INTRODUCTION TO PROPOSAL WRITING

UW Tacoma Office of Research
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THE PROPOSAL WRITING PROCESS: A ROADMAP

- Developing a **tractable topic**
- Identifying **funding** opportunity(ies)
- **Before** you start writing
- **Writing** the proposal
- **Submitting** the proposal
- **Dealing with the decision**
UW Tacoma Faculty
Pro-Tip:

“Approach proposal writing as you would a scholarly project: start early, collaborate with experts (especially our wonderful UWT staff), get feedback, [try to] **enjoy it as an intellectually stimulating activity** (not just something to cross off the do list).”
DEVELOPING A TRACTABLE TOPIC

Consider the extent to which potential projects...

...aligns with your passions and long-term goals
  • Do you want to spend a lot of time with it?
  • Think strategically

...is compelling and ‘fundable’
  • What is the problem?
  • Why is it important?
  • Will others agree with you?
  • Preliminary data?

...is in your/your team’s ‘wheelhouse’
  • Methodologically?
  • Institutionally?
  • Previous work
  • Preliminary data?
UW Tacoma Faculty
Pro-Tip:

“Choose a project that you are truly passionate about, something that aligns with your core values. That conviction will come through in the proposal process.”
IDENTIFYING FUNDING

Where is the money?

Total grants funded in U.S. (FY2016): $1 Trillion

- Corporations = 2% ($19B)
- Foundations = 6% ($59B)
- Individuals = 27% ($282B)
- Federal = 65% ($668B)

Source: Grant Training Center (2017)
IDENTIFYING FUNDING

UW Tacoma: $3.1M in new awards in FY2017

- Federal: 55%
- WA State: 20%
- Other universities: 11%
- Local governments: 10%
- Foundations/non-profits: 4%
- Foreign: 1%
IDENTIFYING FUNDING

Resources for finding funding:

• Databases
• Sign up for email alerts!
• We are here to help!

Be careful with eligibility...
IDENTIFYING FUNDING

Resources for finding funding:

• Databases
• Sign up for email alerts!
• Learn from your colleagues
• Be nosy!
• Leverage internal grants
• We are here to help!
Internal Awards

• **Royalty Research Fund (RRF)**
  [http://uw.edu/research/or/royalty-research-fund-rrf/](http://uw.edu/research/or/royalty-research-fund-rrf/)

• **Global Innovation Fund (GIF)**
  [http://www.washington.edu/globalaffairs/funding](http://www.washington.edu/globalaffairs/funding)

• **UW Innovation Awards**
  [http://uw.edu/research/the-university-of-washington-innovation-awards/](http://uw.edu/research/the-university-of-washington-innovation-awards/)
BEFORE YOU START WRITING...

You have a Request for Proposal (RFP) in hand...

STEP 1: Read the solicitation/RFP
STEP 2: Read the RFP again
BEFORE YOU START WRITING...

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STEP 2: Read the RFP again

• Boring, but important
• Grants are rejected because they don’t follow basic instructions
• Subtle (and not so) hints that tell the applicant what and how to write
BEFORE YOU START WRITING...

STEP 3: Contact us (the Office of Research)

• Let us help you think through the details in the RFP and make a plan
• Often helpful to discuss your conceptual framework together
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STEP 4: Ensure eligibility (with the OR)
- Institutional eligibility
- Individual eligibility
- Letter of intent
- Internal submission
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- Individual eligibility
- Letter of intent
- Internal submission

STEP 5: Let your Dean/Director know you’re applying
- Get them started on a letter if necessary
BEFORE YOU START WRITING...

STEP 6: Understand the funder’s objectives

• “Seek first to understand, then to be understood”

• Funder does NOT exist to fund the research you want to do;
  • They exist to fund their funding priorities

• Objectives vary widely by funder
  • Federal: Very specific funding priorities
  • Foundation grants: Carrying on the legacy of the founder

• Seek to understand the types of projects that have been funded
  • Federal: Advanced searches on solicitation and/or topic
  • Foundation/internal grants: Often list past recipients

• Seek to understand the funder’s language so you can speak it

• We are here to help!
“Proposal writing is a two phase proposal. First, write a proposal for whatever you believe is awesome. Second, submit the proposal that the funding agency is willing to fund. In other words: Read the RFP carefully to identify the intersection between what you believe is worth doing and what the funding agency is willing to support.”

“Know the mission of the agency”

“Try to remember all sponsors need to spend their money; a proposal should help them identify a good way to spend it. In other words, find out their priorities and meet them.”
BEFORE YOU START WRITING...

STEP 7: Understand the reviewers and review process

- Actual humans!
  - Reviewer rosters
  - List of Program Officers/Directors
  - Advisory Boards

- Criteria often boils down to:
  - Is the idea good?
  - Will it make a “difference”
  - Are you the right person/people to do it?

- Most often explicitly stated in RFP
NSF Merit Review Criteria

Proposals assessed based on potential to...

1a) ...advance knowledge within a field or across different fields (Intellectual Merit)
1b) ...benefit society or advance desired societal impacts (Broader Impacts)
2) …explore creative, original, or transformative concepts

And the extent to which...

3) …the plan for carrying out activities is well-reasoned, well-organized and based on sound rationale
4) …the individual/team is well-qualified to conduct the activities
5) …there are adequate resources available to the PI(s)
UW Tacoma Faculty

Pro-Tip:

“Learn as much as you can about the people who are going to be reviewing the applications. While an organization, foundation, government agency, etc. writes the check, humans pick the winners.”
BEFORE YOU START WRITING...

STEP 8: THINK... A LOT...

- Logic models and conceptual frameworks can be very useful
## Developing a logic model

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### Evaluation
What do you want to know?

How will you know it?

*Source: Grant Training Center, Project Strategy & Design Workbook (2017)*
Developing a logic model: Example

**Inputs**
- Resources:
  - Funding
  - National and local program staff
  - Parents
- Collaborations:
  - School administrators and teachers
  - Local organizations
  - National organizations
- Planning:
  - Evaluation
  - Program sustainability

**Activities**
- Recruit and train parent leaders
- Provide technical assistance to parent leaders
- Develop and disseminate materials on parent involvement to parents
- Disseminate FIP materials to local and national funders and organizations
- Build relationships with schools
- Develop coalitions of local parent involvement programs and organizations

**Short-Term Outcomes**
- Increase number of parents in communities who are trained by parent leaders on parent involvement
- Increase parent knowledge on how to become involved in their children's education
- Build or strengthen local collaborations at each site to promote and sustain parent involvement
- Increase awareness of and commitment to FIP and its sustainability

**Long-Term Outcomes**
- Increase involvement of parents associated with FIP in their children's education
- Increase parents' levels of involvement in their children's education – parents work closely with school systems and seek leadership positions
- Establish FIP sustainability

Source: Grant Training Center, Project Strategy & Design Workbook (2017)
BEFORE YOU START WRITING...

STEP 8: THINK... A LOT...

• Logic models and conceptual frameworks can be very useful

• Create a timeline for the proposal process
  • Identify all tasks ahead of time and responsible parties
  • Create a timeline for requests
  • Shorter the requirements, longer you should plan to work
  • Keep in mind the UW Office of Sponsored Research (OSP) deadlines

• We are here for you!
BEFORE YOU START WRITING...

STEP 9: CONTACT THE PROGRAM OFFICER

Research Initiative for Scientific Enhancement (RISE) Program (R25)

RISE (R25) is a developmental program that seeks to increase the number of students underrepresented in the biomedical sciences that complete Ph.D. degrees in these fields. The program provides grants to institutions with a commitment and history of developing students from populations underrepresented in biomedical sciences as defined by the National Science Foundation. By supporting institutions with well-integrated developmental activities designed to strengthen students' academic preparation, research training and professional skills, the RISE Program aims to help reduce the existing gap in completion of Ph.D. degrees between underrepresented and non-underrepresented students. Applicant institutions must award the baccalaureate, master's or doctoral degree in biomedical science fields.

Institutions that have received less than $5 million per year from R21 and equivalent grant support (total costs) in each of the last two fiscal years are eligible to apply. An institution may apply for and hold only one RISE grant. Institutions eligible for the initiative for Maximizing Student Development Program are not eligible to apply for or receive RISE grants. Similarly, IACUC lead institutions are not eligible to apply for or receive RISE grants. The total requested project period for these awards may not exceed 5 years. Awards are renewable. While there are no budgetary caps for this award, all requested costs must be reasonable, well documented, and fully justified and commensurate with the scope of the proposed program.

For additional information about RISE awards, see the NIH Guide for Grants and Contracts. July 8, 2018 (PAR-18-361), visit the Training, Workforce Development, and Diversity Web site or call Dr. Luis Cubane at 301-594-3900 or Dr. Anissa J. Brown at 301-594-0800.

2018 RWJF Culture of Health Prize

Call for Applications
Release Date: August, 10, 2017 | Application Deadline: November 03, 2017, 3:00 p.m. ET

PURPOSE

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) Culture of Health Prize (the Prize) recognizes communities that have placed a priority on health and are creating powerful partnerships and deep commitments that will enable everyone, especially those facing the greatest barriers to good health, the opportunity to live well. A Culture of Health recognizes that health and well-being are greatly influenced by where we live, learn, work, and play; the safety of our surroundings; and the relationships we have in our families and communities. The Prize elevates the compelling stories of local leaders and community members who together are transforming neighborhoods, schools, businesses, and more—so that better health flourishes everywhere.

SELECTION CRITERIA

There are characteristics shared by communities that catalyze and sustain positive change. Because the Prize recognizes whole communities, applicants must think beyond their own individual organizations and initiatives to what has been accomplished across the community. Applications will be judged based on the criteria below.

- Defining health in the broadest possible terms.
UW Tacoma Faculty Pro-Tips:

“You should **ALWAYS** contact your program officer before you submit your proposal (or even before you start writing). I know that sounds scary, but they genuinely want to help and are willing to hear your pitch. Then when you get the grant, _keep in touch_ about your progress. **Cultivate the relationship** for long-term success.”

“Reach out to sponsors to **develop relationships**. Learn what their funding priorities are, tell them what you are interested in, and stay in touch. **Offer to be a resource.**”
UW Tacoma Faculty
Pro-Tips:

“For every grant I’ve applied for, meeting with the Program Director (preferably face-to-face) has been the most helpful thing, both pre-award insight and post-review feedback... I’ve found that the PD wants to know who you are, where you are in your career, and what you are trying to do... Turn them into your advocate... and [let them] promote [your] competitiveness.”
BEFORE YOU START WRITING...

STEP 10: THINK SOME MORE...

• Refine your conceptual framework and proposed activities based on feedback from Program Officer
WRITING THE PROPOSAL

So, you’ve now:

...reviewed the solicitation/RFP
...let the Office of Research and Dean/Director know
...ensured eligibility
...researched the funder’s priorities, the reviewers, and the review process
...developed your conceptual framework
...discussed your project with the Program Officer
...have a timeline for completing the proposal

Time to start writing!
Every proposal is a sales pitch.
WRITING THE PROPOSAL

Your work is to tell a coherent, compelling story....

• You are selling “stock” in your work; your idea is an investment
  • Funder wants to trust that you will provide a high return
  • Show how your past success predict future success
• The reviewer should leave as excited about the idea as you are
• But, remember: You are building career-long relationships
  • Avoid ‘dazzling today, disappointing tomorrow’
WRITING THE PROPOSAL

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...quickly

• Imperative to catch readers attention in first page
• The “20 minute rule”*

*Rule comes courtesy of Ann McMahon, UW Bothell Office of Research
WRITING THE PROPOSAL

Like most stories, good proposals have a narrative arc.
There is a Big Problem
It’s really, really important because...

Background/Motivation
We know some things about this problem...
But we don’t know some other really important things about it

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Literature Review
Luckily, I/we have an idea for how to fill this gap in our knowledge!

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Research Question(s)/Objectives/ Specific Aims
This is the plan for how I/we will do so...
It is a good plan because...
I/we are the right people to carry out this plan...
I/we will assess how good it is by doing...

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Research Plan/Procedure
The proposal will have a considerable impact on:
- Scholarship
- Society
- My career

Contributions/Broader Impacts

A happy ending!
Different emphases for different funders
"The Foolproof Research Proposal Template"

LARGE GENERAL TOPIC OF WIDE INTEREST
(Global Warming, Immigration, Cancer, Etc.)

Brief Ref. to Literature I  Brief Ref. to Literature II

"HOWEVER, scholars in these fields have not yet adequately addressed XXXX..."

GAP IN KNOWLEDGE
1. Urgency: This gap is bad!!!
2. HERO Narrative: I will fill this gap!!!

YOUR RESEARCH QUESTION
“I am applying to XXX to support my research on XXX”

SPECIFICS OF YOUR PROJECT
(background info, location, history, context, limitations, etc.)

LITERATURE REVIEW (Multi-page, thorough, accurate, relevant)

METHODOLOGY (Discipline specific)
TIMELINE (Month by month plan)
BUDGET (Realistic and legitimate expenses)

STRONG CONCLUSION!!!
("I expect this research to contribute to debates on xxxxx")

Source: https://theprofessorisin.com/2011/07/05/dr-karens-foolproof-grant-template/
WRITING THE PROPOSAL

As you write, think about your reader

• Your target: A scientifically-literate, but uninformed reader

• Observe the donor’s language in the RFP, then speak it

• Do not assume existing knowledge about your topic
  • But, be careful not to “talk down” to readers with more expertise

• Respect the reader’s time and energy; Make it easy for them
  • Do not make the reader think or look anything up!
  • Be explicit: It is your job to connect the dots, not the reader’s
“Your job is to recruit a champion [and not detractors] who is excited and enthusiastic about the work you propose to do.”

“Seek out opportunities to serve on a review panel – it is one of the best things you can do to understand how reviewers think and improve your proposal writing”
WRITING THE PROPOSAL

As you write, think about your reader

• Your target: An scientifically-literate, but uninformed reader
  • At the same time: Do not “talk down” to readers with expertise

• Observe the donor’s language in the RFP, then speak it

• Do not assume existing knowledge about your topic

• Respect the reader’s time and energy; Make their work easy
  • Do not make the reader think or look anything up!
  • Be explicit: It is your job to connect the dots, not the reader

A great way to make sure your proposal hits these marks:

Have scientifically-literate, but uninformed readers review it!
WRITING THE PROPOSAL

Mobilize your team

- Look to reviewers to ask critical questions, sharpen thinking
  - Point to areas of confusion, prompt possible solutions

- Nitpicking has its place

- Different reviewers for different purposes
  - Colleagues in your field, colleagues out of your field
  - Partners/friends, your grandma
  - The Office of Research (Me!)
WRITING THE PROPOSAL

Your work is to tell a coherent, compelling story, quickly
WRITING THE PROPOSAL

Your work is to tell a coherent, compelling story, quickly ...in a very specific structure

1) Title/Cover Page
2) Project Summary and/or Abstract
3) Project Narrative/Description
   • Background/Motivation/Existing Literature
   • Research Questions/Objectives/Specific Aims
   • Research Plan/Procedure
   • Contributions/Broader Impacts
   • Evaluation/Assessment Plan
4) References Cited
5) Curriculum Vitae/Biosketches
6) Timeline
7) Budget and Budget Justification
8) Supplementary Documents
   • Current and Pending Support
   • Facilities and Equipment
   • Letters of support/Letters of collaboration
   • Data Management Plan
   • Institutional Certifications
   • PI Leadership Plan
   • Postdoc Mentoring Plan

All these components tell a piece of the story!
The miscellanea

Supplementary Documents
• Current and Pending Support
• Facilities and Equipment
• Data Management Plan
• Letters of Recommendation/Support
• Letters of collaboration
• Institutional certifications
• PI Leadership Plan
• Postdoc Mentoring Plan
WRITING THE PROPOSAL

Letters of Recommendation/Support

• Important part of the story, particularly for foundation grants

• Get started well ahead of the deadline

• Intellectual and collaborative contributions

• Your potential, within the specific context of the funding opportunity
  • “She is perfect for this award because…”

• Your scholarly strengths and qualities

• Perhaps, why you were selected to be a faculty member

• **We can help think through suggested content!**
WRITING THE PROPOSAL

Curriculum Vitae / Biographical Sketches

• Use to bolster your story – don’t submit a multi-purpose CV
• Follow directions!
WRITING THE PROPOSAL

Curriculum Vitae / Biographical Sketches

- Use to bolster your story – don’t submit a multi-purpose CV
- Follow directions!

Timeline

- Not always required, but always a good idea
- Consistency with the research plan and procedure is key
- One free, web-based project management tool: www.ganttter.com
Gantt charts – An example

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Source: Grant Training Center, Project Strategy & Design Workbook (2017)
WRITING THE PROPOSAL

Curriculum Vitae / Biographical Sketches

• Use to bolster your story – don’t submit a multi-purpose CV
• Follow directions!

Timeline

• Not always required, but always a good idea
• Consistency with the research plan and procedure is key

Budget and Budget Justification

• The budget drives the story
• Must be reasonable, justifiable, and consistent with your narrative
• Ensure that you can afford to do what you say you will do
• We are here to help you!
WRITING THE PROPOSAL

Title / Cover Page

• Follow directions!

• Title is important piece of your sales pitch!
  • Catchy, but not cutesy – goal is to standout, but not annoy
  • Easily understandable – often used to assign reviewers
  • Explains why it is important
  • Try to stay away from questions
WRITING THE PROPOSAL

Abstract / Project Summary

• You **must** catch the reader here

• Tell reader immediately what you are intending to do
  • What major problem you are going to solve
  • Why is your solution so exciting
  • What approach are you going to take to solve it
  • How it will save the world
There is a Big Problem
It’s really, really important because...

We know some things about this problem...
But we don’t know some other really important things about it
WRITING THE PROPOSAL

Narrative: Background / Motivation / Existing Knowledge

Tips:

• Consider a robust introduction, particularly in longer narratives

• “Cite, but don’t slight” – those slighted may be your reviewers!

• A project overview visual showing how pieces fit can be helpful
Luckily, I/we have an idea for how to fill this gap in our knowledge!
WRITING THE PROPOSAL

Narrative: Research Question(s) / Objectives / Aims

Tips:

• Questions and aims should be clear, specific, measurable
• Straightforward connection between questions and aims
• Scope should be reasonable and defensible given time and budget
• Typically 1-2 overarching aims, 2-4 objectives (although varies)
• Delineate between preliminary work completed and work proposed
  • Clearly explain what you have found
  • Then, how the proposed work will build on preliminary findings
  • Aims should not incorporate completed work
This is the plan for how I/we will do so...
It is a good plan because...
I/we are credible people to carry out this plan...
We will assess how good it is by...
WRITING THE PROPOSAL

Narrative: Research Plan / Procedure

Tips:

• Should leave no pragmatic question unaddressed

• Always explain the “how”
  • Not just “I will measure...”
  • But, “I will measure X by Y metrics using Z instrument”

• Logic/workflow model can help, if not included elsewhere

• Timeline can help here, if not included elsewhere

• Seek to establish credibility
  • Communicated by how competently you present the research plan
  • What are you doing now – cite prior work, modestly
  • What you will do better with the proposed funding
WRITING THE PROPOSAL

Narrative: Contributions / Broader Impacts

A happy ending!
The proposal will have a considerable impact on...
- The field
- Society
- My career
WRITING THE PROPOSAL

Narrative: Contributions / Broader Impacts

Tips:

• Contributions to scholarship
  • Within and outside your field

• Contributions to society / public at large
  • Envision the world with the problem solved
  • Both direct and indirect impact of findings, related activities
  • Impacts to specific populations of students, workforce, public
  • Partnerships developed between academia, industry, community
  • National security, economic competitiveness

• Contributions to your research program
  • “Priming the pump”
  • Supporting your long-term research agenda
WRITING THE PROPOSAL

Using the UW Tacoma context to your advantage

- Predominantly undergraduate institution (PUI)

- Students served
  - Approximately half (52%) transfer from 2-year colleges
  - Less than 45% Caucasian
  - Designated ‘Asian American and Native America Pacific Islander Serving Institution’ (AANAPISI)
  - 20% enrolled through military benefits (active, veteran, child/spouse)
  - Other, that aligns with the RFP?

- Community-engaged, role as an anchor institution
  - Context of Tacoma and South Sound, generally

- We can help in framing our context for the specific opportunity
UW Tacoma Faculty
Pro-Tips: Telling your story

“Be clear and specific on your purpose, plan of action, and definitions when writing your narrative. For example, vague references to [social] equity in the broader impact section will not cut it. You need to make your research compelling. Be specific.”

“Pilot data helps. Essentially, what have you tried (learned) as you have pursued this line of research? Funders want to see that you have been working on these ideas; that you have some evidence or more questions, and now need additional research support to investigate further.”
UW Tacoma Faculty
Pro-Tips: Telling your story

“Always lead with a major question you are going to ask... [then] return to that central question throughout.”

“[Make sure] the proposal addresses the RFP objectives in the strongest terms you can think of.”

“Write a grant that matches your ‘credit’ gained from education and work experience.”
WRITING THE PROPOSAL

Writing quality matters!

• Substantiate all claims with evidence

• Never complain
  • Don’t give reviewers a reason to dismiss your proposal

• Think critically about whether details help the story, or distract from it
  • Reading aloud, or having someone read aloud to you can help flag

• Use active voice
  • “PIs will conduct spatial analysis”
  • Not “Spatial analysis will be conducted”
WRITING THE PROPOSAL

Writing quality matters!

• Every word serves a purpose – minimize unnecessary ‘fluff’
  • e.g. “It has been shown that...”; “Indeed, one might argue...”

• Minimize use of vague qualifiers and unfettered enthusiasm
  • e.g. “a lot”; “really”; “very”; “exciting”

• Watch comparisons (“more than,” “better,” “improved”)
  • Always report alongside a reference point

• Avoid platitudes – don’t assume that reviewers share your values
  • e.g. “We must save the speckled brown tree frog from extinction”
The goal: No grumpy reviewers!
WRITING THE PROPOSAL

The goal: No grumpy reviewers!

• Follow directions!
• 1” margins
• No more than 6 lines of text/inch
• Legible font, 11 point min.
• Maximize white space
• Consistent (sub-)headings
• Highlight key ideas consistently
• Limit acronyms to those likely to know, maybe a few more
• Typos make it easy for the reviewer to dismiss your proposal
WRITING THE PROPOSAL

The Goal: No grumpy reviewers!
WRITING THE PROPOSAL

The Goal: No grumpy reviewers!

- Title/Number
- Legend
- Placed next to the reference text
- Legible – size and clarity
- Don’t assume printed in color
UW Tacoma Faculty
Pro-Tips:

“The quality of the proposal really matters. Sitting on a review panel I saw plenty of mediocre, but well-presented proposals get funded, and good, but poorly-packaged proposals get rejected.”
SUBMITTING THE PROPOSAL

Start early!

• A good goal: Solid internal draft to Office of Research (10) business days prior

• Engage us from the outset

• Can be helpful to work through iterative drafts throughout the proposal process

• All routed through UW Office of Sponsored Research (OSP)
  • This takes time – let us help you think through a timeline
SUBMITTING THE PROPOSAL

UW System to Administer Grants Electronically (SAGE)

• All proposals must be submitted through SAGE

We are here to help with the submission process!
UW Tacoma Faculty Pro-Tips:

“Start early - if this year's deadline is approaching, consider aiming for NEXT year's deadline to give yourself enough time to write a quality proposal.”

“Take it seriously. Put the work into it to make it excellent.”
DEALING WITH THE DECISION

Your submission is awarded

• Rejoice!

• Let us know so we can celebrate and track your successes
DEALING WITH THE DECISION

Your submission is awarded
  • Rejoice!
  • Let us know so we can celebrate and track your successes

Your submission is not awarded
  • Set aside reviewers until you are in a space to receive them
  • Take a deep breath – reviews are not personal attacks
  • Think of grants(person)ship as a sport
    • Take the opportunity to better understand the rules and improve
    • Engage your team, including the Office of Research!
  • Keep playing – persistence pays off
UW Tacoma Faculty
Pro-Tip:

“Don’t get discouraged about rejections, most ideas take a lot of time and effort, and some iterations to develop fully into a strong research project.”

“Don't give up. Be persistent. Don't take negative critique personally. It is ok to re-submit and try again. Very few investigators get their proposals funded in their first try. If you try, the probability is admittedly low. But if you don't try, the probability is zero.”
WE ARE HERE FOR YOU!

Please do not hesitate to contact us:

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