

Renowned researcher emphasizes importance of collaboration

DeKalb, Ill. — As an accomplished interdisciplinary scholar who ran an international research center in Greece, David Stone knows a little something about collaboration. As the Associate Vice President for Research at Northern Illinois University, he also knows a little something about attracting grants: His institution receives more than \$50 million annually in external funding.

So when David Stone says collaboration makes researchers more competitive both with respect to the importance of their science and in putting together the kinds of grant proposals that funding agencies and review panels are looking for, that's the voice of experience talking.

"For a long time, interesting questions in science were thought to reside within a single discipline, but now the more interesting questions in science may require biologists, physicists or engineers to reach an answer that may come from more than one intellectual direction," he said.

Stone gives the example of putting an antimicrobial coating on elevator button to prevent the spread of illness. Developing the coating would fall under the expertise of a nanotech physicist, but getting it to stick to the button itself may require a chemist or an engineer. The project might also require an anthropologist to study elevator behavior and public health experts to provide insight on disease vectors.

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And while those scientists often come from different universities or research institutions, it's no longer unusual for collaboration to cross out of academia and into the arenas of business, industry, public health, media, or education. That could mean input from not only researchers, but government agencies, hospitals, for-profit businesses, and non-profit organizations.

"It's complicated," Stone said. "But it's not new. People have been talking about interdisciplinary since the 1920s, so it ain't that new. What's new is the frequency with which inter- and multidisciplinary questions seem to be getting asked, or, at least, the extent to which they are seen as the important questions that need to be most urgently addressed. Albert Einstein solved a physics problem all on his own, won the Nobel Prize and got on the cover of Time magazine. Nowadays, to get on a magazine cover, you've got to solve a problem in nanotechnology, bio-informatics, or alternative energy, and that's not going to be a single person but a team from a variety of disciplines."

But long before much of that important research work begins comes an equally critical step: Writing a competitive grant proposal to secure the funding that pays for the research. Stone emphasized that this part of the process also requires teamwork, especially when a growing number of researchers are vying for a finite number of research dollars.

"The grant writing process is very different from the science, but it also requires collaboration," Stone said. "If you don't get the right team of people together to write the proposal you're going to have a harder time getting the money you need to do the science. And the money is absolutely getting harder to get. The money has stayed about the same but there's a whole lot more people chasing it.

"You need whatever leg up you can find."

In order to stay competitive in the grant world, Stone and his team take building proposal teams and collaboration very seriously. Embarking on a project last fall in search of a software product to help them manage the process of pre-award proposal development. "It was time that we stopped using email and spreadsheets to manage the process. Grants need their own space, they are too time sensitive and complex to take email risks. We were looking for something to help us do the traditional things like search for funding; however, we also wanted to expand the functionality. We were in search of a way to support having a dialog about the project even before a funding opportunity is available. We also wanted a single place to put everything, making it easy for the project team to locate information, engage external partners, and have the entire process archived. In addition to our required feature set, it needed to be easy to use and require very little training to get up and running."

After reviewing more than 6 products from university-specific to enterprise-wide collaboration, the team selected In4Grants. He recalls, "Our requirements were specific and focused and we felt that the product provided most of what we needed. The In4Grants team was responsive to our questions and listened to our ideas on future growth for the product. We are happy with our decision and look forward to partnering with them for the long term."

About David Stone: David is the Associate VP for Research at Northern Illinois University and has been at the university since 2006. From 2003-2006, he has served as founding director of the South-East European Research Centre, an international research center and think tank jointly established by the University of Sheffield in the United Kingdom and CITY College in Greece. Stone also served as a Professor at CITY College and developed the sponsored research office at the American College of Thessaloniki. Prior to working in Europe, he held numerous academic and administrative appointments, notably as director of research at the Fenway Community Health Center in Boston, director of the Boston Violence Prevention project at the Harvard School of Public Health, and as associate director of the Pediatric and Adolescent Health Research Center at the Tufts University School of Medicine.

July, 2011

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