for unforeseen causes for rejection and gives time for corrections. My Grant.gov submission system gets slow as you near submission deadlines and as you approach 5:00 P.M. Eastern Time. I have had to decline applications from consideration because they are five minutes late. Don't let that be you.

So, there's my pitch. Do yourselves a favor. Be honest with yourself. Start early. Focus on relevant concerns. Talk to the granting agency. Build a coalition with your colleagues and key stakeholders. When you build the perfect beast, your personal grantsmanship success rate will go up! ■