

Christmas Time-some Thoughts on Research and Funding

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Opinion

It is that time of the year again, Christmas time! While I was busy wrapping up students grades for this semester, doing laundry, cooking dinners for my family, and shopping for Christmas gifts, I got a friendly reminder from the Editorial office that I need to write an editorial article for our journal. Gosh, I totally forgot about it and now there are only 5 days left! What should I write? It reminds me of the old school days in China when I was in primary school with writing assignment due, but I had no clue what I should write (make a face and smile here).

So what should I do? Hmm, I need to find a topic that can attract eyeballs of our readers. But during Christmas time, besides Santa, shopping for gifts and traveling to some wonder land, I really couldn't think of a thing that is more attractive, and besides that, who would read articles during Christmas except those nerds like me? So I would just talk about what nerds like to read, and maybe (just maybe), some people are still thinking of research and funding issues, especially those who are in the early stage of career, such as junior faculties. Yeah I know, I've been there before, and it really hunted me to even think about the words P (Promotion) and T (Tenure).

So let me share some of my own story, story of failure but not success. Well, it is not easy to share one's failures at Christmas time, but I won't mind to share it if you can smile, or have similar experience and nod your head, or can gain something positive. So, this is what happened: I haven't been successful on grant application for about 8 years since the last time I was funded by a NIH small grant, although I have published extensively on cancer screening in top journals. I think I have improved in grant writing over the years; and over the past 8 years, I have written about a dozen grant applications (well, of course, they are definitely not on the same project)! So if you failed in grant applications recently, take heart and know that you are not alone, don't worry and don't feel frustrated, maybe it is just because your ideas are so novel that some reviewers simply have no clue due to their limited knowledge (big smile here).

While I was not successful in funding, somehow, I was invited to a few scientific merit review panels these years (I don't know why I was chosen, but God knows). I was on the pure method panel of Patient-Centered Outcome Research Institute (PCORI) twice this year, and reviewed about a dozen applications for PCORI. It was an eye-opening experience. I must say PCORI review is kind of different from NIH review: its members are from all areas, including scientists, stake holders (such as insurance companies), and patients representatives. In the pure method panel, even though all members are called scientific

reviewers, they are from all kinds of backgrounds, and almost all of them are not in the area of Biostatistics, nor Statistics. I noticed that only a few statisticians in our panel, and one of the applications that I deemed high and a major breakthrough in methodology research on clinical trials, was dragged down by the other two reviewers, due to the fact that the reviewers are not statisticians, and they barely understand what is going on. I don't want to complain the review system, but some of the funded projects are really just so-so projects: it satisfies every reviewer's appetites, it brings no harm and no risk, but not much improvement, nor break through either.

Now what should we do? You might ask. This is what I choose to do: keep publishing good quality papers while keep on writing grant applications. I don't believe in good luck, but I believe in good work and destiny. No one knows when we will be funded, but God knows. So we have to keep on writing grant applications and learning in the process, and leaving the door open for God to bless us. If reviewer comments are constructive and beneficial, then learn from it and take care of it in your next resubmission; if the comments are nonsenses, just ignore it and don't take it personally. The first few times I got denied in grant applications, I was thinking whether I should wait to publish new result until the project was funded, but then I realized that if I kept on waiting, it might incur double losses: no funding and no publications. So I have decided from the early years that no matter my projects were funded or not, just kept on publishing. I call it decoupling of research/publishing and funding. One good thing about the area of bio/statistics is that we need computers mainly to do research, and no other fancy equipment is necessary for most projects. And it is for sure that keep on publishing good quality papers laid a good foundation for future funding opportunities.

Finally I want to encourage our reader to keep a positive perspective in our daily life. After tasting failures for a long time, I am now more thankful than ever, "because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us" - Quote from the book of Romans 5:3b-5a in the Bible. I am grateful that God keeps me in good health; blesses me with good night sleep and good family support. I am thankful that I love my daily job as a faculty member at U. of Louisville, and enjoy doing research in my area. And I want to thank the editorial office of the Journal of Biometrics and Biostatistics for their timely reminder and their hard work to accommodate this article during Christmas time, I really appreciate them. And I want to wish everyone a very Merry Christmas and a productive new year. God bless you and your family!