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Grappling for grants

Times are changing for young biomedical researchers in the United States. Today, youngsters either take longer to secure their first tenure-track post or fail to compete effectively for grants with their more established colleagues. At least, that is the picture painted by data released recently by the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Covering who gets what sort of funding, the data reveal that in 1980 grants to investigators under the age of 35 accounted for 23% of all funding awards, but by last year that figure had dropped to just 4%.

Academics who wish to blame this change on the NIH can point to the agency's increased focus on few large projects rather than myriad small ones, and a shift away from training grants. And NIH officials who want to indict academia could argue that universities watching their bottom lines are creating fewer permanent positions, and so are increasingly relying on adjuncts and postdocs to handle teaching and research.

The truth? Probably a combination of both arguments, plus a few other factors. Issues such as demographics must surely be important. There is evidence that the upper end of the academic pipeline is becoming clogged with senior scientists. And although younger investigators are finding it hard to win funds, the actual pool of cash available has grown dramatically, effectively doubling in the past five years alone.

So what would help young investigators in their first academic post? One thing the NIH could do is reinstate training grants — but without some of the baggage attached to earlier, now abolished, programmes, such as the need for reference letters or stretching relatively small grants over a long period of time. In the meantime, young scientists must continue to compete with their more established peers, and should treat the grant-seeking process like an election — they should apply early and often.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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