THE ART, CRAFT AND WORK OF SUCCESSFUL GRANTS GETTING

When I was asked to prepare this column, I eagerly agreed. As an historian, as one who has experienced success and failure when applying for research grants, and as one whose day-to-day work involves interactions with scholars from a wide range of disciplines as they seek out, prepare, submit proposals, and then manage the research program, I thought I might have some insights into the Art, Craft and Hard Work of Grant Getting. The art of successful research program management – financial management, personnel management, and milestone achievement – is the subject of another set of columns.

The readers of this column are outstanding scholars – they have advanced degrees, have published in peer-reviewed journals or have published a scholarly book, and are viewed by students as mentors and experts. Yet, if they apply for a research grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) or other agencies, the likelihood of receiving funding is 40% or less. And, from many, to be deemed worthy of funding but not funded, or to have one's proposal viewed as inadequate is a "kick between the eyes" – how could one's colleagues not recognize the importance of one's project? Moreover, we know that the culture in which we operate is changing. Younger scholars who are recruited to our universities come with the expectation that they will seek out and obtain research support for themselves and their graduate students. Deans, department chairs and research administrators provide "start-up" and "seed" grants to these new scholars and work closely with them to identify funding opportunities and to prepare competitive applications. Hence, accessing research funds from all granting agencies is increasingly competitive – the numbers of high quality applications grows faster than the available funds.

There are "best practices" for preparing successful applications for external research support.

First, begin early. As we tell our students, leaving things to the last minute does not allow for a quality product, whether writing an essay, studying for an examination, or preparing a grant application. The advice I often give is to begin preparing the grant application at least six months in advance of the deadline. This time period provides an opportunity to review the literature, identify the key issues or themes or hypotheses that you wish to explore, conduct preliminary archival or other primary research, to sketch out the body of the proposal, and to discuss the proposed project with colleagues. If you are unable to do a preliminary visit to an archives you should correspond with the archivists to obtain descriptions and extent of collections that you wish to review. Are the finding aids available on-line? These data allow you to predict how much time you may need at an archives.

Archivists also know if data on the subject of your study is located in other collections as well. This information may be critical to your application as a referee or committee member may have intimate knowledge of the collections and identify your lack of knowledge of related collections as a critical flaw.

Second, read carefully the guidelines of the agency to which you intend to apply. Assess whether your project fits the agency's funding programs. Review the agency's history of grant giving – have they supported research in your field before or is this a new departure for them? In the list of grants awarded you may discover the names of colleagues with whom you are acquainted. You might inquire if they will share with you their successful submission. When in doubt about an agency's priorities, contact the agency's program officer or ask your research grants officer to do so for you.

Third, read carefully the application forms for the agency and adhere closely to the instructions. The forms were designed to structure the presentation of the information and allow for an efficient and effective review of proposals. If forms need to be submitted on-line, allow extra time for data-entry and to ensure accuracy. Follow the agency's prescriptions for format. One does not want a proposal rejected because the font size is too small or that critical forms were missed.

Fourth, prepare an outline of your proposal and begin to draft the proposal. Ask colleagues who are familiar with the field to review the draft for you. You should ask individuals whose judgment you respect and who will be critical. Carefully assess their advice and its applicability to your proposal and the agency's funding criteria and incorporate where possible their insights and suggestions into your proposal.

Fifth, after you have had the experts review the proposal and have revised the proposal, ask the "knowledgeable layperson" to read the description of the research. This person should be an individual who is not in your field. Research grants officers are usually quite good at this task and often identify gaps that may to you and the experts not be obvious because you know the field so well. Again, review their comments carefully and integrate those that you feel are appropriate. You are striving for clarity, precision, and focus. Lay readers should be able to understand your hypotheses, methodology and analysis without being overwhelmed by jargon.

Once you have reached this stage, it is time to begin to "wordsmith" the application, ensuring that the page length meets the agency's restrictions. If a proposal is too long, agencies often discard "extra" pages that may contain the critical elements of your proposal.

This is also the time to begin the budget proposal. A good tool to assist with budget development is a GANTT or PERT chart on which you identify all the critical activities for your project and the time frame in which the research, analysis and writing will occur. These tools also allow you to track who will be doing what (e.g., graduate students or collaborators). Among the key elements to consider are:

Personnel: Will you support a graduate student or employ undergraduate research assistants, if so when and for how long and at what cost (per hour or a stipend)? Some agencies strongly encourage the support of younger scholars but want them treated as researchers-in-training and not as "gophers".

Travel: Which archives or special collections do you need to visit? Where are these located, when are you able to visit, how many visits, and how long on each? Why are multiple visits required? Do you need to fly or can you take a car or train? Is local ground travel required? Do you need to stay in a hotel or are bed and breakfasts or local university residences suitable and at what cost?

Equipment: If you require a laptop, camera or tape recorder, clearly articulate why you need to buy such equipment and not merely borrow it from the University or rent it. Don't pad or lament your whine about the lack of support from your institution.

Dissemination: How do you intend to disseminate the outcomes of your research? What are the costs associated with conference attendance? Will your students participate in the analysis, conference presentations, and journal articles?

Consult with colleagues and your grants officer on the costing of your proposal. A budget that is too low is reviewed as severely as one that is padded. The keen eyes of knowledgeable colleagues identify those who pad budgets but also identify researchers who do not understand the true costs of a project.

If your research involves human participants, you will need to consult your institution's research ethics officer. Institutional policies and the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Research Involving Humans apply to historians as much as they apply to behavioural scientists. For individuals engaged in oral history, the Oral History Association has excellent guidelines for the ethical conduct of research with human subjects.

In the period leading up to the deadline – revise and edit. Aim for clarity of argument and presentation. Proposals that are too dense – in argument or visual presentation – may not receive the positive review that one expects. Our colleagues serve as referees and grant selection committee members a

service to the community. If you make their tasks more efficient, you are likely to receive a quality, critical assessment.

If your application is a resubmission, ensure that you responded to the comments of the grant selection committee. Do not complain that they failed to understand the nuances of your argument.

Check and recheck. Ensure the budget adds up and that the amounts on the budget page are transposed correctly to the summary page.

Do you need a layperson's summary? If so, ensure that it is written so that laypeople are able to understand it. Avoid jargon. Have a layperson read the summary.

Listen to your colleagues and advisors. Take their advice in the spirit in which it was provided – constructively critical.

Submit it to your chair or dean and research grants officer in time for a final, unrushed review. With adequate time, grants officers will review proposals against the objectives of a competition, check the budget for accuracy, and check that all the components have been addressed and all pages are included.

The writing of successful grant applications is an Art, it is a Craft, and, above all, it is Hard Work. Agencies that sponsor research want to be associated with individuals who are outstanding scholars and who are winners. These agencies want to take educated risks and to fund individuals and their projects that lead to new knowledge and its effective dissemination. The Art, Craft and Work of grants writing allows you as a scholar to demonstrate to these agencies through their peer review committees that you have the capacity, skills, vision and imagination to undertake successfully the project that you proposed to them. Above all, they want you to succeed and to be associated with your contributions to knowledge and our understanding of the world in which we live.

Good luck and apply!

Michael Owen
Director, Office of Research Services
Brock University