Grant Proposal Writing in Information Systems

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of grant proposal writing in Information Systems. In particular, we focus on where to find calls for grant proposals, how to write proposals, the proposal review process, and what to expect when a proposal is funded. Guidelines for writing proposals include writers becoming involved in the grant review process to gain a better understanding of how the granting process works and avoiding such pitfalls as writing proposals to increase salary, recognition, or university standing. The proposal writing process is a challenging task and this paper, based on a grant writing workshop at AMCIS 2005, provides support for navigating the process.

Keywords: grant proposal writing, information systems grants

I. INTRODUCTION

Proposal writing is a difficult task in any field. Information Systems research is no different. Major concerns for funding organizations include

- the allocation of a generally limited set of funds to support high quality research,
the definition of the field of Information Systems and
the definition of which type of IS research is worthy of publishing.

Successful proposals are driven by true research needs. Researchers should be wary of falling in the trap of writing proposals for the need of personal financial gain or school gain, political gains, or as credit towards tenure and promotion. These goals can be achieved in easier ways, although all of them can be secondary outcomes of successful proposal writing and project execution.

In this paper, based on a workshop offered at AMCIS 2006 in Omaha, Nebraska in August 2006, we explore grant proposal writing primarily from the viewpoint of Information System scholars. We did not examine all sources of grants (e.g. nonprofit foundations, university specific, the Society for Information Management), all types of grants (e.g. pedagogical, equipment, travel, summer support), or the assessment of the potential competition in applying for grants. Instead, we looked specifically at the roles that both industry and government agencies play in grant proposal writing in support of individuals and their research, the process and outcomes of these funded grants, and techniques and pitfalls in the proposal writing process.

II. WRITING GRANT PROPOSALS

Grant proposals go through a competitive selection process and the acceptance rates can be as low as 10% in Information-Systems-related programs. Though there is no silver bullet for writing a good grant proposal, in this paper we provide general rules that can guide a researcher in improving their chances of grant proposal acceptance and funding. Many of these guidelines are a replication/reiteration of tips and tricks already know to successful proposal writers [Porter, 2003].

Information systems, whether in business schools or elsewhere in the University or college, lie in a gray area of research funding - both for federal grants or private foundation grants.

1. Funding agencies are often hesitant about treating proposals from business schools in a “fair” way based on the perceptions that business schools are sufficiently rich that they can fund their own research.

2. Business schools do not have a strong history in obtaining federal government funding for research.

3. Information systems itself is viewed as a domain which lies in the intersection among the engineering sciences, the pure sciences, and the social sciences. Many times funding agencies are not willing to fund “interdisciplinary research.” On this last issue, some recent National Science Foundation (NSF) research programs (e.g., The Information Technology Research Program) improved the situation significantly.

To overcome these three concerns, applicants should focus their proposal on tools or ideas that are generalizable beyond business schools and IS context and demonstrate clearly the return on investment that a funding agency will obtain. For example, suggest that your research on computing will involve the business school or businesses only as a starting point or an illustrative case.

Agencies fund high risk research. Therefore, the proposed topics should show significant changes and long term impact to the Information Systems field. As a proposal writer, you must determine if the topic is a new idea, or if it is an add-on to existing idea. Most funding programs clearly identify whether they target revolutionary or evolutionary research ideas. Unless explicitly identified, funding agencies may consider both types of proposals because both can provide key contributions to the field. However, express this difference clearly in the proposal and do not try to do everything in one proposal. In either case, provide strong literature coverage.
Show your own collaboration at the national and international level, because this information improves your ability to articulate the research idea in the context of ongoing research. It also demonstrates your competency in the research domain and the context of study.

In a proposal, formulate clearly

- the research questions and goals,
- the methodology, and
- offer an execution plan that identifies the project risks and limitations.

Write concretely about the deliverables you intend to produce and create trust that you can deliver what you propose. To do so, provide details on research infrastructure and administrative support.

The research plan should include benchmarks and evaluation criteria. Provide a timeline on how to evaluate the project. If necessary, consider including collaborators with expertise needed for successful execution. For example, collaborators may conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the outcomes of the research project.

Budgets should directly reflect your plan of work and should be realistic. It is often difficult to negotiate the amount of funding afterwards, though government agencies sometimes have room for negotiation in certain instances. In most cases, you may expect to cut 20-30% of your proposed budget with a possible revision in the scope of the project. Remember that budgets include indirect costs charged by universities of about 40% to 50% of the grant money when the proposal is submitted through the university. Industry sponsors are often unwilling to support indirect costs and may choose to provide the funding as a gift.

Make sure you clear up intellectual property issues, human subject issues, non-disclosure agreements, and letters of participation from organizations that you intend to work with prior to submission. If needed for your research, particularly if you work with human subjects, obtain approval from your Institutional Review Board (IRB).

The research idea must be well articulated and succinctly expressed in the proposal. Peer feedback is a valuable tool in achieving this goal. Revise the proposal several times based on the feedback prior to submitting to a funding agency. When revising a proposal, always follow the formatting guidelines. Failure to do so can be grounds for rejection without review. Some researchers use the services of professional writers and members of a university grant office to help with grant proposal preparation.

Begin the proposal early. Do not expect that a proposal started a week or two before the deadline will be competitive. Since a large number of submissions are made close to the deadline, there is a possibility of getting locked out of online submission systems. Typically, you can not appeal for deadline extensions. In addition, when doing a proposal submission, you need to go through the grant office at your university. This procedure can sometimes take three weeks to get your final proposal through the university and to the granting agency. Find out whether your grants office is fast or slow. Remove that time from your available time for preparation. Make sure you submit at least drafts of the proposal early with online submissions; you can replace them with revised versions before they are officially submitted.

III. GRANT PROPOSAL REVIEW PROCESS

Reviews performed for government agencies are typically compensated (e.g., National Science Foundation); however, industry reviews are performed as a service (e.g., Microsoft). The background of the reviewers and their expertise in your area of research vary considerably. The review process is most often single blind. In some cases, reviews are compiled by a program director and decisions are made by that director. In other cases, review panels are convened to discuss and evaluate proposals. In this process, proposals move up or down in their potential for...
being funded and the amount to be funded. In rare circumstances, typically for very large proposals, the funding agencies perform site visits.

In the proposal, you roughly have the first one or two pages to get the reviewers attention. Important aspects of the proposals discussed beyond the early pages of the proposal are less likely to receive the same level of attention because the reader may lose interest, thereby decreasing your chances for funding. From government agencies you will often see the reviews. In industry, you will rarely see the reviews due to litigation concerns. Make sure that you keep in touch with the program manager to learn about the proposal strengths and weaknesses that were not articulated in a review.

IV. GRANT PROPOSAL OUTCOMES

If you receive funding often requires you to produce research output in the form of conference publications and other publicity. These presentations require demonstrations, progress reports, and discussions of future work. Conference proceedings provide a quick outlet for the results, but you need to make sure that the quality of the proceedings is acceptable. Make sure also to engage industry whenever your proposal entities and allows you to do it. Some agencies (like DARPA) require on-site presentations of the progress of your work. Some agencies also expect that you share the dataset obtained through a funded grant. If you are unwilling to share the data, you will not likely receive funding.

If you do not receive the grant, revise and resubmit the proposal. A second round proposal will be more likely to succeed. In addition, if the proposal is rejected consider using relevant parts of it into an academic paper to strengthen your track record.

V. FINDING GRANTS

Many government agency, foundations, and private companies dedicate web sites to listing all available grants (e.g. the ACM [1999]). Appendix I lists additional online resources for available grants. You can also contact agency program directors directly. NSF offers an e-mail service which provides reminders for all forthcoming funding opportunities. Government agencies such as NSF issue requests for proposals three months prior to grant proposal due date. Monthly email newsletters, alternative industry sources, and philanthropy web sites of major corporations list opportunities for funding. To comb the vast listings of available grants, consider funding a student or employee as a resource for the entire department or college.

Information on approved grants is also often available online from government agencies. The fastest way to obtain a copy of the proposal is often to contact the Principal Investigator directly or through the funding agency. Universities may provide a repository of funded proposals.

VI. BECOMING FAMILIAR WITH THE PROCESS

Volunteering to be on a reviewer of proposals is a good way to gain first-hand experience on how the system works. You can quickly learn what good and bad proposals look like, and make contacts and a good impression inside of the funding agencies.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

When writing a proposal, follow the call for proposals clearly. Do not retrofit your research to a grant proposal call; write a proposal because your research truly needs funding to succeed. Establish a track record in the field through research collaboration. These collaborators oftentimes can act as mentors to help you write grant proposals [Banta et al., 2004]. Also make sure that you have the infrastructure in place to handle the grant if it is awarded. Keep the lines of communication open to all those involved including mentors, reviewers, and project directors.

Grant Proposal Writing in Information Systems by K. Lyttinen, J. Prey, B. G. Ramesh, M. Germonprez, and D-G. Ko
Instead of working on isolated research projects, plan a research program in which different, but related streams of research may be lead to grant proposals. This strategy will help leverage the significant investment that you need to be successful in this endeavor.

REFERENCES

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APPENDIX I. ONLINE GRANT RESOURCES

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