

Redefining Grant Funding in Higher Education



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Executive Summary

Higher education is navigating a period of rising uncertainty around research funding: declining federal success rates, shifting agency priorities, growing expectations for public impact, and workloads that increasingly exceed available institutional support. Faculty feel these pressures directly. Many are asked to pursue external funding while teaching full loads, advising students, managing administrative work, and navigating uneven access to mentoring or research development structures.

This white paper examines those challenges through data and through the lived experiences of faculty who generously shared perspectives on what it now takes to sustain a competitive research trajectory. Their insights help illuminate the gaps, pressures, and possibilities shaping today's rapidly changing funding landscape.

Featured Experts and Faculty Voices

To better understand these systemic pressures, we spoke with faculty experts whose work spans different disciplines, institutions, and funding ecosystems. Their insights helped articulate the conceptual foundations of this report and the patterns that appear across higher education.



Sabrina Noel, PhD

Associate Professor
University of Massachusetts-Lowell
Perspective: The invisible labor of grant-funded research and the disconnect between institutional assumptions and the day-to-day realities of running funded projects.



Franco Montalto, PhD

Professor
Drexel University
Perspective: How diversified portfolios—city agencies, utilities, community partners—provide stability and flexibility when federal priorities shift.



Jolie Sheffer, PhD

Associate Dean
Bowling Green State University
Perspective: The uneven pathways faculty encounter when institutions lack consistent mentoring, shared models, or institutional knowledge around grants.

Their perspectives reveal consistent themes: time scarcity, inconsistent access to mentoring, changing funder expectations, and the widening distance between what faculty are asked to do and the structures available to support them.

Reflections from Course Participants

To complement these expert perspectives, we also gathered reflections from faculty who participated in NCFDD's inaugural offering of the Rethinking Your Research Funding course, a program designed to help faculty build critical skills for navigating the new funding landscape. Their reflections show how faculty experience grant-seeking in real time while managing full academic workloads.



Henning Schröder, DMA

Professor
Western Michigan University
Perspective: How rare and valuable it is to have structured space for early-stage idea development, and how even modest scaffolding can help faculty reconnect with and clarify their research directions.



Jeffrey Wickliffe, PhD

Professor, Chair
University of Alabama at Birmingham
Perspective: How disciplinary assumptions about "legitimate" funding pathways can unintentionally narrow researchers' options, and how expanding that view opens meaningful avenues for work that had been sidelined.

Together, they highlight the practical realities behind the broader structural patterns described in this report, including the effects of limited time for idea development, the influence of disciplinary cultures, and the importance of community in sustaining momentum.

Looking Ahead

Across expert insights, participant reflections, and national trends, a consistent conclusion emerges. The challenges faculty face in pursuing external funding are rooted in structural conditions rather than individual limitations. Faculty bring strong ideas and a commitment to research, but they often work within systems that do not provide the time, clarity, or support needed for sustained proposal development.

The chapters that follow examine these structural conditions in depth, describe the consequences of inaction, and outline institutional practices that can strengthen research capacity. When faculty are supported with consistent structures, collaborative communities, and opportunities for early idea development, they are better positioned to pursue ambitious research that serves institutions, their fields of interest, students, and the public good.

Redefining Grant Funding in Higher Education

Securing external funding has long been central to the academic enterprise. Grants sustain research agendas, support graduate and undergraduate researchers, and enable faculty to pursue work that advances knowledge and serves communities. They provide the resources that allow labs to function, collaborations to grow, and students to access meaningful scholarly experiences. At the institutional level, external funding contributes to reputation, research capacity, and financial stability, which is particularly crucial at a time when campuses are facing a demographic cliff and declining perceptions of higher ed's value while simultaneously needing to demonstrate public impact, and competitiveness.

Recently, the environment for obtaining these resources has become significantly more challenging. Federal agencies such as the National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities have experienced reductions in funding, now funding fewer than one in five proposals. Success rates in NSF's Engineering and Biological Sciences directorates remain around 16 percent and 18 percent, and NEH programs similarly report rates that typically fall below 20 percent. These numbers reflect rising proposal volume, constrained budgets, and expanded expectations for rigor, clarity, and documented benefit to the public.

National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities now **fund fewer than one in five proposals**

These dynamics also play out unevenly across disciplines. Humanities and social science faculty navigate ecosystems with fewer large-scale opportunities, greater variation in what counts as fundable, and limited departmental models to follow. Early exposure to grant pathways differs widely, and many scholars lack access to the kind of structured mentoring and internal review processes that support their STEM counterparts. As a result, promising ideas may struggle to gain traction **due to structural conditions rather than intellectual merit.**

All of this contributes to a growing misalignment between what faculty are asked to do and the conditions under which they are asked to do it. Grant writing becomes an individual task added to already full workloads that include teaching, advising, service, and existing research commitments. Many faculty work late at night or during breaks to meet proposal deadlines. Over time, this pattern increases the risk of burnout, delays idea development, and constrains an institution's ability to create a more sustainable approach to research funding.

Who Gets Funded? How Institutions, Disciplines, and Priorities Shape Access

The pursuit of external funding has never been simple, but the current environment poses difficulties many faculty have never experienced before. The pressures of securing support now shape the day-to-day realities of researchers across disciplines and career stages. Success rates remain low, research expectations continue to rise, and institutional dependence on external funding has intensified. At the same time, the impact of these pressures is uneven. Disciplinary ecosystems differ widely in the availability of opportunities, the clarity of established pathways, and the mentoring faculty receive, leaving some researchers navigating far more opaque routes than others. These trends affect individual faculty directly, even when their root causes reflect broader institutional and national shifts.

Shifting federal priorities also play a central role. Funding agencies have adjusted emphasis, timelines, and thematic priorities over the past several years, altering both who is competitive and which types of projects gain traction. Faculty often experience these shifts as abrupt or destabilizing, a reminder that the stability of research careers depends not only on strong ideas but on approaches able to absorb change.

Shrinking Success Rates and Increased Competition

As noted in the introduction, major federal funders now award only a small fraction of the proposals they receive, with success rates in the teens across many programs. What has changed in recent years is not only the level of competition, but the context in which it unfolds. Longer review cycles, more detailed requirements, and growing proposal volume mean that even well-developed ideas face long timelines and uncertain outcomes. These conditions shape faculty experience differently across disciplines and institutions.

For faculty outside STEM, the barriers can feel even steeper. Dr. Jolie Sheffer, Associate Dean in the College of Arts and Sciences at Bowling Green State University, noted that humanities scholars often lack clear pathways into the grant world. She explained, “I have been a part of a couple of National Endowment for the Humanities grants. Those have been the kind of big ones, because I am from a humanities discipline where grants are not the lingua franca.” Her experience reflects what many humanities and social science scholars face: limited early exposure to grant development and few departmental models to follow.

Competition has also intensified because more proposals now emerge from multi-institutional teams supported by strong research development infrastructures. Smaller or teaching-focused institutions must compete in the same ecosystem but often lack the staff, training, and technical assistance that well-resourced universities consider standard. Over time, these gaps widen as successful institutions reinvest in research development capacity while others struggle to build it.

Increased Institutional Reliance on Federal Grants

The pressures placed on individual faculty are tied directly to broader institutional priorities. External funding supports graduate students, laboratory infrastructure, community partnerships, and the research identity of entire campuses. According to the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, U.S. higher education institutions spent 97.8 billion dollars on research and development in 2022, with more than half coming from federal sources (NCSES). For R1 universities in particular, grant revenue influences reputation, rankings, and long-term financial stability. At many R1s, the vast majority of the on-campus research support is solely focused on large-scale federal grants, ranging from how to apply for these grants, how to write proposals, and how to construct budgets.

This dynamic creates a self-reinforcing cycle. Well-funded institutions can hire competitive researchers, maintain advanced facilities, and attract additional grants. Institutions without this momentum fall further behind, even when their faculty produce strong research.

Dr. Sheffer described how these perceptions take shape on the ground. She noted that “a lot of faculty are making decisions without the information they need. They do not necessarily know what is realistic for their institution, what kinds of awards fit their field, or what pathways people before them have taken. Without that shared knowledge, it is hard to even know what to try.” These gaps in institutional knowledge can lead faculty at smaller or teaching focused campuses to assume the grant world is out of reach and can lead larger institutions to overlook the potential of smaller, community centered, or interdisciplinary awards.

Faculty Role Strain

Securing external funding requires time, concentration, and extensive coordination. Yet most faculty must undertake this work on top of full teaching loads, advising responsibilities, and service commitments. Grant writing rarely appears as a discrete responsibility in workload models, even though it demands sustained attention and repeated cycles of drafting, budgeting, and collaboration.

Dr. Sabrina Noel, Associate Professor of Public Health at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, emphasized how much invisible labor this entails. She explained:

“Institutions are not always thinking about what it actually takes to run a project — the money, the time, and the day-to-day work. There is often a disconnect between the people doing the research and those at the organizational level who approve and process grants. They are not always on the same page about what the researcher needs to make a project work.”

Her comments highlight how often faculty must absorb responsibilities that institutions underestimate or overlook. Managing budgets, navigating pre- and post-award requirements, staffing projects, and sustaining research momentum all fall on faculty who are simultaneously teaching, advising, and mentoring. Without coordinated institutional support, these demands accumulate in ways that leave little room for the uninterrupted thought and clarity that competitive proposal development requires.

“There is often a disconnect between the people doing the research and those at the organizational level who approve and process grants.”

Disciplinary Disparities

Differences in disciplinary funding ecosystems shape who feels prepared and supported. STEM fields often have built in systems that guide faculty through multiyear funding cycles, large scale awards, and collaborations that require administrative and technical assistance. Humanities and social science faculty often encounter smaller awards, fewer well defined programs, and less institutional familiarity with funders.

For Dr. Sheffer, NEH grants provided a rare on-ramp into external funding in a context where few colleagues treated grants as a central part of scholarly life. Many departments in the arts and humanities still lack shared knowledge about funder expectations, typical award sizes, or realistic timelines for proposal development. Without intentional mentoring and training, these gaps persist and limit the diversity of scholarship supported by external funding. These differences influence not only funding outcomes but also whether faculty perceive grant seeking as viable or relevant within their fields.

Changing Ecosystems and Applied Models

The national funding landscape is shifting toward applied, community-engaged, and interdisciplinary work. Shifts in federal emphasis have altered what counts as competitive, what kinds of partnerships matter, and how faculty must document the potential public impact of their work. Many agencies now prioritize broader impacts, public engagement, and partnerships that extend beyond campus. Faculty trained primarily in traditional research models must now adapt to expectations that include partnership cultivation, community consultation, and documentation of real world impact.

Dr. Franco Montalto, Professor of Civil, Architectural, and Environmental Engineering at Drexel University, offered a clear example of how applied portfolios evolve over time. He explained that “throughout my academic career, I have always had a mixture of funding. NSF and NOAA grants, but I have always complemented that with local funding.” His collaborations with New York City agencies, the Philadelphia Water Department, and community-based organizations illustrate how diversified portfolios can expand both the range of funders and the societal relevance of research.

As federal priorities shift and budgets fluctuate, community-based and partnership-driven models may become even more important. Institutions across the country need to encourage faculty to pursue state agencies, foundations, regional partners, and municipal collaborations to reduce vulnerability to federal volatility. Faculty who can work across these boundaries will be positioned to succeed in a landscape where flexibility and responsiveness are as essential as disciplinary expertise.

Summary: Key Dynamics in Who Gets Funded

Taken together, the patterns in this chapter reveal several consistent realities.

- 1 Success rates** remain low and continue to place significant pressure on faculty.
- 2 Institutional resources** strongly influence who can compete effectively.
- 3 Disciplinary pathways** into grant seeking are uneven and often inequitable.
- 4 Shifts in federal priorities** have reshaped funding opportunities and changed which kinds of work are most competitive.

These forces create a competitive landscape that faculty must navigate without equal access to time, training, or institutional infrastructure. The next chapter examines the structural causes at the center of this misalignment.

Structural Causes of a Stalled Grant Pipeline

The challenges of today's funding landscape are rooted in structural pressures that shape how faculty work, how proposals are developed, and how institutions organize their research portfolios. These pressures have intensified as federal priorities have shifted, review cycles have lengthened, and agencies have reoriented investments toward topics and partnership models that differ from past expectations. Expectations for external funding have risen across nearly every sector of higher education, yet the time, training, and infrastructure required to meet these expectations have not kept pace. The result is a system in which individual faculty feel the impact of national and institutional shifts that they did not create and cannot easily control. Researchers must navigate increasing complexity without the coordinated support that competitive grant seeking now requires.

“Always have a grant in the pipeline that you are working on, even if you know it won't get funded for a few years.”

Time Scarcity

One of the most significant barriers is the lack of protected time for grant development. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine notes that traditional academic workloads offer little protected time for research development, which is especially problematic for activities that require repeated cycles of drafting and revision (National Academies). Proposal writing is cognitively demanding and depends on long stretches of uninterrupted time, yet most faculty work within schedules fragmented by meetings, teaching, and service obligations that limit opportunities for deep thinking.

Dr. Noel described how funding expectations now require continuous attention. She explained:

“Someone told me years ago to always have a grant in the pipeline that you are working on, even if you know it won't get funded for a few years. Keep something in rotation. I did not really learn that until later in my career — to have proposals constantly moving in the background while you go after other streams.”

This guidance reflects a broader reality of contemporary grant seeking. Faculty are expected to maintain multiple proposals at various stages of development while simultaneously managing ongoing projects, teaching, advising, and service. The expectation to keep work “in rotation” adds a layer of continuous effort that is difficult to sustain without protected time and structured support. Without sustained periods for idea development, funder research, relationship cultivation, and drafting, even strong concepts struggle to take shape as competitive proposals.

Time scarcity is intensified for faculty who teach heavily, advise numerous students, or hold leadership roles. In such contexts, grant seeking becomes a parallel job rather than an integrated component of academic work. Over time, this separation contributes to stalled proposal pipelines and discourages early-stage exploration.

Inconsistent Mentoring and Feedback

Mentoring and internal review systems vary widely across institutions. Some faculty have access to structured proposal feedback, but many rely on informal networks or limited departmental knowledge. The National Academies report highlights that inconsistent access to high-quality review leaves researchers navigating funder expectations largely through trial and error (National Academies). Internal review systems that focus primarily on academic merit may overlook questions of competitiveness, feasibility, and alignment with sponsor priorities.

Dr. Sheffer sees the consequences of this unevenness. She noted that “as soon as it is outside of that familiar system, faculty tell me they do not even know where to start. They are trying to make decisions with very little information, and that leads to a lot of unnecessary guessing.” Her perspective reflects what many researchers experience: without clear guidance or opportunities to learn how different funders operate, faculty must navigate complex expectations without a roadmap.

These mentoring gaps strengthen existing inequities. Faculty who begin with little guidance often remain disconnected from the cycles, conversations, and informal knowledge that shape long-term competitiveness.

Changing Funder Priorities

Funder expectations have also shifted in ways that increase the complexity of proposal development. Many agencies now emphasize broader impacts, cross-sector partnerships, public engagement, and data sharing. These expectations have shifted repeatedly in recent years, at times broadening the scope of what funders emphasize and at other times narrowing eligibility, priorities, or acceptable approaches, disrupting research programs and redirecting which topics, populations, or methods receive sustained support. These shifts encourage meaningful collaboration but require planning and documentation that extend well beyond traditional research design (National Science Foundation, “PAPPG”).

These expectations also involve relationship building and administrative work. Researchers must often coordinate multi-institution teams, negotiate roles, prepare community partnership plans, and develop data management strategies, all of which demand support that is unevenly distributed across institutions.

Dr. Montalto described how these shifts intersect with funding stability. He noted that “if you are relying exclusively on federal funding to support your work, and you work in those areas, you may find yourself without resources.” He contrasted this vulnerability with the stability that can emerge when researchers diversify their partnerships. “With some of these partnerships, you can keep things going,” he explained, “because those partners may still support research in areas the federal government is no longer deeming a priority. So even when one door closes, another may be open through state agencies or utilities that still see the value.” His experience illustrates how diversification and community-based collaboration can help researchers adapt to changing priorities and maintain momentum in an uncertain funding environment.

“If you are relying exclusively on federal funding to support your work, and you work in those areas, **you may find yourself without resources.**”

A System Outpacing Its Supports

Taken together, these pressures create a system that asks more of faculty than current structures allow. Proposal submissions have increased across several federal agencies, yet the number of awards has remained relatively stable (National Science Foundation, “PAPPG”). Many institutions have not expanded their research development capacity to match the rising complexity of proposals. Faculty are writing more applications that require more coordination, yet the time and assistance required to prepare them are often insufficient.

This imbalance has predictable consequences. Proposal churn increases without corresponding gains in success rates. Faculty experience heightened stress as expectations outpace available time and support. Institutions with limited research development infrastructure fall further behind even when their faculty produce strong ideas and scholarship.

In short, the stalled grant pipeline is not the product of individual shortcomings. It reflects structural mismatches between demands and available support, uneven access to mentoring, and shifting national priorities that shape which kinds of work are most likely to advance. Understanding these pressures is essential for designing systems that allow faculty to pursue competitive ideas with clarity and stability.

The Hidden Cost of Inaction

Across conversations with faculty, a consistent pattern emerged. When funding lapses or support structures fall short, research activity slows, uncertainty grows for students and staff whose work depends on grants, and faculty face pressures that extend well beyond the immediate setback. These effects accumulate quietly and predictably, shaping the direction of projects and the stability of the teams involved. When institutions struggle to adapt to today's funding realities, the consequences are immediate and far-reaching. Burnout emerges quickly, students lose research opportunities, and institutions risk long-term erosion of their research capacity. The hidden costs of inaction accumulate in the form of disengagement, talent loss, financial vulnerability, and widening inequalities across higher education.

Burnout and Disengagement

Burnout is often the first and most visible consequence. Securing funding requires persistence, yet repeated rejections without adequate support can leave faculty discouraged and vulnerable to disengagement. Many begin to limit their submissions, particularly after tenure when structural support often declines. Mid-career faculty are especially at risk. They frequently hold heavier service roles while maintaining active teaching schedules, and the cumulative strain reduces their capacity to sustain a productive research pipeline.

Dr. Noel described how expansive the role of a funded researcher has become. "You are asked to be a researcher, a marketing person, a media person," she observed, "you are supposed to be a networker, you are supposed to know how to write papers, write grants." She emphasized that faculty are responsible for managing pre-award, post-award, and the day-to-day work of running projects, often while teaching. These descriptions reflect a broader pattern: faculty are balancing scientific work with extensive administrative and communication demands, and when these demands are unsupported, stress accumulates in predictable ways. Grant seeking becomes yet another demand layered onto already full weeks.



Dr. Noel described how expansive the role of a funded researcher has become. "You are asked to be a researcher, a marketing person, a media person."

Quantitative evidence underscores these risks. An analysis of early career NIH applicants found that researchers who secured initial awards produced approximately 30 percent more publications over the following decade and were twice as likely to obtain subsequent federal funding compared to peers who narrowly missed funding (Li 2017). These compounding outcomes show how early setbacks, when unsupported, can have long-term consequences for research activity and career stability.

Studies also show that repeated rejection without structural support increases the likelihood that faculty will exit academic research entirely. A 2019 study found that scientists who accumulate unfunded applications are significantly more likely to leave research, even when their publication records match those of funded peers (Wang et al. 2019). Taken together, the evidence indicates that burnout is not simply a matter of individual resilience. It reflects the cumulative effects of unsupported rejection and unmet structural needs.

Researchers who secured initial awards **produced approximately 30 percent more publications** over the following decade and were **twice as likely** to obtain subsequent federal funding

Talent Loss and Retention Challenges

The next consequence is talent loss, which emerges gradually but has lasting effects. Inaction also threatens faculty retention. Faculty who feel unsupported in the pursuit of external funding often look to other institutions or other career paths. The financial and organizational costs of turnover are substantial. Research teams dissolve, students lose mentors, long-term projects stall, and departments lose momentum.

In her coaching and administrative work, Dr. Sheffer has seen how funding disruptions reverberate through research groups. She described what it was like to support faculty during the most recent federal shifts:

“I was talking with faculty who were dealing with, ‘What does it mean that my grant is terminated? What do I do? How do I support staff that are soft funded?’ We were really, in real time, trying to understand what was happening, what was likely to stick, and what options people had. I would get off a call and say, ‘Okay, yesterday the federal government announced this; let’s talk about what it means for you and where you can pivot.’”

Her description captures both the uncertainty faculty face and the emotional weight of carrying responsibility for teams whose jobs depend on unstable funding. These disruptions affect research continuity, staff retention, and the long-term stability of entire labs, especially when institutional systems are not equipped to absorb sudden gaps.

Recent findings confirm the destabilizing nature of funding gaps. A 2023 study of 200 faculty across 20 universities showed that even a delay of thirty days increased the probability of nonemployment among grant-funded staff by roughly forty percent, and those who remained employed earned significantly less than peers in continuously funded labs (Tham et al. 2023). Talent loss therefore unfolds at multiple levels, affecting faculty, staff, and students whose work is tied to a grant's continuity.

Widening Institutional Disparities

A third pattern shaping the funding landscape is the widening of disparities between institutions. While external competition affects faculty everywhere, its impact is uneven. Institutional infrastructure has become a dividing line that determines who can compete effectively and who must navigate grant seeking without adequate support.

Research intensive universities often reinvest grant revenue into staffing, internal review systems, and proposal development infrastructure. These investments create a reinforcing cycle in which well-supported faculty produce stronger proposals, secure additional funding, and contribute to further reinvestment.

Teaching-focused or under-resourced campuses face a very different reality. Even when faculty have strong ideas, they may be moving through complex and unfamiliar processes without guidance. Dr. Sheffer described how this plays out for many researchers:

“Folks who are very grant active are used to their particular agencies. They have relationships with program officers they have known since they were a graduate student. These are the stepping stone grants. This is the early career one you go for, and then this will be the next one. And as soon as it is sort of outside of that, it is really just a mystery. It is really unknown. And then I think there are a lot of faculty that just have not been part of that grant ecosystem. They are also just sort of like, there is nothing for me out there. If I am not asking for five million dollars, there are no grants, and it is not true either.”

Her observations point to structural patterns rather than individual limitations. Without mentoring, internal models, or early exposure, faculty at smaller institutions may interpret an unfamiliar landscape as evidence that opportunities do not exist.

Dr. Sheffer also described how assumptions within institutions can reinforce disparities:

“Smaller or teaching-focused institutions sort of think that the grant world is not for them, when in fact there are big grants that are often appropriate for more teaching-focused or undergraduate-focused institutions. And there are larger institutions that tend to think only of supporting grants over one hundred thousand or five hundred thousand dollars. That is incredibly short sighted, because faculty need to start with the smaller to get practice and learn the genre of grant writing.”

These dynamics discourage early exploration on one end and narrow institutional attention on the other. Both limit opportunities for faculty to develop competitive skills, build confidence, and gain experience with proposal systems.

Recent survey data illustrates the stakes. At the University of Pittsburgh, more than half of faculty respondents reported being very or extremely worried about meeting funding needs for their sponsored projects (University Times 2020). This anxiety reflects uneven access to the tools and time required to write and manage competitive proposals, not a lack of talent or ambition. Together, these patterns reveal that funding disparities map onto institutional infrastructure rather than research merit.

“**We do not talk about** our failures the same way we talk about success.”

Broader Consequences

Finally, the effects of inaction extend beyond faculty and institutions. Students lose access to meaningful research experiences. Community partners lose opportunities for collaboration and innovation. Institutions lose reputational strength, competitiveness, and long term capacity to fulfill their research missions.

Dr. Sheffer observed that academia rarely shares the full story of the funding process. She noted that “we do not talk about our failures the same way we talk about success,” and that faculty are unlikely to announce, “I applied for a 1.5 million dollar grant and I did not get it,” even though they “learn a lot from going after grants whether [they] get them or not.” When institutions neither normalize failure nor invest in systems that support resubmission, they squander both faculty learning and institutional potential.

Key Risks if Inaction Continues

Without meaningful intervention, the pressures described above translate into risks that affect faculty, students, and long-term research capacity:

- 1** **Increasing rates** of faculty burnout and disengagement.
- 2** **Higher turnover** among faculty and research staff.
- 3** **Fewer opportunities** for students to participate in research.
- 4** **Growing disparities** between institutions with robust support and those without.
- 5** **Reduced competitiveness** for federal and foundation funding.
- 6** **Long-term weakening** of research capacity across disciplines.

These costs show that inaction compounds vulnerabilities rather than preserving stability. Small gaps in support become systemic over time, shaping who stays in research and which projects advance.

Designing Scalable Systems That Support Grant Development

The pressures shaping today's funding landscape demand more than individual perseverance. They reveal a structural reality in which expectations for external funding have risen sharply while institutional scaffolding has not kept pace. As success rates fall and workloads intensify, faculty are left to navigate proposal development without the coordinated support, protected time, or strategic guidance that competitive grant seeking now requires. A systems-based approach becomes essential, not because individuals lack motivation, but because the work itself exceeds what can reasonably be managed alone.

The result is predictable. Promising ideas are delayed. Early-career researchers lose momentum. Senior faculty absorb growing amounts of invisible labor. These challenges cannot be solved through productivity strategies alone. They require institutions to rethink how they structure support, how they design research development systems, and how they create the conditions for faculty to pursue ambitious ideas with clarity and consistency.

In this chapter, the focus shifts from describing broad challenges to outlining specific, scalable structures that campuses of any size can adapt. These supports do not require large research offices to be effective, but they do require deliberate design.

What Effective Support Looks Like

Strong support systems begin with structures that help faculty refine ideas, form collaborative teams, and maintain consistent writing habits. This aligns closely with national research development frameworks. The National Organization of Research Development Professionals defines research development as a strategic set of activities that advance research goals through idea generation, team formation, and proposal preparation (“About NORDP”). This definition emphasizes that competitive proposal development is an iterative, structured process rather than an individual effort carried out in isolation.

Research development offices built around this model typically offer opportunity scouting, concept feedback, draft review, broader impacts consultation, and general grantsmanship guidance (“What Is Research Development,” Kent State University). These services help faculty progress from early ideas to fundable concepts through predictable stages that improve clarity and competitiveness.

Even campuses without full research development units often provide forms of structured guidance. Multi-session grant writing programs, for example, offer targeted instruction paired with opportunities for peer exchange (“Research Development,” University of Connecticut). These programs allow faculty to work steadily across several weeks, translating high-level ideas into compelling narratives.

Evidence shows that structured interventions can improve proposal outcomes. For example, a grant writing bootcamp for women in STEM increased submissions, awards, and total external dollars secured within a year (Smith et al. 642). The program blended expert coaching with protected writing time and peer accountability, creating an approach that institutions can adapt regardless of size.

Across these examples, a core principle emerges: faculty thrive when they have reliable, repeatable opportunities to engage in idea development and proposal writing. With that kind of structure in place, grant seeking shifts from a last-minute scramble to a steady, strategic process. Over time, these supports reshape habits so that proposal development becomes part of the regular rhythm of academic work rather than something taken up only in moments of crisis.

Scalable Interventions That Build Momentum

Not every institution can staff a full research development office, but many interventions are both scalable and impactful.

Internal Seed, Pilot, and Bridge Funding

Internal funding plays a pivotal role in helping faculty build competitive proposals. Seed and pilot programs give researchers the opportunity to collect preliminary data, test new ideas, and form collaborative teams.

At Utah State University, seed grants are structured to support early-stage work while guiding faculty toward external submission within one to two years (“Seeding USU Research Growth”). This creates a natural developmental arc from idea generation to proposal completion.

Indiana University offers a portfolio of internal awards that includes pilot grants, bridge funding, and targeted opportunities aligned with priority research areas (“Internal Funding Opportunities,” IU Research). These programs often require applicants to articulate clear pathways for leveraging internal funds toward external competitions, reinforcing a culture of strategic planning.

Internal funds also strengthen interdisciplinary collaboration. Many programs prioritize multi-investigator or cross-department partnerships. This helps researchers escape disciplinary silos and pursue projects that position them for larger external awards.

Bridge funding fills another critical gap. As federal review cycles lengthen and decisions become more unpredictable, lapses between awards can jeopardize staffing and project continuity. Well-designed bridge mechanisms provide short-term stability, helping faculty maintain momentum until new resources arrive.

Dr. Noel emphasized the importance of diversifying funding sources beyond federal agencies. She explained how combining NIH grants with foundation, community, and industry support broadened her lab’s work and made it more resilient when priorities shifted. Her experience shows how institutions can encourage faculty to pursue a broader ecosystem of funders to improve stability and adaptability.

Workshops, Accountability Programs, and Writing Retreats

Some of the most effective supports for grant seeking faculty require coordination more than major investment. Programs that offer predictable structure and regular engagement help faculty sustain momentum over time. Three low-cost, high-impact models include:

- 1 Grant Writing Workshops:** These structured sessions give faculty opportunities to learn funder expectations, receive targeted feedback, and begin shaping ideas in a supportive setting. Workshops create an early entry point into grant development for faculty who may not yet feel ready for a full proposal cycle. They also help demystify the process by making room for questions, examples, and practical guidance drawn from experienced reviewers.
- 2 Multi-Session Bootcamps:** Programs that meet repeatedly across several weeks offer a different kind of support. The Smith et al. bootcamp illustrates how multi-session models blend dedicated writing time with expert mentoring and peer accountability, leading to measurable increases in submissions and awards (Smith et al. 642). Because faculty return to their projects each week with clear goals and structured time, these programs reinforce steady progress and reduce the sense of starting from scratch.
- 3 Writing Groups and Retreats:** Faculty writing groups and short retreats create protected, distraction-free time that can be difficult to secure during a regular semester. Research shows that brief but consistent writing sessions reduce isolation and increase productivity (Geller and Eodice 94). When tied directly to proposal development, these groups offer opportunities to draft sections, workshop ideas, and build confidence in an environment where the work is both expected and supported.

What makes these interventions successful is not their scale but their consistency. Each reinforces routine engagement with proposal writing rather than last-minute activity driven only by deadlines. When institutions create regular opportunities for faculty to think, write, and refine ideas, they help integrate grant development into the ongoing rhythm of academic work rather than treating it as an occasional, high-pressure task.

Rethinking Tenure Expectations and Timelines

Changes in funding patterns have also prompted institutions to reconsider how proposal activity is evaluated. NIH data show that the average age at first R01 award has risen significantly over time (“Age Distribution of Principal Investigators,” NIH). In this environment, expecting early-career faculty to secure large grants within narrow timeframes is increasingly unrealistic.

Some campuses now recognize internal awards, foundation grants, team science contributions, and evidence of sustained proposal development as meaningful indicators of research trajectory. Others have adjusted tenure clocks or evaluation criteria to reflect volatility in the external funding landscape. These shifts signal that institutions can support competitive research by aligning evaluation systems with the current realities of proposal development rather than outdated expectations.

Building a Culture of Collaboration

Grant success increasingly depends on collaboration across disciplines, institutions, agencies, and communities. NORDP identifies team formation as a core research development function (“What Is Research Development,” Kent State University). Internal programs reinforce this by supporting multi-investigator teams and interdisciplinary concept development. Utah State University’s Integrated Team Research seed grant, for example, funds collaborative teams working toward external submissions (“Seeding USU Research Growth”).

Faculty often describe collaboration as intellectually and practically generative, especially when it expands the range of funders and partners available to support a project. Dr. Sheffer noted that she enjoys helping faculty “reimagine the possibilities and get out of the well-trod grooves they have set for themselves,” a shift that often opens new directions for research. Dr. Montalto described how applied partnerships can sustain work when traditional pathways narrow. He explained that collaborating with state, local, and utility partners creates opportunities because “those partners may still support research in areas the federal government is no longer deeming a priority,” and that “with new forms of partnership, we can continue to do important work even in this period of shifting federal priorities.” Together, their experiences show how collaborative approaches expand both intellectual and funding possibilities in ways that single-agency strategies cannot.

Institutions that create structured opportunities for faculty to meet, exchange ideas, and form teams help translate these collaborative possibilities into practice. Regular spaces for interdisciplinary conversation reduce the isolation that often accompanies early-stage proposal development and make it more likely that researchers will identify partners, refine concepts, and pursue opportunities they might not have recognized on their own.

Normalizing Failure and Supporting Resubmission

Given national success rates, proposal rejection is an expected part of grant seeking. Many faculty, however, lack structured support for interpreting reviews, identifying actionable next steps, or preparing resubmissions. Evidence from NIH R01 applicants shows that revised proposals have higher success rates than first submissions and that resubmission contributes to stronger long-term funding trajectories (Doyle et al. 4 to 6).

Both institutions and individual faculty can take practical steps to strengthen resubmission pathways. Helpful supports include:

- **Post-Review Debriefs:** Regular, structured conversations that help faculty translate reviewer comments into clear plans for improvement. These can be facilitated by research offices, departments, or peer groups.
- **Revision-Focused Workshops:** Targeted sessions that guide faculty through interpreting scores, addressing critiques, and planning timelines for resubmission.
- **Internal Peer Review:** Systems that allow faculty to receive constructive, discipline-informed feedback before sending revised proposals to external funders. Even informal peer review circles can serve this role.
- **Microgrants for Resubmission:** Small funds that help faculty collect additional data, consult with collaborators, or hire editorial support tied to revision plans.
- **Cultural Reframing of Outcomes:** Departments and research offices can normalize the idea that unfunded proposals are part of a longer developmental arc. Faculty can reinforce this by treating reviews as information rather than as a final judgment.

Dr. Sheffer emphasized the importance of this perspective. She noted that faculty can “stay the course for a while or make plans to both stay the course and have a backup plan,” rather than reacting to every shift in priorities with abrupt changes in direction. Structures that encourage reflection, planning, and steady revision help faculty see resubmission as a productive next step, not a setback.

Revised proposals have **higher success rates** than first submissions and resubmission contributes to **stronger long-term funding trajectories**.

Moving Toward Systems That Match the Work

The practices outlined here reflect a shared conclusion across faculty interviews and national models: effective support does not require sweeping reform. It requires systems that match the realities of grant seeking. Structures that provide protected time, coordinated feedback, opportunities for collaboration, and guidance on resubmission help faculty maintain momentum during long proposal cycles.

When institutions design environments that support sustained idea development, faculty gain the clarity and consistency needed to pursue funding in ways that are both strategic and sustainable. These systems not only improve competitiveness, they strengthen the long-term scholarly capacity of the institution as a whole.

What Faculty Told Us: Three Insights from the NCFDD Research Funding Course

If the current funding landscape reveals anything, it is that faculty want to do this work. They want to pursue ideas that matter, contribute to their fields, engage communities, and secure resources that move their research forward. What is often missing is not motivation but infrastructure: the structures, time, mentorship, clarity, and community that make sustained grant seeking possible.

The inaugural cohort of NCFDD's Rethinking Your Research Funding course offered a closer look at what faculty need in order to make progress. Their reflections highlight patterns that extend far beyond the course itself and reveal insights that faculty across disciplines can use, regardless of whether they participate in a formal program. These observations also illuminate where institutional systems already support research development, where gaps persist, and what shifts when faculty are given even temporary frameworks that encourage experimentation and reflection.

The sections below distill three major insights faculty shared about the conditions that help them think clearly, explore new possibilities, and reengage their research with more purpose.

1. Faculty Need Space to Engage Their Research with Clarity

Faculty consistently emphasized that space for brainstorming was a scarce resource. Competing responsibilities, fragmented time, and pressure to produce left little space for early stage thought. Participants described the NCFDD course as offering a temporary structure that made it possible to pause and think about their ideas without the usual interruptions. Specifically, faculty in the course engaged with each other in NCFDD's private Funding Community — a safe space where researchers could openly exchange ideas and share insights.

One participant, Dr. Henning Schröder, noted that the weekly structure gave him a way to think about funding even during the busiest point in his semester. He said it helped him see that he could “carve out a little bit of extra time in addition to what I do with teaching” and use it to plan next steps rather than simply reacting to immediate responsibilities. This shift did not change his workload, but it changed how he experienced it. He could separate long-term research thinking from the urgency of day-to-day tasks, which allowed ideas to develop more steadily.

For another participant, Dr. Jeff Wickliffe, clarity meant stepping back from entrenched routines. He shared that the course reminded him to focus on “what is the problem you are trying to address and why is it a problem,” instead of jumping straight to technical details. Reframing his ideas for a broader audience helped him see pathways for work that had been sidelined simply because it did not fit existing agency priorities. This reframing allowed him to revisit projects he valued but had set aside, not because the ideas lacked merit, but because they had lacked a clear place to land.

“

I had projects I cared deeply about, but I backburnered them because I couldn’t find a real home for them at NIH. The training reminded me that federal agencies aren’t the only place to look. You can go where people are excited about the problem you want to solve, and that opens the door to work you actually want to be doing.”

Jeffrey Wickliffe PhD, MS

Professor, Chair
Environmental Health Sciences
The University of Alabama at Birmingham



2. Faculty Benefit from Seeing Multiple Pathways to Funding

Participants entered the course with vastly different understandings of what counted as legitimate funding. Some were trained to see national agencies as the only real destination. Others came from disciplines where traditional pathways barely existed. These assumptions shaped what faculty believed was possible, and once they began exploring alternatives, those assumptions shifted quickly. However, in the NCFDD course, faculty learned from and could ask questions of peer experts who had successfully secured research funding from a range of sources.

In doing so, participants also began to see that alternative funding pathways often require a different approach. Rather than responding to standardized calls with highly technical narratives, faculty described the need to cultivate relationships over time, frame their work for diverse audiences, and articulate impact in ways that resonated beyond a single agency or discipline.

Dr. Wickliffe described how narrowly focused his field had become. He explained that many environmental health scientists are “NIH focused, that is all we ever think about,” and reflected on how that mindset constrained his own work: “I had projects I cared deeply about, but I backburnered them because I couldn’t find a real home for them at NIH. The training reminded me that federal agencies aren’t the only place to look. You can go where people are excited about the problem you want to solve, and that opens the door to work you actually want to be doing.” Exposure to alternative funders helped him return to ideas that were meaningful but previously unsupported.

“

I got some great links and connections. I learned how to strengthen my nonprofit funding game, my industry funding game, and then I also learned about additional sources. I got answers in all of those areas, and I learned how organized people are in pursuing these things — how you can have multiple things happening at the same time instead of putting everything into one basket.”

Henning Schröder DMA, MM

Instructor, Saxophone
Irving S. Gilmore School of Music
Western Michigan University



Dr. Schröder approached the funding landscape from a very different place. Because his work spans performance, composition, and interdisciplinary teaching, he had always relied on small nonprofit and arts-council grants. The course widened that landscape dramatically. As he put it, “I got some great links and connections. I learned how to strengthen my nonprofit funding game, my industry funding game, and then I also learned about additional sources. I got answers in all of those areas, and I learned how organized people are in pursuing these things, how you can have multiple things happening at the same time instead of putting everything into one basket.”

Together, these reflections underscore a broader point. When faculty understand the full range of funders available, they can design strategies that reflect their research rather than contorting ideas to fit restrictive assumptions. This shift expands both imagination and opportunity.

3. Community Matters, and it Doesn’t Require a Heavy Lift

Grant seeking is cognitively demanding, but participants emphasized that it is also emotionally heavy. The weight of rejection, uncertainty about expectations, and the solitude of proposal development can make the process feel isolating even in well-resourced institutions. Even light interaction with peers in the NCFDD Funding Community space changed that experience for many participants.

Dr. Schröder noted that although he could not be highly active in the learning community, he still felt supported by seeing others ask questions and offer feedback. He said it helped him recognize that “we are all in this together,” a realization that eased the pressure he felt to navigate unfamiliar funding systems alone.

Dr. Wickliffe reflected on how common isolation is in research environments. He described faculty who sit “in the same place but on their own,” often without the networks needed to explore new problems or connect with funders outside their discipline. Even though he participated asynchronously, he found it grounding to see peers working through similar uncertainties and ambitions.

These observations highlight a simple but often overlooked truth. Faculty thrive when they do not have to figure everything out alone. A community does not need to be intensive to be effective. It needs to be consistent, nonjudgmental, and available at the moments when faculty are most likely to get stuck.

A Path Toward Sustainable Support

The experiences of Dr. Schröder and Dr. Wickliffe illustrate what becomes possible when faculty are given structured time, expert framing, and a sense of community around grant seeking. The insights they shared point toward practical conditions that help researchers move forward: clarity about their ideas, awareness of multiple pathways to funding, and connection to peers who normalize the process.

Sustainable research development does not depend on a single program or office. It depends on coordinated structures that help faculty think clearly, pursue diverse funders, and remain connected to one another during a process that often feels isolating. NCFDD’s Rethinking Your Research Funding course models the types of structures that enable faculty to advance their research in a sustainable way. The framework helps faculty establish routines, receive guidance, and build collaborative habits. Institutions can draw on this model to strengthen their own systems and expand the support available to their faculty.

When internal and external supports work together, faculty gain the clarity, confidence, and community necessary to sustain ambitious research in a complex funding environment. Institutions that invest in these conditions strengthen not only their researchers but the long term vitality of their scholarly mission.

The Future of Research Support for Sustainable Scholarship

Grant funding has always been about more than dollars. It shapes what questions faculty can ask, which students they can support, which communities they can partner with, and how institutions understand their own mission. In the current environment, that influence is sharper and more unforgiving. Success rates remain low, expectations are high, and the day to day work of securing support often falls on individual faculty who are already stretched thin. In this context, institutions face difficult choices about where to invest time and resources, and faculty must navigate research responsibilities alongside teaching, advising, and service.

The evidence and experiences described here point toward a simple truth with complicated implications: the problem is not that faculty are unwilling to do the work. It is that they are routinely asked to do it without the time, tools, or community that make sustained grant seeking possible. A second truth follows. Institutions cannot control federal budgets or shifting agency priorities, but they can influence the structures that shape how faculty move through the stages of idea development, proposal preparation, and revision. Doing so requires acknowledging constraints, setting priorities, and approaching support as an ongoing process rather than as a single intervention.

This means confronting the obstacles that make change difficult, including limited research development staffing, uneven mentoring infrastructure, departmental workload norms, and budgeting cycles that leave little room for sustained investment. Rethinking grant funding means reimagining that context, not asking individual researchers to work even harder inside it.

From Individual Heroics to Shared Responsibility

Across disciplines and institutions, faculty described a familiar pattern. Proposal development happens late at night or during breaks. It is squeezed in around teaching, advising, administrative duties, and existing projects. It is treated as a personal obligation that somehow lives outside the official workload, even as institutions rely on its results.

Faculty in very different positions noticed this same misalignment. In public health and environmental health, national agencies are visible but volatile. In the arts and humanities, federal programs exist but are rarely treated as a standard part of scholarly life. In both contexts, faculty recounted how often grant writing felt like a solitary task, something they were expected to figure out largely on their own.

When support appears, the picture changes quickly. Protected time, even in modest amounts, helps faculty move from crisis mode to intentional planning. Early feedback keeps them from investing months in ideas that are not yet fundable. Research development staff and internal programs help translate broad concepts into concrete plans. Seed grants create room for experimentation and data collection. Institutions that provide these structures treat grant seeking as a shared responsibility rather than an individual test of endurance.

The result is not simply more proposals. It is a different relationship to the work. Faculty begin to see funding as part of a longer arc of idea development and collaboration, rather than as a series of disconnected deadlines. These shifts do not eliminate the structural pressures described in earlier chapters, but they show how targeted supports can reduce the sense of isolation that faculty highlighted so consistently.

Recognizing a Wider Range of Funding Pathways

The current funding landscape rewards flexibility. Federal agencies remain important, but they are no longer the only, or even the most appropriate, avenue for many kinds of work. State and local agencies, foundations, utilities, municipal partners, community organizations, industry collaborators, and internal institutional funds all play meaningful roles in supporting research and creative projects.

Faculty who have learned to work across these boundaries described the benefits with clarity. Diversified portfolios made their research more resilient when federal priorities shifted. Community-based and applied projects opened new intellectual questions and new sources of support. Smaller awards, internal grants, and local collaborations provided on-ramps for early-career scholars and for colleagues in fields that rarely see large national awards.

Yet these same faculty also noted how rarely their broader funding strategies were recognized as legitimate within institutional cultures that still equate success with a narrow set of federal mechanisms. When internal systems prioritize only a few kinds of grants, they overlook much of the work required to build community partnerships, sustain local collaborations, or align projects with regional priorities. They also risk sidelining entire disciplines.

Rethinking grant funding means broadening the map of what counts. It means valuing internal awards that seed ambitious ideas, recognizing foundation and community grants as substantive contributions, and treating partnerships with public agencies, nonprofits, and industry as central to a campus research mission. It also means making these possibilities visible to faculty who have been trained to look in only one direction. This expanded understanding aligns with the disciplinary disparities and institutional inequalities discussed earlier in this report, and it highlights the importance of locally appropriate pathways into research funding.

This is not an argument against federal funding. It is an argument for a larger imagination, one that sees national agencies as part of a more varied ecosystem rather than as the entire landscape.

This is not an argument against federal funding. It is an argument for a larger imagination: one that sees national agencies as part of a **more varied ecosystem** rather than as the entire landscape.

Designing Systems that Match the Work

Faculty testimony throughout this paper underscored that effective grant seeking is a cycle, not a single act. Ideas emerge, are tested and refined, translated into proposals, reviewed, rejected, revised, and resubmitted. Teams form and evolve. Relationships with funders and partners develop over years. Each stage asks for specific kinds of support.

When institutional systems are mismatched to this cycle, friction accumulates. Faculty receive notice of opportunities only weeks before deadlines. There is little capacity for concept feedback or draft review. Proposal submissions rise without a parallel increase in mentoring or infrastructure. Grant funded staff sit in precarious positions between awards. Rejections arrive without time or support for thoughtful resubmission.

By contrast, the models highlighted in this paper share several features. They provide predictable structures for idea development and writing. They invest in research development staff who know both the disciplinary terrain and the funding ecosystem. They offer seed and bridge funding that link internal support to future external submissions. They incorporate workshops, writing groups, and accountability programs that normalize steady, incremental progress. They frame rejection as part of the process rather than as a verdict, then provide concrete help with revising and resubmitting.

Importantly, many of these practices are scalable. They do not require large offices or extensive budgets to begin. A small seed grant program, a recurring proposal circle, a simple internal review process, or a semester-long writing group can shift both expectations and outcomes. Over time, these structures help faculty see grant seeking as a navigable process rather than as an opaque test of individual resilience. Still, institutions must make strategic choices about where to begin. What is manageable for a flagship university will differ from what is feasible for a small liberal arts college or a regional campus. Clarity about local priorities and constraints is essential.

Choosing a Different Future

The pressures shaping today's funding landscape are not temporary. Faculty will continue to face competing demands on their time, and institutions will continue to navigate shifting priorities and limited resources. What can change is the way these challenges are approached.

One of the clearest insights from the experiences outlined in this paper is that progress happens when support is understood as shared work. Faculty bring the ideas, the disciplinary expertise, and the relationships that move research forward. Institutions bring the structures that make consistent progress possible. When these come together, the path from early concept to funded project becomes more predictable and far less isolating.

Strengthening this alignment does not require wholesale transformation. It begins with a few focused commitments that benefit both faculty and the institution:

- **Making space** for early idea development
- **Encouraging exploration** of diverse funding sources
- **Providing research development support** appropriate to the local context
- **Creating environments** where questions, drafts, and setbacks can be discussed without stigma

These principles look different across institutional types, but they share a common goal: ensuring that strong ideas are not lost to preventable barriers.

Faculty continue to ask important questions and pursue work that serves students, communities, and the public good. The future of research support depends on building systems that help those ideas move forward with clarity and stability. Rethinking grant funding is not about replacing existing efforts, but about strengthening the conditions that allow scholarship to grow. When faculty insight and institutional strategy reinforce one another, research becomes more resilient, ambitious, and sustainable.

About NCFDD

Founded in 2010, NCFDD is the leading provider of professional development in higher education. Working with over 340 colleges and universities and thousands of individuals in schools nationwide, we are 100% devoted to supporting faculty members, postdocs, and graduate students in making successful transitions throughout their careers.

NCFDD provides on-demand access to the mentoring, tools, and support needed to be successful in the Academy. We focus on four key areas that help achieve extraordinary writing and research productivity while maintaining a full and healthy life off campus: strategic planning, explosive productivity, healthy relationships, and work-life balance.

Our Approach to Research Development

Strong research trajectories depend on time, structure, and support. NCFDD's research development resources are designed to help faculty:

- **Clarify ideas** before proposal writing begins
- **Identify funders** that align with their work
- **Build momentum** through small, consistent steps
- **Develop sustainable** proposal routines
- **Reduce isolation** by connecting with peers who understand the realities of academic life

Rethinking Your Research Funding

Rethinking Your Research Funding is a four-week virtual course designed to help faculty strengthen and expand their funding strategies. Participants will learn how to identify and pursue non-federal sources of research support (such as foundation, industry, and state or local grants) reframe their work for broader audiences, and build sustainable partnerships beyond traditional grant pathways.

This course is designed to support any faculty member exploring funding for their research. It is especially beneficial for those who have unexpectedly lost access to traditional funding options.

Learn More

Institutions and individual faculty members interested in strengthening research support and development can find additional information at www.ncfdd.org/grant-funding-course

For questions about research and funding programming, contact help@ncfdd.org

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