Spectrum Launch: Writing grants, celebrating milestones and interviewing for grad school

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Hello, and welcome to the first *Spectrum* Launch of 2022. In this newsletter, we aim to provide guidance and resources for early-career autism researchers.

To start off, let's talk about getting grants.

For context, not all researchers need grants. Some are funded through so-called 'hard money' — that is, they receive a salary directly from their institution. Others rely on 'soft money,' meaning that their income comes from grants. Many positions involve a combination of the two.

There are pros and cons to these **different funding models**, which researchers debated in a Twitter thread in December.

Those who opted for a soft-money position pointed out that pulling in grants often means that they don't have to take on other duties, such as teaching or serving on administrative committees, that can detract from time spent doing research.

But as many others noted, chasing down those grants is a lot of work, too. And only a fraction of submitted grant proposals actually get funded: In 2020, the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health awarded funding to 21.5 percent of research grant proposals submitted and 34.5 percent of career-development grant proposals, according to **data from the National Institutes of Health** (NIH). (If you're interested in applying for an **NIH grant**, the NIH provides some helpful information about which grant type makes the most sense for a given career stage.)

Other funding organizations offer additional opportunities for grants, but each organization has different application requirements, meaning — you guessed it — more work with each submission.

So how do researchers get their work funded?

One key is to keep trying, says **Rebecca Shaffer**, associate professor of pediatrics at Cincinnati Children's Hospital in Ohio. Shaffer was recently awarded funding from the Department of Defense's Autism Research Program. ("My first big one," she says.)

The process gets easier with time, Shaffer says: Once you have something written down, you can repurpose those words for future submissions. "I have come to realize that everything can be used again. Maybe not in the same format, but [by] adapting it [and] editing it."

For that reason, she encourages early-career researchers to get that first grant submission out of the way, even if they don't anticipate getting funded immediately. "The first one is the trickiest," she says, but "it's practice for the next one."

It's also important to familiarize yourself with the funding agency or organization that you're applying to, says **Alycia Halladay**, chief science officer at the Autism Science Foundation (ASF). "ASF loves an application where there is a great scientific project and an amazing training plan," she says, so a training plan — explaining how the funding will help you develop your career as an autism researcher — is "absolutely key" for a successful ASF submission.

There are multiple ways to gain insight into what different organizations are looking for. "Take advantage of every opportunity: every webinar, every meeting, every published resource," Halladay says. She also recommends talking to program officers at funding organizations and signing up for newsletters and Facebook groups that offer grant-writing seminars. (ASF offers these seminars every September.)

After all of that work, submitting a grant can be a bit anticlimactic, Shaffer says. "You send it on to your grants people [at your institution], they put it in for you, you get an email that it's submitted."

It can also be tough to dive back into normal work right away, so Shaffer says that she makes it a point to take a break and properly celebrate the submission.

> Yes!!!!!! I celebrate submissions with all the self care things that couldn't happen during grant/paper writing like massages, haircuts, a new book, or shopping ?? If I don't remember to schedule it, the transition out of the project is so much less satisfying! **https://t.co/YiDMIrgfl7**
>
> — Dr. Rebecca Shaffer (@BeccaCShaffer) **January 19, 2022**

She'll also text a group of her work friends so that they can cheer on her submission.

Because there is usually a multiple-month gap between submitting a grant and learning if it was awarded or rejected, planning a celebration helps her to at least temporarily close the chapter on that project. "After that, I can shift to the next thing on my list," she says.

And once the results do come in, "either we're going to go out to eat to celebrate, or we're going out to eat to take care of me," Shaffer says. Plans to celebrate her Department of Defense grant are in the works, she says.

Jobs and funds:

- Speaking of grants, applications are open for the Simons Foundation Autism Research Initiative's (SFARI) **Bridge to Independence Award program**. Applicants should have a Ph.D. or M.D. and be seeking a tenure-track position for the upcoming academic year. The deadline is 28 February. (SFARI is funded by the Simons Foundation, *Spectrum*'s parent organization.)
- The Autism Science Foundation's **Undergraduate Summer Research Grant** is also open for applications. They're seeking "highly qualified undergraduates interested in pursuing basic and clinical research relevant to autism spectrum disorders during the summer." The deadline for this is also 28 February.

Recommended reads:

- Interviewing for graduate school? One faculty member **offers some tips**.
- And a graduate student **lists some questions** you might want to ask during your interviews to identify any potential red flags.
- **Ashley Holloway**, a graduate student at the Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine in Chicago, Illinois, prompted a discussion on Twitter about why some researchers decide to **pursue a tenure-track position**.

I came into grad school set against pursuing a career as a TT faculty member, but now I'm leaning into the idea more and more.

PIs, what aspects of your job sold you on your career choice?

— Ashley Holloway (@___AshleyH) **January 25, 2022**

- In a Twitter thread, lab heads describe **the best decision they made** early on in starting their lab. "Hire a postdoc, the sooner the better," wrote **Lucina Uddin**, professor of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences at the University of California, Los Angeles.
- "The next generation of neuroscientists needs to learn to how to code," argues neurobiologist **Ashley Juavinett** in a new article in *Neuron*.
- And saying goodbye to a research career **doesn't have to be forever**. In an article for *Nature*'s career column, a scientist who left academia in 2010 and returned once her children were school-aged writes about how she was wooed back to the lab.

Any suggestions for how to make this newsletter as useful as possible, or recommendations for what topic we should cover next? Send them to angie@spectrumnews.org.

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