Strategies to Support Networking Between Faculty and Program Officers

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Importance of Networking with Program Officers

Investing in faculty success is critically important – faculty are the engine that drives research

• Networking with program officers is a key to success for established and junior faculty and the university
• Raises profile of the university and our faculty at the agencies
• Gives us access to information we might not otherwise get
Is it Legal to Talk to Program Officers?

A personal networking history

• 1985: Is it legal to talk with program officers?
• 1995: Met with NIH/NCRR program officers in Washington, DC
• 1996: USDA Competitive Grants Program
  o Program officers Sally Rockey and Peter Johnson helpful
  o With Rockey, organized satellite grantsmanship workshop
• 1998: NIH grant on neurologic disease in pigs submitted and funded!
• 2015: Interaction with program officers is not only legal, it’s critical to success
Networking Establishes Relationships, Increases Visibility

Relationships with program officers are extremely important:

- Visits develop relationships – program officers can’t be as helpful if they don’t know you
- Visits increase their knowledge of the university – raises national profile
- Increases program officer knowledge of faculty expertise – they need scientists to serve on review panels and working groups and to keep them current on research
- Program officers may share information about initiatives and opportunities before they hit the street
What Faculty Should Get from the Experience

• Advice on how their research fits, or doesn’t fit, into agency priorities
• Knowledge of how program officers think and what questions they ask about projects
• Program officer can become a resource for information and advice
  o Faculty now have a relationship and can pick up the phone or email the program officer
  o Large grants have been funded with program officer feedback on concept papers
Return on Investment

- Office of Research partners with colleges and departments to fund travel to agencies, paying 1/3 each
- Terrific return on investment – in $ and relationship building
- Examples of success
  - $7M to develop a web-based information system after visiting with a program officer about our capabilities
  - Junior faculty member asked to submit a proposal on his first visit to NSF
  - Multiple visits and networking with DOD program officers yielded major funding for one of our most important research areas
Importance to Program Officer

1) Wants to build relationships with scientific community
   - Help scientists (especially early career) understand the process
   - Fund the best science $\rightarrow$ advance mission of funding agency
   - Experts for review panels
   - Experts for future working groups/task forces

2) Don’t want to review applications that are not aligned with program priorities

3) Don’t want scientists to waste time writing applications that are not a fit for the program
Program Officer Expectations – Before the Visit

1) Faculty member sends information about his/her project
   o Concept paper (<2 pages)
   o Specific Aims page (NIH; 1 page)
   o Project Summary (NSF; 1 page)

2) Information includes descriptions of any unique institutional resources
   • Animals or land
   • Research core facilities or major equipment

3) Information includes descriptions about expertise (faculty member and/or project team)
   • Biographical sketch in agency format
Program Officer Expectations – During the Visit

1) Faculty member is prepared to discuss his/her project
   - Specific aims
   - General approach/methods – emphasize new techniques
   - Relevance to funding agency (so what?)

2) Faculty member asks questions!
   - The program officer should not have to do all the talking
   - Don’t ask about page limits, budget, or other items that are clearly defined in the RFA

3) Faculty member listens to advice from program officers
   - Take notes and follow up as needed
   - Don’t argue
Successful Visit

Program officer perspective:
• Better understanding of potential project
• Projects submitted that fit program priorities
• Identified new expert reviewers for panel

Scientist perspective:
• Better understanding of program priorities and review process
• Ideas to revise project and submit (or not)
• Contact to find additional funding opportunities
• Future communication by email, phone, national meetings, etc.
Questions to Ask Program Officers

- Is this project a “fit” for this program?
- Is the project too ambitious/not ambitious enough?
- Does the review panel have appropriate expertise to review this project (e.g., technical, familiar with models, multidisciplinary)?
- How are applications from early career scientists reviewed?
- What is the success rate?
- What is the award size (if not in the RFA)?
Questions to Ask Program Officers

- NIH: What mechanism is the best for this project? (R01, R21, K)
- NIH: Which study section is the best fit for this project?
- NSF: Examples of “broader impacts”?
- NSF: Strategy for CAREER proposals?
- How can I volunteer to serve on a review panel?
Do NOT Ask Program Officers

1) Will this project be funded? Program officers cannot predict how reviewers will score/rank applications.

2) Who is on the review panel? Although NIH publishes names of charter study section members on the internet, most funding agencies keep this information confidential.

3) When does the review panel meet? Although NIH publishes the date of study section meetings on the internet, most funding agencies do not disclose this information. Wait to be notified – do NOT contact program officers about the status of an application.
Do **NOT** Ask Program Officers

4) Did Dr. Smith submit an application or get funded by this program? Information regarding applications is confidential. Most agencies provide information on awards on the internet.

3) Will you give me a copy of Dr. Smith’s application that was funded? NO. You can ask Dr. Smith for a copy of the application. You can also request information through the FOIA, but this takes time and applicants can redact confidential information.

4) Will a letter of support from my Congress person give me a better chance of getting funded? NO.
Example of Success

New Assistant Professor (2006):

• Never written a competitive grant application
• State-of-the-art technology in genome analysis as PDF
• Access to many cattle with known pedigrees at university
• Concept paper described projects for ~10 years and ~10 scientists
• Application focused on one objective from concept paper
• Application was funded!
• Applicant was invited to serve on review panel in 2008
Not So Successful Example

Senior Professor (1997-2001):

- Had small amounts of funding from industry
- *Good* science, but not *great* science
- Trying to develop a new assay to measure a new hormone in sheep (no one else had been able to develop this assay)
- Reviewers made recommendations, applicant disagreed, resubmitted without major revisions → reviewers made recommendations, applicant disagreed, resubmitted without major revisions → …*never contacted the program officer*…
Nuts and Bolts of Engaging Program Officers

Step 1: Identifying a Program Officer
Step 2: Preparing a Concept Paper
Step 3: Making Contact with a Program Officer
Step 4: Talking with Program Officers
Step 5: Following Up After the Meeting
Step 1: Identifying a Program Officer

- Review sponsor websites, directorate/program webpages, and abstracts of funded projects
- Review the solicitations in which you are interested
- Ask colleagues for recommendations of sponsors, programs, and/or program officers to contact
Step 2: Preparing a Concept Paper

What could a concept paper look like?

- One to two pages in length
- Structure is flexible
- Key section headers could include:
  - Overall goal and objectives
  - Problem to be addressed
  - Approach
  - Potential impacts/outcomes
  - Anticipated budget
  - Contact information
Step 2: Preparing a Concept Paper

Heilmeier’s questions:

• What are you trying to do? How is it done today, and what are the limits of current practice?
• What is new in your approach, and why do you think it will be successful?
• Who cares?
• If you are successful, what difference will it make?
• What are the risks and the payoffs?
• How much will it cost?
• How long will it take?
• How will you evaluate success and impact?
Step 2: Preparing a Concept Paper

Tips for writing a concept paper:

• Use a style and terminology consistent with the sponsor being approached
• Write “SMART” objectives: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound
• If relevant, refer to unique resources, collaborations, and/or preliminary data available to support the proposed work – this holds true for investigator expertise as well
• Employ graphics to help tell the story
Step 2: Preparing a Concept Paper

Tips for writing a concept paper:

• Think of the title as an eye-catching newspaper headline
  “Boron Carbide Neutron Detectors” vs.
  “Efficient Neutron Detectors Based on Boron Carbide” vs.
  “An Efficient, Compact, Cost-Effective Neutron Sensor”

• Utilize color and institutional “branding”

• Ask others to review and provide feedback on the draft concept paper
Step 3: Making Contact with a Program Officer

- Faculty member sends an e-mail of introduction
- Includes as attachments a concept paper and agency-specific biographical sketch
- Requests a half-hour meeting and arranges for a date/time to discuss the project and agency fit
- Prior to the meeting, emails the program officer to:
  - confirm the date, time, relevant phone numbers, and meeting location
  - ask whether visitor badges are needed
Step 4: Talking with Program Officers

- Listen!
- Anticipate that a half-hour meeting could go longer if a program officer is enthusiastic about the idea
- Do not be surprised if other program officers are invited to join the conversation
- Pay attention to body language
Step 5: Following Up After the Meeting

- Send a thank you note – doing so is more than just good manners, it keeps the line of communication open
- Prepare a brief written summary of the conversation(s) to share with university administrators, as relevant
- Share the summary with collaborators, if applicable
- Develop proposal using knowledge gained
How Research Development Professionals Can Help

• Identify program officers
• Provide guidance on the development of concept papers (e.g., outlines, review for readability and visual appeal)
• Coordinate travel plans
• Accompany faculty to meetings
• Use knowledge gained to help develop proposals
Questions?