

TIGER TIPS

Strategies for Increasing Team Funding Success

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Over the past several years, funding for team science has become the norm rather than the exception. The complexity of scientific questions has increased dramatically and has correspondingly required more novel configurations of multi- and transdisciplinary teams to achieve funding success. Unfortunately, too many proposers remain on autopilot from past single-PI grant protocols and consequently write team grants as if they were writing a single-PI grant with a few “silent partners.” Teams must present themselves as an engaged and disciplinarily interactive group contributing to an integrated research narrative.

Failure to plan, develop, and write a team grant as a continuously engaged team is a serious and common flaw often resulting in a proposal declined for funding. Failure is usually the result of multiple flaws, most notably a research narrative that reads like a copy and paste of siloed sections by thematically disconnected contributors rather than an integrated narrative by continuously engaged team members.

Moreover, a siloed research narrative typically occurs when the team fails to organize, plan, or schedule the proposal production waypoints sufficiently in advance of the due date. By their nature, team proposals take more time to develop and write, placing a premium on organization and communications. They require a stepwise process of key waypoints in the proposal production process to ensure that each member of the team understands who does what and when and commits to a project timeline of multiple internal due dates.

Another common failure of team grants at all scales is copying and pasting research sections by contributing authors into the project description without a narrative integration plan. This plan is usually implemented by one member, most often the PI, of the research team sufficiently skilled at both integrative writing and a nuanced understanding of the overarching technical aspects of the proposal. This skill and understanding enable her to edit and rewrite narrative contributions to make them read more clearly and seamlessly.

In this context, it is critical to note that contributing authors must make narrative contributions that are newly drafted and clearly map to the current funding solicitation guidelines and incorporate all team members’ understandings of what research is being proposed, why it is being proposed, and how it will be accomplished as a team. Narrative contributions must not be revised sections from prior proposals submitted in response to prior solicitations, either funded or declined. Narrative contributions must never be haunted by “narrative ghosts” of past proposals. The graveyard of declined proposals is well populated by spare parts (narrative sections) from prior proposals put forward with high hopes but little realistic appreciation for what characterizes a fundable team research narrative.

These “off-the-shelf” contributions to team proposals stick out like a sore thumb; they are siloed rather than integrated into the entire proposal narrative; they respond poorly to what the agency wishes to fund; they are overly general rather than specific; and they hinder efforts to edit the proposal because they are set apart from the team narrative rather than integrated into it. In effect, an off-the-shelf contribution to a research narrative is the worst kind of interloper—one that will likely doom the proposal to failure. Bottom line: recycling is great for the environment but recycling prior narrative sections into a new team effort will likely result in failure.

In this context, the critical role of the narrative integrator is not unlike that played by a Supreme Court Justice responsible for writing the Majority Opinion for the entire Court. The Majority Opinion must incorporate the position of each Justice voting in the majority. However, in the case of the research narrative, it is the technical rather than legal reasoning of each member that must be seamlessly incorporated into a well-crafted Project Description. The key take away here is that, as the challenges of technology and science become more complex, so, too, are the team configurations needed to perform the research and hence to write the research narratives needed to see them funded. Because of this dramatic transition from single-PI to transdisciplinary team proposals, the old ways of writing successful proposals undertaken by a single person with a few “silent partner” researchers who would only engage if funded, are totally insufficient. Success is now based on how well the research team can function and communicate as a proposal writing team in the ways discussed above.

****As a reminder, the Research Development & Grant Writing News is a monthly newsletter available to all faculty and staff which includes a number of resources including guidance regarding specific funding programs, tips and hints for proposal development, and monthly listings of available funding opportunities. For more information, be sure to visit the link for Proposal Development on the left-hand toolbar of the [PSFS main website](#). Note that, as this is a subscription (covered by PSFS), log-in with your Auburn user name and password is required for access.***