

The Myth that Agencies Fund Good Ideas

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An all too common “urban legend” among prospective but inexperienced grant applicants is the notion that agencies fund good ideas. This example of “*putting the cart before the horse*” is a challenge for those who support research development activities, or otherwise advise new faculty on research grant writing. Where this notion takes a foothold in the thinking of those seeking support, it can result in a frustrating experience for all involved, not to mention a wasteful commitment of time, resources, and personnel.

In this sixteenth-century analogy for doing things in the wrong order, you can think of the “cart” as the proposed research idea and the “horse” as the goals and objectives of the funding agency as defined in a solicitation. ***Having a good idea is a necessary but insufficient requirement for funding success.*** A good idea cannot stand alone, at least in the world of funded grants, without first being preceded by and intertwined with the mission objectives and investment priorities of the funding agency.

A good idea that does not offer value-added benefits and impact the agency mission or the field in a significant way will not be funded by a federal agency. In the world of writing research grants, the facts of life, so to speak, are simple: it is not about the research goals the applicant would like to address; rather, it is about the research goals the funding agency requires the applicant to identify in support of its mission.

Too often, those new to grant writing do not fully appreciate how tightly constrained federal funding agencies are in what they fund and why they fund it, or the very high degree of fidelity required of any successful proposal to meet ***all*** the research goals and objectives defined in the solicitation. A meticulous reading of the solicitation, an explication of text, if you will, is often the first casualty of unbridled enthusiasm neither bounded nor tempered by the constraints imposed on the proposal process by agency guidelines.

Understandably, those new to grant writing often feel exuberant at the prospect of seeing their ideas made real by funding from a federal agency—so much so that they become distracted and inattentive to the basic reality of successful grant writing: ***a funded grant is not so much about your good idea as it is about the value of your good idea to the funding agency.*** Unfortunately, human nature being what it is, it is often difficult for those who believe in the importance of their idea to make this necessary distinction. The longer the notion persists that a good idea largely untethered to an agency’s research goals is sufficient for funding, , ***the more certain a declined proposal will result.***

The reality of competitive grant writing is that money does not flow to good ideas unless they pay homage to the agency’s reasons for funding proposed research in the first place. ***Bottom line:*** there is a lot of ***strategic “market” planning*** done by those who are successful in obtaining external funding, ***not the least of which is how best to “pitch” a good idea to the funding agency so as to convince it of the value-added benefits the proposed research will bring to an agency’s goals.*** Making this strategic connection is key to success in obtaining