

## Talking Research Funding to Your Academic Officer

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As a long-time biology faculty member deeply committed to research with undergraduates, department chair, dean of mathematics and science, and now chief academic officer (CAO) of a sciences and health university, research has been and will always be dear to my heart. How could I not support any reasonable proposal to advance research? And how could you convince me that your particular proposal should be supported? To answer those questions, let me share a bit about my responsibilities as CAO.

Planning for the future is perhaps the greatest responsibility of my office. My institution has a mission and goals. They shape the direction that we will take over the next decade or more, but they do not automatically dictate what steps will be taken. Long-term, strategic planning requires a vision shared by all constituents of a university: students, faculty, staff, alumni, friends, and supporters. The other administrators and I use the shared vision, mission, and goals to set priorities.

Setting priorities is largely a meaningless exercise unless our precious resources are allocated based on those priorities. In fact, we follow the old directive, "Put your money where your mouth is." Here it can get tough to make your case for support of your research project. Is research a priority for your institution? If so, why? Is your institutional vision to provide significant research experiences for undergraduates or is it to be recognized nationally for research in one or more fields? Is your work in one of those fields? If you answer yes to either of those visions, you have a potential case to make to your CAO. However, making the case to support your research because it furthers undergraduate research is far different from making the case to support your research because it advances your recognition in a research arena. If you make the wrong case, a good CAO will be unmoved because she/he recognizes that what you propose, worthy though it may be, does not further the strategic direction of the institution. Investing would not be a good use of resources. Let's look at examples.

You are a tenured faculty member in chemistry. You're a great teacher and have always had active research. You have just returned from a sabbatical at an industrial research laboratory. You discover a federal matching-fund opportunity to purchase large pieces of equipment. With a half-million-dollar nuclear magnetic resonance spectrophotometer and a post-doc for three years, you can continue the work you began on your sabbatical. Within a year you could complete two or three major papers and continue at that rate as long as you have a post-doc. All you need is half the total funds including benefits, a place to put the equipment, the infrastructure to support it, the time to use it, and some support for the supplies to run the equipment. What is my reaction?

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Suppose yours is a comprehensive, urban state university with a graduate program in chemistry. Much of its operating budget comes from state support. Tuition and fees cover most of the rest. The mission includes providing an excellent education to undergraduates. It also includes training students to work in local, technology-dependent industries. The strategic plan is for your university to become a regional leader in chemistry research. Your chair supports your request.

I listen with enthusiasm and encourage you to go forward with a proposal. I advise you to include salary money for yourself, both during the academic year and through the summer so you will have time to do the work. I caution you that the university cannot support a post-doc at the end of the project period, so you must develop a plan to sustain your research effort. I am excited by the opportunity to invest in a project that meets the goals of our shared vision. If you are successful, everyone benefits. You do great research and become competitive for additional grant funding. The work is publicized regionally, and maybe even nationally. We become better known in an area we had already identified as a priority. Your work and the part-time faculty member who teaches your courses enrich undergraduate education. Graduate students in your lab have new opportunities.

Now, suppose yours is a private, primarily undergraduate institution. Your mission is focused on excellence in teaching and learning. Scholarship is expected of all faculty members because it makes them better teachers. Undergraduate research has been a strong tradition for 20 years and is deeply valued by faculty, students, and administrators. Most of your operating budget comes from tuition and fees, from the endowment, and from gifts. Your strategic plan includes increasing the number of students incrementally, providing the support needed for 70 percent of them to successfully complete their degree within five years, and becoming known regionally as a center for outstanding live theater productions. Your chair has encouraged you to talk with me but with reservations.

I listen carefully to your proposal and find it intriguing. I ask for more detail on how the instrument will be used within the chemistry curriculum and discover that it is too sophisticated for any but the most advanced students to use. On average, 1.2 senior students do chemistry research annually. None of the other three faculty members in the department will use the equipment, so you are sure that it will be well cared for and have a long life. Reluctantly, I tell you that I cannot support your proposal. It would require diverting funds from endeavors that support the mission and strategic plan of the institution to an endeavor that does not. It would be wonderful for you. It might even establish you as an authority in a specific field. But its cost to overall undergraduate education is too high. Still, I want you to be successful and fulfilled. Together we talk about how the proposal might be adapted to strongly support undergraduate education, including research. You'll be back after you've thought more about it.

Those two scenarios are nice, clean, easy to analyze, and not necessarily realistic. In real life there are blurred lines and gray areas. But, understanding your institution and its direction is critical to making your case. Understanding your CAO is also critical. How can you best make your presentation to help her/him see how your proposal advances the interests of the institution? Is she/he a philosopher, a scientist, a sociologist? Would you present your case in the same way to all three? What kind of evidence would each of them find persuasive? How much time does she/he need to evaluate your proposal? Is there a preference for narrative, bullet statement, hard copy, electronic, in-person? What are the end products that will result from your project, and how do they relate to your CAO's objectives? What maximizes the probability that you will achieve your objectives? Consider how your project will make the CAO look good. When your success reflects well on your college, your CAO also benefits.

Finally, be flexible and persevere. If you're not successful with your initial idea, don't give up. Listen closely to why you are not supported. Analyze whether your idea can be modified to fit your institution's needs without losing its value to you. Get feedback from as many people as you can. You'll get there in the end.

***Barbara J. Byrne is vice president for academic affairs at the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia. Email: [b.byrne@usip.edu](mailto:b.byrne@usip.edu).***