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FIRST PERSON

What to Say—and Not Say—to Program Officers

By Michael J. Spires

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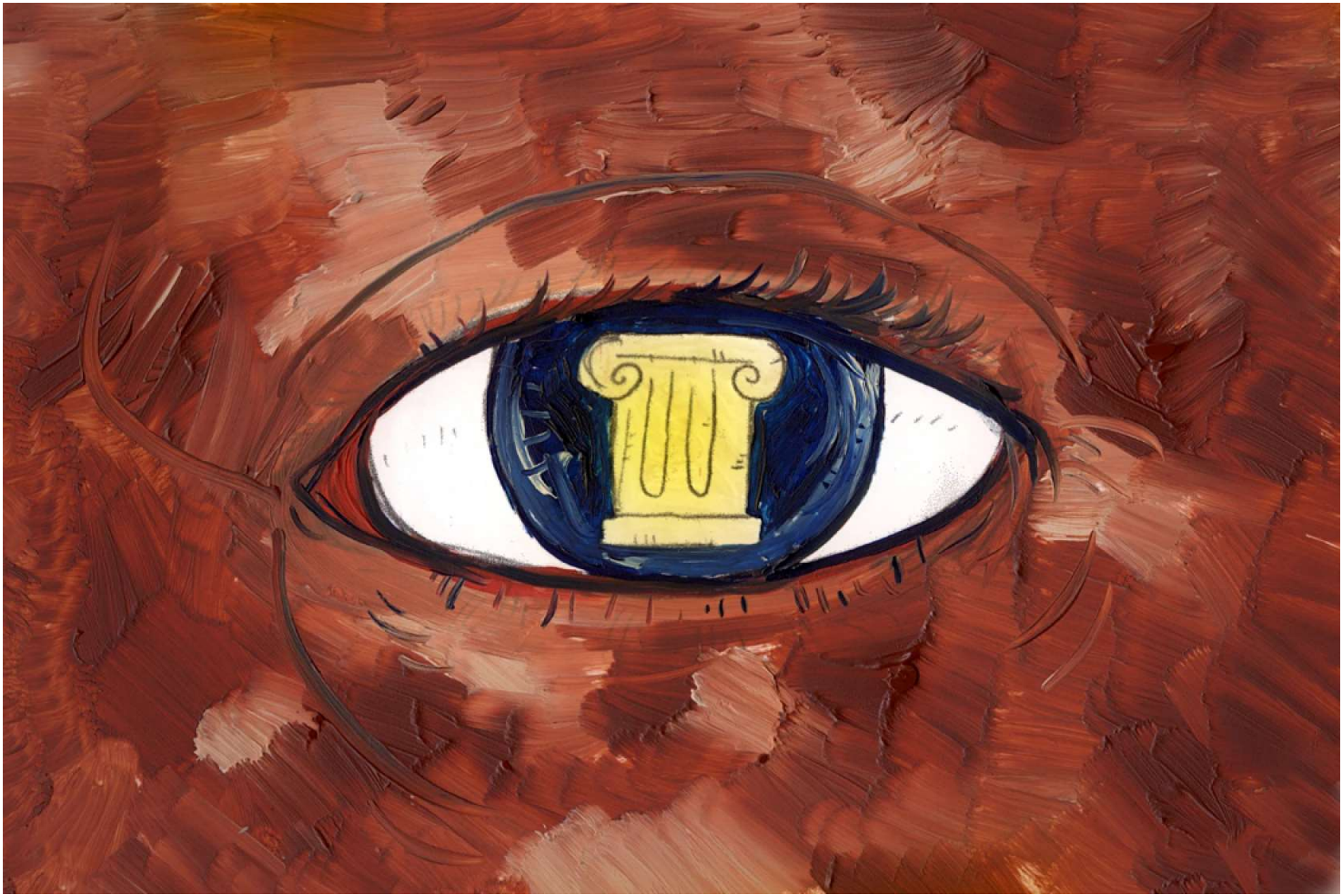

BRIAN TAYLOR

Members of the program staff at the National Science Foundation routinely advise investigators and administrators to “call early, call often.” Those of us who are research administrators (deans, directors, department chairs, and others) often encourage researchers to contact a program staff member for help. So why don’t they?

After more than five years in research administration, I can tell you that most scholars and researchers would rather undergo a root canal without anesthesia than call a program officer. And my experience is borne out by other professional colleagues who have encountered the same resistance.

When scholars are asked to contact a program officer, their responses are usually variations on two basic themes: “Won’t I look stupid?” and “Won’t they turn down my proposal?”

To be fair, neither of those questions is as naïve as it might appear; neither is the underlying fear entirely unwarranted. After all, grant agencies have the cash that drives much of the research enterprise these days (money that, in turn, helps keep the doors of many colleges, universities, and nonprofit research organizations open), and their institutional memory can be very long indeed.

In an attempt to reduce that natural anxiety, I have a few simple suggestions to offer. In fact, those same principles will also work when faculty members need to communicate with staff members in the university’s sponsored-research office, with grants accountants, and in many other professional situations. My suggestions are based on my own experiences and many conversations with other research administrators and with program officers.

Let’s start with a few “thou shalt nots.” First and foremost, do not contact program staff members “just to chat"—or at least don’t do that when you’re calling in an official context. Not even if your department chair tells you to.

A program officer's opinion of you could literally determine whether or not you will be successful in your research career, which has implications for your broader career as well. Do you really want to start that relationship by appearing on the grant maker's metaphorical doorstep like a student in an introductory class looking for a few extra-credit points? There are probably worse ways to initiate that relationship, but it's hard to imagine what they might be. So when you contact the officer during the work day, keep your comments strictly professional. Leave the social chit-chat for another time and place.

The program officers I've spoken with about this say it's OK to have informal chats with them outside of their offices—at a professional conference, for example. It's OK to talk with them in general terms about your research interests and how they may intersect with the agency's priorities. Just don't overdo those conversations, or monopolize a program officer's time.

Second, don't cold-call them unless your question is very simple or you just need a quick confirmation of a program guideline. It's better to first send a short e-mail that summarizes your issue. At the end of the e-mail, ask the program officer to call or e-mail you back in a few days. Mention dates and times when you either will or will not be available.

If you're getting in touch to talk about your research program or a prospective proposal, attach a brief summary (no more than one to two pages) to your e-mail. That gives program officers time to be sure they understand your issue (or to seek clarification about it from you), and also to formulate a substantive answer.

As an added benefit, starting the exchange over e-mail allows them to respond at their convenience, rather than trying to understand your question, give a response, and still get you off the phone in time for them to make a

panel-review meeting or a pressing appointment with the director.

E-mail also gives you a reference for later, so you don't have to remember who you spoke to—and what that person said—the next time the same question comes up. Put a copy of those e-mails in your grants files and share them with the appropriate person at your sponsored-research office so you can find the relevant information when you need it. Doing so will also ensure that your university is kept in the loop and is aware of any instructions or rule interpretations that the program officer gave you.

Third, don't pester your program officer. The more complex your question or problem, the longer it's going to take to understand it, do research on it, and communicate the response to you. Behaving like a small child on a long car trip is unlikely to hasten the response, and it just might affect the quality of both the response you get and your future interactions with the agency. If a week or more goes by and you still haven't heard back, then make a quick call or send a short e-mail to follow up.

All of that sounds like I'm discouraging researchers from calling. I'm not. I'm just encouraging you to call for the right reasons. So what *should* you do when you contact a program officer?

First, and most important, do your homework. Before reaching out with a question, seek out the answer on your own. Check the agency's or program's Web site, review the applicable guidelines, or contact your institution's sponsored-research office. You may well find the answer in one of those places—and if you don't, you'll at least be able to frame the question more thoroughly.

You'll also demonstrate that you've done your due diligence. Agencies revise their grant-making priorities, program guidelines, and staff assignments fairly regularly, so make sure that you're working with the most current information available. What was OK last year may not be OK now (or vice versa), and the person you dealt with last time may have left or changed jobs. A bit of preparation beforehand will save time and potential embarrassment later.

Next, be as specific as possible in your request. Narrow the focus of the question or issue that you need resolved. That becomes critical the closer you are to a program deadline. The demands on program staff members go up whenever a deadline is in the offing, so be respectful of that. If possible, time your question so that it won't come during a deadline crunch. If you just can't wait, then limit yourself to the most urgent issue(s) and get right to the point.

The same holds true for the summaries you submit of your research plans and potential proposal ideas: Stick to the major points and communicate them as clearly as possible. Don't bury the program officer in methodological details or the minutiae of your literature review (unless doing so is important for understanding your question, or the originality or impact of your proposed research). Concentrate on the big picture, and, especially, the expected outcomes and deliverables. Also remember that while your program officer will have research experience in your discipline, it is probably not going to be exactly the same as yours. So don't assume he or she will automatically understand your research or the significance of every detail. Make the connections, and make them as clearly and succinctly as possible.

Third, when in doubt, ask! In today's competitive grant environment, even a little misstep can have large consequences. "Minor" lapses that might have coasted under the radar a few years ago are now reasons for

returning a proposal without review. Don't let your proposal get declined on a technicality or because you applied to a program with different priorities from your project.

Program officers are normally evaluated on the number of quality proposals that they support, not on the overall number of proposals coming into their programs. They have a vested interest in helping you craft a quality proposal, so let them do it.

Finally, if the program officer has to say no—and that will happen a lot—there are a couple of things to remember, whether that no applies to a request you've made or to your entire proposal. The first is that while program officers often have considerable discretion, they are nevertheless bound by rules that they probably didn't make themselves. Be courteous even though you're disappointed.

But don't let your disappointment rob you of the chance to do better next time. Read any comments you received about the proposal; then put the whole thing aside for a few days or weeks. When you're over the sting of the rejection, go back and reread the comments. Then call the program officer to discuss them and to ask how you could make the proposal better next time.

And ask the follow-up question. The nature of that question will vary with the circumstances, but the general formula would be: "Is there a way to move to 'yes' here?"

In other words, don't assume that "no" is automatically the end of the discussion. There may be another program where your research would fit perfectly. A policy change could be in the works that would turn the rejection into an

acceptance. You might have a more competitive proposal if you paired with a collaborator in another discipline, or a scholar who has more experience than you do in the relevant field(s).

A phone call or a brief e-mail can save you a great deal of effort and unproductive work. So yes, “call early, call often.” But do so for the right reasons and in the right circumstances. You’ll then be well on your way to developing a good working relationship with your program officers, and enhancing your chances of getting your proposals approved.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please email the editors or submit a letter for publication.

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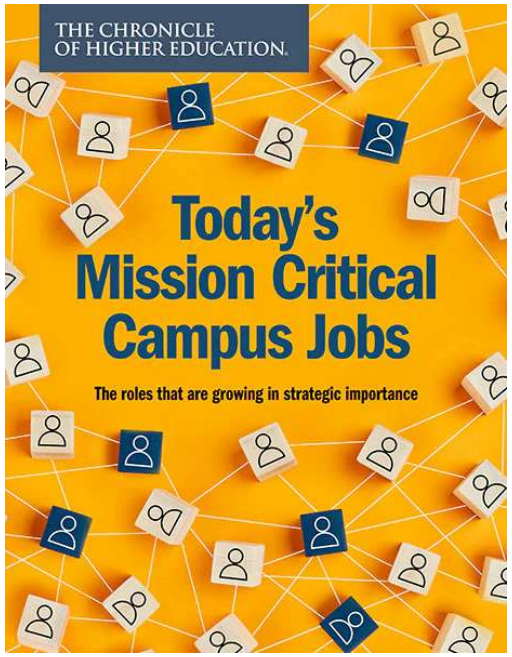

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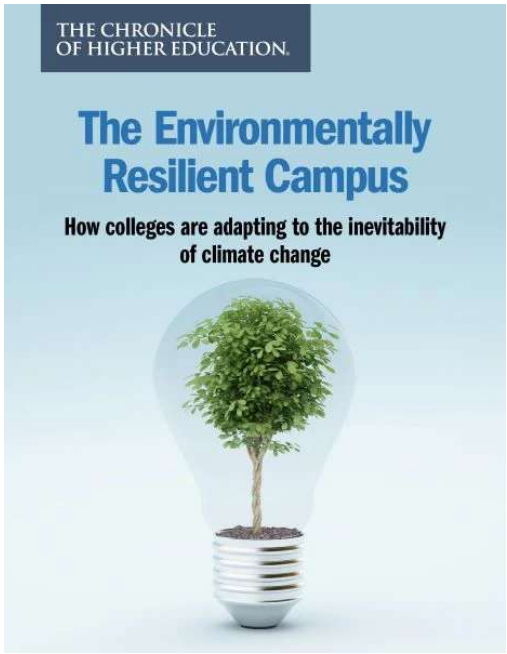

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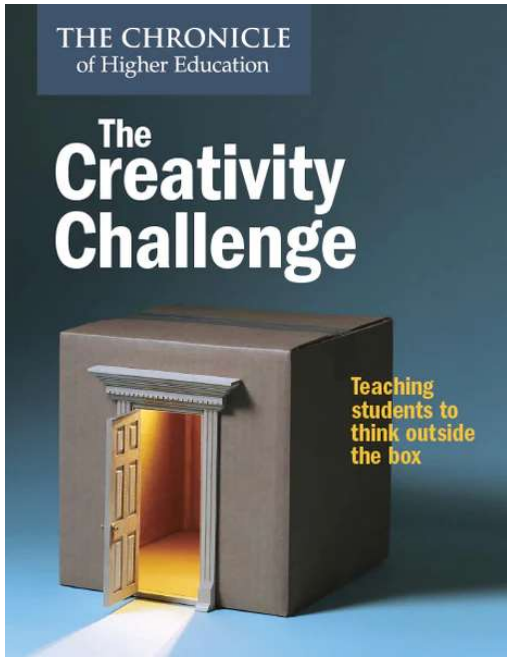

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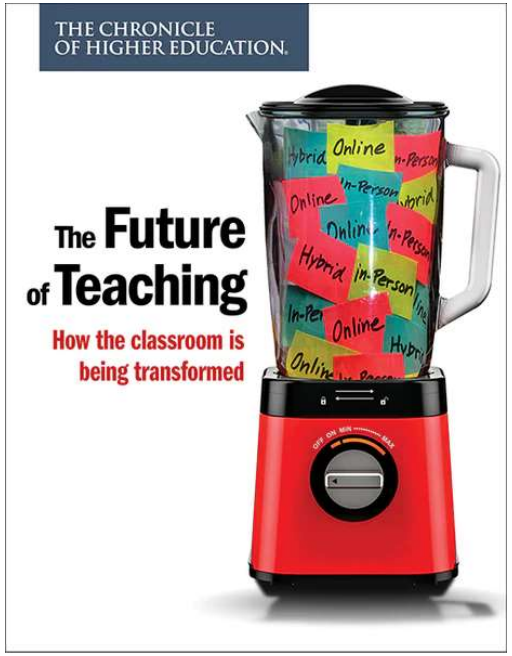

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