More Paper out the Door:
Ten Inexpensive Ways to Stimulate Proposal Development

Robert Porter
University of Tennessee

ABSTRACT

Conventional wisdom says that the way to win more awards is to get researchers writing more proposals. Yet many incentives designed to stimulate proposal development can be hard on the bottom line, especially those that pay researchers for their time or to attend grant-writing workshops presented by outside consulting firms. This paper presents ten inexpensive strategies the research office can use to stimulate researchers to write more and better proposals. Most of these techniques require little more than efficient use of existing institutional resources.

INTRODUCTION

In classic management theory, some functions are "line," which means they relate directly to the goods or services produced by the organization, while others are "staff," meaning they exist primarily or exclusively to support the line functions. In a university, teaching and research are line functions. Research administration, like human resources, has traditionally been a staff function. Our typical role has been to support, facilitate, and enable our institutions' researchers in their efforts to find money for their scholarly work. Krauser (2003) described our ideal role as that of an institutional servant-leader. In the overall flow of events, however, much of our work has been downstream, as most pre-award specialists first engage researchers at the point when a grant proposal is nearly ready to be submitted to a sponsor. If the proposal turns out to be successful (and a declining percentage of them are), then our post-award staff swing into action. For research administration to

lead in an increasingly competitive environment, a good case can be made that we need to focus more of our energies upstream, where researchers may or may not be thinking of writing a proposal in the first place.

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A FIELD IN TRANSITION

In recent years, research administration has been transitioning to a mixed "line/staff" model, where newly hired proposal development specialists have been actively engaged in a variety of initiatives designed to get more researchers writing more and better proposals. As evidence of this national trend, one need only cite the creation and rapid growth of the National Organization of Research Development Professionals (NORDP). Now in its third year, NORDP currently lists 271 members from 154 institutions, and has become an effective national forum for the exchange of best practices related to research development (Falk-Krzesinski, 2011; NORDP, 2011). A quick survey of topics presented at annual meetings of NCURA and SRA shows an increasing emphasis on research development, from the practical skills of grant writing to the subtleties of forming and facilitating new interdisciplinary research teams.

TEN STRATEGIES

Here are ten ways to get more winning proposals coming in the pre-award door. Accompanying the rationale for each strategy, there are practical tips for implementing and managing the endeavor.

Table 1. Ten Strategies to Stimulate Proposal Development

1. Home-grown Workshops	6. Mentor Matchmaking
2. Visits by Grant Program Officers	7. Research Forums
3. Awards Newsletters	8. Online Tutorials
4. Collections of Successful Proposals	9. Getting on Review Panels
5. Departmental Retreats	10. Coaching and Editing

1. Home-grown Workshops

Grant writing, like any skill set, can be intimidating to those who lack confidence in their ability to produce a quality product. Because it is intensely competitive with a greater chance of losing than winning, researchers are faced with the prospect of investing their precious time to no avail. Workshops can go a long way to reduce or eliminate such disincentives. Recognizing this, many institutions send researchers to grant-writing institutes or bring consultants on campus to provide the training. Either approach can be inordinately expensive with questionable returns, as many such programs are typically targeted to broad audiences such as public school educators and nonprofit organizations, and not to the specialized needs of academic researchers. Home-grown workshops, taught by any combination of research office personnel and grant-savvy faculty, are more likely to yield positive returns at a much lower cost. Beginning workshops on basic grant-writing skills should be offered on a regular basis, supplemented periodically by those focusing on specific funding agencies. Especially popular are presentations by successful grant writers and copies of winning proposals (Porter, 2004).

2. Visits by Grant Program Officers

Researchers are stimulated by updates from grant program officers (POs) at major federal agencies, many of whom are encouraged to present information at professional meetings and to make campus visits. While they sometimes balk at traveling to a single institution, it is a different matter entirely if you can invite them to a multi-institutional gathering. Contact research administrators at nearby institutions. Raise the prospect of co-sponsoring a grants conference and offer to be the host institution. With just a few positive responses, you can present POs with the prospect of presenting to a regional grants conference. Your success rate will be higher if you address your first inquiry to high-ranking administrators at the agency. They typically pass along your invitation to designees who now have a stronger incentive to accept, and these are the people you wanted anyway. You will get much more out of their visit if you plan for double-duty: Start with morning presentations to the assembled group, then arrange afternoon meetings with individual researchers. To be scheduled for a private meeting, investigators must first send you concise abstracts of their proposed research, which are then forwarded to the POs prior to their arrival. Even when the proposed project falls outside the POs' program expertise, it is surprising how often they can offer constructive advice. And here is the good news for your budget: By federal rule, they cannot accept honoraria and the government must pay their travel expenses. (An exception is a working lunch, for which high-ranking administrators at your institution might be willing to pay.)

3. Awards Newsletters

Despite the ever-increasing emphasis on interdisciplinary research, many investigators operate within self-imposed silos of their own departments and

laboratories (Rhoten, 2004). Frequent communications about your institution's overall funding activity can do a great deal to force cracks in these walls. Try sending a periodic hard-copy newsletter to all faculty and administrators listing recent awards by principal investigator, sponsor agency and total amount. Readers will quickly see that most large awards are interdisciplinary.

Group the listings by department and/or college. Once a quarter, compile the awards data into bar graphs showing key trends, e.g., number of proposals submitted, total awards, comparisons with last year, etc. Each year, publish the "top ten" awards (or whatever number best reflects your institutional size). The impact of this simple tool can be surprising, and the benefits are many: (a) writers of winning proposals are recognized and celebrated, regardless of the size of their awards; (b) investigators learn about successful principal investigators (PIs) who might become future collaborators; (c) investigators learn about funding sources they were not aware of before; (d) administrators can see how their departments and colleges compare with others, and how they are trending; (e) the whole institution gains a heightened sense of its current research portfolio; and finally, (f) the research office is credited with compiling and disseminating the data.

The University of Tennessee has posted a variety of newsletter formats on its [research office web site](#). A word of caution: You can expect researchers and administrators (especially those with low numbers) to scrutinize this list and raise questions about how the data are compiled and reported. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as long as you can justify your procedures and apply them consistently. And be forewarned: Any change in your data-reporting method data will only result in a new list of detractors!

4. Collections of Successful Proposals

Reading successful grant proposals has a powerful influence on beginning writers (Friedland & Folt, 2009; Henson, 2004; Porter, 2004). Not only do they pick up valuable lessons on writing style; they also learn about possible new funding sources and how to mold their proposal to fit a particular grant program. Finally, they identify colleagues who can be a font of useful information about how to interact with sponsors and with specific program officers. Most grant winners like to share their successes, and reading their winning proposals can be an effective way for a newcomer to start a mentoring relationship. To post a sample collection online, start by forming a committee of experienced senior researchers representing a range of disciplines. Distribute a list of recent awards to your institution and ask the committee to select a diverse sampling of research themes and funding agencies. As a professional courtesy, request permission from the selected PIs to post their proposals on a secure web site, accessible only to researchers in your institution. A few PIs may perceive this as encouraging future competition, but most will be glad to accommodate. Be sure to promote the

availability of the collection and keep it updated.

The research office web site at the University of Tennessee features a Grantseekers Tool Kit, a collection of helpful materials that includes successful proposals from a variety of sources.

What if your store of institutional proposals is limited? Copies of winning proposals in many disciplines can be purchased from The Grant Center at reasonable rates. The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases has posted four recent R01 proposals with reviewers' comments using the new NIH per review scoring system. A well-written NSF proposal is also available on the web site hyperlinked here. Finally, successful proposals can be obtained directly from federal agencies under the Freedom of Information Act with a simple request, but be prepared to wait four to six weeks for the documents to arrive, with sensitive information redacted, such as investigator salaries and intellectual property.

5. Departmental Retreats

Department heads at research institutions are always eager to expand their portfolios of sponsored projects, and annual retreats provide excellent opportunities for grants specialists to provide useful information, including updates on funding opportunities, data on proposal award activity, and a review of the support services offered by the research office. To get on the agenda, let department heads know about recent grants conferences you have attended, such as those sponsored by

NSF and NIH, and offer to present relevant updates at their retreats. Even if you have not attended a recent conference, these agencies often post slides of key conference presentations on their web sites; you can pick and choose which ones would be of most interest to any given audience. Before the retreat, search funding databases such COS, InfoEd SPIN, and the Foundation Directory Online for grants targeted to the discipline at hand. Select a dozen or synopses of programs that appear most promising and distribute copies at the retreat. You will be surprised to see how many faculty are unaware of programs from major agencies that are repeated on an annual basis.

6. Mentor Matchmaking

Young investigators can find themselves in a lonely "sink or swim" environment when it comes to sponsored research, and many are hesitant to approach experienced grant writers on their own. Unfortunately, institutions that provide structured mentoring systems are more the exception than the rule—an odd irony, since senior researchers, especially those in academic settings, are usually willing to share their wisdom if the circumstances are right. So what are the "right circumstances" for low cost mentoring? First and foremost, recognize that busy senior researchers are jealous guardians of their time. To be effective as a matchmaker, the grants specialist must be both coach and cheerleader. Start by working with the new investigator to clarify promising research ideas and possible funding sources. The

next step is to identify which senior researcher(s) could be a helpful resource. Then contact the senior person and ask for a brief meeting. Escort the junior person to the session to facilitate the dialogue and keep the meeting focused on key questions: Does the research idea appear to be fundable? Which specific grant program in the sponsor agency should be targeted? Does the senior person have personal contacts in that office? Does s/he have any suggestions for developing a strong research design? Would s/he be willing to look at a one- or two-page project overview? After the session, prod the junior person to send immediately a well-written thank-you, with the brief project summary attached. (Be aware that inertia in professional relationships settles in quickly, so success in the matchmaking role often entails some degree of nagging.)

7. Research Forums

An institution's research portfolio cannot grow substantially if most proposals going out the door are the small, single investigator type. Major multidisciplinary proposals start with researchers sparking ideas off one another, and this cannot happen if investigators remain siloed in their labs. Moreover, whole departments can be locked into a traditional, discipline-driven view of their research potential, too narrow to be competitive in today's theme-driven, interdisciplinary funding environment. The research office can provide a valuable service by serving as a kind of "executive producer" of research forums focused on promising

interdisciplinary issues, such as green engineering, climate change, and the economic potential of social networking. Of special interest are themes highlighted in the strategic plans of major funding agencies such as the National Science Foundation (2011), the National Institutes of Health (2011), and the U.S. Department of Energy (2011). Coordinating a research forum is time-consuming but not particularly costly, even if no registration fee is charged. Little academic expertise is needed on your part as the more experienced researchers are very good at identifying appropriate speakers and persuading them to come. Once the agenda is set, a little promotion to nearby institutions will usually result in good attendance, as everyone is looking for sponsor updates and future collaborators. The effort does require a strong capacity to plan ahead, a keen eye for detail, excellent communication skills, and the ability to follow through on all assignments—precisely the skills of many folks in the research office.

8. Online Tutorials

There is a wealth of fine grant-writing tutorials online, but few new investigators know where they are. The best grant writing tips for NIH proposals can be found on the web site of the National Institution of Allergenic and Infectious Diseases. (These materials are also useful for USDA proposals.) The Foundation Center offers an excellent short course on writing proposals to private foundations. A quick Internet search will locate helpful guides to other

government and private agencies. Hot links to several concise, highly readable materials should be featured on the research office's web page and promoted via the awards newsletter and other channels of communication. The Grantseekers Tool Kit page at the University of Tennessee features numerous guides, articles and manuals—some of general interest, others focused on specific funding agencies.

9. Helping Researchers Get on Review Panels

Serving on a review panel is like a graduate education in grant writing: This is where researchers learn to step out of their academic boxes and write to the needs and expectations of the folks who have a great deal to say about where the money goes (Porter, 2005). Because the major agencies need thousands of new reviewers each year, grant program officers are constantly on the lookout for fresh talent. When young investigators have honed their core research theme into a brief two or three paragraph project summary, they are well advised to send that all important first e-mail to the appropriate PO, inquiring whether the basic idea is a good fit with the program (Porter, 2009). If the response is encouraging, the next e-mail should express a desire to serve on a review panel, and include a brief résumé with picture attached. It is not uncommon for young investigators to be invited to serve, either on a panel or as a mail reviewer, even before they have submitted their first proposal.

Though trips to visit with POs can be expensive for researchers in some locations,

those within driving distance should do this on a regular basis. Experienced grant writers view these pre-proposal discussions as critical to their success. Newcomers to the sponsored research game are unnecessarily hesitant about this, as they are uncertain how they will be received. In fact, most POs are highly receptive to such meetings, for practical reasons:

1) Listening to new ideas for research can be an effective way for a deskbound program officer to learn about possible new directions in the field.
2) If the research idea is not a good fit, these conversations can reduce the number of noncompetitive proposals that must be processed.
3) If it is a good fit, the PO can offer helpful tips to shape the proposal for success.
4) Such meetings are a good way to recruit new talent for future review panels.

If travel to the DC area is not practical, new investigators should be encouraged to look for grant program officers at meetings of their academic disciplines, as POs are encouraged to attend such events.

10. Coaching and Editing

Many, if not most, young researchers struggle with grant writing. Even those with impressive publishing records can find it frustrating to shift from dense academic prose to a concise, energetic proposal writing style. This is where the grants specialist as a coach and editor can provide help that could make the difference between failure and success. Good grant writing is mostly a matter of rewriting, and if the core idea is fundable, it is well worth

the time invested to turn weak writing into a persuasive presentation. Though coaching and editing are labor-intensive at first, the need for assistance tails off rapidly once the researcher catches on to the simpler, more free-flowing style of a winning proposal.

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SUMMARY

Many of the most effective ways to encourage proposal development are inexpensive. By extending a helping hand at the most critical phase of researchers' thinking—whether or not to write a proposal—a proactive research office exerts a powerful upstream influence on the overall flow of the institution's research activity. This alone can provide a healthy and much-needed boost to the myriad activities associated with traditional pre- and post-award research administration.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Porter, Ph. D., is Director of Research Development, University of Tennessee, where he conducts grant-writing workshops for faculty and graduate students. Over the past ten years he has presented papers and workshops on grant writing at national conferences and has published prize-winning articles in the *Journal of Research Administration* and *Research Management Review*. Dr. Porter has previously taught at Virginia Tech, Swarthmore College, and Eastern Washington University. He holds graduate degrees in Speech Communications from the University of Michigan.