Revising and Resubmitting Rejected Proposals

Prepared for Temple University

Logistics

- Feel free to ask clarifying questions at any time during the presentation.
- There will also be time for questions and discussion after the presentation.
- Slides (with embedded hyperlinks) will made available for attendees after the presentation.

AGENDA

Common Reasons for Rejection and Possible Remedies

Should I Resubmit?

Interpreting Agency Reviews and Digesting Reviewer Comments

Specific Revision Strategies To Address Reviewer Concerns

Q & A

PROPOSAL REJECTION

- Most proposals **(75%-90%)** are rejected

- Very few applications are funded on the first submission

- Rejection is simply part of the grantseeking process

- Upon rejection, you join an esteemed group of colleagues!

What Proposal Rejection is NOT:

- Proposal rejection is NOT a rejection of your interests or your life's work.

- Rejection is NOT necessarily even a rejection of the quality of the proposed research project or research design.

There are many complex reasons for proposal rejection!

"OUR PROPOSAL DIDN'T GET THE GRANT, BUT THEY WANT US TO TEACH PROPOSAL WRITING."

Rejection Makes Your Next Proposal Better

- Rejection offers a learning opportunity

- Reviewers are not always wrong (but can sometimes be wrong)

- The "Peer Review" system usually works well, but can be a barrier to innovation and to new investigators. Know the rules and use them to your advantage!

- Grant success requires an intentional strategy and a whole lot of grit and determination. Persistence and patience is key!

REJECTION OFTEN LEADS TO POSITIVE RESULTS

Federal Resubmissions Have Higher Success Rates:

Resubmissions have a higher success rate:

- In 2016, the overall **NIH** success rate for new R01 applications (without the New Investigator/Early Investigator advantage) was **14.5%**. The success rate for resubmission applications was **32.5%.**

- NSF does not publish data, however anecdotally we know that resubmissions have a higher chance of success

- Resubmission success rates are higher across nearly all federal agencies

- Resubmission provides an opportunity for the PI to fine tune his/her proposal, emphasizing identified strengths, addressing concerns, and fully articulating/revising the text to include more relevant detail. Additionally, the PI can revise to include text that may have been omitted from the original submission.

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Resubmission/Reapproach Success Rates for Foundations and Corporate Sponsors

- Commonly asked question with no simple answer. Too many caveats to list.

- Statistics (based on responses from 878 grantmakers in 2004 survey conducted by the Foundation Center):
  - One-third of responding grantmakers in 2004 received fewer than 50 proposals; 38% of those funded at least half of the proposals they received.
  - 6% of responding grantmakers received more than 1,000 proposals each; 11% of those funded at least half of the proposals.
  - Overall, 35% of responding foundation and corporate sponsors in 2004 funded 50% or more of the grant requests they received.

Current Statistics for Foundation and Corporate Giving

- Out of $316.2 Billion of private giving in the US in 2012-2013, <u>16% came from foundations</u>, and <u>5% came from corporations</u> (corporate foundations included in foundation percentage). The largest share, 72%, came from individuals (living donors).

- 2014 and 2015 represent the highest and second-highest totals for charitable giving – and the third and fourth largest percentage increases in giving – in the past 10 years, adjusted for inflation.

- According to the Foundation Center, In 2015, the largest year-over-year percentage increase in giving came via grants made by independent, community and operating foundations, an increase of 6.3% when adjusted for inflation.

- In 2015, Foundation giving totaled $58.46 Billion.

- In 2015, Corporation giving totaled $18.45 Billion.

Relevant Charitable Giving Highlights

- Nationally, giving to education institutions remained strong in 2015; growth exceeded 5%, as it also did in four of the five years between 2010-2014.

- Five charitable subsectors <u>saw large increases</u> (>5%); giving to education; arts, culture and humanities, environment/animals; public-society benefit; and international affairs.

- Giving to education totaled $57.48 Billion in 2015 (Giving USA,2016)

- Giving via grants by community, private (including family), and corporate foundations in 2020 is predicted to increase by 6.3%, adjusted for inflation.

- Giving by corporations is expected to increase by 0.4% in 2020 due to slow average growth in GDP and in corporate savings.

- Highest number of grants in 2013 (42,037) totaling $3.5B, went to Human Services. Health and Education tied for highest dollar amount, $5 Billion.

COMMON REASONS FOR REJECTION AND POTENTIAL REMEDIES

Reason #1: Administrative Rejection

- Your proposal did not align with the Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA) or had a focus outside of what the Request for Proposal (RFP) intended.

- Your proposal did not meet technical requirements such as font, margin, page limits, etc.

- Your submission may have been incomplete, or it may have omitted a required form or other ancillary submission document.

- The PI or submitting institution was deemed ineligible to apply, or other eligibility issues were identified.

- Funding restrictions were not followed, or funding was requested for ineligible activities or expenses.

- Application was submitted after the deadline.

Demonstration/Example

Excerpt taken from actual Reviewer Comments received from a rejected proposal:

"Cannot find the [reference] article 'Oleksyuk et al., 2015' cited by the PI, which supports the 86% sensitivity derived from preliminary experiments."

Potential Remedies for Administrative Rejection

- Carefully and completely review RFP

- Be sure to follow prescribed format. Identify additional application materials that you may have missed.

- Utilize internal resources (OVPR) and Office of Corporate and Foundation Relations.

- Ask for assistance from a colleague who has experience with the funding source.

- Apply early.

- Consider changing applicant institution. Form a partnership with a colleague at an eligible institution and become a subcontractor/partner.

Reason #2: Your Proposal Wasn't a Good Fit

- The program to which you applied may have changed focus.

- Your project focus or idea may no longer be priority.

- Your project may have been too close in scope, emphasis, or geography to one or more projects already funded.

- Your project did not align with the goals of the RFP/FOA under which you applied

Demonstration/Example

Actual Reviewer Comments received from a rejected proposal (redacted):

"Although the proposal submitted by Drs. X, and Y was found to have significant Intellectual Merit, the proposal did not align well with NSF Program ABC criteria, and this reviewer questions the project eligibility for the submission under NSF Program ABC Track 2."

Remedies for Misalignment / Fit

- Remedies are similar to the Administrative remedies previously mentioned with one caveat:
  - Reach out to the Program Officer to discuss your proposal. Ask if there is another funding mechanism that might be a better fit, and/or inquire about suggested revisions to project design focus to improve alignment with RFP/program goals.

Reason #3: Inadequate Research Team or Resources

- The PI has minimal experience in either research or grants management or both

- The team lacks experience in the field or is missing a critical expert

- Unclear description of work roles/tasks (especially important to collaborative research proposals)

- Publications are perceived as inadequate or not relevant to project

- Time dedicated to the project is deemed insufficient or staff are untrained

- Facilities/Equipment is deemed inadequate to meet objectives

- Required Letters of Commitment/demonstration of commitment of partners was omitted from submission

Demonstration/Example

Taken from actual Reviewer Comments received in response to submission of a rejected proposal (redacted):

" *While the PI presents a plan for the use of required equipment at XYZ University, the described equipment is ill-suited for a multi-user environment. The proposed plan provides an insufficient justification in terms of number of users, hours needed, or project demands and the budget does not include usage fees for the stated equipment at the proposed laboratory.*"

Remedies: Inadequate Resources

- Add experienced Co-PIs or Senior Personnel to the project who have relevant experience in the research field or program area.

- Postpone resubmission or reapply only when you have either more relevant publications or add Co-PI or other PI with relevant publications

- Address areas identified as having inadequate resources.
  - Include a feasible plan in the proposal to access required equipment and include funding in the budget to pay for required access at another institution if needed.
  - Include similar plans for facilities and space.
  - Be sure to also consider time allocations. Consider expanding the timeline if feasible and include time dedicated over the summer as potential remedies.
  - Obtain a Letter of Commitment from all partners. Be sure the Letters specifically state what time/resources they will dedicate to the project.

- Diffuse, superficial or unfocused research plan
- Importance of topic to discipline/ Lacks innovation
- Absence of acceptable scientific rationale
- Lack of experimental detail
- Lack of preliminary data or weak preliminary data
- Questionable reasoning in experimental approach
- Lack of experience in essential methodology or specific technique
- Evaluation plan or methodology is inadequate
- Focus too narrow or too broad
- Project proposes unpopular or uncommon or new/unproven methodology or approach

Demonstration/Example

- Actual Reviewer Comment from rejected proposal:

"The initially described hypotheses were not well-developed and the PI is encouraged to strengthen the hypotheses part and making sure that they are testable. In the experimental approach, the PI suggested to focus on two PFASs that contain sulfur and the monitoring method was based on detection of sulfur groups. The panel is concerned about the analytical strategy, since other perfluorinated chemicals (PFCs) exist that do not contain sulfur compounds thus limiting the opportunity for detecting non-PFAS PFCs. Also, the time frame spent on developing the analytical approach (1 year) seems to be long- the detection method could be developed prior to starting the research.

The PI showed preliminary data in the proposal, however the Panel observed a discrepancy between the claims that linear adsorption was assumed, while non-linear adsorption was observed in the preliminary results. The Panel found the idea of applying the soil proxies interesting, but is also concerned about simplifying this approach due to selection of one functional group at the proxy, since a wide range of sorption values exist. The plan to compare natural soil and proxy soil experiments using proposed techniques may not be possible. Logistically, the number of samples that must be analyzed one at a time at this system seems overwhelming and the Panel is apprehensive if this can be done."

- Include a strong Introduction; Highlight project importance and innovation
- Include comprehensive literature review
- Present project in intellectual context. Be sure to present a focused, precise and comprehensive research plan. Are your aims too vague?
- Explain method selected and include a rationale for why it was selected
- Highlight prior research and preliminary data to demonstrate feasibility
- Explain why other methods are not used or why proposed method is the best option
- Use a strong format to show progress of ideas
- Change project scope
  - Add Co-investigators if too broad
  - Decrease the number of aims/goals and provide more focus. Add additional aims if too narrow
  - Expand the timeline to include more time
- Include a section to discuss common pitfalls and contingency plans

Reason #5: Project Design

- Not enough evidence to support the need

- Idea is too ambitious

- Goals and/or objectives are unattainable (or unattainable within the stated timeframe or budget)

Demonstration/Example

Taken from Reviewer Comments received from a rejected proposal:

"There is clearly an argument to be found here, about the homogenization of certain practices in documentary <u>and</u> fiction films designed for festivals. I am, however, less certain that I can visualize the book that the PI suggests he is going to write. While the proposal offers what seems to be a well thought-out, orderly plan, the chapter content breakdown seems to be reductive of potentially <u>major</u> topics (every single one!) causes me to be cautious about the viability of the enterprise, and the prospect of its completion. Can all this really be done in single book? In a year and half? I'm not sold."

Remedies: Project Design

- Include a detailed needs analysis/justification
- Include specific background data – your own and others
- Be sure that stated objectives are measurable
- Limit the number of aims to three (3)
- Propose/complete a pilot to demonstrate feasibility before resubmission
- Can the project be broken into smaller pieces?
- Consider alternative funding options

Reason #6: Budget

- Budget is either inadequate or excessive for the proposed scope

- Cost/benefit analysis is not convincing (or was not included)

- The budget included funding for ineligible costs or activities (**indirect costs, travel and equipment are common pitfalls**)

- Consultants are not linked to proposal activities within the narrative

- The budget request does not adhere to guidelines (e.g. requests only one year of support instead of total for entire grant term, or does not break down budget by year as instructed).

- The budget request does not show or include in-kind or matching funds (e.g. Support from the University and/or other sources and donors).

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Demonstration/Example

Taken from actual Reviewer Comments received in response to a rejected proposal:

" While the PI presents a plan for the use of required equipment at XYZ University, the described equipment is ill-suited for a multi-user environment. The proposed plan provides an insufficient justification in terms of number of users, hours needed, or project demands <u>and the budget does not include usage fees for the stated equipment at the proposed laboratory</u>."

Remedies: Budget

- Review the RFP and supporting materials for a list of eligible/ineligible costs. Be sure all budget items reflect eligible costs.

- Justify the budget request and match expenses to the scope of the project. Include detailed information for equipment, travel, consultants, and indirect costs (if allowed).

- Pay attention to the stated budget floor and ceiling, and stay within the requirements of the program/sponsor.

- For foundation/corporate proposals, be sure that your budget request amount aligns with giving history and is not too high or too low. Refer to grantmaker's IRS Form 990 to determine suggest funding request amount. See Guidestar.
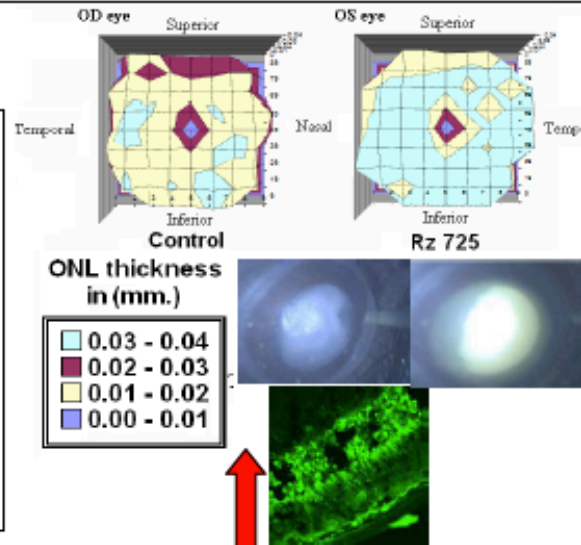
Remedies: Budget (continued)

- Have you included expenses that do not match stated activities? Have you included positions in your budget that are not discussed in the narrative or for which responsibilities are not explained or assigned?

- Include a detailed budget summary/justification that provides a rationale for questioned costs. Be clear in how you determined budget and expenses. Provide quotes if feasible.

- Are there activities that have no associated expenses within the budget?

- Have you matched your budget to the project and not your project to the budget?

- Consider the sponsor's funding cycle(s) (e.g. NIH - resubmit in first cycle of the fiscal year whenever possible).

Reason #7: Presentation

- Proposal is a "Wall of Words?"

- Proposal lack graphics, timelines, or illustrations or graphics are confusing and not aligned with text

- Formatting is misaligned or does not adhere to standard format requirements. Headings and sub-headings do not align with rating criteria or as instructed in the RFP.

- The proposal includes typos.

- Writing is unclear

- "Readability" is hampered by formatting or presentation of text.

Fig. 1. In Vitro Cleavage of Human _RHO_ mRNA.
(**Left**) _In vitro_ transcription from linear plasmid templates for the human _RHO_ mRNA (510 nt piece = Short), and the various Prislei-VAI constructs were made at 37°C. <u>Lane 1</u>: MW markers; <u>Lane 2</u>: Short + Chrys13-725 in Prislei; <u>Lane 3</u>: Short + Chrys8-725 in Prislei; <u>Lane 4</u>: Short + Inactive 725 in Prislei; <u>Lane 5</u>: Short + Active 725 in Prislei; <u>Lane 6</u>: Short + Prislei; <u>Lane 7</u>: Short substrate (510 nt); <u>Lane 8</u>: MW markers. hhRz 725 cleaves effectively within VAI-Prislei without a TLR. Enzyme core mutation obviates catalysis. Stabilized Chrysanthemum hhRz without TLR has no cutting. (**Right**). 2D RNA structure of VAI scaffold. The hhRz inserts between the SalI and PstI sites.

Fig. 2. In Cellulo Cleavage of Human _RHO_ mRNA. (**Left**) HEK293 transfection with control plasmid (VAI with no hhRz) and with active or inactive hhRz 725 constructs. Hatched bar and black bar are different VAI scaffolds (black is Prislei VAI). Active hhRz 725 suppresses levels of full length human _RHO_ mRNA by 50-68% depending upon VAI scaffold type (p<0.05), but inactive hhRz does not suppress indicating a pure catalytic effect. (**Right**). Shows the 2D structure of the minimal hhRz with arbitrary antisense flanks. Inactive mutant has GtoC (arrowhead) conversion.

Fig. 3. Preliminary Evidence of Photoreceptor Rescue in adRP Model. (Top) Subretinal Injection of rAAV expressing 725 hhRz or control without hhRz into the nasal retina. Right eyes (OD) injected with control and left eyes (OS) with 725 hhRz vector. Outer nuclear layer (ONL) thickness measured by optical coherence tomography (**OCT**) across retinal surface and plotted in areal topography maps (color scale in millimeters below). 725 hhRz promotes rescue of at least nasal and inferior quadrants relative to control. (**Middle**). Subretinal injection of dye in glass needle inserted through eye wall from right side. (**Bottom**) Histological section through a mouse retina that received a subretinal injection of rAAV that expresses EGFP (green) in outer nuclear layer (photoreceptors).

within its anticodon loop region (Medina and Joshi, 1999), and other tRNAs have been used as hhRz scaffolds in therapeutic contexts. Additionally, htRNA^{Lys3} has been widely studied, including two decades of work by collaborator Agris (Agris et al.,1997; Yarian et al., 2000; Stuart et al., 2000; Murphy et al., 2004; Bilbille et al., 2009; Vendeix et al., 2012). Recently, the htRNA^{Lys3} scaffold was used to abundantly express various small and large RNA aptamers and hhRzs in bacteria for biophysical and structural analysis (Ponchon and Dardel, 2007, 2009). The scaffold maintains the tRNA intrinsic RNA

Remedies: Presentation

- Include white space (e.g. paragraph indents, spaces between paragraphs, headings, etc.)

- Use targeted sentences; avoid long paragraphs, run-on sentences and use language a lay-person will understand

- A picture is worth a thousand words! Use graphs, charts, timelines, visuals, to clearly articulate/emphasize important points and break up the text.

Considerations – Rejection/Denial With Comments

- Do reviewer comments align? Is there agreement among reviewers on the strengths and weaknesses in the proposal?

- Consider revising sections where consensus among reviewers has not been reached, even if the majority of reviewers swayed one way or the other. This indicates that the proposal is not clear or raised too many questions.

- If you believe the proposal addressed a required criterion, and the reviewers missed it, then the proposal's description wasn't clear and should be revised (e.g. PEBKAC).

- Sometimes reviewers are wrong (e.g., one reviewer cites the page number and paragraph where the proposal addresses a required element, while other reviewers claim that the proposal doesn't address the required element.) Pointing out such a mistake is typically of little value: the funding organization has already made its decision and awarded funding. Federal proposals may have a process in place for requesting an appeal or redetermination. Be sure you understand the rules and process.

What Considerations Exist In the Absence of Comments?

Independence Blue Cross
FOUNDATION

November 15, 2016

Kate Moore
Executive Director, Corporate and Foundation Relations
Temple University
TASB, 3rd floor
Institutional Advancement
1852 N. 10th Street
Philadelphia, PA 19122

Dear Ms. Moore:

As the President of the Independence Blue Cross Foundation, I regret to inform you that the request for funding from **Temple University** through our Blue Safety Net program has been declined.

The Blue Safety Net grant process is competitive. We received a number of commendable requests, but were unable to support them all.

On behalf of our Foundation, we appreciate the good work you do in our community. If you have any questions, please contact me at 215.241.2435.

In good health,

Lorina Marshall-Blake
President
Independence Blue Cross Foundation

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38

Foundations, Corporations, and Private Funding Sources: The Absence of Comments

- Private funding sources typically do NOT provide specific comment on applications or reasons for rejection.

- Foundations and corporations typically have a range of review procedures that may or may not be disclosed, from formalized scoring to a reviewer's "feel" for the proposal.

Strategies for obtaining feedback in the absence of reviewer comments:

- Contact the funding source. Some will talk, others will not. If the funder states that it will not respond for requests for its rational for funding/not funding a proposal, respect that statement and do not call.

- Research the projects that the grantor did fund. Call an awardee to find out what the grantor said were the strengths of the application, and to determine how the awardee approached the funding organization.

General Best Practices for After Rejection: All Scenarios

- Shelve the proposal for a while until the initial sting wears off

- Check your attitude – Are you performing a progress review as part of a continuous grantseeking process or a post-mortem assessment/autopsy where grants go to die?

- Analyze the reviewers' comments, if any

- Restart the proposal development/revision process:
  - Reach out to colleagues and/or other institutions who have been successful with a specific funder to find out what they did right and ask for tips.
  - Contact a Program Officer
  - Seek guidance and assistance from internal resources (e.g. OVPR)

- Track the results of your efforts. Keep a database so you know where you're hitting the target and where you're missing.

- Use information from your database and from speaking with successful applicants to guide next steps with each funder.

- Decide whether or not to revise and resubmit or pursue other funding sources.

- Use resources wisely. Scrapping a viable proposal, or portions thereof, would be wasteful. What can be revised? What can be repurposed? What should be scrapped?

SHOULD I RESUBMIT?

Making the Decision To Revise and Resubmit

- Federal grant rejections will provide the benefit of reviewer comments.

- Foundation rejections typically **do not** provide comments or reasons for rejection

- Reviewer comments are not "all inclusive." Resubmission improves the likelihood of success, but do not guarantee it.

- The decision to resubmit requires the consideration of many factors.

Making the Decision to Revise

- Analyze the reviews
  - Were the reviews generally positive?
  - Did strengths outweigh the weaknesses?
  - What types of issues were identified by reviewers? Why was the proposal rejected?
  - Assess the consistency of comments
  - Pay special attention to the Summary of Comments. It typically does a good job at highlighting the most important issues raised by reviewers.
- Get another objective opinion
- Contact the Program Officer
- Reassess time and PI commitment
- Reassess institutional commitment
- Decide if the project is still of interest and is still relevant
- Commit to your decision – either go for it, or bury it and move on!

Administrative Considerations

- Are there a maximum number of submissions/resubmissions allowed?

- Have I reached the resubmission limit for the agency?

- Is the specific funding mechanism/RFP/program still available? If closed, is the program expected to open again? When?

- Can I reasonably revise the proposal and address all identified weaknesses before the application window closes? If not, what are the future deadlines?

- Is my proposal time sensitive? Does the resubmission window work with time constraints (remember that funding is approximately 6-9 months from the date of resubmission for federal proposals).

- Do you still have the time/bandwidth to dedicate to the project?

- Are there other considerations or changes in circumstances (e.g. change in position or teaching schedule, a successful grant award, etc.)?

Analysis of Reviewer Comments

"Fatal" Feedback:

- Reviewers did not find the proposed research important or innovative

- Reviewers found that the hypothesis is not supported by pilot data or the work of others

- Reviewers found that the literature review was incomplete, outdated, or resulted in conclusions by the PI that were not evidence-based

- Reviewers found that the proposed research has already been completed by someone else or that it replicates existing or previously completed research.

- Reviewers found that the proposed methods are not suitable for testing the stated hypothesis.

Analysis of Reviewer Comments

- Were reviewers right? Can you see their point?

- What did reviewers generally agree upon? Were there outlier comments?

- Were reviewers wrong, or did your proposal simply not articulate what you had hoped?

- Did reviewers misinterpret text or an illustration?

- Did you fail to include detail that would have addressed reviewer concerns?

- Determine the heart of the problem – Is the project flawed in some way, or did the proposal omit important information or fail to communicate important points?

- Can reviewer concerns be rectified?

- Is the overall tone of the review positive? What does your "gut" tell you?

Consider Alternative Funding Sources and Other Factors

- Is your project a better fit for another agency?

- Would a pilot project help to demonstrate feasibility?

- Is there another funding source available that could help to better position you for a reapproach in the near future?

INTERPRETING AGENCY REVIEWS

Interpreting Agency Reviews

- Identify the type of problems identified by reviewers
  - Were problems across the board or isolated to one reviewer?
  - Can the identified weaknesses be addressed?
  - Was there "fatal" feedback?
  - Are there presentation/articulation problems that can be easily corrected?

- Determine the strengths of the proposal that were stated in the review
  - Are strengths across the board or isolated?
  - Keep as many identified strengths as possible

Demonstration/Examples

Include a demonstration of reviewer comments received. Comments and proposal excerpts will be taken from those proposals submitted by Temple PIs in response to our call for rejected proposals and comments.

Particular emphasis will be on comments where there was consistency across the board, and then also where there were many outlier comments or even contradictory comments by reviewers as part of the same review.

Analysis of comments will include strategies for interpreting reviewer comments and looking for "tone" of the review.

TALK TO A PROGRAM OFFICER

Talk to a Program Officer When In Doubt

It is a good idea to reach out to the designated program officer to discuss resubmission as a general rule.

All federal agencies have an assigned program officer.

A foundation may or may not have a program officer to speak with. As a general rule, foundations typically prefer pre-application contact. A foundation generally does not provide reviewer comments and the reason for rejection from a foundation may not be provided.

Foundation Rejection

Because foundations typically do not provide reviewer comments or direct feedback as to why a proposal was not funded, the best strategy for a re-approach is to work with the Office of Corporate and Foundation Relations to establish a relationship with a Foundation before approach or re-approach if rejected.

Revisit your proposal after each rejection.

Ask a trusted colleague to review the proposal and provide feedback.

Consider submission to a diversified portfolio of sponsors, both federal agency and foundation, and remember that persistence and patience are necessary for success.

"Many of life's failures are by people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up."

Thomas Edison

HIGHER EDUCATION

Jacklyn Sutcivni

Grants Consultant

Jackie's career as a grant writer spans a broad range of disciplines. Since 2000, she has helped institutions of higher education, healthcare agencies, not-for-profit organizations, and governmental entities obtain more than $87 million dollars in grant funding. A former research assistant, healthcare professional, public administrator, staff grantwriter for higher education, and small business owner, Jackie brings a range of skills and experience to every engagement. Specializing in federal grant submissions, her expertise in federal grant program design, implementation, and management are immediately evident. She is especially skilled in advancing initiatives through the development of multi-partner and consortium grant proposals and balancing faculty and administrative perspectives.

CONTACT

Katy Bristow
Content Director
kbristow@hanoverresearch.com
www.hanoverresearch.com