Tips for Successfully Finding Funding

What is that one thing about your proposal that assures you will receive a grant? Almost every researcher who applies for funding believes he or she has that magic silver bullet, i.e., something about their proposed research project and corresponding application that will lead to a grant award.

If there is one lesson that will help the most in successfully pursuing research funding, that lesson is: "Do whatever it takes to avoid losing." This is a life lesson that successful people tend to learn early on, but it's never too early or too late to put it into practice. How can *you* avoid losing?

Don't Make Mistakes

There are many common mistakes to avoid. One of the most frequent faults is not paying attention to the award guidelines. For instance, the solicitation may tell you that proposals must include creative, integrative and effective research and education plans and must show excellence in both education and research, but many applicants discount the importance of the education part. It is important to realize that most applications have strong research plans, and the inclusion of a strong education plan often determines whether the project gets funded.

Read the Program Solicitation Carefully

Be sure to read and follow **all** instructions. Provide exactly what is asked for, and nothing less. For example, the solicitation may tell you to include an integrated plan of research and education -- make sure you take the time to develop a strong one. If the solicitation tells you to obtain and include the written endorsement of your department chair, then do it! If your bio should contain no more than 10 references, don't put 11, but put a strong 7 or 8. If your project description is limited to a maximum number of pages, make sure you don't go over the page limit.

Develop Rapport with the Appropriate Program Officer

Run your draft plans by the program officer in the program to which you plan to submit. This is legal and highly encouraged by most program officers. They are generally extremely helpful. They might recommend changes that make your proposal stronger or more suitable, or suggest sending it to another program for which it would be a better fit.

Carry Out a Thorough Literature Review

Be sure to do a thorough literature review and cite the most important relevant work and researchers in areas covered by your proposal. Include related education areas in your search. Do not omit an important researcher, because he or she may be a peer reviewer of your application. And, never be negative in your citations; that is, propose building on previous work, not correcting it.

Explain How You Will Validate Project Objectives

Be specific about how you will measure success in your research and education plans. Clearly state your hypotheses and itemize any data you plan to collect. Make explicit connections between the hypotheses and the data. The reviewers will be looking for how you plan to demonstrate that you have done what you propose to do.

Spell Out Long-Term Goals

Spell out your long-range goals and how the proposed work will further them. While your biography should not be modest in the accounting of your accomplishments, do not overreach in describing them. Be sure to include any experience, education, publications, awards and special skills that suggest you can carry out your planned research successfully.

Have Others Review Your Draft Proposal before you Submit

Get feedback from colleagues, mentors and others in the field before submitting your proposal, and perhaps even someone you know who is good with grammar and punctuation. Nit-picky readers may be irritating but are helpful in pointing out weaknesses. Don't be obtuse to constructive criticism.

While there are no guarantees of your proposal being funded, integrating these insights into your proposal preparation will unquestionably improve your odds. These simple steps can help you to successfully create and build a career in academic research.