

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

Vice Provost for Research and
Dean of the Graduate School

August 30, 2010

To: Selected Department Chairs, Program Directors and Associate Deans

From: Dennis G. Hall QuickTime™ and a
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Subject: The Research Scholar Grant Program

I have been asked by the College of Arts and Science Dean's Office to share with you some information about the Research Scholar Grant (RSG) Program, which provides an excellent opportunity for eligible faculty to seek internal funds to support research. More than 250 distinct awards have been made to more than 150 different Vanderbilt faculty members since the program began operating in 2000. In particular, I have been asked to advise you about the competitive aspect of the program, which I will do herein, but let me take this opportunity in addition to summarize the program more generally, something your newer faculty might find helpful.

As many of you know, my office solicits proposals for each new cycle of the RSG program in September. The announcement is sent to the faculty by e-mail, with a link to the website where the full set of instructions on preparing and submitting proposals can be found. Quoting from the 2009-2010 guidelines, "The University Central Research Scholar Grants (RSG) Program encourages original, innovative scholarship by faculty working on research for which the opportunities for extramural funding are limited." In practice, this means that the RSG program is intended primarily for faculty in the Humanities as well as those in the Social Sciences without access to NSF or other substantial federal support. Full details about eligibility can be found in each year's RSG program announcement.

The RSG program solicits proposals in six categories: 1) Collaborative, Interdisciplinary Research Grants (CIRG); 2) Faculty Development Grants; 3) Research Scholar Fellowships; 4) Summer Stipends; 5) Undergraduate Research Supervision Grants; and 6) Lectures and Symposia. The RSG program does not provide conference support. Proposals are due in January for four of the categories (#2, #3, #4, and #6) and in March for category #5. The CIRG category (#1) employs a two-step submission process, with *pre-proposals* typically due in late October. Specific due dates, proposal guidelines and detailed descriptions of all submission categories can be found in each year's program announcement, posted each September at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/dsr/intramural.php>. A complete chronological list of all awards made since the very beginning of the RSG program can be found at that same location.

It is important to appreciate and to communicate to your faculty members that selection for an award from the RSG program involves a *competitive process*. Each year, more proposals are received than can be funded. Proposal categories #2, #3 and #4 have generally been the most popular. Last year (2009), my office received a total of 35 proposals in those three categories, but was able to fund only 20 of them, which means that 15 of those submitted were declined. Selection is based on the recommendations of internal review committees made up of several senior faculty members. There was a time when a single committee was sufficient to read and

review every proposal, but growth in the number of submissions now necessitates fielding two committees each year to handle the workload. Half of the full set of proposals is assigned to each committee, which then meets in the spring to develop recommendations. In the course of doing so, committee members read their assigned half-set of proposals in advance, then come together in person to discuss and rank them. Once I receive their rankings, I begin with the most highly ranked proposals and try to make as many awards as I can until I exhaust the RSG program's budget. After my decisions have been announced, I send a summary letter to the deans of A&S, Blair and Divinity explaining, by category, how many proposals were received and funded in each of the three colleges/schools. Whereas I do inform the deans which of their faculty members received awards, I do not inform them which of their faculty submitted proposals that were declined.

There are occasional misunderstandings about the intent of the Research Scholar Grant program, so let me try to clarify one key point. The RSG program is focused mostly on the Humanities, to be sure, but it is not targeted toward any particular faculty rank. This issue often surfaces in connection with applications for Research Scholar Fellowships (RSFs), the funding category that provides partial support for the second semester of an approved leave. Not surprisingly, in any given year, I receive RSF applications from assistant professors, associate professors and full professors, all hoping for help financing a second semester of leave. But the RSG program is not predisposed toward any rank. Every year, RSF awards are made to assistant professors, associate professors and full professors. Likewise, depending on the details in a given year, some faculty members in all three ranks might find their applications declined. Awards are made based on the committees' assessment of the quality of the proposals. Each year, committee members comment that within the field of proposals, some are exceptional whereas others convey the impression of having been hastily prepared or of not having been thought through carefully. Because the process is competitive, it takes a strong proposal to win an award from the RSG program.

Please share this information with your faculty by distributing this memo, by discussing the RSG program at a faculty meeting early in the semester, or both. It is true that the RSG program is competitive, but it is also true that the odds that a well-prepared proposal will receive an award are quite good, currently a bit better than 50%. It is an opportunity well worth exploring.