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How to design a winning fellowship proposal

Be clear about your training plan and goals to boost your chances of a favourable outcome, say Crystal M. Botham and Tanya M. Evans.

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Adapted from Ja Inter/Getty

Looking to win a US graduate or postdoctoral research fellowship? Don't focus only on your current research: you'll need a proposal that outlines your specific goals for career development and training.

Most US fellowships, such as the National Institutes of Health's National Research Service Awards, support research-related and professional activities. These might include taking extra courses or giving a talk that will enhance the award recipient's training experience and improve their potential for success. But the most common mistake we see applicants make in our coaching sessions (and that we made ourselves) is to focus only on their research. That's

just one component of a winning application.

We encourage graduate students and postdocs to design a path that will complement their previous training and help to propel them towards their next career stage. We've developed an outline for incorporating training goals into fellowship proposals. Here are the basics:

- Write down what type of scientist you want to become. Are you aiming for an academic career at a research-intensive institution, a career with a focus on teaching, or do you see a non-academic path in science? Which research area most intrigues you? What approaches and methods excite you? It is also helpful to list the publications, grants and presentations that could emerge from this training opportunity.
- Describe experiences or outcomes that show your potential. Emphasize the evidence for your high potential by noting the publications, awards and research you have that illustrate creativity or technical skills. We know from experience that it is easy to be discouraged at this point, but your history, which defines who you are today, is not everything.
- Highlight career growth and development areas that need attention. We have noticed that trainees who are able to delineate gaps in training, or in the experience they need to move on to their next career stage, are highly successful at documenting the need for and value of the proposed training. We recommend describing 3–5 training goals, such as obtaining specific technical training, gaining laboratory management skills or establishing new collaborations.
- Design a thorough training plan. Anchor this plan around your goals to address specific areas for growth. You can include campus-seminar series, visits to a collaborator's lab to learn a technical skill, oral or poster presentations at scientific conferences, courses on specific research topics or professional-development skills such as management or scientific writing, mentoring or teaching. Throughout the proposal, you must make a compelling case that your future success depends on your getting this and career-development and research training. Explicitly state, for instance, that you need the proposed technical skill to complete one of your specific aims and future research goals.

We've found that discussing specific goals is crucial for successful fellowship applications. For example, we coached a postdoc on revising a proposal that reviewers had described as having a "cookie-cutter training plan". It listed proposed activities without linking them to the postdoc's background and trajectory.

In the revision, the applicant described how the plan addressed their specific training goals: to cultivate a certain technical skill, for example, the postdoc would complete specific coursework and work in a collaborator's lab for three months. The proposal was funded.

Remember, too, that the exercise of completing this application is useful; even if you don't win the grant this time, the experience that you gain will make you a stronger contender for the next one. Perhaps even more importantly, you will be armed with a clear plan for reaching your career goals and research milestones.

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