

ARTICLE

Working with your Administration to Garner Support for Neuroscience Programs

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In this article, I discuss the ways that faculty can work with academic administrators to advance neuroscience programs. To be successful in making the case for resources, you should identify the institutional and administrative priorities, and be sure that your proposal aligns well with those. You should demonstrate the need and expected benefits that the additional resources will provide for the students and institution, and you should muster a group of like-minded colleagues who support your

proposal. Expect that the process may extend over several years, as resource constraints and proposals from other programs will compete with yours and possibly delay your obtaining the resources you seek. Patience, persistence, and politeness will all come in handy during these potentially prolonged negotiations.

Key words: administration, resources, priorities, interdisciplinary.

INTRODUCTION

As a neurobiologist who has been in and out of the administration of two colleges in my career—as biology department chair, dean of mathematical and natural sciences, and associate dean of the college of arts and sciences at Pomona College, and currently at Lewis & Clark College—I have the unusual experience of having been in the position of both arguing for and deciding how to distribute resources. Drawing on my own experiences, discussions with others in the administration of those colleges, and with friends who are administrators elsewhere, I offer the following suggestions for working effectively with your administration. I also realize that the term “administration” is somewhat ambiguous and can mean different things at different institutions. It may include department chairs, associate deans, deans, provosts, perhaps even presidents, depending on the size of the institution and how it is organized. It may even include other faculty members if, for example, position requests are vetted by a faculty committee. So when I say “administration” or “administrator,” I really mean whoever is in the position of deciding how to distribute resources at your institution. I have tried to make my remarks broadly applicable to include all these sorts of administrators. My take-home message is that it is essential to align your program with institutional priorities and to gain as many allies on campus as possible. I recommend several publications from Project Kaleidoscope that amplify or complement these themes: Dunbar (2004), Francione (2004) and Lidsky (1994).

There is no secret to working with administrators because they are pretty much like everyone else. To be effective it's important for you to understand their point of view and the factors that influence it. It then is often possible for you to craft a proposal for resources that fits into their agenda while advancing yours. Your first goal in garnering support for a Neuroscience Program then should be to gather as much information as you can about the administration's concerns, constraints, and values. You will certainly want to marshal data in support of your

position—about the number of students and faculty affected, about the number of competitor schools who already are doing what you propose, and so forth. But data alone will seldom suffice unless they are placed in a context that aligns with the administrator's and institution's goals. That is, garnering resources is essentially a political process.

It is also important to realize that administrators are accountable to others, and thus must act within constraints themselves. Chairs report to deans, deans to provosts or presidents, presidents to boards of trustees, and so each must attend to the wishes of his/her superiors in this chain as well as to the wishes of those who report to her or him. Generally, the board of trustees or overseers establishes overall operating budgets by setting the tuition and the rate at which endowment income is spent on operations. Administrators then allocate the funds thus generated according to existing needs or, when possible, to support new initiatives. Requests for new initiatives can come from many sources, including the board itself (to enhance athletic programs, for example), other administrators (to promote campus sustainability, say), and faculty who seek to enhance existing academic programs or establish new ones. It is the job of the administrator to try to balance these competing and sometimes contradictory desires by allocating resources appropriately.

OPTIMIZING YOUR CHANCES

In the rest of this article, I will discuss why it is difficult for administrators to grant you more resources and how you can use this understanding to improve your prospects for success.

Resources are limited

“Resources” is a code word for “money” in its various forms, which can include operating budgets, personnel (faculty and staff), facilities, and so forth. No matter how rich the college or university, how creative the people who work there, or how large the talent pool, the needs and

desires of the members of the institution will always exceed the resources required to satisfy them. That is true even during periods of growth, but especially so in these difficult economic times when college and university income is typically static or even decreasing (because of losses in the value of endowments, increased need for student financial aid, and sometimes declining enrollments). Even so, there are likely to be administrators, faculty, and staff who want to expand existing academic programs or begin new ones (departments, majors, minors), which would necessitate reducing support for other programs.

That situation requires those who manage the resources (the administrators) to make choices among the various competing needs and desires. It is not hard to identify bad ideas and weed them out. The problem typically faced by administrators, however, is that there are more good ideas than they can possibly support, and therefore not all the good ideas can be acted on.

When you approach your chair or dean with an idea to develop or expand a Neuroscience program, therefore, do not be surprised if they aren't initially receptive. Already they have had to say no to some good ideas from your colleagues; and if they say yes to you, then they will need to justify their decision to others in the institution who have different priorities.

Working within constraints

Determine how priorities are set. Given that this situation of limited resources is likely to persist for the foreseeable future, what can you do to garner (more) support for Neuroscience programs? First, it is important to learn about how priorities are set and decisions made at your institution, because each institution (and each administrator) tends to favor a particular set of procedures for setting priorities. In some cases, the institution may have a strategic plan, so initiatives that advance the goals of the plan will receive more attention than those that do not. Perhaps there are personal or institutional goals that the administrator is trying to promote, apart from a strategic plan, such as increasing the size of the student body or promoting interdisciplinary scholarship and teaching. Perhaps your college or university is competing with others for students and looking for ways either to distinguish itself from the competition, or conversely to mimic the competitors and "keep up with the Joneses." Sometimes priorities get driven opportunistically, for example, because of the adventitious availability of external funding to initiate or expand an activity. Of course, these are not mutually exclusive; more than one of these policies may apply at any given time in an institution.

Knowing something about the landscape at your institution can help you craft your appeal in the terms most likely to gain a favorable hearing. For example, if the administrator has indicated a predilection to support interdisciplinary programs, you can make the case that neuroscience is an interdisciplinary area *par excellence*, spanning the natural and social sciences and humanities (and even the arts). Or if competition with other colleges is a driving force, you can point out that you are losing students to all your competitors who have neuroscience

programs, unlike your college. On the other hand, perhaps a neuroscience program would set you apart from the schools with whom you compete for students, and help you stand out from the pack, if they don't have such a program. Couching your request in these ways shows the administrator that you are sensitive to institutional context and have thought about how neuroscience fits into the overall program, which is what they must also do.

Plan ahead. Administrators don't like surprises, because much of their time is consumed by dealing with unanticipated emergencies—illnesses, accidents, budget gaps, etc. So another last minute urgent request is not going to be welcome. Instead, you should do some reconnaissance before moving to a formal proposal. Talk with the people whose support you need to let them know your long-range plans and get a sense of their receptivity to it or concerns about it. To the extent that their concerns are reasonable, you can help your cause by structuring a proposal that addresses those concerns up front. (No, we don't need another faculty position. Yes, there is already lots of student demand for neuroscience courses.). If the administrators are encouraging, find out what kinds of information would help them decide favorably so you can provide them with that ammunition.

Gather supporting information. There is a place for data, of course, and you should also be prepared to provide information about the likely impact of the program on the institution. Are students clamoring for a neuroscience program? The registrar and admissions office can be sources for how often they are asked by prospective and enrolled students about the availability of a neuroscience program. If there's already a minor or concentration, how often do students request a major? How many faculty are available to support the proposed program? Are they already in place or will additional hires be needed? What additional resources—supplies, support staff, equipment, office, lab or teaching space—will be necessary? How many comparable colleges and universities are already doing what you propose?

It is obviously easier to sell a program that draws on existing resources, perhaps with some reconfiguration, or requires only modest additional resources, such as a new course or two, than one that requires major additions of faculty or other resources. For that reason, it is usually more palatable to keep your request modest. If you are starting a program where none has existed, it is better to aim for a minor or concentration rather than a free-standing major. If you succeed in getting a small program started, document its achievements (numbers of students educated, their post-graduation successes, etc.) as a way to lay the foundation for future expansion, if that is your goal. About the only time it makes sense to shoot the moon is when a generous foundation or alumnus will underwrite the cost of establishing or enlarging a program, providing the university time to do long-term budget planning needed to sustain the program.

Maximize your chances for success. I've already mentioned some important ways to do this. Align your request with institutional or administrator goals. Minimize the cost to the extent possible. Take advantage of grant

opportunities or other means to boost the program, but also provide a plan for sustaining the program once the grant expires. Involve the administrators in your planning early on. Finally, it's crucial to muster support from colleagues. Ideas that come from groups of faculty will be received more favorably than ideas that come from a single energetic individual. In part that's because a single individual can leave, become ill, or retire, thereby endangering the program, while a program supported by many people can survive the loss of any one. There is more political weight behind a proposal with a large number of supporters. So find all the allies you can and involve them in planning your request.

Be patient. Do not insist on a quick decision once you have made your pitch. There's a story that all potential administrators are taught in "administrator's school" to say "no" if pressed for an immediate decision.. (Actually, in the story, administrators are supposedly taught to say, "If you need an immediate reply, the answer is no, but if you can wait until I have time to think the issue through, and help me deal with potential objections, then the answer might be yes".) Of course that reticence is because it's difficult to retract an approval that has been granted, so it is prudent to work through the likely short- and long-term consequences of approval beforehand, which takes time.

Making a request for resources to an administrator for a Neuroscience (or any other) program is a lot like writing a grant proposal. You may be lucky on your first try, but it's more likely that you won't succeed. As with a grant proposal, find out what the reasons were for your rejection, modify the proposal, and try again. It always helps your case if you can take and respond to constructive criticism.

Be persistent. If a neuroscience program is important to you and if you believe it will benefit your college or university, then be prepared to be in for the long haul. I've had the opportunity to work with eight deans and seven presidents in my career so far at two different colleges, and I have known many more administrators from other institutions. Almost without exception they became administrators because they saw it as an opportunity to help a department, a college, or a university get better, and this position gave them more resources to help achieve that goal than they had as a faculty member. But even if your dean or other relevant administrator sees your proposal as enhancing the institution, his/her hands may be tied by tight budgets, and political opposition from other programs or higher administration. Moreover some administrators may be opposed to your proposal for personal or ideological reasons. In those cases, you need to keep trying to change their mind, but be prepared to wait until the situation changes—the stock market rallies and the endowment recovers, or an antagonistic dean moves on, etc. Five years may seem like a long time to you, but it's roughly the median time in service for a college dean these days, so in most cases you will outlast your dean, and you can hope for one who is more sympathetic in the future.

Whatever you perceive to be the reason for having your proposal rejected, be civil and professional in the face of an adverse decision, and don't burn your bridges by

attacking the administrator who delivers the news. It may be satisfying in the short term to vent, but it will not advance your long-term goal of enhancing a neuroscience program. For that you will need all the help and support you can get, and as few opponents as possible, so don't turn a potential supporter into an antagonist for little gain.

Be grateful. If you are successful in gaining (more) support for your neuroscience program, make sure you show your appreciation to those responsible for the decision. This can range from a simple thank you note (which will have more impact than on oral "thank you") to some more tangible quid pro quo—a willingness to serve on a committee or task force, or supporting some other initiative that the administrator favors during a faculty meeting. In short, do something to help the administrator who has been willing to help you.

CONCLUSION

In these economically uncertain times, there are no guarantees that even the best case for additional support for a neuroscience program will be successful. However, you can increase your chances for success, now or later, by situating your proposal within your college or university's context and aligning it with administrative and institutional priorities, providing data to support the need, mustering colleagues to support your position, and working collegially with the administrators who are responsible for making decisions about the allocation of resources. In the long run, this will benefit the college or university, you and your colleagues in the neuroscience program, and, most importantly, your students.

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