

Global Political Perspectives: From EAU to HEL and Back

By Jeremy T. Miner and Tiina Berg

With an annual budget of \$30 billion, the National Institutes of Health is the largest public funder of medical research in the United States. With so much money, competition is fierce: according to the NIH Data Book, in 2014 more than 51,000 applications were submitted and 9,000 awards were granted to researchers in every state and around the world. This reflects an average success rate of 18 percent. Over the past decade, NIH budget appropriations have grown only 7 percent, while the number of applications have swelled 25 percent—10,000 more applications were submitted in 2014 than in 2004. The budget for 2015 and request for 2016 remain relatively flat, which in practical terms means that success rates are likely to continue inching downward, and that researchers who are fortunate enough to win grant awards will face the reality of having less buying power than they did ten years prior.

On the other hand, the European Union has made a significant investment in research innovation, making nearly €80 billion (≈ \$90 billion) in funding available over 7 years (2014 to 2020). The goal of Horizon 2020 (as presented on its website) is to “ensure Europe produces world-class science, removes barriers to innovation, and makes it easier for the public and private sectors to work together in delivering innovation.” The program is open to researchers throughout the world, and most calls require collaboration among EU or associated countries’ organizations and, quite often, among non-EU organizations. In health-related calls, US organizations are not only welcome to participate but also are entitled to receive funding. Data from calendar year 2014, however, suggests that competition for funding is brutal: in the inaugural competition, Horizon 2020 received nearly 37,000 applications and had a success rate of 12-14 percent. In some health-related call topics the success rates dropped as low as 1.9-6.9 percent. Due to reductions in national funding levels, the Horizon 2020 program has taken on an even greater importance in European countries.

A certain irony exists when these initiatives are contrasted. Although the NIH annual budget is 2.4 times the size of Horizon 2020’s annual budget, in the US there tends to be lamenting about chronic underfunding while in the EU there is widespread acclaim for the biggest investment ever in research innovation. Success rates at NIH are perceived by researchers as being abysmal, never mind they are 1.5 times greater than at Horizon 2020 as whole, and 2.8-9.5 times greater when focusing exclusively on health-related funding. Young researchers in the US who are unable to secure NIH funding to support their own investigations may find themselves contemplating switching to careers in industry or leaving the field altogether. Researchers in the EU who were not selected for an award in the inaugural Horizon 2020 competition may find themselves searching for the intestinal fortitude to succeed in spite of the funding odds.

In these times of uncertain funding, research administrators can play key roles in keeping researchers motivated and in increasing researchers’ chances for funding success. The following four examples are drawn from a research university in Finland and a predominantly undergraduate institution in the US.

“It took me a year to get to know the league, the systems.”

– Jari Kurri

Research administrators can teach researchers about the value of engaging in preproposal contact with program officers, past grant winners, and past grant reviewers to learn more about the grants process. Researchers need to understand who will be reviewing their proposals, the conditions under which proposals are being reviewed, and the criteria used for selecting awards. Research administrators can also teach researchers the rules governing resubmissions and help them realize that getting turned down is often the first step toward getting funded. Reviewer comments may identify specific areas of concern to be addressed in

a revised proposal; funding chances usually improve with resubmission.

At the University of Helsinki, a researcher and research administrator worked well in advance of the deadline and submitted a strong application to a national funder. Several months later, the application was declined and reviewers’ feedback was quite controversial. Not to be deterred, the researcher tweaked the idea and submitted to the European Research Council, which is part of Horizon 2020. This sponsor funds excellent science which is “high-risk, high-return,” and is the most coveted EU funding mechanism nowadays because it is possible to apply for €1.5-3.5 million for five years. Unfortunately, the researcher did not receive the grant. However, based on reviewers’ comments, the research plan was revised and submitted again to the national funder—and this time it received a €1.5 million award. The road to the funding success can seem long, but working together to understand sponsor expectations and values can expedite goal attainment.

“This our canvas. Our easel. This is how we paint, on fresh sheets of ice.”

– Jeremy Roenick

Research administrators can help researchers dream big. Beyond reading request for proposal guidelines for eligibility criteria, budget limitations, due dates and submission procedures, research administrators can facilitate identification of sponsor hot buttons, and themes (such as collaboration) that should be highlighted in an application. By working with electronic research development tools and through networks such as NCURA’s Collaborate Global, research administrators can identify potential avenues for forming partnerships locally, regionally, or internationally. Moreover, they can endorse the project with senior administrators to secure internal buy-in for the collaborative arrangements. Research administrators supply researchers with tools and encouragement to be successful.

A University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire researcher had once identified a grant opportunity and planned to submit a request for modest funds for a health-related initiative. When it was pointed out that collaborations were highly encouraged and funding requests of all sizes were welcomed, the researcher was initially hesitant, thinking that a bigger project simply meant more work. As the result of a brainstorming session, a topic of national significance was identified and the researcher began envisioning ways to engage other partners. A series of meetings, phone calls, and emails ensued, and additional collaborators from across the state joined in. As researchers planned the project, research administrators worked together to establish frameworks and agreements that would make the financial logistics viable. The project idea blossomed to four times the original budget size with ten times the impact. The sponsor was captivated by the big idea and awarded big bucks, the largest single grant in the competition. The sponsor now holds up the project as a model for others to replicate.

“I don’t think this league will challenge me enough.”

– Noora Rätty

Research administrators often can share examples of projects that sponsors have funded in the past as a way to inspire researchers to submit an application: “As you can see, the sponsor supported a similar project at [university name, location], perhaps they’d be interested in supporting your project as well.” In instances where a sponsor declines to fund an application, research administrators can appeal to a researcher’s sense of determination, persistence, and inner strength, what the Finns call *sisu*. Remind researchers that they’ve decided on a course of action and urge them to stick with it, regardless of published funding odds.

At the University of Helsinki, active collaboration is supported between researchers and research administrators at the central level as well as the departmental level. When a US federal funding announcement was published, a central level research administrator contacted a researcher whose latest achievements seemed to fit perfectly with the sponsor’s priorities. The challenge, however, was that neither research administrators nor the researcher had much experience with the US sponsor. So, the application was a pilot project for everyone involved. Together, they navigated uncharted territory. The application wouldn’t have been possible without information flowing both ways—the researcher openly shared a long-range vision, research agenda, and key outcomes from previous work and the research administrator helped identify possible funding opportunities and create a long-term funding strategy. This kind of collaboration based in trust and mutual respect is highly rewarding.

“You’re silently hoping, but you don’t want to admit how much you’re really hoping. You try to play it cool. But when I got the call, I started shaking and I got super emotional.”

– Cammi Granato

Research administrators fill many roles beyond what a job title and position description suggest, including serving as cheerleaders, advisors, strategists, mentors, therapists, career counselors, and life coaches. Particularly during the time between when an application is submitted and a funding decision is rendered, researchers may experience some anxiety. They might want to confirm with the sponsor that the application was received or call the program officer to see whether a new detail, such as a journal article recently accepted for publication, can be appended to the application. Research administrators can remain positive during this waiting period and be a voice of reason with researchers, preventing

them from becoming their own worst enemies by tinkering when they should leave well enough alone. And when awards are announced, they can become the researcher’s biggest advocate, sharing the good news with key constituents on and off campus.

A University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire researcher was feeling uneasy one time about how long the sponsor was taking to make a funding decision—after all it was a full *24 hours* beyond when they said the announcement was going to be made public. After talking it through, the researcher agreed to wait a bit longer. A day passed. Then two. A week. The researcher’s concern was growing exponentially with each additional day. Another heart-to-heart conversation calmed the researcher’s nerves and reconfirmed the same course of action: let it play out on its own. At the end of the second week, the program officer emailed to say an award was imminent as soon as some internal budget logistics were sorted out. The researcher was relieved and thrilled—and thankful for being talked out of taking imprudent actions. A small gift bag of specialty chocolates launched the grant award celebration.

In sum, while the politics of public and private sponsors can make researchers go “eww” and make them feel like they’re going through hell, research administrators can draw on their personal skills, professional resources, and local and global networks to get researchers back on track toward funding success. ■



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