Your Grant Was Not Funded: What Do You Do Now?

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Introduction

Most investigators would agree that while there are many limitations and potential inaccuracies associated with the classic process of formal competitive peer review used by the NIH and other funding agencies, it is still probably the fairest and most objective system for identifying the best research proposals. The effect of this system of relentless meritocracy has been to steadily “raise the bar” each year, for grant applications that are good enough to be funding. The reality for many applicants is that even when every effort has been made to submit a proposal with the highest quality and with careful attention to every detail, it is very likely that the first application for funding will not be successful. A single weakness identified by the referees, even if it is obvious that it can be readily addressed, is often sufficient to place the scoring of a grant application below the threshold for funding. One of the reasons for this phenomenon is that new grant applications compete in the same pool at each review session with revised and resubmitted applications for the same funding opportunities.

The key point here is that many funding agencies allow proponents to submit revised grant applications after they have not competed successfully in a previous round. The rules vary with the type of grant and agency, but typically, applicants may be allowed two rounds of resubmission. In preparing their revised applications, applicants typically have access to detailed critiques provided by the referees.

Strategies

For the purpose of this presentation, suggestions were sought from 18 experienced, NIH-funded investigators. The sample included MD and PhD investigators, with NIH funding experience ranging from 7 to 20+ years. They were asked to respond to the following question:

What are the 2 or 3 most important points of advice you would give to a colleague who has just learned that a new grant application will not be funded?

Analysis of these responses resulted in the following 13 points, which will be elaborated in the workshop presentation:

(1) Deal with your disappointment
(2) Revise and resubmit
(3) Be Persistent
(4) Get help
(5) Seek advice from grant agency staff
(6) Understand what the referees are saying
(7) Balance ambition with focus
(8) Respond appropriately
(9) Get the format right
(10) Strategize the specific aims
(11) Get the content right
(12) Demonstrate a good environment
(13) Strategize the budget and duration
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Synopsis
No matter how much care is taken, it is very common for the first submission of a grant application not to be funded. Many funding agencies allow proponents to submit revised grant applications, responding to detailed critiques provided by the referees. This presentation describes key suggestions obtained from a group of 18 experienced, NIH-funded investigators, responding to the question: What are the 2 or 3 most important points of advice you would give to a colleague who has just learned that a new grant application will not be funded?