

Grant Writing in the Age of Collaboration

by
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One of the most fascinating yet challenging aspects of grant writing in higher education is facilitating collaboration. In this essay I discuss the grant seeking world's movement toward increased collaboration among diverse groups and strategies grant writers can use to build and guide interdisciplinary teams.

Introduction

Over the past five years I have worked with groups of university faculty and staff members, representatives of non-profit agencies, K-12 school personnel, and private consultants to plan projects and develop grant proposals. These groups cover the entire spectrum in terms of their experience with, and effectiveness of, collaboration. Some people seem to have a natural ability to connect with others, set aside egos, compromise when necessary, share the workload under tight deadlines, and devote the time and resources it takes to collaborate. Others call or e-mail a colleague the day before the proposal is due and invite him/her to be a co-investigator and call it "collaboration." I have worked with faculty members who bring a group together one time, solicit ideas, and then write a "collaborative" proposal that only reflects their original ideas. Then there are the junior faculty members who want to collaborate with more veteran faculty but don't know how to begin the process and must carefully balance collaborative work with individual research to insure being granted tenure. As a grant writer, I work with all of them.

Collaboration is collective learning; it is the sort of thing which happens when research teams or working parties fuse well together. Colleagues share insights and knowledge and together move towards a fuller shared understanding. It is not a situation where individuals compromise themselves; indeed, they exert themselves, but they do so with the aim of furthering understanding and working towards resolving a shared problem, not exercising their own egos. (1 p.96)

Why collaborate?

Collaboration has become "essential for survival in today's fast-paced, complex world" (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2004). The increasing levels of complexity in our world require individuals to develop expertise in highly specialized fields; no one person has the capacity to accumulate all the knowledge in any given field.

We are well past the point at which the knowledge required to enhance the health and well-being of individuals and communities can come solely from lone investigators trying to unlock nature's secrets, or from the offerings of any single discipline. The myth of the solitary scientist in search of truth is a romantic notion whose continued existence serves as a major barrier to progress in bringing the collective weight of the sciences to bear on the problems of humankind. And the idea that all scientific progress takes place within the boundaries of current disciplines is historically invalid and currently counterproductive. (2)

In today's world, the adage "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts"—regardless of the field—is becoming more and more descriptive of the synergy that happens when specialists work collaboratively instead of in isolation. To tackle 21st century challenges such as trying to quell the SARS epidemic, establish a lasting peace in the Middle East, or to explore the outer limits of the universe requires an interdisciplinary team.

As I monitor daily requests for proposals from funding agencies, I see evidence of an increasing trend and preference for interdisciplinary projects from both federal agencies and private foundations. The Lone Ranger approach to research is becoming increasingly rare. My grant writing experiences with groups have proven to me that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" when collaboration works well. I believe a proposal is stronger when it reflects thoughtful and collective planning. Creativity, perspectives, and passions can expand and grow under the guidance of several collaborators' expertise.

It has been my experience that the individuals who collaborate well believe in the collective strength and energy of the group, demonstrate mutual respect, tolerance, and trust in their actions, are not threatened by differing viewpoints, are willing to compromise, are comfortable being leaders as well as followers, and thrive in the environment of ongoing learning that is created when individuals with diverse expertise and perspectives come together (3).

The problems and challenges of collaboration

Not all faculty members see the value of collaboration. In the world of academia, faculty are not trained to work together, and the reward structure is usually biased toward individual, not group, efforts (4). Administrative structures tend to be protective of their turf and often neither promote nor reward collaborative work, especially if it is cross-disciplinary. And, many faculty members' experience with "collaboration" may have been primarily attending endless, process-intensive, committee meetings where little seems to happen.

Collaboration does require more time than working alone. Trusting relationships are integral to building an effective collaboration. It takes time to build that trust. Individuals must also devote time to learning to speak a common language with shared concepts and to address institutional barriers, even before the process of brainstorming and planning begins. Collaboration also requires a certain degree of compromise and the setting aside of egos. A faculty member may put an idea on the table, only to find it changing forms many times as the proposal evolves until the final project is very far removed than the original idea he or she first presented. Solo ownership is lost.

While grant writers can act as catalysts in bringing faculty members with valued expertise to the table, can make sure everyone's voice is heard and that each person feels valued for his/her contributions, and can provide assistance throughout the proposal development process, we can never guarantee that the "right chemistry" will be present (or evolve) to insure faculty members work together effectively. Sometimes faculty members naturally connect and blend personalities, developing a level of comfort, trust and commitment as shared ideas begin to evolve into solidly designed projects. But sometimes the chemistry simply does not work, despite our best efforts. Personalities don't mesh, territorial issues loom too large, priorities remain too far apart, work styles don't coincide, or the group is unable to establish a balance between individualism and integration.

The role of the grant writer in collaborative efforts

The roles we assume as grant writers vary from collaboration to collaboration and project to project. Oftentimes we don't know what our designated role will be ahead of time, especially when we work with new groups. Grant writers must develop good working relationships with all group members before faculty recognize the value we, too, bring to the collaborative process.

Although there are clear guidelines and procedures for many of the tasks grant writers perform, there are no hard and fast rules that govern the art and science (for it is both) of collaboration. Learning to facilitate collaboration is something we learn through careful observation of individuals who do it well (and not so well), through experience, and much trial and error.

At times we grant writers find ourselves acting as advocates for the process of collaboration. Although the initial investment of time may be intensive, we assure skeptical faculty members, the rewards of developing a good working relationship with colleagues may last for many years. We try to convince faculty that the broader views and diverse perspectives around the table will, in the end, result in a stronger project that has commitment from everyone because each team member helped craft it. We point out the advantages of sharing the workload and that making new connections will undoubtedly lead to other connections and future successes in the grant-seeking process. We emphasize that funding agencies view collaboration as a strength, as a priority, and more and more as a necessity to receive grant awards.

While there may be few directional signs to guide us, there are many ways grant writers can encourage effective collaboration, resulting in stronger and more competitive proposals. In my thinking about collaboration, these ways fall into seven broad areas:

- making connections;
- helping new faculty chart their course;
- facilitating long-range planning;
- matching interests with funding opportunities;
- coordinating logistics;
- guiding the proposal development process; and
- maintaining momentum.

Making Connections

Many faculty concentrate so intently on their own research that they are unaware of what their academic neighbors are studying. Grant writers can connect people. We assume the responsibility of learning what each faculty member's interests are and knowing what projects are currently happening across the campus (and beyond). This enables us to suggest linkages around common interests shared by colleagues. Fellow grant writers in other schools and colleges within our university setting also serve as sources of knowledge about particular projects and possible collaborators. As we form connections with increasing numbers of faculty members we cross disciplinary lines and the possible combinations of collaborators multiplies.

Helping new faculty chart their course

We work closely with junior faculty as they begin their careers. Some of them come from graduate programs with strong grant-writing cultures. Some are not. Wherever they may be in their grant-seeking experience, we shepherd these faculty members into the world of grant writing and help them chart a course for tenure and beyond that will allow them to collaborate in a way that will enhance their individual research agendas and contribute to their long-term professional goals.

Oftentimes new faculty want to collaborate with faculty who have similar or complementary research interests but they aren't sure how or where to begin. We use our growing network of grant writers, the collaborative relationships we have developed with faculty from other disciplines, and the Community of Science expertise database to find and bring together potential collaborators.

Some academic departments value and encourage collaboration while others place more emphasis on individual research. We urge new faculty members to learn their department's tenure philosophy so they know the nature of the challenges they are facing.

Facilitating long-range planning

As faculty share research interests in the early stages of collaboration, grant writers can help the group identify ideas that have the potential to evolve into grant proposals that are specific enough to provide a group focus around a shared goal yet broad enough so that each member of the group has room for exploration according to his/her research niche.

While we work with groups to prepare a collaboratively driven grant application, we encourage them to think beyond the proposal at hand. We guide them to envision a larger picture and the long-range goals that they would like to achieve. We then help them divide up the overall plan into fundable and manageable "chunks" that will result in a series of interconnected projects that successfully build one upon another and complement the research interests of each collaborator. Teams that come together solely for the pursuit of a particular request for proposals are usually "one and done" if the proposal is not funded. Teams that think in terms of long-range goals, who take time to celebrate (and recuperate) after submitting a proposal and then continue planning toward the next step, are more likely to be rewarded for their persistence. Their good ideas invariably evolve into even better ideas as they continue collaborating and working together.

Matching interests with funding opportunities

We urge faculty members to start the collaborative process *before* they pursue funding opportunities. As they brainstorm (a time consuming but integral part of the process) and ideas begin to gel, the grant writer can begin matching project ideas with potential funding sources. The initial relationship building and idea-sharing process builds a solid framework based on shared interests and commitment. This foundation allows team members to come together on quick notice, should a request for proposals appear that has a tight timeline.

Coordinating logistics

One of the most time-consuming tasks involved in collaboration is the coordination of logistics. Grant writers can assume many of these responsibilities, including scheduling meetings, reserving meeting space and equipment, mailing directions and parking tags, ordering food, arranging conference calls, contacting individuals to write letters of support/commitment, gathering data, collecting vitae, coordinating the scope of work and budgets with subcontractors, gathering information for the never-ending array of forms required with federal proposals, and collecting necessary signatures before proposal submission. All of these tasks allow the Principal Investigator (PI) and co-investigators to devote more of their attention to developing proposal content.

Guiding the proposal development process

Our roles generally help to guide the proposal development process and navigate inevitable hurdles in the process as they arise. Grant writers are the interpreters of the proposal guidelines and the keepers of the draft narratives and budgets as they go through numerous iterations. Grant writers are the reality checkers when group ideas grow larger than the scope of the proposal at hand or veer off course. Grant writers are the central point of coordination for all forms, letters, vitae, etc. that must be collected. Grant writers are the timekeepers who mind the calendar and clock as deadlines approach. Grant writers are the tactful naggers who remind faculty of proposal parts we need from them. Grant writers are the logistics coordinators and are the primary contact when collaborators have questions. In short, in the midst of the flurry of ongoing activity during proposal development, grant writers are often the calm eye of the hurricane around which everything else revolves at dizzying speed.

Maintaining momentum

Busy faculty members' time and energies are often torn in different directions. It is vital that the momentum that brings people together initially be maintained over time. We know through experience that the ideas that begin to evolve and take shape as collaborations develop "have to be kept alive and humming through regular meetings and communication" (1 p.104). Otherwise, even with the best intentions, faculty interests get diverted in different directions and the group loses momentum.

Although the PI's leadership of the group is crucial to maintaining momentum, there are ways grant writers can contribute to group momentum as well. One of the most exciting things grant writers do is to take group ideas as they evolve and begin to mold the "lump of clay" on the table into something resembling a draft proposal. As the beginning of any writing activity is usually the most difficult part, grant writers often

help faculty over that initial hurdle by starting the process and giving them something to which they can respond. Even if the finished draft looks very different from the grant writer's initial efforts, what we initiated represents a starting point that maintains momentum.

The larger the size of the group, the more difficult the collaborative process often becomes. Grant writers can sense when this is a problem and can recommend a "team within a team" approach. Once the large group has had an opportunity to begin brainstorming ideas, a smaller, more manageable group meets to refine those ideas and develop a working draft to which the larger group can respond. Grant writers often facilitate the work of both groups and act as the liaison between the two.

Grant writers also try to keep groups "on track" during meetings so that the collective energy keeps focused on moving the proposal forward. Timely alerts of funding opportunities, regular communication with group members, and occasional reminders of information still needed and milestones reached along the proposal development timeline also help to keep the momentum going.

Reflections

No two collaborations are the same. I learn something new from each group experience that I can then add to my growing "toolbox" of grant writing skills. Regardless of the composition or experience of the group, however, I believe there are multiple ways grant writers can help build and guide interdisciplinary teams whose collective strength reflects the belief that their interactions are synergetic.

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