

by Karen Young Kreeger

TURNING POINTS

## Get Help to Win Grants

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I remember well the angst over writing grant proposals. When I was a fisheries PhD student, I wrote a few while indulging in long, intimate bouts with coffee. Two proposals got funded--a large one, prepared with my advisor's help, by a federal agency, and a small one by a sports fishing research organization. This experience helped me write an aquarium's funding proposal later, when I started science writing full time.

(Unfortunately that one didn't get funded.)

If you are a PhD student or postdoc, writing your own grant proposal--regardless of its success--and the comments you get from grant reviewers and colleagues can give you an edge. "I think the only way that they can understand that [importance] is by talking to a lot of people about the grants process. For some, this isn't even on their radar screen," says **Victoria McGovern**, a program officer at the Burroughs Wellcome Fund in Durham, NC.

**Robert Rich**, a program officer for the American Chemical Society Petroleum Research Foundation, recommends that scientists at every stage of their careers chat with grant administrators if they have questions about the rules or deadlines. "Unfortunately, most don't," he notes.

Program officers can help with the nuts and bolts of the grant application, but Rich and McGovern suggest that grant writers have their peers look over the proposals for scientific inconsistencies or for errors in logic. "If you send [the proposal] out to say three of your colleagues before you send it into the agency, it's like already having the peer review process take place," Rich explains. "But instead of having it ruled out for funding you can look at the comments, make changes, and send it in."

Just as it is the responsibility of the postdoc to seek advice on grant writing, it is also the responsibility of mentors to steer them in that direction. Most mentors do not readily relate to their students what they need to know about writing winning grants. McGovern likens this phenomenon to the life lessons parents forget to tell their children. "I think it's the professional obligation of the mentor to provide that kind of support for people going on to academia," Rich says.

**Brittney-Shea Herbert**, a postdoc in the lab of telomerase researchers **Jerry Shay** and **Woody Wright** at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas, says her advisors are very approachable for help on grants, and "that's what makes a good mentor; they want to help advance your career."

Not all postdocs get that kind of help. But you can get assistance from many other resources if your mentor is not helpful; talk to colleagues outside your department or at national meetings, or other postdocs in the lab. Herbert says she has mainly met with administrators in her department or in the university's office of research--other good sources for help--for questions about budget, safety, and the signature page.

Where else can you go for help? "If you're in a lab where the mentor just won't talk to you about grants, there are always other faculty around and you can always bring it up over beers with people," suggests McGovern. Grant writing is simply "one of those things people should be talking about."

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