Institutional Barriers and Faculty Persistence: Understanding Faculty Grant-Seeking at a Predominantly Undergraduate Institution

By Katy M. Pinto & Dorota Huizinga

The Predominately Undergraduate Institution in this study identified a sharp decline in external grant seeking during the 2007–2014 academic years. During these years some faculty applied for grants on a regular basis, but some faculty stopped seeking grants altogether. The first author interviewed 15 of the most persistent grant seekers to understand faculty capacity. During the study, faculty spoke of their many successes and structural barriers in their grant-seeking activities, and it became a common theme in faculty interviews. This study presents findings about individual and institutional factors (both support and barriers) that increase and decrease grant-seeking activity among faculty.

PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES THAT RELY HEAV-ILY on state or federal government aid often find themselves pressured to secure external dollars because of shrinking government budgets. The pressure for external funding is regularly passed down to faculty (Elliott, 2016; Musambira, Collins, Brown, & Voss, 2012; Reiser, Moore, Bradley, Walker, & Zhao, 2015). Faculty productivity in research depends on individual and leadership characteristics in addition to institutional cultures of universities (Bland, Finstad, Risbey, & Staples, 2005; Smith, 2016). Previous studies point out that professional development in the area of grant seeking is needed and valuable (Reiser et al., 2015; Wisdom, Riley, & Myers, 2015). These studies suggest that individual factors like collaboration with colleagues, time use for proposal development and submission, and identifying grants are important in research proposal success (Smith, 2016; Wisdom et al., 2015).

However, is individual motivation enough given the important role that universities play in supporting research activities? Factors such as institutional culture (e.g., University mission statement regarding grants, faculty development in grant seeking, release time for research, and availability of research assistants) were highly predictive of increased faculty productivity around grant seeking and research productivity (Bland et al., 2005; Bland, Seaquist, Pacala, Center, & Finstad, 2002; Musambira et al., 2012). Walden and Bryan (2010) found that faculty identified pre-award and post-award motivators and barriers to grant submissions. In particular, two institutional support structures increased grant seeking among faculty. One institutional support structure was in preparing grants (pre-award) and the second (post-award) was receiving personnel or travel support when projects where funded. One structural barrier was not having adequate support to submit proposals in a timely manner (pre-award; Wisdom et al., 2015). These structural factors (both support and barriers) are among the most difficult for faculty to control.

The importance placed on individual factors of grant seeking must be placed in the context of institutional structures that exist around grant-seeking activities (Cole, 2010; Easterly & Pemberton, 2008; Mullen, Murthy, & Teague, 2008; Porter, 2011). Using qualitative interviews with faculty at a Predominately Undergraduate Institution (PUI) in California, we identify individual and institutional factors (both support and barriers) that influence their desire, willingness, and efforts in seeking grants. We ask two separate and related questions: a) How do faculty maintain research productivity in external grant seeking? And b) How does institutional support and leadership affect their grant-seeking behavior?

Context

The PUI in this study experienced a sharp decrease in external grants submissions 105 attempts in 2007–2008 to 36 in 2013–2014. As a

predominantly undergraduate institution (approximately 12,600 undergraduate and 2,100 graduate students), the faculty face heavy teaching loads and an increasing demand to maintain vibrant research agendas (which includes seeking external grants). The typical teaching load on this campus is 4/4 and has been for many years, recently newly hired faculty (all ranks) have been able to have a 3/3 teaching load for their first two years. The university consists of 7 colleges, the top five majors (business administration, psychology, criminal justice administration, sociology, and health science) are from three largest colleges. The departments vary in size, but tenure density for the campus is the lowest in the system at around 28% in fall 2016 illustrating that tenure/tenure track faculty have increased burdens in teaching and service. The student body mirrors the surrounding communities and the campus officially became a Hispanic-Serving and Minority-Serving Institution in 2001 (approximately 62% of students of Hispanic/Latino decent and 14% are Black/African American), these designations positioned the university as competitive for certain external research grants. At the time of the study grant support was not centralized. There are three large groups or offices managing pre- and post-awards: a) a pre-award office for non-government funding (e.g., foundation awards), b) a pre-award office for internal and government grants, and c) a post-award office that administers the distribution funds for external grants received from both non-government or government agencies. The lack of a centralized support for grants creates some confusion and frustration on the part of faculty (as described below in results section).

Approach and Methods

We conducted 15 in-depth interviews with tenured/tenure track faculty during the spring 2015 semester. A purposeful sampling was used to recruit faculty who had applied for a grant consistently (at least one internal or external grant) from 2007 to 2014. All faculty in the study are from three of the largest colleges on campus (majors in these colleges include earth science, computer science, sociology, psychology, education, and music, philosophy, English). An open-ended protocol centered around demographic characteristics of faculty (e.g., sex, race, college, years employed at Predominately Undergraduate Institution (PUI), and external grant

awardee), the pre-awards process (e.g., submitting grants process, identifying funding, collaborations, general knowledge around grant seeking), and post-awards process (e.g., administration of grant funds). Ranging between 45 and 90 minutes, interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis using HyperResearch, a qualitative data analysis software that allows the researcher to code qualitative data and analyze data by viewing reports on coding (e.g., frequency of codes, building relationships with codes and summarizing statistical data about codes and frequencies). Each transcription was reviewed three times, first for accuracy, then with a content analysis approach to identify topics/themes from interview protocol, and finally to identify themes that emerged from the faculty interviews.

Results

In Table 1, we present the demographic information for faculty in our study. We interviewed a total of 15 faculty, in Table 1 we present the major demographics for this group. We interviewed 11 tenured faculty and 4 tenure track faculty. Only one assistant professor had been on campus less than two years. We interviewed 8 women and 7 men, from three large colleges. The average years worked on campus was 10 years. White faculty members where the largest racial/ethnic group interviewed, followed by African American and Latino faculty, and Asian faculty members as the smallest of the four groups. The faculty interviewed had secured external (11 out of 15) and internal grants (14 out of 15).

The results from the interviews are presented in two large sections: individual and institutional factors affecting faculty grant seeking. Faculty interviews reveled several themes in individual and institutional factors that affected faculty grant seeking behavior. For individual factors and grant seeking we suggest that faculty capacity is important in individual motivation to apply for grants. The six themes that emerged from faculty interviews show faculty capacity levels, but also the factors that increase or decrease their grant seeking. Four themes increased faculty grant seeking: individual drive for funding, prior experience, presence of collaborators, and knowing your audience. Two themes decreased faculty grant seeking: administrative pressures and lack of support for grant activities in retention, tenure, and promotion process. The second section,

presents the institutional level factors that shaped grant seeking. Institutional capacity is important for the types of institutional structures of support or barriers that faculty mentioned in their interviews around grant seeking. Faculty identified institutional support structures and barriers that influenced their grant seeking. Three institutional structures of support increased faculty grant seeking: grant writers, pre-award faculty research liaison, and internal grants. Four institutional barriers decreased grant seeking activities: a revolving-administration, decentralized pre-award and post-award offices, post-award support, and broken promises by the university.

Individual Factors and Grant Seeking

Faculty Capacity

Faculty capacity was a key component in the pre-awards process of grant seeking for the faculty interviewed in this study. Their high capacity helped them be persistent and consistent grant seekers when external grant submissions decreased across campus. Their individual capacity in grant seeking helps us identify factors that increase or decrease faculty grant seeking activities (Table 1). Faculty discussed four factors that increased their grant seeking: (a) drive for grant funding, (b) prior experience, (c) collaborators, and (d) knowing your audience. Two factors decreased grant seeking: (a) administrative pressures and (b) concerns with retention, tenure, and promotion.

Individual Factors that Increase Faculty Grant Seeking

Drive for funding. All faculty interviewed in the study secured external or internal funding at the PUI and many viewed grant seeking as part of their professional activities. Seven faculty (out of 15) reported that seeking external grants was part of their careers and part of their

discipline and they had a long tradition of seeking grants (as graduate students or prior positions before working at this PUI). For example, when I asked a tenured faculty member who secured an external grant why they pursued grants they said:

> It's my persona, like I did not have apply for this [grant] and get a grant this big, you know. I wanted to do it for personal reasons. I wanted the success of knowing I could be a PI on a very competitive major research grant. And I did . . .

The individual drive for funding helps us understand why some faculty seek grants consistently.

Prior experience. Graduate school, professional associations, or at other institutions (research and academic) were some of the prior experiences that faculty mentioned when discussing their experience with grant writing (9 out of 15 faculty). Prior experience with grants at other institutions was a source of motivation for three faculty who all had experiences at other institutions where they were successful in securing grants. Prior experiences kept faculty persistent in seeking out external grants.

Collaborators. Faculty often mentioned collaborators on their grants and they saw collaboration as part of the process of successful grant seeking (11 out of 15 had collaborators). The collaborations were on and off campus and with other researchers

Table 1. Demographic Information for Faculty (PUI-Faculty Grant Study, 2015)

Demographic Information	Total (N=15)	Sex Male	Sex Female
Tenure Status			
Tenured	11	5	6
Tenure Track	4	2	2
Sex			
Female	8		
Male	7		
College			
Humanities	3	1	2
Education	3	2	1
Natural & Social Sciences	9	4	5
Race/Ethnicity*			
African-American	3		
Asian	2		
Latino	7		
White	10		
Years at PUI (average)	10	11	9
Grants Secured			
External	11	6	5
Internal	14	8	6

*We do not present race/ethnicity by gender to maintain anonymity.

in their field (four had collaborators only off campus, two had collaborators only on campus, and five had a mix of collaborators on and off campus). Collaborating with a senior researcher with more experience was important for three faculty. Four of the collaborations were also done to combat the structural barriers faced at the institution; essentially, grants were submitted through the collaborators' institution. This strategy was a way for faculty to maintain active research agenda.

Know your audience. An important aspect of success in grant seeking was knowing your audience. Junior faculty were more likely to only know of one or two external granting agencies, while experienced faculty often had at least four external granting agencies (or programs) that they routinely targeted for funding. In addition, a more nuanced realization by some faculty was that for institutional grants (e.g., Title V grants), the administration has to be consulted and convinced to support the grant or else the grant can fail. These institutional grants involve planning and aligning your goals with the goals of administrators.

Individual Factors that Decrease Faculty Grant Seeking

Faculty Workload. Faculty obligations outside of their research agendas, like teaching and service, were difficult to balance with demands of grant seeking. Four faculty had decreased their grant seeking activities and pointed to work load issues (e.g., teaching or service) as part of the reason for their declined grant activities. One faculty member, who secured a prestigious external grant, had slowed down applying to grants. I asked if they had applied to another external grant in their field and they stated:

> I had thought about applying for that. Then I was strapped for time and I didn't make the time. I guess for me that comes down to time. I don't have time to sit and think about, "What would I do if I could have this grant?" Sometimes I think about it but then I – there's so many other competing interests that I don't have the time really to.

Similarly, faculty who had a track record of applying for grants often slowed their grant-seeking activities because of administrative duties, in particular, serving as department chairs. Three faculty in the study became department chairs and all stated

that this greatly slowed down their grant seeking activities, one of these three stopped altogether.

Retention, tenure, and promotion. Three junior and associate level faculty discussed the overall tension they felt between seeking grants and the process of retention, tenure, and promotion at this campus. They were passionate about research and they wanted to devote time and energy to external grants, but their departments were not always willing to support grant seeking as part of their promotions. One faculty member saw the importance of grant activities in the university and college strategic plans, they did not see grant activities valued in departmental level strategic plans. One faculty member described it this way:

> I see that the university level strategic plan, I see the college level strategic plan, but I don't see anything dropping down to the departments in terms of: we have these goals, how are you fulfilling them? What are the metrics? How are they tracked? And who takes ownership of them in each department? I don't see that… I don't – I don't see a connection between that, and what happens in the department.

In particular, the department is important above because it defines guidelines for retention, tenure, and promotion. If the department does not value or explicitly state grant activities as valuable scholarship toward research *or* if they value publications over grants, then a faculty member seeking tenure or promotion is putting themselves at risk of engaging in an activity that will not be rewarded by the department. This is also influenced in part by institutional factors, but it here to illustrate the tension that many faculty face in the early stages of their careers—their individual motivations have to be tempered by institutional expectations.

Institutional Factors and Grant Seeking

Institutional Capacity

Institutional capacity was important for faculty in pre- and post-award stages of grant seeking. First, the decentralized system of the grant process at this instituting creates much of the confusion and frustration around grant seeking. The lack of communication between these offices and faculty perpetuate an environment that is not supportive of grant seeking activities and ensures that there

are various leaks in the institutional pipeline for grant seekers. Consequently, individual factors that shape faculty grant seeking operate in the context of institutional capacity that is out of the control of faculty, but the institutional capacity often has a big impact on their success around grant activities. Two main institutional factors emerged from faculty interviews: institutional structures of support and institutional barriers to grant seeking activities.

Institutional Structures of Support

Grant writers. The ability to hire grant writers was a key factor for faculty who secured multi-million dollar external grants (two out of 15 faculty had such grants and another faculty tried to secure this type of large grant their own, without success). Grant writers served as sounding boards and administrative help for these faculty. In particular, securing multi-million dollar grants required attention to detail to in the request for proposal (RFP). Grant writers had valuable experience that made their proposals more competitive and more likely to receive external funding (especially for large grants). They described the success they had working with a grant writer:

> Every grant that I've been successful on, I've partnered with a grant writer because, again, this is 10 percent of the duties as assigned for me. And I need to have someone who knows how to really be competitive. And I have one grant writer that I've worked with huge success and we're still partners around this enterprise . . . . And that's how we secured that first large Title V grant because of the grant writer. And universities also have the ability to secure grant writers and that might help some faculty too. You know what I mean? If they know that, wow, I can rely on this person to help me pull my thoughts together.

One faculty member secured many large grants with a grant writer and even with a proven track record the university was sometimes reluctant to pay for a grant writer. They overcame the lack of support for grant writers by partnering with outside organizations:

> I was told, "We don't have any money." So I had to partner with [outside organization] and name one of their folks as the Co-PI because they agreed to pay for a grant writer and I couldn't. And we worked out a deal where they play a role in the proposal and I would offer them a sub-contract. And a portion of the grant was allocated to them for services that they would provide.

> But I did that simply because I was desperate for help with paying a grant writer. And the university denied my request for help. So I ended up going to [outside organization]. To partner with them – we ended up getting the grant. And the grant, I believe – I wanna say it's about $5 million. So I was always puzzled. Considering the history we have in getting grants, why were these requests denied?

Overall, for faculty applying for large grants collaboration with grant writers facilitated grant seeking and a lack of access to grant writers was barrier.

Pre-award Faculty Research Liaison. The number of years worked at this PUI ranged from two to 15 years; however, 10 were employed at this PUI for 10 years or more and seven faculty from this group of 10 described how valuable the research liaison in the government grants office was for them in various stages of the grant writing process. The faculty liaison identified grants for faculty, reviewed proposals and provided feedback, and met program officers of external agencies. As such, a faculty liaison can do work that faculty may not have time or resources to do (e.g., travel to meet with program officers which requires time, money, and social capital not all faculty have).

Internal awards. Fourteen out of fifteen faculty in the study had received and applied for internal university grants. The internal grants were used to support some aspect of research like manuscript submissions for publication, conference presentations, and pilot studies on new research interests. Internal awards supported research activities for faculty and kept them active in their research and was an important source of support for their research activities.

Institutional Barriers

Rotating administration. Many faculty in the study cited an ever changing or rotating administration as problematic for their research endeavors. An everchanging or rotating administration creates changing expectations of the research that is supported on campus. For example, one researcher spent considerable time applying for a grant that would support at-risk students on campus; the grant was supported by the college and university administration one year. When the administration changed the next year, though, the new administration did not support the grant—despite very positive external reviews, the grant was not funded. For

faculty, rotating administration created confusion and signaled a lack of leadership. Having new administrators often meant new budget priorities which sometimes meant less grant and research support for faculty.

Decentralized pre-award and post-award offices. Faculty who successfully secured external grants (11 out of 15) pointed out that having decentralized pre- and post-award offices made their grant experience difficult and frustrating. The decentralized office meant that faculty did not always know where to submit a grant, they found it frustrating to submit grants, and they did not always hear about grants that applied to them. As an example, the only faculty member who received a from a non-governmental agency (out of 11 with external grants), submitted the grant on their own. They were not aware of the non-governmental pre-award office on campus. Another faculty pointed out that working with different people in pre- and post-award offices on a budget was confusing:

> The other thing I don't love is that we have to work with the [post-award office budget person] for our budget, and they don't necessarily always know the rules either for all funders. But it still has to be approved by them, so that process is just a little weird.

Two faculty members pointed out that only one pre-awards office regularly emailed about external grants and they did not receive regular emails from the non-governmental pre-award office, which might also have more funding opportunities. A decentralized grant process created frustration for faculty and a leak in the pre-awards pipeline.

Post-award support. Seven out of the 11 faculty who secured external grants expressed a high level of frustration with the post-award office. Faculty complained about (a) not having support for annual reports (or worse, having errors in reports), (b) not being able to pay contractors, (c) not submitting external reports in on time, and (d) not getting accurate budget reports (e.g., being told you overspent money or underspent money).

One faculty member struggled repeatedly to pay contractors on time and to submit annual external reports, they explained that they thought the lack of post-award support was affecting the campus reputation with outside funding agencies:

> So it's possible that there aren't enough people. I know

for a fact that the people doing this just don't have experience administering large grants or even small ones at that. It's, they're not trained adequately and it's embarrassing. And I know that [this funder] now probably has no respect for [our institution] and I can't imagine they'd be excited to work with this institution again given the problems that they've experienced.

The lack of administrative support created frustration in part because faculty paid indirect costs to the university in their grants, so they asked, "Why do so many indirect funds get taken out of my grants and I never have any support?" The lack of support created resentment, mistrust, and led to a negative reputation of the foundation among faculty interviewed. Four of the faculty with large grants told colleagues to keep their own budgets (or hire grant administrators) if they secured large grants because the budget reports from the post-awards office would never arrive or arrived too late. The most junior faculty member in this study (who had not yet secured an external grant) was warned by a senior faculty about seeking external grants though the institution. The negative reputation was enough to give this faculty member pause and to make them not want to consider entering into a relationship with the post-awards office. Moreover, three of the 11 faculty with external funding were considering not applying for grants through the institution in the future and just partnering with outside institutions in hopes that the grant experience would improve for them.

Broken promises. After faculty had received external awards (four out of 15) the university broke promises to them regarding resources connected to grant activities. The most common broken promises were commitments to space, matching funds, or course releases. One of the most common promises broken was support in terms of space to run funded projects. One faculty who had secured large external grants described feeling relieved when they did not get a grant because of the concern with space:

> And so my greatest challenge is we've gotta get ourselves aligned and get our space issues in order so that pre-award promises become post-award realities. And that hasn't been the case. I have folks right now sitting in places that're troubling. There are some temporary spaces that were only supposed to be temporary in the '70s and they're still here. And we get millions and millions of dollars from the feds and I think they want those dollars to be spent. I [recently] didn't get [an

award] because of technical problems, there was a part of me that was really grateful we didn't get it because it called for nine new people. Where am I gonna sit nine new people? . . . And so we're primed better now to respond to pre-award promises and make them post-award realities, but that has been a real challenge.

Similarly, there were some broken promises with regards to matching funds and even matching time off in terms of course releases. One faculty recalled that the university denied a request for three units of course release (essentially one course off) after they had secured a large external grant. Without the matching course release support, this faculty did not have the time to actually run and manage the grant that they had worked so hard to secure. The faculty became stressed about being able to conduct the research successfully because they wanted to reapply for funding in the future and not successfully managing/running a grant awarded could essentially close off future opportunities.

Conclusion

The pressure universities feel to secure external funding is often passed down to faculty. Faculty capacity in grant seeking is often the central focus of faculty development professionals and research and grant administrators. However, we suggest that faculty capacity in external grant seeking should be considered within the context of the institution. We asked two separate yet related questions: a) How do faculty maintain research productivity in external grant seeking? And b) How does institutional support and leadership affect their grant-seeking behavior?

1. The answer to first question suggests that faculty with high capacity maintain an active research agenda because of individual factors like: individual drive for funding, prior experience, collaborators, and knowing your audience.
2. The persistent faculty struggle, like many faculty not in this study, with pressures around faculty workload and pressures of retention, tenure, and promotion shape their grant activities. In part, these factors have institutional aspects because they can operate outside of the faculty's control. However, they influence the individual motivation and decision-making around whether or not they should pursue grants as a rewarded activity.
3. The answer to the second question suggests that institutional factors greatly shape the experience of faculty grant seeking in both positive and negative ways. Institutional factors that support grant seeking or create barriers for grant seeking are out of the control of faculty and point to institutional capacity and culture around grant seeking. Structures of support (e.g., hiring grant writers, having pre-award faculty research liaison, and internal awards for faculty research) also show high capacity for grant writing and culture supports grant activities. Institutional barriers (e.g., rotating administration, decentralized pre- and post-award offices, poor post-award support, and broken promises to funded projects) shows low institutional capacity for grant seeking and lack of institutional support for grant seeking among faculty.

For faculty development professionals and research administrators this creates an interesting problem to try and solve. The authors suggest that while faculty capacity and individual efforts are important in grant-seeking activities, to focus solely on individual faculty capacity misses the role that the institution plays in external grant seeking. We hope our discussion of this relationship between individual capacity and institutional structures will create interest for faculty development professionals and research administrators to understand how institutional change might benefit and better support faculty grant-seeking activities at their institutions.

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