What Makes a Good Proposal?

By Spencer R. Baker and Zina T. McGee

Good proposals stem from good concepts that convince others that you can perform the necessary work to successfully complete a project. Research suggests that the best proposals are those to which reviewers respond, "Why didn't I think of that!" Any proposal should be written in sufficient detail so the reviewers will clearly understand: (1) what the project hopes to accomplish, (2) that the project personnel have the required expertise to accomplish the goals and objectives, (3) the national impact and cost effectiveness of the project, and (4) the evaluation and dissemination plans. Once you have an idea, begin to think of how you can draft this into a proposal. Start with a clear idea of the goals and objectives of the project based on previous or current research. A critical element in this process is that you have adequate foundation of preliminary data to launch a grant application. Be sure to read each program announcement carefully before you begin contacting program officers to see if your research fits with the agenda of their programs. Once a connection has been established, the program officers can help steer your proposal to the specific program within their agency, and they may further indicate the needs of their program that may extend beyond the agency's request. They may also see you as a possible reviewer for future proposals and panels.

If you have been funded before, it is imperative to report the results of your previous funding. Use at least 1-3 pages to describe the results from your previous support. The amount of detail that you place in a proposal often depends on your history. A publication record and proven ability to conduct research lends greater credibility to your proposal. If you have not published or published very little in your field, this makes it more difficult to receive new funding. Funding panels often suggest that if you have no track record or a limited one, it is important that you show that you can solve problems. They have also suggested that before writing a grant, make the first goal to send papers out for publication consideration to establish more credibility in your field. Panelists agree that proposals, particularly those based on collaborative efforts, should present one theme, and you need to demonstrate that you can solve the problems you propose using a specialized case or example. Interdisciplinary projects are generally well-regarded and can improve the research capacity and competitiveness for future projects. It is always best to provide a complete summary of the methodological tools that you anticipate using to solve the problem. Be clear about what instruments are needed to

evaluate the project, and, if applicable, highlight the need for collaborations to make desired improvements in the plan.

Regarding how much detail to place in a grant, investigators have been cautioned against providing too much background instead of clearly stating what is proposed. Reviewers want to know that the project can be completed, and most proposals should cover a research plan for at least three years. It is helpful to reviewers to see that you have developed a time frame to show adequate planning with realistic strategies regarding the program's implementation. It has also been suggested that grant proposals be thought of as proposals for several papers. The first paper, the preliminary results section, should be essentially done with a clear idea of the next several papers.

As you write, keep in mind that a final version of a proposal will have gone through several drafts and revisions, so never plan on writing a final version in a first draft. Grant preparation can take many months, so you need to have a "big picture" idea for several papers, writing, revising and refining a grant that must be polished by the time it is submitted. When you write your proposal it may sometimes seem as though you are stating the obvious, therefore it is important to spell out what is new, what has already been done, and what is in the literature. The proposal must show something new, innovative, and useful to the broader discipline. Panel members have often recommended that you focus on one good idea instead of spreading the proposal across too many subjects. It is always best to write the summary section last; this may be the one piece that everyone reads.

During the discussion of your application during peer review, other reviewers will ask primary reviewers questions about your application. In some instances, they will read only your summary (abstract), significance, and specific aims when applicable. However, all reviewers are important since each gets one vote. Therefore it is crucial to remember that you are addressing multiple audiences with your proposal. Explain your research ideas at a higher level for any non-specialists, and provide other details for the experts. If the grant is awarded, make the best possible use of the funds by disseminating your results through publications and presentations. If the proposal is not funded, consider all reviews and comments objectively and follow the guidelines for revision and resubmission if applicable. Many project awards are made from proposals that were carefully revised and resubmitted after having been declined initially.

Announcements

The Grant Training Center (GTC), located in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan area, conducts introductory to specialized grant training for academic researchers, educators, program planners, public sector and nonprofit professionals and administrators. The Proposal Writing I Workshop schedule for the month of February 2009 includes sessions at the Hudson County Schools of Technology (February 11-13), Georgia Institute of Technology (February 23-25), and Portland State University (February 24-26). For more information, please access the Center's website at http://www.granttrainingcenter.com.