CONQUERING THE RESUBMISSION PROCESS

Prepared for the University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture

June 10, 2021

A QUICK POLL

OVERVIEW OF TODAY'S TOPICS

- WHY REJECTION IS PRACTICAL
- WHAT DOES IT REALLY SAY?
- AGENCY REVIEW PROCESSES
- HOW TO RESPOND
- WHAT NEXT?
- RESOURCES

WHY A REJECTION IS PRACTICAL

PROPOSAL REJECTION ISN'T SO BAD

Most proposals are rejected (75-90%)

Very few applications are funded on the first submission

Rejection is a part of the grant-seeking process

Rejection will allow you to join an esteemed group of colleagues!

WHAT PROPOSAL REJECTION *IS* / *IS NOT*

IT IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO:

- Learn from your mistakes.
- Understand someone else's perspective (AKA *the Reviewers*) and see that they are not always wrong.
- Understand the rules of the peer review "system" and use them to your advantage.
- Cultivate your determination and develop an intentional strategy to be successful.

IT IS NOT:

- A rejection of your interests or your life's work.
- A rejection of the quality of the proposed research project or research design.

Proposal rejection is complex but useful.

COMMON REASONS FOR PROPOSAL REJECTION

WE'RE SORRY—YOUR PROPOSAL IS NOT BEING FUNDED

- Your proposal was rejected for administrative reasons.
- Your proposal was not a good fit.
- You are not equipped with adequate resources.
- You failed to convey 'intellectual merit'.
- Your budget does not align with your proposed scope of work.
- Presentation, presentation, presentation.

REJECTION OFTEN LEADS TO POSITIVE RESULTS

- 2017 NIH success rate for first-time Research Project Grant submissions: only 13.0% (>38,000 applications).[1]
  - Compared to 30.1% for resubmissions
- 2016 NSF success rate: 24% >49,000 proposals, ~12,000 awards.[2]
- Resubmission success rates are higher across nearly all federal agencies.

Resubmissions have a higher success rate.

[1]Table 210: NIH Research Project Grants and R01-Equivalent Grants, Fiscal Years 2008-2017
[2]National Science Foundation, https://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2018/nsf18021/nsf18021.pdf

CONSIDERATIONS *BEFORE* YOU REVISE

FEDERAL VS FOUNDATION

NOT ALL-INCLUSIVE

IMPROVED LIKELIHOOD OF SUCCESS

MULTI-FACETED DECISION-MAKING

- Federal grant rejections provide the benefit of reviewer comments.
- Foundation rejections typically do not provide comments or reasons for rejection.
- Reviewer comments are not “all-inclusive.”
- Resubmission improves the likelihood of success but does not guarantee it.

DETAILS TO CONSIDER

1. Are there a maximum number of submissions/resubmissions allowed?
2. Have I reached the resubmission limit for this particular agency?
3. Is this specific funding mechanism/RFP/program still available?
   a. If closed, is the program expected to open again? When?
   b. If not, what are the future deadlines?
4. Is my proposal time-sensitive?
   a. Does the resubmission window work with my own time constraints?

Funding occurs approximately 6-9 months from the date of resubmission for the federal sponsors.

WHAT DOES THE REVIEW REALLY SAY?

IMPORTANT QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

	YES	NO
Were the reviewers right? Can you see their point?		
What did the reviewers generally agree upon? Any outlier c		
Were the reviewers wrong or did your proposal sim iate what you had hoped?		
Did the reviewers misinterpret text o n?		
Did you fail to include detail that w e addressed reviewer concerns?		
Can reviewer concerns be rectified?		
Is the overall tone of the review positive? What does your "gut" tell you?		

Evaluate critically

REALITY OF REVIEWS

- Reviewers are human too.
- Reviewers may disagree with each other.
- A poor panel fit could lead to an unhelpful review of a relatively strong proposal.
- Negative reviews may not necessarily cover all of the proposal's weaknesses.

THEN WHAT?

1. Get another objective opinion.
2. Reassess your time, your commitment, and the effort needed for a revision and resubmission. Ask yourself:
   - Can I reasonably revise the proposal and address all identified weaknesses before the application window closes?
   - Do I *still* have the time/bandwidth to dedicate to the project?
   - Are there other considerations or changes in circumstances (e.g., change in position or teaching schedule, a successful grant award, other commitments)?
3. Reassess your institution's commitment to this effort.
4. Decide if your project is still of interest and still relevant.

Contact the Program Officer.

THE NIH: AN EXAMPLE REVIEW PROCESS

THE SCIENTIFIC REVIEW OFFICER

Analyze the content of each application.

Recruit qualified reviewers based on scientific and technical qualifications and other considerations.

Assign applications to reviewers for critique preparation and assignment of individual criterion scores.

Attend and oversee administrative and regulatory aspects of peer review meetings.

Prepare summary statements for all applications reviewed.

LEVEL 1: THE SCIENTIFIC REVIEW GROUP

Members

- Chair
  - Moderator of panel discussion
  - Peer reviewer for the meeting.
- Reviewers
  - Access to the grant applications ~6 weeks prior to peer review meeting.
  - Prepare written critique for each application, based on:
    - review criteria
    - judgment of merit.
  - Assign a numerical score to each scored review criterion (see Review Criteria at a Glance).

LEVEL 2: ADVISORY COUNCIL/BOARD

Members—chosen by the respective IC

- Scientists from research community
- Public representatives

Functions

- Evaluate overall impact scores from the peer review process, rankings, and summary statements
- Considers the IC's goals and needs
- Advises IC director on funding decisions

The IC director makes the final funding decision

Galileo's 'heliocentricity' grant proposal is assigned to the wrong review panel. Again.

SIGNIFICANCE – INVESTIGATOR(S) – INNOVATION – APPROACH – ENVIRONMENT

Overall Impact or Criterion Strength	Score	Descriptor	Additional Guidance
High	1	Exceptional	Exceptionally strong with essentially no weaknesses
	2	Outstanding	Extremely strong with negligible weaknesses
	3	Excellent	Very strong with only some minor weaknesses
Medium	4	Very Good	Strong but with numerous minor weaknesses
	5	Good	Strong but with at least one moderate weakness
	6	Satisfactory	Some strengths but also some moderate weaknesses
Low	7	Fair	Some strengths but with at least one major weakness
	8	Marginal	A few strengths and a few major weaknesses
	9	Poor	Very few strengths and numerous major weaknesses

WHAT THE NUMBERS TELL US

Discussed vs Not Discussed (ND)
Impact Score (average of all reviewer impact scores x10)
10-30: likely to be funded
31-45: occasionally funded
46+: almost never funded
Percentile: Percentage of proposals with a better impact score than your proposal

Factor	Resubmit	New Submission	Something Else
Impact score	<46	46+	Not Discussed
Enthusiasm	High	Moderate to High	Low
Weaknesses	Fixable	Fixable / Fatal	Fatal
Timing	< 1 year	> 1 year	N/A
Fit	Good panel fit	Poor panel fit	Good panel fit

This table is a guide, not a rule!

EXAMPLES FROM A SUMMARY STATEMENT

1. Significance:

Strengths

- Studies the feasibility and efficacy of a school-based intervention to reduce childhood obesity among young children.
- Study will be conducted in urban and rural schools in a very high risk population in a state with one of the highest rates of childhood overweight and obesity.
- The intervention being tested is based on children being agents of change in their homes.

Weaknesses

- None noted.

2. Investigator(s):

Strengths

- PI is a family nurse practitioner in a school-based health clinic.
- Dr. [redacted] is an established researcher, although she has a pharm D background.

Weaknesses

- PI has very limited research and publication track record.
- No nutritionist/dietician or physical activity expertise on the team.

3. Innovation:

Strengths

- Leveraging School Health Council in the design and implementation of the intervention provides a framework for statewide scalability.
- Train-the-trainer approach with children as the intended trainer.

Weaknesses

- None noted.

(CONT'D)

4. Approach:

Strengths

- Strong recruitment and implementation plan.
- Strong buy-in from study schools.
- Intervention will be integrated into the school curriculum and will be taught by school teachers throughout the school term.
- Multiple data collection points – baseline, end of intervention (end of school term), and 4-weeks post intervention.
- BMI will be measured.
- Use of existing health behavior surveys will allow comparability to other studies.

Weaknesses

- No control group (moderate). How will the study assess whether the changes observed are not time trends?
- Not much detail provided about the curriculum content. While I understand that it will be developed as part of the study, some examples of the types of things included in the curriculum would be useful to get a sense for how exactly training the child as trainer would work.

5. Environment:

Strengths

- good research environment and strong partnerships.

Weaknesses

- None noted

NIH RESUBMISSION POLICY

- Only **one** resubmission (A1) of an original application (A0) is accepted.

  A1 applications can be submitted to any PA that accepts resubmissions

  Review criteria: current FOA (vs criteria of the A0 FOA).

The NIH resubmission policy applies to all applications submitted to all grant and cooperative agreement funding opportunities that allow resubmissions, *including all fellowship, training, and career development awards.*

Source: https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-18-197.html

RESUBMISSION BY AGENCY

NIH

1-page Introduction at the beginning of the project narrative

USDA

1-page Response to Reviewers at the beginning of the project narrative

DOD (DARPA)

Uses 2-step application process; resubmissions unlikely.

If an invited full proposal is rejected, debrief with agency contact

DOE

Reply to Reviewer Comments **STAGE**

Comments made available to applicant, with a brief opportunity to respond

NSF

All applications are considered new.

Any application that was previously rejected should be substantially revised — but no reviewer response!

Some directorates require a minimum waiting period before submitting.

OR—"Just in Time" documents

TIPS FOR ONE-PAGE INTRODUCTIONS

- Include title and proposal number of original submission.
- Thank reviewers, emphasize strengths and positive comments.
- Address the critiques – all of it!
  - Use Reviewer numbers (i.e., R1, R2, R3)
  - Most important concerns should receive the most space in your response
  - Make sure your responses refer to a section of your proposal
  - Try to be brief and direct > be cognizant of page limits.
  - Use some style tips >> use the active voice, use plural first-person ("we"), and don't use too much space apologizing.

If you aren't sure whether to include responses, ask your PO.

Ask a colleague to read the response.

RULES ARE MEANT TO BE FOLLOWED

1-page Introduction:

- A summary of substantial additions, deletions, and changes to the application
- A response to weaknesses raised in the Summary Statement.
- A different application title is allowable.
- A PD/PI can be added to or removed from the resubmission application.
- Identifying individual changes in the text is **not permitted (NIH)**.
- Use most current forms – info may need to be transferred.
- Provide substantive justification as to why you disagree.

* An exception is made for R25, Ts, Ds and some K applications, to allow a 3-page intro to the resubmission.
Source: https://grants.nih.gov/grants/policy/resubmission_q&a.htm#3425

A SAMPLE INTRODUCTION

Introduction. ***This is a resubmission of DKxxxxx-01 "An Exercise Intervention to Prevent Diabetes" that proposed to test the hypothesis that an exercise intervention is an effective tool for preventing diabetes.***

First, we would like to thank the Reviewers for their useful feedback. Their comments were very helpful in strengthening our study.

As they noted, "The application addresses a highly significant area in women's health that may have a lasting impact in a high-risk population for the development of obesity and diabetes." "Using moderate intensity exercise to diabetes is innovative and could easily be translated into clinical practice."

We have closely considered the Reviewers' critiques and provide a synopsis of our changes made in response to their concerns:

Study Design. R1 pointed out that … As a result, we have revised the design to include….

Source: *Writing Dissertation and Grant Proposals:* Chapter 20, Resubmission of the Grant Proposal

HOW TO RESPOND

EXAMPLE #1

R1. Recommend the addition of a 6-month follow-up study to ascertain if the effect persists after the structured intervention.

DEFEND VS RESPOND

DEFENSIVE

We chose not to conduct a follow-up study as our primary focus in this application was to determine whether the intervention could be effective in real time.

The reviewer raises an important point. Therefore, we have added a three-month post intervention focus group that will assess whether the family continues to dance together, how often, and in what format. We are unable to follow the participants for six months due to the fact that recruitment is rolling over the first two years of the grant, leaving insufficient time to follow the last recruited family. However, we will also perform a six-month focus group in a subgroup of the first 50 recruited families.

Source: *Writing Dissertation and Grant Proposals:* Chapter 20, Resubmission of the Grant Proposal

EXAMPLE #2

The reviewer missed information.

Source: *Writing Dissertation and Grant Proposals:* Chapter 20, Resubmission of the Grant Proposal

DEFEND VS RESPOND

DEFENSIVE

We already included age as a matching criteria as noted on page 18 of the original application.

We apologize for our lack of clarity in describing the study design. We will include age as a matching criteria. Specifically, cases and controls will be matched on age <18, age ≥ 18 (see Section C.4. Study Design).

Source: *Writing Dissertation and Grant Proposals:* Chapter 20, Resubmission of the Grant Proposal

HOW *NOT* TO RESPOND

INAPPROPRIATE RESPONSE "HALL OF SHAME"

Comment from Reviewer 2: "There are many other aspects of NEATPROT5.2.1 biology that could be discussed here. **Perhaps the authors are either ignorant of them or deliberately choose to not discuss them as they do not "fit" with their narrative.**"

Source: *Writing Dissertation and Grant Proposals:* Chapter 20, Resubmission of the Grant Proposal

INAPPROPRIATE RESPONSE "HALL OF SHAME"

Response from PI: "We stand by our original [illegible] structure the paragraph the way it was so that specific matters [illegible] discussed, due to the length of the introduction and the nature of this proposal. We respectfully disagree with Reviewer 2's comment.

Further, **we strongly believe that there should be a fine line between constructive criticism and cyber bullying as assessed by a single-blinded review process, a line that we believe was crossed. Therefore, we request the editorial board to de-elect Reviewer 2's objectivity and suitability for reviewing grants**.

NO!!!

AMENDED RESPONSE

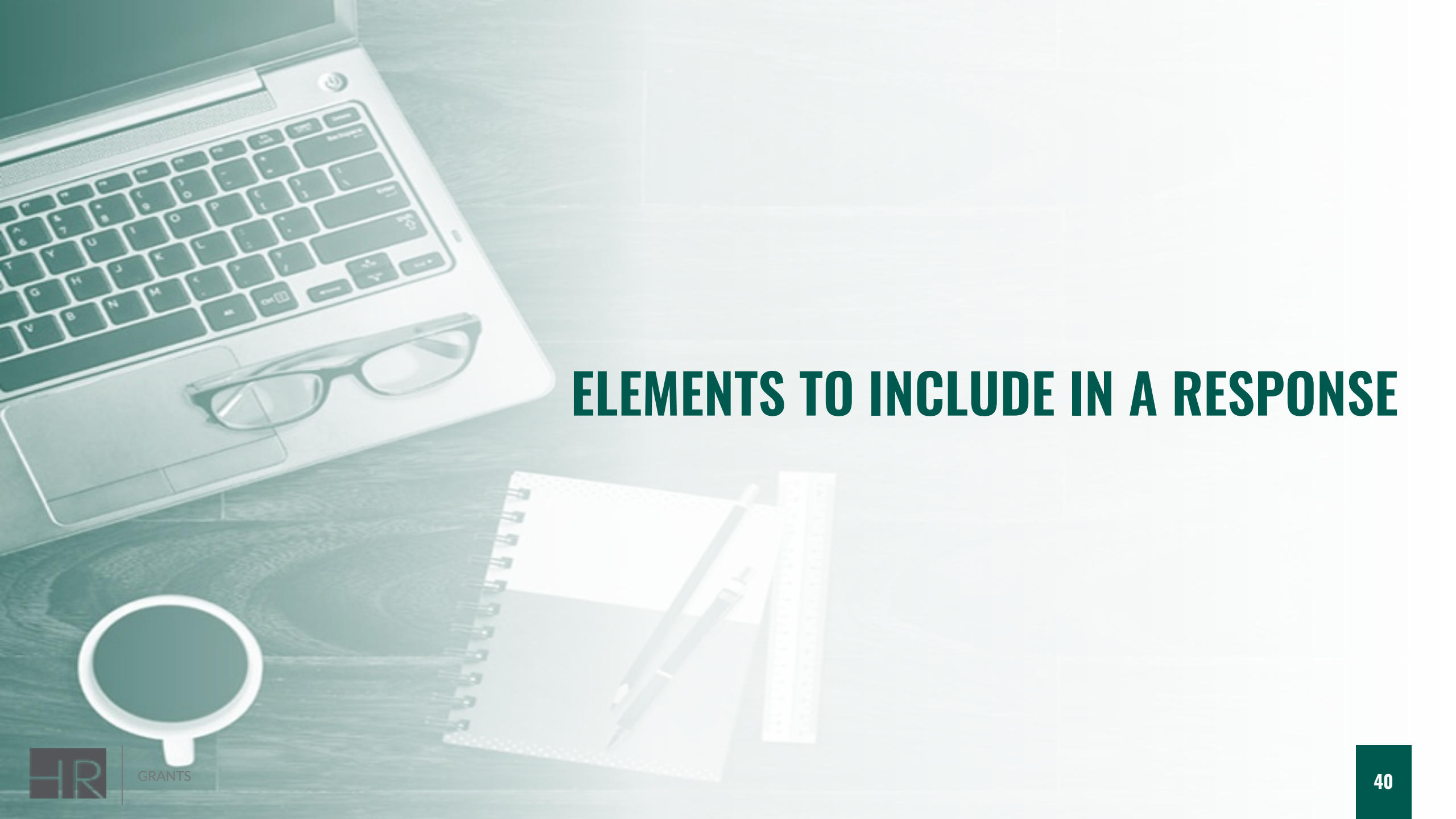
We regret that our review of the literature pertaining to NEATPROT5.2.1 seemed incomplete. While we appreciate the suggestion to present other aspects of NEATPROT5.2.1's biology, due to length considerations and the scope of the project, we have chosen to focus the majority of our discussion on literature that is directly relevant to the rationale of our proposed project rather than general background.

(Still a bit risky!)

AMENDED RESPONSE

We regret that our review of the literature pertaining to NEATPROT5.2.1 ~~seemed~~ was incomplete. We appreciate the suggestion to present other aspects of NEATPROT5.2.1's biology; accordingly, we have added a new subheading to our Significance section that provides a more complete review (**see page 2, lines 15–23**).

Better! But...



ELEMENTS TO INCLUDE IN A RESPONSE

IF REVIEWERS WERE CRITICAL OF YOUR...

Significance

Emphasize how your project addresses a key gap in knowledge and how it aligns with the funder's mission

Methods

Update prelim findings, present the methods to match with project aims/objectives, give an outline of your approach even if your methods are commonly known; explain design decision; identify possible challenges and alternative approaches.

Experience

Discuss relevant experience in addition to just uploading biosketches, recruit new collaborators or consultants, if needed. Consider a more interdisciplinary approach. Integrate an Advisory Board.

Overall Presentation

Beef up the Project Description with great graphics.

DON'T FORGET TO MAKE CHANGES IN THE BODY OF THE PROPOSAL!

- CHECK AND DOUBLE-CHECK THIS BECAUSE THE REVIEWERS WILL.

....UNLESS THE REVIEWERS TOLD YOU TO DELETE SOMETHING.

Source: *Writing Dissertation and Grant Proposals:* Chapter 20, Resubmission of the Grant Proposal

WHAT TO KNOW WHEN IT COMES TO FOUNDATIONS

- A foundation generally *does not* provide reviewer comments and the reason for rejection from a foundation may not be provided.
    - They often lack clear definition for their criteria and processes – or they choose not to follow what they adopt
- A foundation may or may not have a program officer to speak with.
- Revisit your proposal after the rejection.
- Ask a trusted colleague to review the proposal and provide feedback.

CULTIVATION IS KEY

The secret to many Foundation funding successes is cultivating relationships before, during, and after the formal grant process.

FATAL FLAWS

- The proposed research is neither important nor innovative.
- The hypothesis is not supported by pilot data or others' work.
- The literature review was:

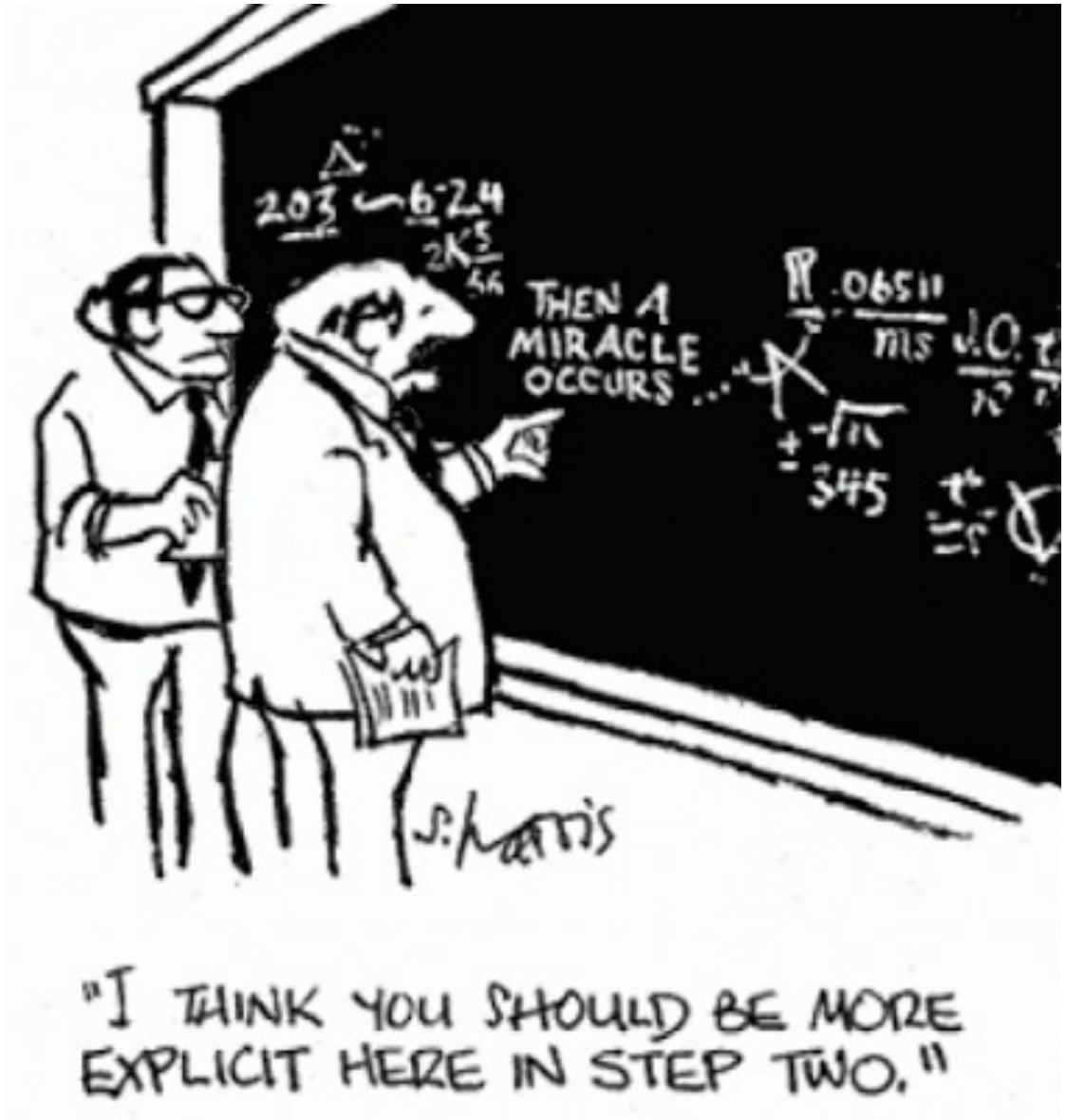
  incomplete,

  outdated, or

  resulted in conclusions that were not evidence-based.

- The proposed research has already been completed by someone else or replicates existing or previously completed research.
- The proposed methods are not suitable for testing the stated hypothesis.

FATAL FLAW...ILLUSTRATED



WHAT'S NEXT?

SOME PRACTICAL ADDITIONS

- Solicit new Letters of Support
- Use any new templates and follow any new guidelines/requirements
- Update Biographical Sketches
- Do not obsess over prior critiques
- Ask for outside help and peer reviewers

IF YOU CHOOSE A DIFFERENT PATH…

- Identify a different study section within the same agency
- Submit to another opportunity within the same funding agency
- Submit to another funder
- Move on from that project
  - Difficult, but sometimes necessary
  - Don’t throw good effort after bad
- Design a pilot project help to demonstrate feasibility

EXPECT IT

ACCEPT IT

PERFECT IT

EXPECT IT

- Grants rarely get funded from their initial submission
- Start planning the minute you submit to make the resubmission better

ACCEPT IT

- Reviewers are ALWAYS right, even when they aren't
- Reviewers will always find flaws
- Reviewers point out imperfections in *what* you propose and *how* you propose it

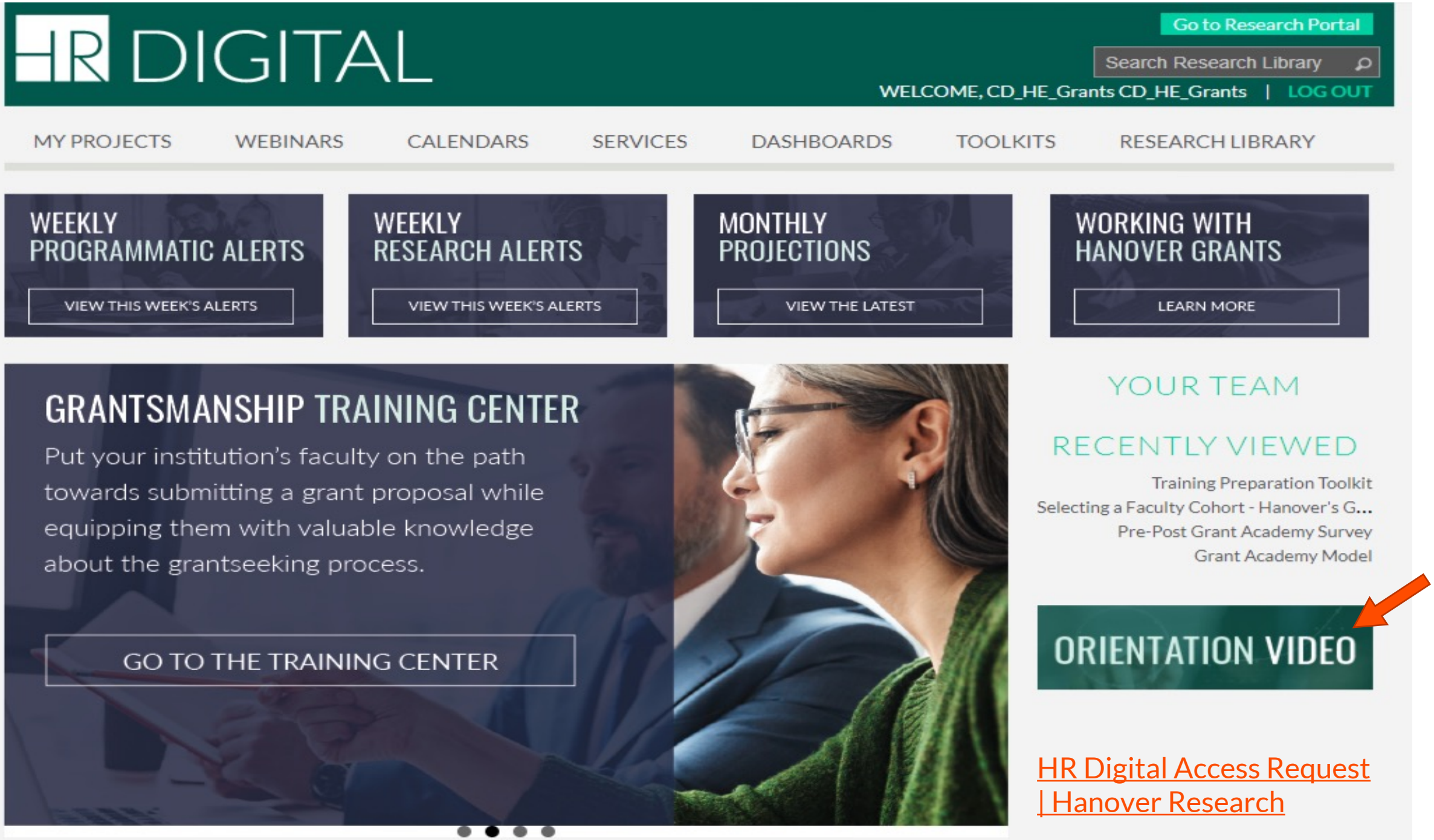
PERFECT IT

- Develop a plan
- Successfully address concerns

RESOURCES TO LEVERAGE

PRACTICAL RESUBMISSION RESOURCES

- National Science Foundation guidance to its review process: https://www.nsf.gov/bfa/dias/policy/merit_review/
- NIH Q&A (FAQs) on Resubmissions: https://grants.nih.gov/grants/policy/resubmission_q&a.htm
- National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) website—a repository of fantastic resources for submissions, resubmissions, and other guidelines: https://www.niaid.nih.gov/grants-contracts/sample-applications



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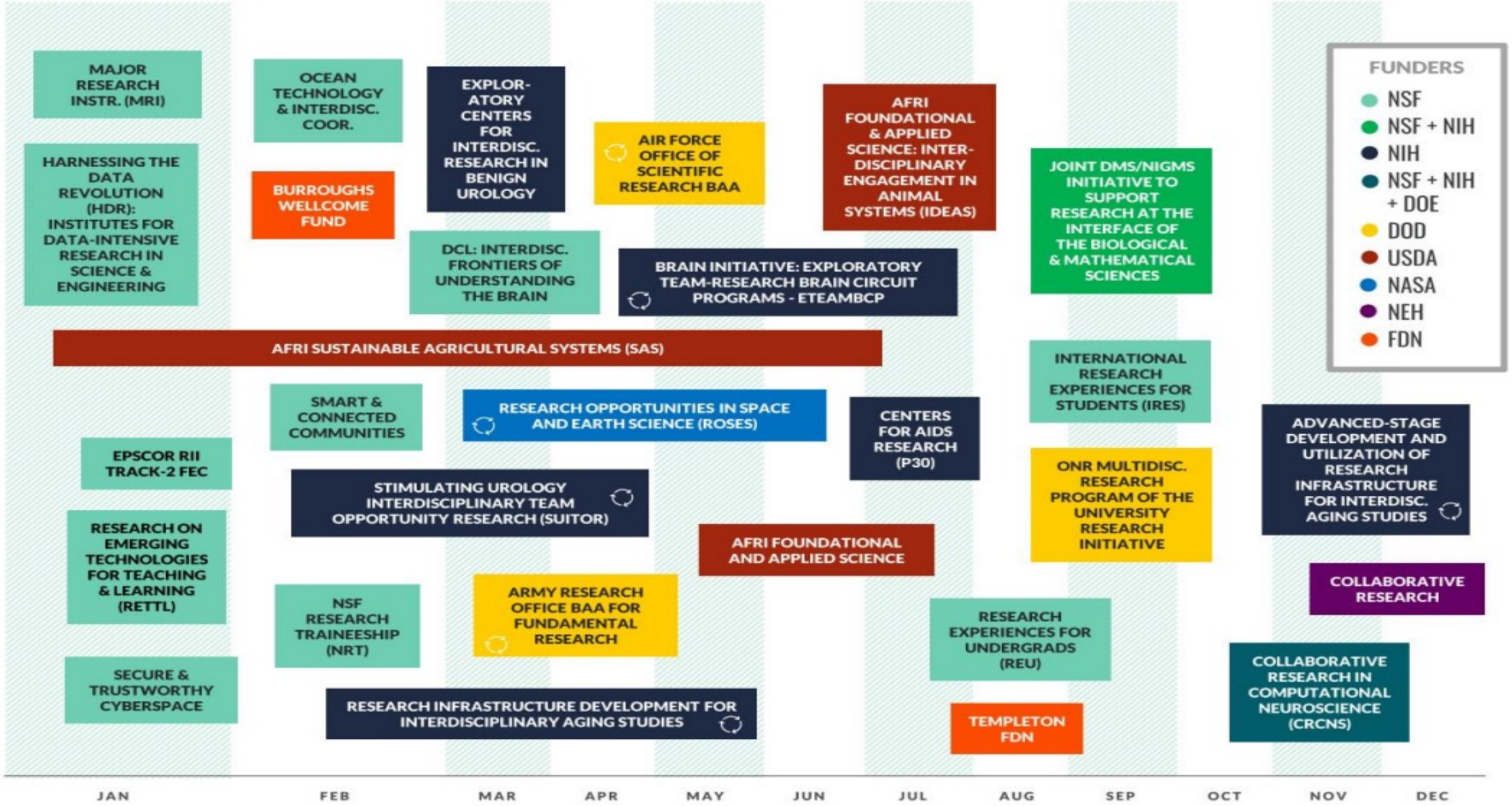
GRANTS CALENDAR

INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH




QUESTIONS?

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