

Strategies for Successful Graduate Fellowship Submissions

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Arts, Sciences & Engineering
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UNIVERSITY *of*
ROCHESTER

INTRODUCTION

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"It's a foolproof formula for writing grant applications."

- **Grantsmanship is the art** of gaining peer-reviewed funding.
- **Our objective:** to help you optimize your chances of success when competing for fellowships.
- This **IS** a competition. The biggest reason for failure is that there is simply not enough funding for all applicants.
- Success or failure depends on the quality of the proposal and comprehensiveness of the application.
- Good grantsmanship won't make a mediocre proposal fundable.
- But good grantsmanship can turn a very good proposal into a fundable proposal.
- It may take **several submissions** to become funded.
- Be persistent; take critiques in the spirit in which they are extended, and be persistent.

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1.3 SEARCHING FOR FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

- UR Fellowships & Awards - <http://www.rochester.edu/fellowships/>
- UR Other Funding - <http://www.rochester.edu/fellowships/other.html>
- SPIN - <https://spin.infoedglobal.com/Home/Search>
- Foundation Directory - <https://fconline.foundationcenter.org/search/member-index>
- Grants.gov – <http://www.grants.gov/web/grants/search-grants.html>
- Websites of Sponsors (i.e., ACLS, NIH, DOE, CASVA, NSF)
- Foundation & Corporate websites (i.e., Simons, Kauffman, Microsoft, etc.)
- All federal agencies (and some organizations) have e-alert systems – register!



1.4 PROGRAM ANNOUNCEMENTS/GUIDELINES

- A public “call” or a solicitation (announcement with guidelines).
- Federal: Program Announcements (PA), Requests for Proposals (RFP), Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA), or for the Dept. of Defense and Dept. of Energy, Broad Agency Announcements (BAA).
- Check for the **most current** program announcement. Often, old announcements are archived, may appear in online searches.
- **Guidelines** are the best source of information about the application’s expectations and the review criterion.
- Read them before you start the application, read them *again* in process and read them *again* as you prepare to submit; keep a copy and refer to them often.
- Some programs also offer webinars, and/or have special websites with a wealth of information about programs.

➤ *Example:* NSF Graduate Research Fellowship Program (GRFP)
<https://www.nsfgrfp.org/>



BEFORE YOU START TO WRITE

SOME THINGS WORTH DOING

- Understand the funding agency/sponsor and its priorities
- Due diligence - find out what/who/how much the agency funds.
- Review the list of recipients for “like” grantees. This will give context about the funder.
- Sponsors fund grantees to advance **their** missions, not the grantee’s objectives. Your research idea/field needs to “fit” well with *the mission* of the funder. Your intellectual objectives should be aligned with those of the sponsor.
- Doubts or questions? Contact agency personnel. They want to help, *but do your homework first* by checking FAQs, the website, and asking only targeted questions. Don’t ask questions covered in the Guidelines and online instructions.
- Seek out advisors who have served on, or have received grants from the agency in the *recent* past. They may have “insider” information and tips.
- This isn’t an exact science:
 - Foundations, in particular, may change priorities.
 - Federal funding responds to agency strategic planning and in response to U.S. government national priorities and agency allocations.



2.1

BEFORE YOU START TO WRITE

BEGIN TO CLARIFY YOUR IDEAS

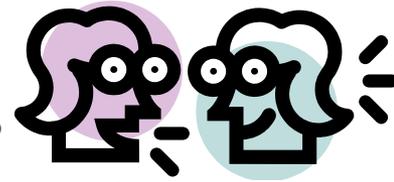
- Do you have a clear, concise (and testable, if applicable) hypothesis or idea?
- Have your objectives and aims come into focus?
“Needing funding” is not an acceptable objective.
- What question(s) will be addressed?
- Can you define and design specific experiments/scholarly processes that will test your hypothesis or expand upon an important idea?
- Can you define measurable and realistic outcomes of the project?
- Can you identify and articulate methods most likely to achieve those outcomes?
- Can you think of ways to assess or measure outcomes/success?
- Can you establish your credibility and capacity for research?



2.2

BEFORE YOU START TO WRITE

THINGS WORTH DISCUSSING WITH OTHERS



- Find examples. Review successful fellowship proposals of peers - use their organization, but of course not their content, as a model/template.
- Identify appropriate faculty and/or advisors to help you. Identify other people “**on your team**” who will critically read your proposal: peers, graduate coordinator, assistant deans and research specialist, College Writing Center tutors, and/or mentors.
- Discuss ideas and submission with your research advisor; advisors are best resource for research proposal and may identify gaps in logic. *You will need your advisor’s support to go forward.*
- Talk to your graduate director, department chair, administrator and/or graduate coordinator of your intention **and the due date**. Remind again at critical stages if you need direct input from them.
- **WRITE! Writing is a way of thinking. It is a way of developing, clarifying and testing ideas as well as expressing them.**



3.0

THE APPLICATION

COMMON SENSE TIPS

- Read the general instructions **CAREFULLY** and follow them **EXACTLY**. **Don't improvise!!**
- Successful applications must *stand out* from the competition; ***the sad reality is that reviewers receive many more applications than can be recommended for funding.***
- Fellowship applications should be "a pleasure to read;" Content should be polished, organized and attractive.
- Use appropriate type size, font, spacing and margins. If undisclosed, assume conventional font, i.e., Times New Roman, 12-point, single space with 1 inch margins.
- **Never** exceed the maximum number of pages or space/characters allowed.
- If extra materials (attachments and/or appendices) aren't allowed, don't submit; submit additional information after the deadline *only* when explicitly allowed.



The quickest way to get a proposal returned without review is noncompliance and incomplete applications; second only to not meeting the deadline.



THE APPLICATION

UNDERSTANDING THE REVIEW PROCESS



UNDERSTANDING THE REVIEW PROCESS

Think of your proposal as an argument for why reviewers should recommend your project for funding. Well-formulated proposals have some or all of the following components:

1. ***An opening that draws attention.*** An anecdote, a powerful statistic, a compelling question, or a statement of impact/significance.
2. ***A concise statement that explains your project.*** The reviewer should know exactly what your research is about ***within the first few lines of the proposal.***
3. ***A review of what is already known about your topic.*** Make a case for why your research is necessary; requires showing your knowledge of the field, prior literature.
4. ***An explanation of how current literature leads to your research questions.*** A cited argument that the research will add to knowledge. Make a case for how the literature leads to your research questions.
5. ***A description of how you plan to answer your questions.*** Now that you have set up your topic, explain exactly what your methodology will be and why it is the best approach for this project.
6. ***A timeline for completion.*** A successful grant proposal is compelling, creative, and feasible. You must show that you have thought through the whole project and that you have a reasonable timeline for completion.

THE APPLICATION

UNDERSTANDING THE REVIEW PROCESS

Fellowships are judged on the applicants' proposal, academic record, GREs, record of productivity, and letters of support. However, *you can* facilitate a better review by understanding the review process.

- Your objective is to make the reviewers *enthusiastic* advocates of your proposal.
- Remember that reviewers are doing this *above and beyond* their daily responsibilities. They typically review many similar applications in any given program.
- Assume the reviewer is in a somewhat related field, rather than for an expert directly in your area; aim the application at both the specialist and the generalist.
- Reviewers may review under less than ideal conditions (evenings, weekends, holidays, at meetings, with screaming kids in the house, or even on the way to review committee meetings). They may be grumpy or distracted. ***Surprise: they may wait until the last minute to review your application!***
- Reviewers may work in bits and pieces and/or skim. Organize your application in accessible, digestible sections, using formatting so that it can be read efficiently.
- Organize with appropriate headings and sub-headings, white space, figure captions, table captions, using simple and obvious numerical classifications.
- Make it *easy* to enjoy reading your application; use good writing practices, i.e., thesis statement, topic sentences, supporting paragraphs, conclusion, etc.

Know your audience.

Don't make reviewers do extra work to understand your proposal



THE APPLICATION

ENGLISH USAGE – PROOFREADING TIPS

- Avoid abbreviations, acronyms and jargon that a non-expert won't understand. If you use abbreviations, fully define them the first time - i.e., University of Rochester (UR).
- Don't rely *only* on your computer spelling/grammar checker. Use a dictionary and a thesaurus; proofread and polish.
- Editing tip: Proofread in several formats - change the font drastically, change the screen size...anything to make yourself approach the proposal afresh.
- Spelling, formatting, and grammatical errors raise a “red flag” and perhaps more importantly, *annoy reviewers*.
 - Mechanical errors distract from the proposed ideas and reflect poorly on the applicant.
 - Presentation speaks to the credibility of the proposer - if the proposal is prepared carefully - by implication - the research will be carefully conducted.
 - Use direct short sentences. Long, convoluted, complex sentences can lose the reader along the way.
 - Research has demonstrated that the average reader loses the thread of an argument after ~15 words. Never use a long, compound sentence when two shorter sentences will do!
 - *Print out a hard copy* at least once. Flaws suddenly become apparent on paper.

THE APPLICATION

INTERNAL REVIEW IS ESSENTIAL

- Ensure that a fairly final draft is reviewed *at least* by your advisor.
- Others who can help:
 - Additional faculty in your direct research area can check relevance, accuracy, ambiguities, and the quality of proposal.
 - A generalist can check for clarity, language flow.
 - Someone who is a good editor/writer; choose someone who can be (kindly) critical and honest.
 - Your letter writers – share your proposal with them
 - If English is not your native language, always engage a native English speaker's help.

Give internal reviewers *enough time* to do a thorough job.



Well before the deadline:

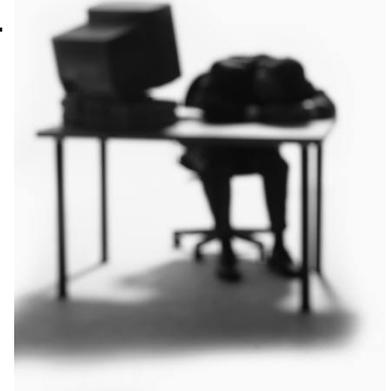
- Request transcripts and GRE scores well in advance.
- Enlist help from departmental administrative staff, graduate coordinator, peers, others (parents) for proofreading.
- Obtain supporters' agreement to write letters of support *early*; these are critical to fellowship submissions.
- Provide supporters with a draft of your proposal and your résumé.
- **Start writing! Write a few hours every day, not in one long marathon.**

Before the deadline:

- Be prepared to submit ahead of time!
 - *On the day of deadline invariably:*
 - The copy machine is occupied by others or is broken down.
 - Your laptop has a virus, your hard drive crashed, you've lost all your data.
 - Your advisor is away; everyone in the department has left for the day.
 - The online portal is busy or malfunctioning.

You get the idea.....
- If paper copy, send out by FedEx or express mail/courier and track the package.
- If online independent submission, make sure to submit at least 2 days in advance of the deadline.

The day of the deadline: It's over. Relax. Get some sleep!! 😊



ORGANIZING THE PROPOSAL

SECTIONS FOR MANY FELLOWSHIP APPLICATIONS

- 1) Title or Cover page/Online info
- 2) Abstract/Project Summary
 - For NSF - Overview, Intellectual Merit and Broader Impact
- 3) Hypothesis and Objectives
- 4) Specific Aims (especially for NIH)
- 5) Background and Significance Section
- 6) Preliminary Data/Studies
- 7) Research Design & Methods; for NIH, Research Strategy (may include assessment)
- 8) Literature Cited/Bibliography
- 9) Appended Documents/Sections (may be required)
 - Personal essay
 - Essay on career plans
 - CV or résumé
 - Letters of support from faculty
 - Budget and budget justification
 - Facilities and Other Resources (i.e., access to lab, libraries, specialized equipment, shared resources and facilities).



THE PROPOSAL - GENERAL

- Tailor your proposal to the most important information, based on the specific space constraints of each sponsor.
- Demonstrate focused, original, innovative, and feasible research.
- For scientific proposals, propose alternative strategies, in case the original experiments or methods fail.
- Use diagrams, graphics, tables and figures: “A picture is worth a thousand words”. However, be mindful that that copies may print in black and white.
- Keep reviewers engaged with your **excitement and passion** for the topic.

**Write and rewrite: work and polish the proposal. Even
with input from others, always keep your own authentic voice.**



6.1

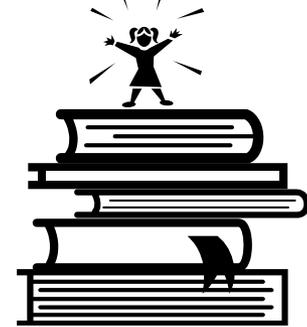
THE PROPOSAL - GENERAL

- Don't overstate or imply that a study will be carried out "because it has never been done" or "there are no data on ..."
- Be confident, but not arrogant - remember, you are still a student/trainee. Reviewers will appreciate the appropriate tone.
- On the flip side, don't be too tentative. You are a member of the UR research community, which has been deemed eminently fund-worthy by the federal & state government, industry and private donors.
- Passive, tentative language weakens proposals. Project that you have every intention of achieving your aims. Reviewers dislike sentences such as "I hope to attempt to seek the development of...."
- State *explicitly* how the proposal relates to the mission, objectives and priorities of the sponsor.
- Reference your writing. ***Use intellectual integrity in all your writing.***



Helpful to use following example headings and expand, in sequence:

- Hypothesis and Long-Term Objectives
- Specific Aims
- Background and Significance: Current State of Knowledge (Literature review)
- Preliminary Studies (students may not have preliminary data)
- Research Design and Methods or if NIH, Research Strategy
- Timetable - graphic timeline, if possible
- Strengths and Weaknesses - be realistic, but not self-defeating. This section demonstrates that you are prepared for eventualities. Reviewers don't expect you to have all the answers.
- Conclusion-wrap it up, if possible. Often there is not enough space for a general conclusion.



SPECIFIC INSTRUCTIONS FOR HUMANITIES

- The body of the proposal can take the form of a descriptive narrative *or* answers to specific questions or a specific need.
- The sponsor's stated humanistic priorities, in addition to application instructions, can guide the organization of your proposal.
- Begin by outlining information guided by five questions, basic to most research proposals:
 - 1) What is it you want to learn?
 - 2) How are you going to learn this?
 - 3) Why is it worth doing-*why is it important?*
 - 4) Timeline and desired outcome - completed dissertation, archival research, additional chapters finalized?
 - 5) How will receipt of the fellowship advance your research? How are you uniquely qualified to conduct the study?
- Outline the whole proposal, then review to see that everything required is included, with minimal redundancy, and that the organization is as effective as possible.
- End on a high note-conclude with the inspirational statement, significance to your field.

- Fill in title page/cover page *completely and accurately* and ensure that any signatures are obtained, if needed.
- The **title** of your project is important.
 - It sets the first impression.
 - Often used, along with the Abstract/Project Summary, to route the application to the appropriate review committee(s).
 - Your title should be descriptive, specific and appropriate, and should reflect the importance of the proposal.
 - A catchy title and a clever opening will potentially get you the attention you need to stand out among others vying for the same funding.

ABSTRACT / SUMMARY OF PROPOSAL

The abstract is a concise description of the proposal, even when it is separated from the application. Sometimes called Project Summary or Executive Summary. It should stand on its own.

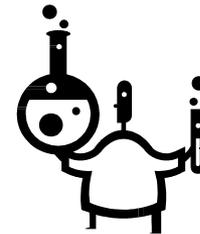
Not all fellowship applications require an abstract, but if they do.....

This may be the most important section in your application.

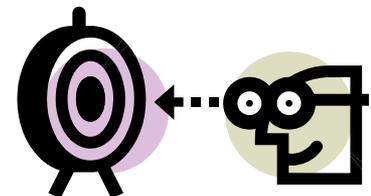
- It is the first section read and sets the first impression.
- Work on it after most of the proposal has been written and fine-tuned.
- OR write it first and use it as an outline for your proposal, tweaking at the end.
- It must be understood by both experts in your field and by generalists.
- For scientific abstracts use third-person language.
- The primary reviewer(s) read the entire application, but others **may read only the abstract**; it may be the only section read by *all* the members of the review committee who recommend funding (or not).

9.0 HYPOTHESIS, VISION & LONG-TERM OBJECTIVES

- A testable hypothesis-driven proposal is most persuasive for scientific proposals using an empirical approach.
- For Humanities proposals this will be the idea/vision/statement of need, i.e., “the important insight or the enduring question” that examines something about the human condition.
- Begin with the stated hypothesis or idea, and link it to your long-term objectives.
- What do you intend to accomplish?
- What is the significance and relevance of the research?



- Specific Aims are different from the hypothesis/idea and serve a different purpose.
- These are the specific steps, experiments, field-work, archival work, comparative studies and readings that will be undertaken in order to *fulfill* the long-term objectives.
- Present them in a logical and sequential order; refer to them throughout the proposal linking writing back to Specific Aims.
- Indicate priorities and feasibility.
- Be reasonable about what can accomplished within the period of funding
 - *Example:* Many fellowships are available for one year only-what can be realistically accomplished in one year?
- For longer projects that have numerous incremental steps, devise a plan for benchmarks or an assessment of results along the way.



- This section should answer three questions:
 - 1) What is already known?
 - 2) What is currently *not* known?
 - 3) Why is it important to gain understanding/knowledge?
- Briefly outline the highlights in the background section. *Critically* evaluate relevant literature: don't just present a compendium or list.
- Discuss any controversy, disagreement, and/or discrepancies in the published results.
- Identify specific gaps and contradictions that will be clarified by *your* study. Carry this into the rationale for your proposal.
- Emphasize the importance and relevance which connects your hypotheses and long-term objectives to the literature review.

- Describe relevant preliminary data.
- Beginning students may not have their own data - state if you are building upon your advisor's/group's research. The extent of this section will depend upon where you are in your graduate career and/or the agency's requirements.
- Review others' preliminary studies, results and scholarship. This will help establish your experience, competence and credibility.
- Persuade reviewers of your relevant training, and that you have substantive data *or are working with an expert who does*.
 - Summarize any relevant previous work, highlighting unique qualifications and skills. Explain how these skills are utilized in your proposed study.
 - List any publications and poster presentations (if permitted). If previously funded by the agency, state that elegantly.

Research Design & Methods section outlines *how you plan to fulfill the Specific Aims*.

- Present this section in a logical and sequential order.
- Describe the relationship of each Specific Aim to each other and to the overall objectives. Then outline the design and methods to accomplish each Aim, and explain why this approach was chosen.
- Reference, but do not describe in detail, well-known or standard procedures.
- Describe procedures that are new or unlikely to be known to reviewers.
- For new methods, explain why they are “better” than existing methods (more cost-effective, fewer steps, less adverse environmental impact, utilize new technology, etc).
- Discuss control experiments, if relevant.
- Explain processes for data collection, analysis and interpretation.
- Acknowledge potential difficulties with methodology - suggest alternative procedures to achieve the aims.
- State possible weaknesses and/or ambiguities and your response (i.e., preempt reviewer criticisms).

Organize the Research Strategy in the specified order and using the NIH instructions:

Significance

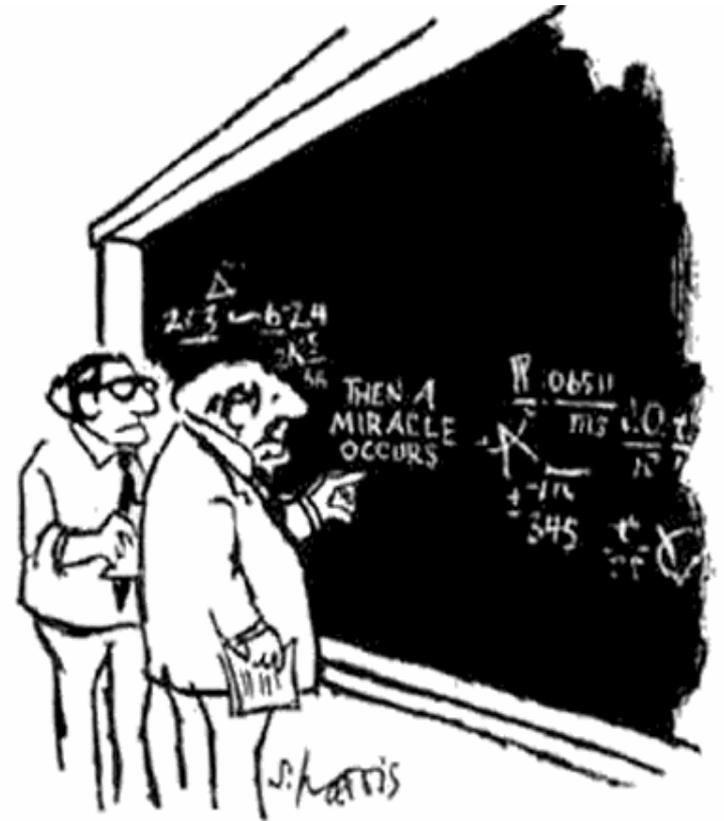
- Importance of the problem or critical barrier to progress.
- How the proposed project will improve knowledge/technology.
- How field will be changed if the proposed aims are achieved.

Innovation

- How proposal challenges and seeks to shift current research.
- Novel theoretical concepts, approaches or methodologies, instrumentation or intervention(s).

Approach

- Overall strategy, methodology, and analyses to be used to accomplish the specific aims.
- Potential problems, alternative strategies, benchmarks.
- Any strategy to establish feasibility; strategies to deal with hazardous materials.



"I THINK YOU SHOULD BE MORE EXPLICIT HERE IN STEP TWO."

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Most agencies state an allowable budget for fellowships, independent of the scientific merit of the application. This information can be found on the website and Guidelines.

- Fellowships are typically limited to a few categories of expense:
 - ✓ Stipend
 - ✓ Tuition (cost of education or institutional allowance)
 - ✓ Travel
 - ✓ Supplies
 - ✓ Institutional payment for related fees
- The budget usually stands alone; a separate section from the rest of the application.
- Although rare for graduate fellowships, a budget justification is sometimes required. Your budget is financial description of your project; the justification is persuasive, explanatory detail as to how you arrived at this calculation.
- Write the budget justification in the same order as the line items or in the order the sponsor lists line items for the budget. Use third-person language.
 - *Example:* \$1,000 to attend the American Economic Society annual meeting in Chicago, IL is requested to present a poster. These costs are estimated as follows: airfare \$500 (estimates based upon Internet site Expedia); conference registration \$200, and subsistence \$300 (based upon \$75 per day for four days).

- **Method of Payment:** Does the payment come to the institution or will the award come directly to the awardee?
- **Tax Implications: All stipends must be reported to the IRS for the amount of stipend paid.** Under current laws and regulations the fellow is responsible for submitting estimates of income to the IRS and paying the amount due. The fellow may have a similar liability for State and/or local taxes. UR administration and funding agencies are prohibited from giving tax advice.
- Many national graduate fellowships provide an institutional allowance (called cost of attendance and/or institutional payment). Typically provided to support partial payment of tuition and fees.
 - Examples: the NSF Graduate Research Fellowship, the Ford Foundation Pre-doctoral Fellowship, The ACLS/Mellon Dissertation Completion Fellowship, the National Defense Science & Engineering (NDSEG) fellowship, the Howard Hughes Medical Institute Pre-doctoral Fellowship
- Indirect costs (overhead, F&A rate) are rarely allowed for fellowships.



CURRICULUM VITAE - RÉSUMÉ

Most applications ask for some kind of biographical information.

- Follow the Guidelines and prepare accordingly.
- Often information is entered directly in the online application and no separate résumé/CV is allowed.
- If allowed-make it brief (1-2 pages, if unspecified).
- Use headings and describe sequentially: educational preparation; research experience; honors and awards; publications and talks, if any; community experience, especially leadership roles; additional skills (language, specialized computer programs, related work experience).
- **Less is more** –organize information to be easily accessible to reviewers and any administrators who handle the application at a glance.
- Do **not** include any personal information (DOB, SS#, marital status, personal webpage, citizenship status).
 - If the agency needs personal information, such as citizenship, they'll request it.



- Recommendation letters and/or institutional letters of endorsement or commitment are generally a critical part of the fellowship application.
- In addition to intellectual merit, fellowships are often reviewed on the basis of the applicants' *potential* or *promise* for scholarship. (In contrast to faculty proposals which are also reviewed for record of productivity as evidenced by publications, funded grants, prior results).
- Recommendation letters may have specific format, submission and page limitations. Provide complete instructions to faculty supporters and allow them enough time to provide *a thoughtful and substantive letter*.
- Make it easy for recommenders to do a good job!
 - Send supporters drafts of your material
 - Remind them of the deadline and submission processes
 - Provide name/email of your graduate rep. or department secretary if confidentiality is warranted or requested by the agency/sponsor





ORPA – the Office for Research and Project Administration at UR provides institutional oversight over all sponsored research.

www.rochester.edu/orpa

- ORPA – provides many services to researchers for pre-award (proposal) development and submission.
- If a proposal requires institutional contacts or an authorized signing official an ORPA representative must be listed.
- ORPA is the *only* office that can submit a proposal *for the institution*. Read the program instructions – most **fellowships** are not submitted via the institution, however most **grants** are.
- ORPA may need to provide a letter attesting how fellowship funds will be applied and/or that no overhead is charged.
- ORPA may very well not play a role in your submission, but informing your department of your intention will preclude any confusion about whether ORPA should be involved.

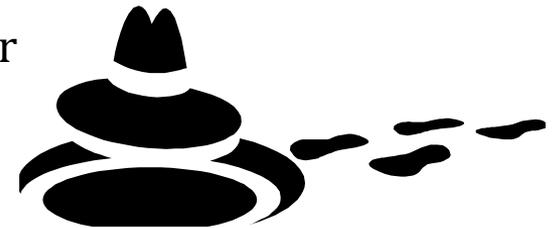
18.0 POST SUBMISSION & AWARD CONSIDERATIONS

- ✓ **Inform your Graduate Studies Office if you have received a fellowship. We track this information.**
- Should you receive a check to UR for educational fees, contact the Graduate Studies Office. Staff can assist with deposit and set-up of a sponsored research account for research related expenses.
- If the sponsor requires progress or final reports, make sure these are prepared and submitted timely.
- Even if no reports are required, send a formal note of thanks to the program manager.
- Follow-up with the sponsor as you achieve benchmarks in your career. Sponsors want to know that their investment has impact.
 - *Example:* Mellon Foundation funded your dissertation completion. Once you have published your thesis, send a copy with a note thanking them for their support.
- If you are successful, you have joined an elite group of scholars who have been funded; the contacts you make via this process may be useful networking contacts later.



COMMON PITFALLS

- Poor (sloppy) presentation and/or not enough focus for the proposed project.
- Incomplete application; non compliance with instructions; formatting and materials not in accordance with Guidelines.
- The student/investigator runs out of time to do a thorough job and/or enlist others who can be crucial to the success of the proposal.
- For foundational funding especially, the research idea is not compelling; not innovative, not ground-breaking or *not aligned with mission of the sponsor*.
- Proposal is unrealistically ambitious. There are no clearly defined priorities with no sense of what can be accomplished during the term of the fellowship.
- The literature prior studies review is lacking.
 - No evidence that the proposer is familiar with prior work/knowledge in the field.





- You are a graduate student at a major research university
- Your UR peers have been successful in submission *and receipt* of fellowships.
- There are institutional, online resources to help you find appropriate funding.
- There are people at UR who can help you navigate this process.
- Your advisor, department and university are all invested in nurturing your success and professional development.
- You will learn a great deal - most writing can be re-purposed.
- Fellowship receipt is a résumé/career building endeavor.
- Experience will help in each subsequent application.

Good grantsmanship is the combination of a great idea coupled with clear and persuasive writing, meticulous attention to detail, and due diligence to sponsor guidelines.

Iskander Zulkarnain – Visual and Cultural Studies

CLIR Fellow, previous Mellon/ACLS Dissertation Completion Fellowship

Lisa Vandebossche – English

McNeil Center for Early American Studies Dissertation Fellowship and Library Company of Philadelphia Fellowships

Ruben Yopez Munoz – Visual and Cultural Studies

Mellon/ACLS Dissertation Completion Fellowship

Jennifer Suor – Clinical and Social Sciences in Psychology

NIH National Research Service Award (NRSA)

Collin Stillman – Physics and Astronomy

DOE NNSA Stewardship Science Graduate Fellowship

Christopher Farrar – Biomedical Engineering

NIH National Research Service Award (NRSA)