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Essay on learning from rejected grant applications

Submitted by Russell Olwell on May 8, 2013 - 3:00am

"I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed."

--Michael Jordan

You are going to get 0 percent of the grants you do not apply for.

In spite of that statistic, many faculty members fear rejection and failure in grant writing, to the point that it keeps them out of the competition. This is too bad, as many academics have fundable ideas, interesting program proposals, and valuable service projects that go un-submitted because of fear of failure. And the cost to those faculty members goes beyond the money left on the table. With level or cut budgets the norm at universities, more and more faculty members are dependent on grant support to advance research and program agendas, and are being evaluated based on their ability to obtain external support.

The ability to take rejection and use it to improve your grant writing practice is the difference between many faculty members who write one proposal and give up, and those who persist to become funded principal investigators (PIs). This level of rejection can be difficult on faculty, who often earn straight As all through school, complete a publishable dissertation, and have little experience with professional rejection until they are in the faculty ranks. The finality of rejection by granting agencies is sometimes shocking -- most journals give you the chance to revise and resubmit, but funding agencies can seemingly execute your proposal without comment.

But rejection is part of the world of grant writing, and funders – government or private -- will never give you 100 percent on a proposal; there will always be negative feedback on any proposal, and often few positive words to balance it out. The ability to successfully incorporate rejection and failure into your overall grant-writing process can be a critical factor in your success, as well as your psychological health.

The first key to dealing with rejection and negative feedback is to plan for it in advance and build it into your schedule. If you are interested in being funded by a program, you need to commit to applying for it at least twice (if not three times). This does not mean that the first attempt is half-hearted, but that the plan is to apply, get feedback, and use that feedback to strengthen the proposal. For a large, multidisciplinary team grant, it is not worth the effort to only apply once, either on the part of the principal investigators or the grants/research office.

Counterintuitively, you may need to seek out negative feedback in advance of submitting a proposal. Building a team within your university or bringing in an outside reader to read and score proposals a few weeks before they are due can make a world of difference in the final competition. These individuals are brought together specifically to find all weaknesses in the proposal before it leaves the door, in the spirit of improvement.

Caryn Charter, Eastern Michigan University's director of the Office of Research Development, brings together faculty and staff from across campus to pre-review key proposals, helping to boost success rates on our campus. Once notice of rejection is received, contact the program officer for any copies of reviewer comments available. Look over the comments systematically, and list out areas where reviewers found weaknesses. If comments are difficult to decipher, a call to a program officer can help you get to the core of what the reviewers found wanting.

At this point, the decision to reapply or not needs to be made. Here are a few different scenarios:

1. They are just not that into you. If your comments are overwhelmingly negative, or sent back without comment, you need to seriously rethink if this project should go back to the same agency. There are ideas that you have

that a funding agency just does not like. You may be applying to the wrong office, or the wrong competition. Your idea may be a poor fit for what reviewers are looking for. Or, as a colleague in chemistry pointed out to me, it may be that your idea just will not work. If you are only receiving 50-60 percent of the points available (in an era when scores of 100+ are often needed to make the funding cutoff) or if the comments suggest that you have made a wrong turn, you need to take the message to heart and look elsewhere. This does not mean you have wasted your time, as many highly competitive programs can force you to think in new and different ways about your work.. But there are times when you realize that you will not be able to prevail in competition, much like the moment in my youth when I moved from t-ball to fast-pitch baseball. Quitting pointless competitions opens up your time for more successful endeavors.

2. You need to systematically revise and apply again. There are situations where your point total is frustratingly close to the cutoff, or the comments are overwhelmingly positive, but you still have fallen short. If you think this is where you are, a call to a program officer can help clarify whether you should consider reapplying with a few changes. Make a list of every single comment reviewers have made, and address each one in the next draft. This may mean bringing in new members to your team or replacing/dropping members who seem to have dragged you down. Often, reviewers point to items that were present in the RFP, but in writing, may have not gotten enough attention – sections such as evaluation, budget, institutional support. Fix these, and talk to your grants office, experienced PIs and academic leadership about how to strengthen the weak sections.

3. You have something here but need to rethink it. There are many ways to fund a project idea, and sometimes you need more than just editing to make a project fundable. It may be that what you have right now is fundable, but with another grantor. I worked on two difficult U.S. Department of Education Promise Neighborhood proposals in our local community, falling short each time. The scores on the second application were higher, but still not high enough to win funding. We used the structure of that proposal for an application to a foundation to fund a more compact version of the project, which was successful. To this day, I am grateful that I wrote the original proposals (I learned a lot about our community), but am also grateful that they were not funded, because we were able to do a project that is far more

successful than that originally proposed.

4. There may be no clear message to rejection, except that you had bad luck. Sometimes, fate simply deals you rejection without providing any useful information. Even if you address every weak point in a proposal and respond to every point of criticism, a new review panel may not like the results. There is a Zen to grant writing, in which the applicant can only control certain factors, but not the outcome. As people progress in the field of grant writing, they need to develop strategies to deal with the volume of rejection received. Some researchers are able to view the feedback received simply as data, without personal judgment. Others are just willing to accept some strikeouts as part of the process of getting hits. Ultimately, the rejection rate for grants that are not submitted is 100 percent, so one will need to risk criticism and rejection to have even a chance of success.

The ball is in your hands. Don’t be afraid to take the shot.

Author Bio:

Russell Olwell is director of the Institute for the Study of Children, Families and Communities at Eastern Michigan University. He has written over $4 million in federal, state and foundation grants, and he has missed a lot of shots in the process. A lot.

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