Revising and Resubmitting Unsuccessful Proposals

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Learning Objectives

- Understand multiple and complex reasons for proposal rejections
- Understand agency review processes
- Determine feasibility of resubmission
- Determine likelihood of future success
- Apply specific strategies to revise proposals based on reasons for rejection
- Gain skill in interpreting agency reviews

Rejection Facts of Life

- Most proposals are rejected: 75-90%
- Very few first applications are funded
- Re-submissions do succeed:
  - NIH report in 2006:
  - 8% for first-timers, 28% for second-timers, 47% for third-timers
  - NSF does not reveal statistics but anecdotally, scores improve
- Rejections offer a learning opportunity
- Reviewers are not always wrong
- The peer review system usually works well as intended
- Grant success is a life-long process

NSF Review Process

- Up to five/six individual reviewers
- Applicant can suggest reviewers and non-reviewers (with reasons)
- Reviewers not known to applicant
- Selected by NSF program officer
- Reviewers may not be the same for resubmissions
- Resubmissions not labeled as such
- No opportunity to identify changes in resubmission
- Applicant receives all individual reviews (scored from excellent to poor) plus program officer summary
- Up to six months for notification

NIH Review Process

- Published, established review groups
- Managed by permanent NIH employee in central NIH division
- Review division separate from funding division
- Reviewers serve three-year terms
- Proposals read by 3-5 individuals
- One reviewer serves as lead discussant but...
- Whole review group discusses proposals

NIH Review Process, continued

- New scoring system as of January 2010:
  - Applicant receives “summary statement” plus several numerical scores:
    - Total possible score of 25 (old range was 500)
    - Percentile score
    - Relevance score
- One resubmission allowed
- Additional space to explain revisions
- Same panel will re-review, with some turnover

DED Review Process

- Three reviewers (non-federal)
- Each reads up to 10 proposals
- Selected by DED program officers
- Total possible score of 100 points
  - Each required section has specific point value
  - Each reviewer separately scores each proposal read
  - Program officer conducts panel discussion to reconcile outlying scores
  - Each reviewer must meet standard of less than 10 points deviation in total score

Other Agencies' Review Process

- EPA, USDA, DOE, DOD
  - May or may not use external reviewers
  - May or may not provide written reviews
  - May or may not have transparent review process
  - May or may not have point system
  - May or may not relate page limits to point system
  - May or may not have resubmission policy

Making the Decision to Revise

- Analyze the reviews
  - Identify types of problems
  - Determine consistency of comments
- Get another objective expert opinion
- Contact the program officer
- Re-assess time and P.I. commitment
- Decide if the project is still relevant and important
- If so, go for it! If not, move on!

Why proposals are rejected

- Administrative/regulatory reasons
  - Agency guidelines
  - Proposal format
  - Program restrictions
  - Deadlines
  - Ineligibility
    - PI
    - Institution

Remedies: Administrative

- Review RFP carefully
- Scrupulously follow the prescribed format
  - Font, page limits, attachments, margins
- Determine if restrictions remain
- Apply well before deadline day
- Find new or co-PI
- Consider changing applicant institution
  - Become subcontractor/partner

Why proposals are rejected: PI

- Principal investigator(s)
  - Inadequate experience – research or management
  - Little evidence of experience with grants
  - Unclear description of work roles/tasks
  - Publications inadequate or not relevant to project
  - Staff insufficient or untrained

Remedies: PI

- Inexperience
  - Add senior co-PIs or consultants
    - Mentor
    - Colleague
    - Subcontract
  - Provide management plan and/or organization chart
  - Include time and task chart
  - Write job descriptions of staff

Why proposals are rejected: Politics

- Political reasons
  - Geographic distribution
  - Congressional influence/interference
  - Set-asides, pork-barrel
  - Problem is too localized
  - Internal competition
    - UW-Madison vs. UW-Milwaukee
    - Ohio State vs. U-Akron

Remedies: Politics

- Secure university commitment to project
  - Keep government relations staff informed
- Set problem in national context
  - Use proposal as case study
  - Show wider/larger application
- If you can’t beat them, join them
  - Include colleagues from Big-Time U

Why proposals are rejected: Intellectual-Scientific-Academic

- Intellectual/scientific/academic reasons
  - Importance of topic to discipline
  - Currency or cutting-edge research
  - Focus: too narrow or too broad
  - Unpopular or uncommon methodology
  - Inadequate literature search
  - Unclear, disorganized presentation with gaps in reasoning and logic

Remedies

- Strong introduction: why is project important
- Comprehensive literature review
- Present project in intellectual context
- Explain method selected and why
- Explain why other methods not used
- Use strong format to show progress of ideas
- Change project scope
  - Add co-investigators if too broad
  - Decrease project goals and provide more focus
  - Add more project time

Why proposals are rejected: Project Design

- Project design:
  - Not enough evidence to support the need
  - Aims are not of sufficient importance
  - Project may not produce any improvement
  - Problem is much bigger than the PI realizes
  - Idea is too ambitious
  - Goals and objectives are unreachable:
    - Too many, too broad, too vague

Remedies: Project Design

- Detailed needs analysis/justification
- Specific background data—own and others
- Measurable objectives/outcomes
- Limited number of aims (3-5 maximum)
- Propose pilot to demonstrate likelihood
- If none of the above are appropriate, look for another sponsor/program

Why proposals are rejected: Budget

- Budget reasons: agency
  - Request too high for program
  - Agency already committed to continuations
  - Fiscal year cycle
- Budget reasons: applicant
  - Unconvincing or confusing budget narrative
  - Inappropriate/unallowable requests
  - Bad arithmetic, wrong F&A and benefit rates
  - Vague travel, equipment plans
  - Too many staff requested
  - Consultants not linked to proposal activities

Remedies: Budget

- Lower the annual and overall request
- Remove some budget categories
- Resubmit in first cycle of fiscal year
- Write a detailed, well-described narrative linking budget requests to project narrative
- Provide quotes and detailed information especially for equipment, trips, consultants
- Add salary schedules, job descriptions, benefit tables.

Why proposals are rejected: Institution

- Institution
  - Facilities, space, equipment, library, etc.
  - Financial resources/cost-sharing
  - Other research support:
    - Graduate students
    - Grant infrastructure
  - Legal issues:
    - Institution being audited or under sanctions
  - Inadequate compliance infrastructure/history

Remedies: Institution

- Provide more detail on facilities—floor plans, lists of equipment, other resources
- Find a partner institution/lab/department
- Resolve compliance issues
- Describe grant management system
- Provide letters of support/commitment
- Specifically identify cost-sharing
  - In-kind
  - Cash
  - Other sources of funding

Why proposals are rejected: Presentation and Format

- Presentation
  - Writing is too vague to the reviewers
  - Long paragraphs, long sentences, long words
  - Careless proofreading: grammar, spelling, typos, punctuation
  - Masses of print without pictures or format
  - Poor quality or mislabeling of images
  - Inaccurate word choices

Remedies: Presentation, Format

- Use clear, specific format strategies:
  - Do careful and multiple proofreading
  - Use external editor
  - Provide headings and sub-headings
  - Use frequent and relevant illustrations
  - Write short paragraphs
  - Write short sentences:
    - 20-word rule
    - Long sentence/short word rule

Case Study

- National Science Foundation program requirements:
  - implementing strategies that will lead to an increase in the number of students (U.S. citizens or permanent residents)
  - obtaining STEM degrees at institutions with baccalaureate degree programs
  - the total graduation numbers of such students at the institution(s)
  - must include specific numerical targets for these increases

Case study, continued

- If a project focuses efforts on only a subset of STEM fields, increases in those fields must not be at the expense of degrees in other STEM fields.
- may focus on the retention and/or recruitment of undergraduate students into STEM fields.
- Outreach efforts are appropriate only if the efforts can be expected to result in additional STEM majors and graduates at the submitting institution(s) within the grant period.
- All Type 1 projects are considered to be institutional efforts.

Case Study Discussion/Decision

- Revise and resubmit?
- What to change?
- What to keep?
- How to address reviewers' concerns?
  - Explicitly?
  - Implicitly?
  - Not at all?
- How to convince next reviewers to fund?

Thanks

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