Ten Tips on Writing a Successful Application for the Lifeline/NHLBI Mentored Clinician-Scientist (K08) Research Award

The K08 Award is unlike other NIH research award programs (i.e., R-series awards), in that it is specifically intended to promote mentored research training for early career stage clinician-scientists. It is therefore vital that vascular surgeons applying for the K08 Award keep in mind that there are four principal criteria used by reviewers to judge the relative merit of these applications. These criteria are the quality of: (1) the Applicant, (2) the Basic Science Mentor, (3) the Career Development Plan, and (4) the Research Plan. It is safe to say that each of these criteria are given approximately equal weight in the initial review process. The following ten tips are intended to help potential applicants avoid some of the common pitfalls in applying for the K08 Award program:

1. Identify a Mentor

It is vital to establish a productive working relationship with an individual at your institution who has a substantial commitment to basic science. This individual should be well funded preferably through the NIH, and also should have expertise in your area of research. The mentor should also have a documented record of training basic and clinical scientists. This record should be included in the application. Make sure that the relationship between mentor and applicant is clearly demonstrated in the application. A strong letter of support from the mentor describing precisely how this relationship will enhance the applicant's career development is essential. Strong applications demonstrate substantial interaction between mentor and applicant as well as easy accessibility of the mentor. DO NOT rely solely on the research mentorship or administrative support of your clinical chief of surgery, or an undefined relationship with a basic science mentor with whom you have not worked closely.

2. Define a Career Development Plan

Concentrate on developing a focused, relevant, and exciting Career Development Plan in recognition that this is one of
the major components of the proposal. The environment should be such that the candidate learns new techniques or becomes involved in a new area of research. The application is looked upon less favorably if there has already been a long-lasting relationship with the proposed mentor, particularly if the area of research is not new. At the termination of the mentored award, it is anticipated that the applicant will gain the necessary skills to obtain independent R0-1 funding. DO NOT focus the entire proposal on the specific Research Plan to the neglect of the Career Development Plan. The Career Development Plan may actually be more important than the Research Plan.

3. Create an Oversight Committee

Create an oversight committee that will help guide your career development. Each committee member should be familiar with the area of your research and perhaps contribute to its development in ways that the mentor cannot; however, the Committee is intended to guide your career development rather than just to facilitate the research project itself.

4. Study Research Ethics

Include appropriate course-work in research ethics, biomedical statistics, animal welfare, and protection of human research subjects regardless of the topic or specific needs of your project. DO NOT overlook your need for additional training in the responsible conduct of research, regardless of your previous background.

5. Give It Time

Allow 1-2 years to develop a mature, hypothesis-driven, mechanism-based research program prior to submitting an application. DO NOT propose studies consisting primarily of preliminary, descriptive work. Demonstrate productivity in the application through preliminary studies and initial publications. The application should reflect a broad vision for sustainable career development rather than just a limited number of experiments or a narrowly-focused project.

6. Provide Preliminary Data

Provide sufficient preliminary data to support the rationale and experimental approach to be used for each Specific Aim of the proposed work. DO NOT provide unrelated preliminary data that does not help support the Specific Aims of the project proposed.

7. Follow Application Instructions

Follow the exact instructions for NIH and provide all of the information requested, and ask for help if you have any questions. The basic information on NIH K08 programs is available online.

The critical supplementary information regarding K08 applications to NHLBI also is provided online.
8. Also Apply to SVS Foundation

Also apply for supplemental funding through the SVS® Foundation. Information and instructions are available on the Awards and Scholarships page. NOTE - You must send your application to the AVA at the same time you submit to NIH to be considered for supplemental funding.

9. Define Your Research Time

Demonstrate that you have an honest and realistic time commitment to basic research by specifically delineating the time to be spent in clinical activities. DO NOT assume that "70 percent effort" means anything less than 70 percent of your total working hours. All clinical activity should be included in your estimate of percent effort, regardless of the distribution between clinical and laboratory work. These estimates are carefully scrutinized by reviewers, who seek assurance that the applicant's research training efforts will not be diverted. It is important that your division chief or department chairman state in their letter of support their intent to allow the candidate to have 75-80% protected time. Moreover, this commitment should not be contingent upon receipt of the grant. The reviewers wish to see a strong commitment of the department to the individual regardless of whether the individual's first attempt of funding is successful.

10. Ensure Protected Research Time

Protect your time, focus your energies, work hard, and remain persistent. DO NOT allow clinical responsibilities to overwhelm your passion for basic research, let frustration distract and dissuade you from achieving your goals, or give up.

Additional hints on how to prepare a competitive application for this program are available from the NHLBI: "Helpful Hints for NHLBI Mentored Clinical Scientist Development Award (K08)". A model grant application for this program is also provided.

If you have questions about these requirements or if you wish to obtain assistance or advice when preparing your application, please feel free to contact members of the Research and Education Committee. The primary goal of the committee is to increase the number of Vascular Surgeons who successfully compete for these awards.