Every position on your C.V. will incrementally shape and define your career. Whether you’re seeking a position in academia or something else, you quickly realize the market is flooded with applicants for a small number of openings, and most of these are “soft” funded. In this article, I’d like to dispel the myths about jobs that are “term” or “pending continued funding”—or simply soft money. Soft money research (SMR) provides a platform to do literally anything, with one caveat—you have a sponsor. The choice to pursue SMR is often not a conscious decision as soft money chooses you and generally not the other way around.

What Is Soft Money?

Soft money is ephemeral funding, usually for a specific sponsor with specific set of deliverables. Researchers working in soft money thus rely on grants and contracts to pay their salaries. While SMR institutes vary in their structures and business models, all rely on sponsors to survive. Sponsors can come from a lot of different places, including federal, state, and local governments; NGOs and foundations; and private industry. The diversity of funding sources and various mechanisms to get such funding can become nerve-wracking since so much is riding on a successful proposal. Many find the process extremely stressful and uncertain while others excel when given license to explore bigger research directions, often outside their fields of expertise and comfort zone.

Entry SMR positions, including post-docs, are shepherded from proposal to completion by the principal investigator (PI). Your goal is to learn the ins-and-outs of grant and research management so that you can handle your own grants. In the meantime, good researchers working with good and should, have the latitude to extend research beyond contract requirements. Ultimately, sponsors need to their questions, often through reports that address their specific issues in a way that is readable to the sponsor (i.e., respect the educational background of the sponsor). They often don’t want to read peer-reviewed research—they want something tailored to their needs, as manuscripts, re-submitting the research to peer-reviewed journals is much more efficient. Remember, currency for promotion and success are programs, similar to tenure-track faculty, two peer-review publications per year.

How Do Soft Money Institutions Function?

I have worked at three institutes—Pacific Northwest Lab (PNNL), the Desert Research Institute (DRI), and the Bureau of Economic Geology (BEG). Federal labs and most agencies are becoming more dependent on external funds, but generally your salary is not. Most other research institutes are truly soft-funded, and you sign an annual contract, and you sign an annual contract. Institutes are unaffiliated with a university (DRI) while others within university depend on some direct support appropriations. For example, BEG’s operating budget comes from dollars appropriated by the State of Texas.