



Association of
Departments of
Family Medicine



Funding Strategies for Department Chairs: Building Sustainable Research Curricula

By Peter Seidenberg, MD, Chair, ADFM Research Development Committee

Introduction

Securing and managing funding is one of the most critical responsibilities for academic department chairs seeking to build and sustain a strong research enterprise. Effective research leadership requires a nuanced understanding of institutional structures, funding streams, and the balance between strategic investment and return on research productivity. This white paper provides a framework for department chairs to assess funding opportunities, develop infrastructure that supports scholarship, and cultivate long-term sustainability. It emphasizes practical steps in budget planning, faculty development, and collaboration across institutional and external partners to strengthen the research mission of the department.

Strategic Considerations for Research Funding

Before pursuing new research initiatives, department chairs must evaluate the existing infrastructure and funding environment. This includes identifying hard-money support, available mentorship, and interdepartmental resources. Engaging with clinical chairs and administrators can clarify how institutional funds flow, what levels of indirects are accessible, and how current budgets align with strategic research goals. Chairs should review financial structures with department financial leaders to align resources with research and scholarship priorities, ensuring the department's vision is both aspirational and achievable.

Leadership and Infrastructure Support

A dedicated Vice Chair or Director of Research is often essential to coordinate the department's research agenda. Funding for this leadership role should be clearly defined, with FTE allocations reflecting departmental capacity and desired growth. Chairs should plan for bridge funding, start-up support for new faculty, and pilot grants to stimulate early-stage projects. Funding mechanisms must also account for travel, publication costs, and endowed positions that enhance visibility and sustainability. Collaborative appointments with other departments or research centers can leverage shared funding while promoting cross-disciplinary innovation.

Designing the Chair's Research Package

A well-structured chair's package should provide sufficient support to maintain existing research activity while fostering growth over at least a five-year horizon. This includes personnel such as research faculty, leaders, and a grants manager; research support staff like statisticians, analysts, editors, and assistants; programmatic infrastructure such as

writing boot camps and publishing support; and strategic integration aligning research priorities with institutional initiatives.

Funding Streams and Management

Chairs should diversify funding streams to balance soft money and institutional support. Key strategies include robust pre- and post-award oversight, resource sharing for specialized expertise, and long-term team development beyond project-based staffing. Understanding the effort and skills required for various funding sources helps align departmental growth with realistic expectations.

Key Sources of Funding

Effective research programs leverage multiple funding tiers: federal (NIH, PCORI, AHRQ), governmental (state and local), private foundations (e.g., Gates, Moore), VA/DOW grants, internal institutional support, philanthropic and endowed funding, and collaborative CTSA-supported opportunities. Strategic partnerships emphasizing team science can expand access to diverse funding mechanisms and accelerate interdisciplinary research.

Navigating Funding Limitations

Chairs must understand the nuances of each funding type, including NIH restrictions, PCORI's lower award ceilings, and institutional requirements for PI eligibility. Awareness of K-award funding gaps and university cost-sharing policies ensures continuity between grant cycles and mitigates funding shortfalls.

Articulating the Value Proposition for Research

A strong departmental research culture enhances academic reputation, recruitment, and advancement. Chairs should highlight the value of research in promotion and tenure, resident and faculty recruitment, and public visibility. Addressing misconceptions about research 'costing' clinical revenue and developing transparent value systems for faculty across tracks reinforces the importance of scholarship. Primary care research's role in improving value-based outcomes further strengthens the case for institutional support.

Conclusion

Sustaining a research curriculum within a department requires both financial acumen and visionary leadership. Chairs must balance short-term resource allocation with long-term investments in people, infrastructure, and institutional relationships. By understanding funding streams, mitigating financial risks, and demonstrating the tangible value of research, department chairs can cultivate an environment where scholarship thrives. A strategic, diversified approach to funding ensures that research remains an integral and well-supported pillar of the academic mission.