Keys to Grants Success: FAQs

Finding funding sources

Q: How do I find a funding source for my research or special project?

A: The University of Detroit Mercy subscribes to several searchable grants databases which list available funding opportunities.

InfoEd SPIN is a comprehensive, searchable database listing both government and private sources of funding. You can subscribe to at www.infoed.org and set up email alerts. They will send you a daily digest listing all funding opportunities that match your parameters.

The Foundation Directory Online, https://fconline.foundationcenter.org/, is a searchable database of foundation and corporate funding sources. Records summarize the foundation's interests, grant awards and guidelines. Records also link to the foundation's websites. The username is UDMgrantseeker and the password is UDMresearch. Please be sure to log out when you are finished, because only nine people can be on at any given time.

www.grants.gov lists all federal funding opportunities. They also have an RSS feed, as do many agencies.

Also, feel free to send a summary of your research interests to the OSPRA. I will keep an eye out for any funding opportunities that look like a match. I am also happy to help you set up funding alerts in SPIN, Foundation Directory Online, grants.gov or RSS feeds.

Vetting funding sources

Q: How can I determine whether a grant application is worth my time, or if the chance of success is practically zero?

A: Begin with the RFP. For instance, if the RFP states that they are only making one award nation-wide, then the agency probably has a strong idea of who that will be before they release the RFP.

Federal agencies list their funding success rates by mechanism and program. For instance, the current success rate of a National Institute of Health R01 proposal on the first submission is around 13%. Most researchers are not funded on their first try, but use the reviewer feedback to revise and resubmit and often get funded on their second try. Success rates on the R01 increase to 34% on resubmissions.

Federal agencies (and many foundations) list their funded proposals on their websites. NSF, NIH and ED all have searchable databases where you can see abstracts of prior funded proposals. When you look at the list, you can see if your project seems to fit with what has been funded. Also, you can see if any small, Primarily Undergraduate Institutions like us have been funded. If

all the awardees are large research institutions, then that particular opportunity may not be the best fit.

Also, many Project Directors and Principal Investigators are very forthcoming. I have written many PI/PDs and requested copies of their full proposals, and they have sent them to me. (With the caveat that if there are intellectual property issues involved, they are less likely to want to share.)

Asking someone from the Grants Review Team to vet the RFP may also prove helpful---especially those who have experience with the funding source.

Q: Do grant reviewers favor large, public research-focused universities to award grants to (compared to small faith-based institutions)?

A: Sometimes. Sometimes being small works in our favor. There are several grant programs geared toward smaller institutions (the NIH AREA R15 grant, for instance). Several NSF grant opportunities allow small institutions to include a Research at Undergraduate Institutions (RUI) component, which ensures that a PUI reviewer will be included.

It is always a good idea to look at what has been funded to see if other PUIs have been successful with a particular opportunity.

Also, sometimes a collaborator from a large research university can strengthen a proposal.

It should also be noted that UDM can be particularly attractive to various federal and foundation funding agencies specifically because of its mission and geographic location. In addition, because funders wish to spread their funding as wide as possible, UDM is in a good position to seek funding. Most importantly, funders are most interested in who can make the strongest argument—in terms of project design, capabilities (PI and institutional infrastructure), evaluation, and potential impact—if this is present, the specific institution matters little.

Q: How can I maximize my likelihood of grant acceptance, while still carrying my teaching and service loads?

Beginning with a smaller grant opportunity with higher success rates could be an option, such as a grant from a foundation or corporation. Foundations can also be more likely to meet with you to see what you are doing for themselves. (Please keep Yvonne Lindstrom from University Advancement in the loop if you contact a Foundation.)

Also, it is never too early to begin work on a grant proposal. Be sure to allow at least 10 weeks so that you don't become overwhelmed as the deadline becomes close. Ask colleagues who have been successful in the past to review, and make sure they have enough time to review carefully.

Finally, with federal funding success rates around 15%, understand that very few faculty are funded the first time they apply. Plan to rewrite the proposal 2-3 times.

Grantsmanship/Grant Review

Q: Are there any tips or secrets to making a grant stand out to reviewers?

A: There is an element of marketing involved, even with federal grants. It is a good idea to start with a good hook so that reviewers' level of enthusiasm begins high.

Be sure to read the mission and purpose of the organization and tie your project directly to it. Also keep in mind their review criteria (i.e., significance/intellectual merit, innovation, broader impacts). What impact will your project have? Why is it important? Making sure your approach/methodology is clear is also important. Work plans/timelines/logic models can be helpful in this respect.

Small things like appropriate sub-headers, enough white space on the pages, and some figures and graphs to break up the text can make a lot of difference.

Q: One reviewer sounded like he/she missed the whole point of the proposal. What can I do to avoid this, or can this be avoided?

A: It is imperative that each element of the proposal, including each question, is clearly answered. Especially in the case of federal grant proposals, when reviewers use standard evaluation forms that mirror the proposal, failure to directly and fully respond to an item can result in a significant loss of points. Similarly, for RFP's in which the funding purpose is somewhat prescribed, be certain that the proposal is fully aligned with the requirements both in content and philosophy.

Also, it is a good idea to obtain feedback from colleagues to make sure your intent is clear. Asking for feedback from readers both inside and outside your discipline can help you understand how your proposal reads. Be sure to give them two weeks to read it, and yourself at least a week to make revisions based on their feedback.

If the agency provides the opportunity to suggest reviewers, do so. While you can't suggest anyone with a potential conflict of interest (such as collaborators), you can recommend people in your field who are likely to be familiar with your work.

Finally, bear in mind that reviewers are human. They may be tired or in a bad mood when they sit down to read your proposal and there is nothing to be done about that. If there is a consensus with a majority of reviewers and then one seems to be wildly different, then it is probably safe to set that one aside when you begin revising.

Q: If I submit a revised version of the proposal, can I/should I use the same title?

A: If you are submitting it as a Resubmission (as in the case of the NIH), yes, absolutely. If you are submitting as a new grant, then you can if it makes sense. Keep in mind, though, that if you are submitting as a new grant, then you will likely have entirely different reviewers who will not know what changes have been made based on feedback.

Resources

Q: How do we access a template that would have a lot of the university background information that would go into a grant?

A: The OSPRA has many templates which include such information. Email Cate at caldwecr@udmercy.edu. I am also happy to help facilitate the procurement of Institutional Research data. Our IR director Shelley Wagnon would like at least three weeks lead time for data (such as enrollment, retention, graduation, etc.)

Q: Who can help with statistical support?

Internally, Professor of Mathematics Xiaohui (Kathy) Zhong has expressed willingness to provide statistical help on grant projects, as has Assistant Professor of Business Administration Mithu Bhattacharya. The OSPRA also keeps a list of external consultants.

Approaching the Program Officer

Q: How can I approach the program director in order to improve the proposal given the thin feedback?

If possible, connect with the program officer from the beginning. Once you have a one-page overview or a paragraph detailing your concept, reach out to them to set up a time to discuss. They can give valuable feedback on direction before you even finish writing.

Likewise, after you receive reviewer feedback, try to set up a time to go over it with them. They may be able to provide insights that the reviewer did not.

Some program officers are more accessible than others. If someone is not getting back to you, see if there are other program officers listed in the solicitation and try one of them, instead.

Sometimes the program officer will review your proposal in advance and give feedback, such as for the National Endowment for the Humanities. Usually if this is an option, it will be spelled out in the guidelines. If this is an option, I would strongly recommend taking it, though it will push your deadline forward by six weeks.

Budget

Q: When requesting funding is it preferable to ask for the full amount offered or is it better to request less?

A: Ask for what you need. The RFP will establish the budget limit, if any, which all applicants must adhere to. Barring that, you don't need to struggle to keep the budget low. You want to make sure you have all the resources you need to carry out the project. Sometimes the agency will come back and ask you to reduce the budget, and if you are already bare bones, you might

not be able to conduct the project. However, I would advise keeping the budget free of bloat. Costs should be reasonable.

Tenure/Promotion

Q: Do failed grant applications help support tenure and promotion applications, or is it a waste of time?

A: Not all grant applications are equal. For instance, the promotion and tenure committees understand that a proposal to the National Institutes of Health for an R01 grant is a considerable amount of work, and that they are very competitive. A scholarly proposal to the NSF or NIH, even if unfunded, would help support an application for tenure/promotion, while an unfunded application for a smaller grant might not.

A longtime member of the University Promotion and Tenure Committee said that "faculty should add all grants submitted regardless of funding status in their dossier -- they do need to make it very clear which grants were funded and which were not funded, but being on the University P&T committee in the past, it is helpful to see a faculty's productivity in writing grants and his/her willingness to not be successful since we all know you don't get funded every time you apply."