

The ACLS Peer Review Process

Mark W. Roche

I would like to share with you some reflections from last year's ACLS competition for Associate Professors. 200 applicants competed for sixteen grants. The proposals were first reviewed by two disciplinary scholars in a broader field, at which time 40% or more of the applications were eliminated. They were then reviewed by a panel of five (two such panels were constituted, so my panel selected eight of 53 at the finalist stage as well as eight alternates). The panel in which I participated had people from the following fields: Anthropology, History, Literature, Philosophy, and Religious Studies. The universities represented, besides Notre Dame, were Berkeley, Dartmouth, Duke, and Princeton. We gave a pre-rating to the cases, then we discussed them in order from highest to lowest in terms of the pre-rating. Colleagues were very much willing to integrate the insights of others and to adjust their preliminary views. We then placed them in five groups: Yes, Maybe Yes, Maybe, Probable No, No.

Some competitions, such as NEH, provide applicants with feedback. Others, for example, the ACLS, do not provide feedback. In these latter competitions one simply doesn't know how close one might have come and therefore one has the obligation to try again. There are any number of reasons, beyond the numbers, why one doesn't receive a fellowship. Perhaps the most important criterion of all is clarity. The final review panel for many fellowship competitions consists of reviewers in other disciplines. If one cannot understand what is stated in the 4-7 page application, the candidate will be very harshly criticized. There is very little tolerance on the part of reviewers when they are working through more than fifty applications if a candidate is not able to formulate his or her thoughts clearly, concisely, and persuasively in a short abstract.

Many members of the panel on which I participated thought that applicants should be elevated if they were writing in such a way that they could reach a broader audience. At least two panelists said they elevated books that they themselves would want to read even though they weren't experts in that particular area. In some cases, one's emotional response to the proposal played a role. ("The proposal sparked." "The project grabbed my interest.") Jargon immediately led to the elimination of an application. So, too, will one fail if one uses sloppy logic, overgeneralizations, or other simple problems that allow the panel, when reviewing a very large number of outstanding applications, to eliminate someone. At that stage one is, unfortunately, almost looking for excuses to eliminate candidates. Don't make yourself vulnerable in this way. The best strategy is to have senior persons and colleagues in other disciplines, ideally neighboring disciplines, review the final draft of your application. The number of proposals that were sunk because of jargon was even to me, who has little tolerance for jargon, quite striking. Another common problem arose when candidates decided to stake out an area but did not present an argument or a thesis. Again and again, panelists argued that the topic was interesting but the claims were not developed in any way that indicated one had a bold thesis or claim of any kind. In some cases, one had the sense that the candidate had been searching for a topic that had

yet to be investigated, without the candidate really justifying that area or making clear how he or she would show something new by looking at that area. This problem arose especially in fashionable fields, where one had the sense that one was simply externally plugging categories into a topic as opposed to letting the topic or the evidence drive the categories.

In more cases than I would have preferred, some panelists would criticize a proposal for leaving something off of a bibliography. When one reduces a long bibliography to one or two pages, one makes oneself vulnerable to such criticism. For that reason, one must attend as carefully as possible to the bibliography and elevate those works that are most significant. Not only bringing to light the broader significance of one's study but also placing oneself in relationship to contemporary debates in the field is important for a successful proposal. Broad topics are often very appealing to multi-disciplinary panelists, but the breadth of one's topic needs to be weighed against the ability to convince the audience that the applicant is the appropriate person to manage such a difficult and broad-ranging topic. Often the question arises, does the person have the skills to carry out this project? Someone with rudimentary knowledge of Arabic who is taking on a major project in Arabic philosophy will be eliminated because of his or her lack of credentials. Candidates were sometimes described as not being up to the task.

One should not overstate one's case and render one's claims vulnerable simply by making assertions that are so bold that reviewers will question whether or not the ideas can be sustained. The inverse problem, too much modesty, should also be avoided.

In a few cases the first page of the proposal grabbed the reader's attention, but the development of the proposal did not suffice. A sure clincher for negative comments is to propose a question in the opening few sentences that receives no attention in the remainder of the proposal. One must also measure out an appropriate relationship between one's proposal and one's project. For example, in one proposal only 1/5 of the space was devoted to 50% of the book project. It simply looked inappropriate.

Also significant was the importance of showing that the project was sufficiently developed that one could really utilize the free time but not so far developed that the time would not be well spent or that the project would be rapidly and ably completed with or without the grant. One applicant on a panel on which I sat was harshly criticized for seeking a grant when the project was basically done, and he only wanted to edit the manuscript.

The position of the letter-writer sometimes plays a role, particularly strong, well established scholars who write letters, endowed chair holders, leaders of professional societies, leading scholars in the field, Nobel Prize winners, carry more weight than associate professors. At the same time, unlike letters of reference for job candidates, who often speak of the scholar's developing potential in various areas, critical comments in a fellowship competition such as this will often weaken a candidate's chances.

One should apply early and often, as applicants who had a good résumé as a result of other grants and book prizes, etc., were more likely to receive support in cases of conflict. Good journal placements are also important.

In one case, where I could not comment because of a conflict of interest, I observed that an applicant received relatively high ratings from most of the reviewers, although one person was highly critical of the application. Because that one person was in the same field as the applicant, the other reviewers deferred to the more dominant and authoritative voice, and the applicant was effectively excluded by the simple bad luck of having that one reviewer on the panel and having one less voice on the panel (my own). It wasn't necessarily a case of someone not being qualified, and only the specialist seeing through the weaknesses of the application. It was a case of legitimate intellectual differences among two scholars who work in the same field. There was no sense of defensiveness or personality conflict, there was simply an honest difference in methodology, ideas, and claims. With another review panel, that particular application, which was both clear and bold, may well have succeeded.

In my panel philosophers suffered greatly as a result of lower reviews of panelists almost across the board who did not see beyond the obscure language employed and did not recognize the deeper significance of certain philosophical studies. One of the panelists, a philosopher herself, argued that it was a shame that no philosophers were being forwarded since philosophers are handicapped by the technical nature of their language and the obscurity of their topics. I responded that philosophy has traditionally reflected on broader issues and sought connections to other disciplines. Analytical philosophy, unfortunately, does not always reach out in this way. Proposals that are strong and avoid these pitfalls have a very good chance. In the panel on which I sat several members had trouble listing a sufficient number of proposals that had their full endorsement. In a pool of 53 applicants, only one person received sufficiently high numbers across the board that the applicant was immediately awarded a grant. The other seven were debated at length, and only five of those were able to receive a majority vote – the remainder had to be ranked in order to determine the final two slots. What I took from this experience was that although the odds are often very difficult (in this competition, including those eliminated before the final panel, only 8% received grants), the quality of proposals is not always sufficiently high, so there are ample opportunities for us to obtain grants.