

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

MAY BE INEXPENSIVE BUT WITH A BIG RETURN!

Reading Robert Porter's article, "More Paper Out the Door: Ten Inexpensive Ways to Stimulate Proposal Development" (*RMR* 19: 64-73 [2011]), I was impressed with his eloquent argument for working with investigators in what has been called "pre-pre award" or proposal development. His ten inexpensive ways, neatly summarized in a table, can (and should) be carried out in any type of institution that wants to increase its grant productivity and awards. Too often, however, universities do not offer such services or offer only a few, citing lack of staff, lack of faculty interest or participation, or a belief that such activity should be conducted at the departmental level. I would argue that this support not only should become part of the central grants function but should be expanded, in ways I will address below.

Those of us who have been working in proposal development long before the recent interest that he cites can document the success of such initiatives. For example, he writes that home-grown grant workshops have the advantage of being

tailored to "the specialized needs of academic researchers" and consequently are "likely to yield positive returns at a much lower cost" than external grant writing workshops or those offered by consultants.

Let me offer a few examples from my own experience to reinforce that idea. For the last five years I have presented a workshop on preparing NSF CAREER grant applications, a program that is targeted at junior faculty on the tenure track. These are very prestigious but highly competitive grants that essentially support a faculty member through tenure. Our STEM faculty members have enthusiastically embraced the workshops, resulting in a marked increase in the number, quality, and success rate of these proposals. However, we reinforce the strategies offered in the workshop with individualized follow-up, including telephone calls, e-mails, appointments, and multiple readings of drafts.

At a previous university I developed a workshop on "Strategies for Effective Fellowship Applications," targeted to

faculty in the humanities, education, and social sciences, who typically apply for fellowships to supplement sabbaticals or to conduct research leading to books or monographs. For these disciplines there are few large-scale research opportunities; fellowships provide necessary time away from teaching, research travel, and sometimes a research assistant.

However, fellowships are very competitive and usually are awarded directly to the individual. Consequently, many universities do not count fellowships in their research awards and provide little or no support for developing strong applications since the university does not submit the proposal and does not directly benefit from the award.

In these workshops, faculty were encouraged and motivated to apply for very prestigious fellowships; again, these efforts met with great success. Our grants office also provided the same services for these individual grants that we did for those submitted by the institution, including advice, editing, and, in some cases, copying and mailing the applications. I maintain that these actions should be included in proposal development and research support if an institution really wants to grow its grant activity and support faculty research across all disciplines, not just those that yield large grant awards that provide indirect costs.

Another inexpensive but highly effective service is to help new faculty develop individual strategic funding plans. Many new faculty, especially in STEM disciplines, spend the first year building a lab—a very time-consuming and unfamiliar experience. As graduate students they may have participated in their advisor's grant proposals, but few of them are prepared to write their own research applications. They also may not realize that they need to begin with small grants before a funding agency is willing to invest in them for three to five years.

An individual strategic plan, laid out for their first three years, helps them think through a succession of grants, beginning small and working toward the National Institutes of Health (NIH) R01 or the National Science Foundation (NSF) three- or four-year project. All it takes is one meeting, using a prepared template and a well-informed research administrator who knows the grants and deadlines in that academic field. Regular follow-up communication from a research administrator also reinforces the timeline and the available support services. A status meeting at the end of the second academic year offers a good opportunity to review progress, make adjustments to the plan, and motivate the faculty member to continue to develop research proposals.

Yes, such efforts are labor-intensive, but as Dr. Porter notes in the section on Coaching and Editing, “the need for assistance tails off rapidly once the researcher catches on.” Time and labor invested in young faculty will pay off for years to come, building an early set of best

practices and, even more important, confidence in their ability to apply successfully for grants throughout their academic career.

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