Understanding the Mission and Culture of the Funding Agency

Writing successful proposals, and increasing your success rate over time, requires the accumulation of marginal advantage achieved by doing everything right, or nearly as perfectly as possible. One place to find marginal advantage is in your studied understanding of the mission and culture of the funding agency and reflecting that in crafting your research narrative.

Many of the core attributes of a successful proposal are fundamentally generic across federal research agencies and foundations, as well as academic disciplines. One such attribute of a competitive proposal is the PI’s clear and nuanced understanding of the mission and culture of the specific agency or foundation to which the proposal was submitted. This holds true both for research and educational proposals common to universities, and it is particularly true when research proposals may be required to include educational components. Writing successful proposals, and increasing your success rate over time, requires the accumulation of marginal advantage achieved by doing everything right, or nearly as perfectly as possible. You can find such a marginal advantage in a studied understanding of the mission and culture of the funding agency. How well your proposal maps to the objectives and review criteria of any research solicitation determines your competitiveness at any federal agency or foundation. However, for that to be possible, and to better ensure your proposal’s success, you must also map your research to the mission and culture of the agency, particularly since agency mission and culture provide the underpinnings that define all solicitations. Your understanding of the mission and culture of the agency or foundation will significantly affect how you write the proposal narrative by which you will be judged for funding.

**Many avenues lead to gaining a more substantive and nuanced understanding of the mission and culture of the funding agency, including:**

- Visiting the agency website and reviewing the mission, strategic plans, and research and educational roadmaps of both the agency and the programmatic areas within the agency;
- Reviewing online postings of agency reports, presentations, and research and/or educational workshops given by agency program officers;
- Talking to colleagues that have been funded by the agency;
- Identifying researchers on your campus that have served as agency program officers (e.g., NSF rotators) and talking to them;
- Identifying researchers on your campus that have served as reviewers for specific agencies and programs and talking to them;
- Reading agency online abstracts of currently funded projects and asking (by email or phone) whether the PI is willing to talk to you about the agency;
- Reading current agency solicitations in your disciplinary area and identifying any reports, presentations, or technical workshops identified in the solicitation as motivating the agency’s funding of particular research areas;
- Subscribing to agency RSS feeds and email alerts that keep you current on new solicitations, reports, presentations, technical workshops and general agency news related to mission and research priorities;
- Subscribing to RSS feeds and email alerts from national associations, particularly those specific to your disciplinary area (e.g., American Institute of Physics, AAAS, Humanities Resource Center Online)

Funding agencies do not fund research projects disconnected from a long-term, well-thought-out research agenda. Instead, research agencies see themselves as leaders in a national dialogue on research topics and directions, and as key players in defining and driving that national research and educational agenda. Moreover, funding agencies fund those projects that fall within the scope of their mission. This can be a source of frustration to some applicants, who may believe that a good idea alone will merit funding, regardless of how connected it may be to a particular agency’s investment priorities. However, agencies fund only very good ideas that are clearly developed and tightly linked to their mission, vision, and strategic plan. If your proposal does not advance the mission priorities of the agency, it will not be funded.

Therefore, the more knowledgeable you are about a funding agency’s mission, strategic plans, research culture, investment priorities, and the rationale behind them, the better able you will be to weave a compelling and competitive proposal narrative. This agency-specific knowledge allows you to more convincingly describe how your proposed research connects to the research objectives spelled out in the solicitation, which, in turn, will advance the agency’s larger strategic plan and/or mission priorities. How well you convince program officers and reviewers that your research can play a key role in advancing the agency’s objectives, thus contributing to the success of its larger strategic plan, will be a determining factor in the decision whether to fund your proposal.

Many research programs funded by federal agencies, and some private foundations, grow out of an evolving consensus among the national research community on the most promising future directions in specific research topic areas. These directions and priorities, in turn, are translated into funding opportunities at the agencies, or are incorporated into an agency’s strategic plans and given an investment priority, or mission-critical focus.

Educational programs targeted at universities, e.g., curriculum reform, diversity, or undergraduate research, are often developed through the same process. It is not uncommon, for example, for reports of the National Academies, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, or similar associations to significantly influence funding directions at one or more agencies, and for those reports to form the underpinnings of subsequent solicitations. Understanding the origins, underpinnings, and rationale behind funding solicitations will help you better frame your claims of research merit and thereby better position you to write a competitive proposal narrative.

Large agencies, such as the National Science Foundation and National Institutes of Health, are composed of directorates and divisions, or institutes and centers, and these, too, have defined missions, strategic plans, investment priorities, and cultures. At times, these
almost act as autonomous funding agencies in themselves. It may, therefore, also be necessary to understand the mission, culture, and priorities of the particular organizational unit to which you will be submitting your proposal.

A strong proposal allows the funding agency to form a partnership with the submitting institution and principal investigator that will help carry out the agency's vision, mission, and strategic goals. The applicant must understand the nature of this partnership and the expectations of the funding agency, both during proposal development and throughout a funded project. Analyzing the funding agency will help you better understand several key elements common to every competitive proposal narrative:

- Who is the audience (e.g., agency program officers and reviewers) and how are they best characterized in terms of the expertise they bring to the review process?
- What is the best way to address them?
- What is a fundable idea, and how does it support the agency's research investment priorities, or mission-critical objectives?
- How are claims of research uniqueness and innovation best supported in the proposal text and how well do they agree with the agency's research objectives, or mission focus?
- How do you best communicate your passion, excitement, commitment, and capacity to perform the proposed research to review panels and program officers using the language of the funding agency?

Much of this information can be derived by analyzing background information gathered on the funding agency related to a range of topics, including the following available on the agency's website: *mission statement, strategic plan, investment priorities, agency language/technical dialect, management structure, organizational chart, program officers, reports, publications, leadership speeches, public testimony, review process, project abstracts, funded projects, and current solicitations.*

It is important to understand how the various funding agencies differ based on characteristics such as mission, strategic plan, investment priorities, and culture. Researchers in the physical, computational, biological, and social and behavioral sciences may have funding opportunities at two or more agencies, e.g., NIH, NSF, DOD, DOE, NASA, and EPA, but these agencies differ in many ways, including the following:

- Research focus within disciplines
- Mission focus
- Research classified as basic, applied, or application driven
- Research scope and performance time horizon
- Exploratory, open-ended research, or research targeted to technology development and deployment
- Multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary
- Independent research, or dependent linkages to the agency mission, e.g., health care, education, economic development, defense, mission agency workforce objectives
It is also important to differentiate between basic research agencies (e.g., NSF, NIH) and mission-focused agencies (e.g. DOD, NASA, USDA, DOE, NOAA, EPA), as well as to differentiate between hypothesis-driven research and needs- or applications-driven research at the agencies. (For example, an education proposal to DoED would address the need, but one to NSF would not argue need; alternatively, a clinical biochemist doing research on diabetes would write a very different proposal to NSF/MCB (i.e., basic research at the supramolecular and cellular scales, with diabetes as a possible broader impact but not the focus) than a disease-specific proposal to NIH/NIDDK.) One of the most important differences between these types of agencies is the degree of autonomy they can exercise in setting their investment priorities. Basic research agencies, such as NSF and NIH, generally set long-term goals and are less influenced by the President or U.S. Congress than mission agencies. Mission-oriented agencies, such as the Department of Defense or NASA, are highly influenced by the priorities of the President and Congress, and DARPA can shift focus quickly enough to impact currently funded grants. Therefore, focus and priorities at mission agencies can change rapidly with changes in political leadership, climate, or national issues. This means that researchers who apply to these mission agencies for funding are well advised to constantly monitor the priorities of these agencies for changes in direction.

In most cases, this information can be obtained on the internet by visiting the agency web site. Perusing the web site gives the applicant a sense of how the funding agency views itself and the role it sees itself playing in the national research enterprise. This information can be found in the agency mission statement or strategic plan, for example. In other cases, particularly with regard to private foundations, the applicant will find the annual report a source of useful information on an agency’s mission and agenda. An annual report gives the applicant a profile of funded projects, award amounts, and results.

The proposal author(s) needs this information for several reasons, but principally because it will allow the writer to shape the proposal from its inception to conform to the agency’s research and/or educational mission.