Proposal Development

This spring, the EHHD Office of Research Development sponsored three panels about grant development and management. On February 24, Suzanne Christopher (Associate Dean for Research) moderated the first of these panels which featured Bill Ruff (Education Associate Professor of Educational Leadership), EHHD Dean Lynda Ransdell, Christine Stanton (Education Assistant Professor of Social Studies Curriculum and Instruction) and Adina Smith (HHD Associate Professor of Counseling). The questions Suzanne posed to the panel serve as section headers for this discussion summary.

“How did you come to apply for a grant?” The panelists talked about how casual conversations with prospective partners sparked project proposals, the importance of starting with something that is going to be fun, soliciting smaller grants to work up to bigger ones, being open to potential partners seeking YOU out, and starting from a real-world problem that demanded attention.

“What challenges did you face and what strategies were helpful to manage them?” Adina talked about the challenging differences between writing for publication and writing a proposal. She sought out help from the Grant-Writing Bootcamp in Summer 2013. For Christine, a challenge was building sustaining relationships, and a solution was having a partnership model which included planning for and remaining vigilant about working relationships. Lynda talked about the challenge at Boise State of not having an infrastructure to support grant writing, and the big difference it makes when a college or university has this. Another challenge was junior faculty (or graduate students) not getting credit for their contributions to a collaboration. A solution is recognizing the potential for being sidelined in a working relationship and being proactive to prevent it; and having a mentor who’s a grant-writing expert. Bills’ challenge was a short time-line from the publication of a request for applications to the due date. He found it helpful to bring a table into the living room, stoke the
fire and “play cabin” for a couple of days. When opportunities come out annually, one can anticipate and start writing for them even before the formal announcement. Some details might be different, but having an early draft before the announcement will ease the time crunch.

“What strategies moved you from having an idea to actually submitting a proposal?”

Bill talked about the importance of collaboration, and setting up a working environment that works for you. Lynda mentioned putting a sign on the door, “serious writing in progress, do not disturb.” Another important strategy was generating a clear division of responsibilities with proposal development team members. Also key was meeting with the program officer for the grant opportunity – it can be surprising how much good information you can glean about making your proposal competitive. She learned the most by asking “what are the most common reasons proposals don’t get funding?” Christine talked about tapping into available resources from colleagues, and identifying a research methodology that will sustain your passion. Signing on to a senior colleague’s project is also very valuable for junior faculty, to get their foot in the door with an agency such as the National Science Foundation.

“How did you get back on your feet and try again after a rejection?”

Adina and Christine noted that anger can be good fuel for trying again. Bill said, “Revenge kept me going.” You can’t take a rejection personally, however. Having motivating partners will help keep you going. Lynda confessed that she had had as many proposals rejected as accepted. Women tend to be harder on themselves with rejection – you can’t expect it to be perfect. Just kick it out the door by the deadline and get some feedback you can use to make the proposal better next time. Bill commented that often reviewers are looking for nit-picky reasons to reject a proposal, just to reduce the number they have to actually read (such as a budget that goes over the allowance, or the wrong font). Hence the importance of attention to detail! Lynda commented on the importance of small pots of money to seed larger grants.
“Do you have final bits of advice?” Bill commented, “Funded research is so much sweeter than non-funded research.” Lynda recommended finding a mentor to work with. Christine recommended working with a team to spread the workload and help maintain enthusiasm. And Adina recommended preparing to say “no” strategically to requests for your time and involvement, in order to make time for what’s most important.