What Makes a ~~Good~~ Competitive Proposal?

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Overview

- Elements of a competitive proposal
- How to get started on the right foot
- Thinking competitively

Quote to Remember

"There is a difference between an *eligible* idea and a *competitive* idea."

~ Program Officer, U.S. Dept. of Education

What Is A Competitive Idea?

- Different from what is currently being done today
  - “Revolutionary, not evolutionary”
  - “Not an incremental advancement or duplication of previous work”
- Meets the sponsor’s stated program goals and objectives
  - Proposed project fits within program’s scope
  - Stage and level of innovation and is appropriate (R03 vs R01)
  - Confirm idea/approach with the Program Officer BEFORE writing the narrative
- Potential outcomes could “move the needle”
  - Lead to new advances, new theories, new questions, save more lives

Elements of a Competitive Proposal

1. Your Project

- Fits the program
- Is innovative, novel, new, different
- Set in context
  - Explains what is the problem, why it's a problem, why it needs to be solved
- Explains the significance
  - What new knowledge will project bring to the field?
  - What other problems might be addressed/solved by this knowledge?
- Has a strong rationale, everything is well justified

2. Your Argument

- **Most important aspect!**
- **Explains WHY project is different** than what's been done or currently being done
- **Explains WHY project is significant**
  - It may be obvious, but you still have to say it!
- Describes potential problems and how you will overcome them
- Shows excitement, enthusiasm, passion for topic/potential outcomes

3. You The Investigator

- Demonstrate that you:
  - Have the experience, education, training to do the work
  - Have the resources available (or access to them)
  - Have support from your institution, department, advisor
- Come across as confident, capable, thoughtful
- Don’t assume the reviewers know exactly what you know
  - Place the research problem in context
  - Briefly explain jargon, acronyms to ensure reviewers’ understanding

4. Your Narrative and Application

- **FOLLOWS ALL THE RULES STATED IN THE RFP**
- Well written
  - Compelling, interesting, easy to read
  - Logical, organized with headers and subheads
  - Shorter sentences and paragraphs
  - Use figures, bulleted/numbered lists to break up the text
- Free of grammar errors and typos; edited and proofread carefully
- **MEETS THE STATED REVIEW CRITERIA**

Example: NIH F32 Proposal Review Criteria

Scored Review Criteria

Reviewers will consider each of the review criteria below in the determination of scientific merit, and give a separate score for each. An application does not need to be strong in all categories to be judged likely to have major scientific impact.

Fellowship Applicant

- Are the applicant's academic record and research experience of high quality?
- Does the applicant have the potential to develop into an independent and productive researcher?
- Does the applicant demonstrate commitment to a research career in the future?

Sponsors, Collaborators, and Consultants

- Are the sponsor(s') research qualifications (including recent publications) and track record of mentoring individuals at a similar stage appropriate for the needs of the applicant?
- Is there evidence of a match between the research and clinical interests (if applicable) of the applicant and the sponsor(s)? Do(es) the sponsor(s) demonstrate an understanding of the applicant's training needs as well as the ability and commitment to assist in meeting these needs?
- Is there evidence of adequate research funds to support the applicant's proposed research project and training for the duration of the research component of the fellowship?
- If a team of sponsors is proposed, is the team structure well justified for the mentored training plan, and are the roles of the individual members appropriate and clearly defined?
- Are the qualifications of any collaborator(s) and/or consultant(s), including their complementary expertise and previous experience in fostering the training of fellows, appropriate for the proposed project?

Research Training Plan

- Is the proposed research project of high scientific quality, and is it well integrated with the proposed research training plan?
- Based on the sponsor's description of his/her active research program, is the applicant's proposed research project sufficiently distinct from the sponsor's funded research for the applicant's career stage?
- Is the research project consistent with the applicant's stage of research development?
- Is the proposed time frame feasible to accomplish the proposed training?

Training Potential

- Are the proposed research project and training plan likely to provide the applicant with the requisite individualized and mentored experiences in order to obtain appropriate skills for a research career?
- Does the training plan take advantage of the applicant's strengths and address gaps in needed skills? Does the training plan document a clear need for, and value of, the proposed training?
- Does the proposed training have the potential to serve as a sound foundation that will clearly enhance the applicant's ability to develop into a productive researcher?

Getting Started

Start on the Right Foot

- Timing
  - **START EARLY**
  - Minimum 6-8 weeks ahead of proposal due date
  - Make proposal development timelines and stay on top of them
- The Project
  - Read the RFP thoroughly and carefully
  - Confirm project idea with department chair, mentor, advisor
  - Confirm project idea with the Program Officer
  - Inform the Office of Research that you intend to submit a proposal

Don’t Go It Alone

- The Document/Application
  - Use templates, checklists, guidance materials from OSP or from sponsor, if provided
  - Find people to review your drafts from a scientific standpoint and competitive standpoint
  - Use technical editors to help shape and hone your argument and proposal
- If Resubmitting a Rejected Proposal
  - Contact the Program Officer to discuss the reviewers’ comments
  - Ask colleagues/mentors for their opinion/interpretations of comments
  - Address problematic areas in the new proposal
  - Don’t give up or lose hope

Think Competitively

- Competition for research dollars is fierce and probably won't get better
- Keep thinking about how to do things differently than everyone else
- Stay on top of the literature and current events in your field
- Review your drafts from a reviewer's perspective – does it meet the stated review criteria?
- Be open to positive and negative feedback
- Keep refining your argument; practice your "elevator pitch"
- Well-written proposals with clear arguments usually win more than poorly developed proposals

Thanks

Questions?

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