

EDITORIAL

Introduction

This issue of RINAH features one of our occasional guest editorials, this one from Dr. Margaret Grey, who offers her expert advice to new researchers about how to seek funding, a message that seems timely as NIH, and NINR in particular, experience somewhat higher levels of funding in the current budget year. Her comments are adapt-

ed from remarks made on April 9, 1999, at the 11th Annual Meeting of the Eastern Nursing Research Society in New York City.

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Editor

Top 10 Tips For Successful Grantsmanship

This list represents 10 key areas that I wish someone had told me about when I was starting on my career as a nurse researcher (seasoned by 10 years as a reviewer).

1. *Dream big, start small.* Little projects have a way of growing into bigger projects in a program of research. Students and junior faculty members sometimes believe that those of us who have been successful started with large grants. This is rarely true; for example, my first grant was for \$500 and it barely covered copying costs. So start with smaller scope projects that can be used to build evidence for the larger projects to come. Remember, Rome wasn't built in a day, and nursing science will not be built on one project.

2. *Have an important problem.* Convince the audience that your problem is important. Use data on incidence, prevalence, and sequellae of the problem to make the case for reviewers. Even if you are working with an "orphan disease" where there are fewer affected subjects, you can put the study in a larger context. Reviewers want to be assured that the work you do (and that they pay for) will contribute to more than improving the investigator's health.

3. *Talk it up.* Call program staff in agencies and foundations, or write letters of inquiry. Discuss your ideas—make sure they want to receive your proposal. And while you're at it, listen to what they say. If they say, "Be sure to include 'blah-blah,'" you'd better include "blah-blah"! Similarly, if you can't describe to the program staff what you want to do succinctly and clearly, then you probably aren't ready to write a coherent grant application.

4. *Like Item 3: READ the rules, then follow them.* Read the instructions. Then read them again and do what they say. Follow font guidelines and page limits. If they suggest an outline or headings, use them, in the order they are given in the guide-

lines. Remember, most reviewers are middle-aged and either used to or avoiding bifocals, so it's not wise to use the smallest font! Don't ask them to have to find the significant parts of your proposal. Do your homework. Often Web sites and requests for applications (RFAs) will tell you who the reviewers are likely to be. Look up their work and get an idea what their biases might be.

5. *Write to your passion, but listen to the RFA.* New grant writers often ask whether they should stick to a plan for a program for research or take a detour to meet an RFA. The answer is, "It depends." If you are building a program of research and the next project is obvious and feasible, then go for it. Most agencies devote the majority of their monies to investigator-initiated proposals, so the odds are with you. Sometimes, however, it pays to respond to a particular RFA. For us, we had been conducting a series of descriptive studies of psychosocial adjustment to diabetes in children that we expected to continue for a while. We weren't really thinking that we were ready to do an intervention study when an RFA came out for pilot projects in minority populations. We used that opportunity to develop and pilot the coping skills training program we are currently studying in several groups (Grey, Boland, Davidson, & Tamborlane, 1999).

6. *Grants are like sponges: They will expand to fill all the time you have.* Grant writing will take up all the time you have available to work on producing them. In other words, if you start 6 months ahead, you will get more opportunities for review and feedback, but you will still be working on it the week it's due. This tip doesn't mean don't plan ahead and start early. It does mean you need to plan ahead and use your time effectively.

7. *A corollary: Write, write again, critique, and write again.* It takes multiple drafts to make sure you are making your case clearly. Use experts for

consultation as well as people outside your area of expertise who can help you see gaps in your logic. Grant writing is not an exercise in fancy prose—be straightforward. Use the same words every time you talk about the same thing. For example, if you are interested in “depressive symptoms,” use that term every time, not “mood disturbance” or “depression” sometimes.

8. *Show how your variables go together.* Use conceptual or theoretical frameworks to tie the proposed variables together from aims/questions through methods. Don’t force variables or frameworks. I am often asked whether one needs to use a nursing framework. Again, the best answer is to use the framework that best fits the work you propose.

9. *Don’t propose more than a budget can handle.* Be realistic and honest. If a project is really going to take four \$5000 grants to get done, say so. Describe how you will accomplish the work if you don’t get all the support you apply for. Include consultation (even if not paid) to assure that reviewers know that you know your limits. If the budget is too small for the scope of the project, the reviewers cannot know that you know it’s small unless you tell them.

10. *Keep a sense of humor and humility.* Do the best you can given the circumstances. Understand that reviewers are only as smart as their experiences, and they can’t read between the lines. It’s your job to help them understand your work. If they don’t understand what you’re trying to tell them, it’s usually a combination of their expertise

and your clarity (and some folks would say that this order is backward; Fuller, 1982). So don’t get mad; fix it and send it back.

If you incorporate all these, and do your job well, you can look forward to a long and productive grant-writing career. Of course, writing good grant applications does not guarantee that you will get funded, or do good research, but the effort that is put into writing quality grants often translates into quality research. Happy hunting!

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