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Wednesday, January 16, 2008

**Going After Major Money**

By [RUSS OLWELL](#)

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Applying for a major federal grant is like auditioning for the role of Captain Ahab in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. As principal investigator of the grant, you are

signing up to run the whole ship and to bring home the whale.

Not all faculty members will find themselves with a harpoon in their hands, nor do they need to. Many faculty members go their entire career without ever looking for long-term, large-scale funding of projects that sprawl over several disciplines and areas of the university.

But for those of you who do, the rewards can be great. Managed well, a major grant project can make your reputation on the campus, allow you to take on new roles, and give you opportunities you might otherwise never have as a regular faculty member.

However, on the flip side, big-grant projects gone wrong can ruin your reputation and possibly cost you your job. In the worst-case scenario, failure to end a grant in good standing with the federal government can lead to the loss of all federal funding for your institution.

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The importance of assembling a good team to write a grant cannot be overstated. These are the people rowing the boat as you close in on the whale. The team needs strong players in each area of the grant-writing process -- budgeting, planning a program, evaluation, and managing outside partners.

As the lead investigator, your role is to manage the process of putting together the grant, and fill in the areas where the team is weak. So you may not be doing the majority of the grant writing itself; you may not have the expertise to write some sections.

In selecting a team, you can go wrong in so many ways. One is to bring in people with very different ideas from your own and attempt to meld the various visions together. Veterans of that approach are usually no longer speaking to one another.

A grant, while a team effort, needs one voice and one set of ideas. Trying to compromise between two positions usually means compromising the proposal's integrity.

You also need to beware of including high-maintenance people on the team. I used to have a rule that each grant team had a one-crazy-person maximum. That is, only one member of the team could be over the top, hard to deal with, or a prima donna. I have since revised that number downward.

If you receive the grant, your whole relationship with the team members will change. Some of them will become paid employees of the grant, and you will become their employer. As faculty members, we have little training in how to supervise people, but on a grant of any size, you will get that experience quickly. People who were your friends and colleagues will now be on the

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opposite side of the table, negotiating the money you will be paying them.

### **Cutting in Line**

Once you land a big grant, your professional life changes. Suddenly, a chunk of your time is taken out of your department and moved elsewhere. It is a little like that University of Phoenix commercial in which the young man is bringing his boxes into his new office: You have arrived, and you are the boss.

However, success has its price. The details of setting up a new project of any significant size -- hiring staff members, ordering equipment, managing a budget -- can eat up massive amounts of time. It is not that your research and teaching are pushed to the back burner -- they might be knocked off the stovetop altogether.

Managing a grant can also bring you into contact with offices of the university with which you are unfamiliar: grants accounting, human resources, purchasing. In some cases, it can take a year just to learn to navigate those dangerous straits.

Certain departments and colleagues may be less than thrilled with your grant success. Frequent choruses of "Haven't seen you in a while" will begin to ring in your ears. That may happen even if you teach in a department whose members disappear regularly for months at a time without explanation.

The fact that you have disappeared to work on a grant might not be what your colleagues want to hear, and your lack of availability for departmental service can make people feel abandoned.

In a way, getting a large grant is like cutting in line at your university. You

suddenly have the opportunity to hire and supervise a half-dozen, full-time staff members, to manage a budget of more than \$1-million a year, and make research decisions that could influence the lives of thousands of people. But many faculty members with more seniority than you may never get that chance, or may have to wait decades to become a department head and get the opportunity to supervise a small staff of office workers and interns and manage a budget.

It may seem unfair for your colleagues to be resentful, but you can't do much about that. You can, however, let people know that you have not deserted your departmental duties. Serve on key committees or take on an important departmental task. And don't be shy about making sure those efforts get noticed. Try to build your image as someone who is still around the department, even when events call you elsewhere.

In the end, a large project can jump-start or revitalize your career, and allow you to do work you may not have dreamed of before. Having the responsibility of people counting on you, and the opportunity to do important work, can help you see new possibilities for yourself. Suddenly you acquire a documented track record in management that can open up positions to you in administration, if you are so inclined.

On the other hand, keep in mind that every project has a closing date and a final report due and that those who were not nice to people on the way up, may very well see those people on the way back down (or in the restroom of your department's building).

It pays to keep ties with your department strong and to protect your reputation as cooperative and

productive. That way, even if your first big grant does not lead to bigger and better positions and projects, you can go back to the faculty ranks not looking like Starbuck, floating aimlessly in the water.

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*Russ Olwell is an associate professor of history at Eastern Michigan University and project director of EMU Gear Up, a grant project aimed at helping more than 1,000 8th-grade students in five low-income middle schools to prepare for college.*

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