

At the Funding Crossroads: a Call for International Collaboration in Basic and Applied Myology

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Abstract

Funding agencies are moving away from supporting fundamental research projects in favor of mission-oriented research projects. More investigators are, seemingly, competing for research support in programs that have been 'level-funded' for years. Therefore, a new strategy for gaining research support is required by small muscle biology laboratories in order for them to survive. One potential strategy is for small laboratories to develop a network of international collaboration.

Key words: Research funding, international collaboration, fundamental and mission-oriented research projects.

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Participants in nearly every field of muscle research have witnessed a decrease in research funding opportunities over the last five to ten years. With few exceptions, the next five to ten years will likely show a similar trend. Many reasons may be noted to explain this downward spiral. First, there seems to be a move away from fundamental research. Studying a problem as a "quest for knowledge" is not understood, or appreciated, by many lay-people, commodity groups or congressmen [1]. Alternatively, mission-oriented research problems like finding a cure for AIDS or cancer, receive much support. Second, there are a greater number of researchers competing for grant dollars in grant programs, of which many have been "level-funded" for years. Third, many of the resources available ten years ago are no longer available to muscle researchers. Therefore, it is not uncommon for laboratories conducting research in basic and applied myology to become smaller-and-smaller, receive less funding and, yet, become more expensive to equip and operate.

At the same time as funding opportunities are declining, pressure from university and college administrators is increasing for faculty members to procure outside funding for their research programs [2]. Indeed, in many cases, the productivity of a faculty member is in accordance to the total amount of grant dollars that he/she possesses at the time of their annual review. Lost is the idea of conducting quality (perhaps long-term) research that has impact on one's field, or even that contributes to the general knowledge base of one's field [2]. Also lost are many oppor-

tunities for pursuing risky ideas that might lead to major scientific breakthroughs [3], because risky ideas are likely not competitive for funding by research funding agencies.

Solutions to decreased funding opportunities are not easily obtained, and may not be for quite sometime. However, during "lean" years a balanced approach for small muscle research laboratories to continue their research progress is to develop a network of international collaborators. The idea for international collaboration and formation of interdisciplinary research "teams" is valuable for increasing the technology base available to any one laboratory, but is not in keeping with USDA or NIH norms. However, it is evident that establishment of such "groups"

1) would promote more efficient research in one's specialty, 2) free-up grant dollars due to decreased repetitive submittals by duplicate laboratories, 3) produce a collective feeling of optimistic productivity instead of the competitive hostility that now exists between many laboratories, and 4) break-up the "good-old-boy" protective groups that serve each other by accepting marginal papers or grant applications, to the exclusion of others.

Potential collaborative opportunities for interdisciplinary research include the following: The European Community Commission is increasing its efforts in expanding support to interdisciplinary research teams of the European countries, since non-European partners [USA included] may already be eligible for funding. Programs such as BIOMED-2, whose research is focused on major health problems, and is carried out by interdisciplinary teams

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from basic to clinical researchers, and BIOTECH [dedicated to biotechnology research] offer additional opportunities for international muscle research. Although the aforementioned resources are limited and insufficient to fund all the European applications, they offer a chance to motivate and integrate international groups working on focused problems. The end result of such international collaboration is likely to bolster the competitiveness and effectiveness of research in basic and applied myology.

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