RYAN MEYER AND EVAN S. MICHELSON

Proposals as Partnerships

As grantmakers and universities strive for more engaged and societally responsive research, the proposal process could be a place for innovation—and an avenue for institutional change.

Who doesn't hate grant proposals? Researchers devote an inordinate amount of time and resources to writing them. Funders expend enormous effort reviewing them. Only a tiny fraction of proposals ever receive funding from government or philanthropy, and there is often disagreement about what distinguishes a strong proposal from a weak one. Even when a proposal is fortunate enough to be funded, the mere fact that the research then gets locked-in forecloses other opportunities for discovery.

Despite the proposal's outsized role in a challenging grant application and selection process, it has been largely overlooked. We argue that it is ripe for a rethink: Preparing, submitting, and reviewing proposals are likely to be the primary processes by which research dollars are distributed by government and philanthropy. But as grantmakers reach for new goals in science funding, such as supporting more engaged, societally responsive approaches to research, the proposal process itself could be a place for innovation.

In that spirit, the two of us, one a scholar and the other a funder, started discussing proposals for community-engaged research, how to overcome barriers and limitations within the existing system, and ways to make the overall process better—and potentially even sort of fun. In the end we discovered what the two of us actually *love* about proposals: They can lead to creativity and the formation of deeper, more meaningful partnerships. We came to realize that reimagining proposals opens the door to considering how to begin the big work of institutional change.

Michelson: For a long time, I have been deeply interested in how science philanthropy operates and functions. I lead the Energy and Environment program at the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, which supports interdisciplinary social science research, training, and knowledge dissemination to inform the transition to low-carbon energy systems in the United States. Our program focuses on advancing interdisciplinary social science scholarship because bringing together expertise from different fields, methods, and sectors is essential to accelerating energy system decarbonization. The only way to do this effectively is by engaging communities and stakeholders with different points of view on these complex topics. Without integrating community perspectives into scholarship, we have an incomplete view of how to advance the energy transition.

A few months ago I came across a blog post that you wrote, Ryan, that raised many of the same issues I have been wrestling with around proposals, most notably about the relationship between big-picture issues, such as the importance of understanding collaboration dynamics, and more practical matters, such as project structure and funding flows. Where did the ideas in that blog post come from?

Meyer: I'm with the Center for Community and Citizen Science at the University of California, Davis, where we help create research partnerships with groups outside academia, and study how they work. My background is in science and technology policy, so in addition to wanting to make science

more useful, participatory, accessible, and equitable, I also try to chip away at calcified ideas that are both inaccurate and unhelpful: the linear model of science, the deficit model of public understanding of science, the supposed primacy of curiosity-driven fundamental research, and so on. For me and many others, trying to move beyond these entrenched ideas has involved new ways of *doing* science—approaches such as co-production and collaboration with communities and building around shared values.

Doing this kind of science is challenging, and I realized recently that these same challenges come up as we are *developing proposals* for that work. I have learned some tough lessons about engaged research while developing proposals in collaboration with non-university partners. Building trust and developing shared understanding are all the more fraught when negotiating about money—including my own salary—and putting long-term commitments in writing to a third party.

But somewhat counterintuitively, I have also realized what an exciting moment the proposal can be for a collaboration.

Moments of opportunity

Michelson: Every time we launch an open call for proposals, I can't wait for the submission deadline day. We get this flood of proposed ideas at the deadline, and when I start to read through them, I see just how much creativity and originality exists in the research community. I can see the seeds of novel ideas being generated, and I learn about all sorts of topics from experts in the field. With our funding, we can germinate some of these seed ideas and help projects blossom. You can then look back years later and see how those ideas have spread across and taken root within the wider research community. Can you talk more about why you think proposals are an exciting moment for collaboration?

Meyer: Well, people do seem to think I'm crazy when I say it, but it stems from the fact that building strong partnerships takes time and patience. In my experience, you don't just jump in with somebody and immediately write a million-dollar proposal. There needs to be a period of churn. Of iteration. You're exploring shared interests or potentially complementary skill sets among the partners. You're doing small pilot activities, while playing with ideas about bigger collaborations. And it's all very hypothetical.

At some point there's the moment where you think, "OK, we're going to do this together. We're going to write this proposal, and if we get the money, we're going to be working together for a year, two years, three years, even more."

That moment of deciding is very exciting to me, because suddenly we're about to get very concrete. We're going to plan and we're going to think about what it would mean to have significant resources brought to bear on something that's been largely hypothetical up until this point.

Michelson: All the excitement you express about the initial stages of proposal development really resonates with me. We rarely think of proposals as being animating or galvanizing, but for funders, deliberately structuring open calls for proposals to cross boundaries can create new pathways for knowledge generation. I get excited whenever we launch a new, interdisciplinary open call for proposals for the research community. We have the ability to create an opportunity that informs and shapes the direction a field takes—a space where something new can happen.

Meyer: I guess it's nice to know that our "deadline dread" as would-be grantees can be a source of delight for someone! So, as a funder, when you think about community-engaged proposals, what particular things do you need to do in order to support the research community in developing good proposals? Has that been evolving for you?

Michelson: I think funders bear a high degree of responsibility to the research communities that they serve to make clear the kinds of projects they are looking to support and what factors in a proposal would demonstrate a competitive application. When I'm working with my colleagues and advisers to compose the text of an open call, we want to strongly signal the importance of centering community-engaged scholarship as a key element for the proposals that are eventually funded.

We have learned a lot from holding these open calls in recent years. Perhaps the most illuminating insight is that successful community-engaged research partnerships can take many forms. We try to take a portfolio approach in awarding grants. For instance, we might have some collaborations where the academic and community teams are more familiar with one another and are looking to extend a partnership. We then might support a handful of community-engaged research projects that are more novel, perhaps a first instance where a researcher is looking to deepen their engagement with community stakeholders or an effort where a community organization is partnering with a team of scholars for the first time. Although many of the researchers and community entities are located in the same geographic area, which inevitably facilitates regular interactions due to close proximity, we have also supported numerous successful partnerships where researchers and community groups are from different states or regions. This helps to provide a degree of external perspective for both sides of the partnership, as community organizations gain access to new technical expertise while the researchers broaden the application of their methods to different contexts.

Whatever collaboration we end up supporting, it is imperative that everyone involved has the resources needed to succeed. That could mean ensuring more funding flows to community groups if the need is greater, or providing enough travel support so that the

researchers can be on-site more frequently, or supporting a larger number of students in a project to make sure that the academics have the capacity needed to engage community representatives on a consistent basis.

Meyer: I think that really shows the complexity of the shift we're talking about. For funders, you're not simply flipping a switch in order to support community-engaged work; you're inviting in a whole new set of considerations and complexities.

I see that complexity reflected in the process of writing proposals with community partners. And it explains why the spark that comes from deciding to work together on a proposal is so energizing to me—the proposal forces partners to get to know each other in new ways. Some questions are small, along the lines of "How do you pay your staff? Are they salaried or are they hourly?" But you also have to learn how your partner gets stuff done, and what really motivates them. You need to check your assumptions to write a proposal that is not just competitive but is going to actually be valuable for everybody involved. So the proposal opportunity itself is essentially forcing partners to take their relationships to a new level.

But there's a flip side to all this happy talk about collaborative opportunity. If the proposal does get funded, it sets the terms of our work for years to come. Not only is it a pivotal moment for the partnership, you're also inviting yet another set of priorities into your relationship: those of the funder. Funders bring a set of priorities that range from big-picture (e.g., are research outcomes defined in narrow traditional scientific terms?) to the minutiae, such as allowable costs, rules about investigator qualifications, or evaluation metrics. Some of these requirements are intentional and lead to more rigor, but others are just legacy practices that can get in the way of deeply collaborative work.

And so you end up doing a dance with your partner of trying to figure each other out, while at the same time trying to figure out what the funder wants. To me it feels like rotating the pieces of a Rubik's Cube: Each time we talk or send an email or go back to look at that Request for Proposals again, we're turning one side of a Rubik's Cube and looking at it again. As much as deciding on a configuration and locking in the proposal is a generative moment, it's also a risky one.

And that brings up another thing: It's rare enough that you and I are having this conversation as a researcher and a funder, but I wonder what a community partner would say about the process? How might they respond as the Rubik's Cube gets turned and they sort out their relationship to the other players in the partnership?

Boundary objects

Michelson: I think that community partners are often excited to be brought into the research process and welcome the opportunity to collaborate with researchers. It unlocks new pathways for their work that might not have been immediately evident. I also fully recognize how difficult it is to juggle so many high-stakes issues, and that if any one of them wobbles, it has the potential to destabilize an entire collaborative project. This is why I've started to think of proposals as boundary objects—the social science concept that describes moments when different stakeholders in research can come together.

With proposals, funders have the ability to create flexible boundary conditions that bring individuals and institutions together. Ryan, you often make the point in our discussions that proposals span multiple boundaries: between individual researchers and administrators at a university, between scholars and community partners, between the university as an institution and community organizations, and between the proposing team and the funder. Funders do need to think more deeply about how to make these complicated Rubik's Cube relationships work. The most direct way we can facilitate these collaborations is through funding, but there is also a role funders can play in encouraging the initial conditions for these partnerships to be successful.

We need to demonstrate flexibility throughout the proposal assessment phase and the entire grantmaking journey. For example, funders cannot just implement a typical discipline-based review process to assess these proposals. Community-engaged research projects are drawn from different disciplines, and they involve fundamentally different ways of working with communities. So, in our review committees, we draw on those with expertise from fields such as economics, public policy, sociology, and engineering. We also bring in perspectives from practitioners who have deep experience working in communities and nongovernmental organizations, at the state and federal levels—and even with industry. Then, for whichever proposals are ultimately funded, funders need to allow for a high degree of flexibility in how the work ultimately plays out, providing the team with the ability to make adjustments along the way.

Meyer: As a researcher, there are pros and cons to all that complexity and flexibility. If you're not having honest conversations with partners, or not thinking clearly at multiple levels, you might end up in the wrong place as far as collaboration goes. That takes time and patience—and I'd say courage. I have certainly learned from the moments within a proposal development process when I've failed to find the courage to ask hard questions, check my own assumptions, or communicate honestly and bluntly about my own preferences or self-interest.

Relatively early in my time at UC Davis, my research center went in on a proposal for a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant, as part of a fairly new collaboration with a small nonprofit. In the name of equity and of recognizing our nonprofit partner as a leader in this space, we decided to structure it as a "collaborative grant," whereby each partner

has its own budget and its own direct relationship with NSF. It looks great from an equity and independence standpoint; in theory, it allows us to just focus on the collaborative work we do together, without nitpicking each other's budgets.

That turned out to be really challenging for a couple of reasons. First, that partner organization found it quite challenging to manage its own direct relationship with NSF, and the added responsibility sucked up a lot of effort on their part in ways that we hadn't anticipated. Second, having completely separate budgets made it harder to share resources and maintain the flexibility you just mentioned. This was a multiyear nightmare. The need for flexibility was in tension with the particular way we thought about equity at the proposal-writing stage, and we ended up locked into an arrangement that ultimately wasn't right for that collaboration. The lesson I took from this is that enacting values such as equity and empowerment requires a deep understanding of on-the-ground operational realities. We cannot simply hurl ourselves into a project structure based on lofty ideals alone.

What makes for a good proposal?

Meyer: I've written a decent number of proposals, but you've seen many, many more in your role. Are there particular things that make a proposal really sing, or get you particularly excited?

Michelson: Proposals that do well have a lot of synergy between the community partners and the researcher team. They describe their work coherently, and they are well written. Often, this tight integration is evident at the beginning, right at the very first page of a proposal, and it flows through to sections on conceptual background, to the description of research methodologies, to work plan sequencing, and even to nitty-gritty elements of budget allocation and subawards.

Preparing effective, community-engaged research proposals does require a fair amount of time. Recognizing this, we try to reflect this understanding into the way we structure open calls. For this reason, during the first stage, we ask for concise Letters of Inquiry at the outset rather than full proposals. This lowers the barrier to entry and manages time commitment up front.

Winning proposals really have a sense of institutional buy-in at every level of the project. For example, a university is willing to provide funding for cost share or carefully makes sure that sufficient funds flow to the community partner organization and even to the community members themselves. We also look to see if there are letters of support that explain why a research project is important to everyone involved, rather than letters that are formulaic or even duplicates of one another. In the strongest proposals, we even get a sense of how the proposed work might outlive or expand beyond our initial funding.

In contrast, there are some common traits among proposals that do not receive funding. Some are written in a quite disjointed and fragmented way. On a conceptual level, they can be confusing and muddled, using different terms unclearly or without explanation. Structurally, different sections of these proposals don't flow together. The proposed work plans and tasks do not sync up, and they come across more so as parallel efforts as opposed to coherent research activities that are interwoven or connected.

Reconsidering the collaborative infrastructure of universities

Meyer: For me this brings up another part of the boundary-spanning dynamic: Funders pushing the envelope on community-engaged research can sometimes get ahead of a university's policies and procedures, and then researchers have to figure that out, in some sense on behalf of, or in spite of, their home institution.

Even at a university like mine, where there have been very explicit efforts to support community-engaged research, we run into challenges and the proposal stage can become a source of tension. And it's one of the things that made me want to get into this topic broadly: thinking about how universities can adapt to funder expectations and researcher aspirations for collaboration.

Michelson: Yes, this is an area for innovation and the design of new processes, and it's a place where universities can continue to make progress. Often my role as a funder extends to informing debates that are happening within universities about how these proposals can and should be structured to ensure that resources are shared equitably and efficiently.

Meyer: I see institutional recalcitrance manifesting in all sorts of ways: battles over budgets, skirmishes over how things are going to be charged, or simply an unwillingness to help an external partner navigate paperwork. Put bluntly, even if I as a researcher am protective and supportive of my external partners, the university, as expressed in its policies and procedures, is not.

The proposal development phase is a great place to start working on this, because universities invest in personnel to support proposal development. So we can work with those folks and think about how they could be part of an institutional shift to community-engaged research that involves more than just researchers.

Over the next few years, universities are going to have to leave behind their siloed structure and figure out how to build infrastructure that enables collaborations. And I often think about our research center as being a seedbed for designing this infrastructure. We have a lot of understanding and knowledge about how to collaborate effectively,

whether it's with schools, tribes, museums, government agencies, or nonprofit groups. And researchers sometimes come to us and work with us in order to build those kinds of partnerships. But I think we need collaborative infrastructure in more centralized parts of the university—not just at a few research centers. One place to focus would be the people working on contracts and grants, at both pre-award and post-award stages. If their jobs explicitly included understanding and supporting collaboration, the university could deliver on the rhetoric of community engagement in a more fundamental way. This could also help researchers feel less alone in this work, and less responsible for all the boundary spanning it entails.

Michelson: I see these internal tensions you're describing frequently, and it is one of the places where funders can play a role in helping universities shift their practices. Many times, when we are moving ahead in a proposal review process, questions about budget or resource allocation arise because these are usually complicated grants with multiple subawards, contracts, and honoraria.

Meyer: I want to see folks working in the core infrastructure of universities actively supporting collaboration, getting their minds around the goals of the collaboration and saying, "What can we do to help this partnership succeed?" and not just, "How do I help researchers get more money?" or, "Here are the templates and policies for submitting a proposal."

There are plenty of people at the university who think they know the rules, but actually what they know is the norms and what has worked for certain people in the past. And so it would be helpful for the university to build a stable of folks who have more experience navigating that.

Michelson: Your point about the difference between rules and norms is central to this issue. One of the benefits of developing community-engaged proposals is to shift the norms of how institutions function, while still allowing them to operate well within their established guidelines.

To your point about building capacity within universities, I think research teams also need infrastructure and people to manage collaborative proposals if they do receive funding. For instance, we often support program manager roles who provide these critical bridge-building skills, yet they generally sit outside the typical tenure track pathway. Program managers can serve as the critical linchpins in making community-engaged research function, but their funding is often cut in favor of higher-priority budget items.

Meyer: I completely agree. We are always fantasizing about a team member who does program management. And often—almost always—that hypothetical person gets squeezed out of the budget during proposal development, because we're focused on the more tangible activities of the grant. And it just feels so hard to fit in this less tangible role that can hold together all the collaborative connective tissue of the project. It's another great example of a nitty-gritty decision point that has real implications for us and our community partners, and the long-term ability to deliver benefits that may not be tied directly to traditional scientific outputs.

Looking ahead

Michelson and Meyer: The longer we talked about proposals and the role they play in the research enterprise, the more obvious it became that these issues go well beyond proposal writing. What we are really talking about is the role that proposals can play in a broader system of renewal for science and a rethinking of how universities function. This is a multidimensional problem: from the high-level conceptual purpose of what a research university is intended to do, to mid-level issues associated with the questions that researchers choose to explore and places where they choose to work, to smaller-scale issues related to how funding flows through institutions and how resources are allocated across teams. Alignment is needed across all three of those levels, and across multiple organizations, for community-engaged scholarship proposals to flourish.

We do see some promising signs on the horizon. There is an emerging new generation of scholars, drawn from different disciplines and using multiple skill sets, who want their research to have more of a public impact. They want their work to matter. They are dedicated to finding creative ways to undertake this kind of community-engaged scholarship.

We also recognize that there is considerably more uncertainty about how these ideas associated with advancing community-engaged research will evolve and, hopefully, expand. In response, funders need to create more opportunities for scholars to develop community-engaged research proposals that encourage a strong connection between scientific knowledge generation and societal relevance. Wherever this uncertainty leads, we take away two key lessons from this conversation. First, proposals are an important, and often overlooked, leverage point for expressing our values as funders, researchers, and community collaborators. Second, in such moments when writing a collaborative proposal seems hard or even impossible, we are reminded that the proposal represents an important beginning—a small, incremental, and hopefully promising step toward larger-scale system transformation.

Ryan Meyer *is executive director of the Center for Community and Citizen Science at the UC Davis School of Education.* ***Evan S. Michelson*** *is a program director at the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and author of* Philanthropy and the Future of Science and Technology *(Routledge, 2020).*