

Donors give \$2 million to help Tulane faculty more aggressively compete for research dollars

October 22, 2019 12:30 PM Keith Brannon

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Elizabeth “Libby” Alexander and her husband Robert Alexander pledged \$2 million to set up a fund to support faculty and the university’s research grant proposal development initiatives so that researchers can spend more time pursuing world-changing discoveries. (Photo provided)

When many envision the life of a research scientist, they think investigators spend the bulk of their time in the lab or the field pursuing discoveries.

The reality is quite different. Searching for breakthroughs often means chasing highly competitive federal funding for research — and spending countless hours in

front of a computer preparing detailed grant proposals.

That process will get easier for Tulane University researchers thanks to a substantial gift from Tulane alumna and board member Elizabeth “Libby” Alexander and her husband Robert Alexander. The couple pledged \$2 million to set up a fund to support faculty and the university’s research grant proposal development initiatives so that researchers can spend more time pursuing world-changing discoveries.

“After speaking with researchers and learning they were spending an inordinate amount of time on administration — putting grants together and doing follow-up reporting — rather than focusing on impactful research, we knew there had to be a better solution,” said Libby Alexander. “Lifting these administrative burdens will enable Tulane researchers to secure funding even faster and with a higher success rate than ever before.”

The gift will support Tulane’s newly expanded [Office of Research Proposal Development](#), an office solely dedicated to helping faculty across the university prepare the best possible proposals for federal research grants from sponsors such as the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation and others.

“Research is at the heart of Tulane’s mission,” said Tulane University President Mike Fitts. “We’re so grateful to Libby and Robert Alexander for their generous support as we work to significantly expand our research enterprise across the university and across all disciplines. Their support will give our world-class faculty the tools they need to more aggressively compete for — and win — critical research funding as they work to solve some of society’s most complex challenges.”

The gift will support research grant proposal development initiatives in the School of Medicine, the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, the School of Science and Engineering, the Tulane National Primate Research Center and across the university, including cross-disciplinary research efforts. It will also help researchers in meeting compliance and reporting requirements for existing grants.

Tulane investigators received almost \$151 million in sponsored research projects last fiscal year, \$119 million of which came from federal agencies. During the same time period, researchers at the university submitted 1,098 research proposals for more than \$314 million in funding, including 787 proposals for federal grants. Underscoring how fierce competition for federal funding is, the NIH funded only [20% of the more than 54,800 applications](#) it received for grants last fiscal year.

A [recent national survey](#) found that academic researchers spend an estimated 44% of their time pursuing funding efforts alone. Tulane's Office of Research Proposal Development streamlines the process by managing applications from start to submission, providing common grant templates, timelines and checklists for important milestones, writing assistance, technical advice and editing support. The office's seven-member staff also works with investigators and sponsors to understand proposal requirements and convenes meetings of researchers from across campus for multi-investigator funding opportunities.

"If we can help relieve investigators from all of those different administrative tasks in proposal development, so that they can just focus on the science, we've done them a tremendous service and we're enabling them to submit more grant applications to pursue even more research," said Dr. Giovanni Piedimonte, Tulane vice president of research. "I think that we're going to see some exciting returns on those investments, and some great science will be coming out of the process."

Libby Alexander is the former vice chairman of the board of Cotiviti Inc., the successor company of her family's retail and healthcare payment integrity business, Connolly Inc. She received her bachelor's degree from Newcomb College in 1984. Robert Alexander is the former chief information officer of Connolly. In 2017, the Alexanders [created a generous endowment](#) to elevate Tulane's sailing club to a varsity sport during the 2018-2019 season.

The Alexanders' gifts are part of [Only the Audacious: The campaign for an ever bolder Tulane](#). Through the collective power of donors, alumni and supporters, the campaign fuels pioneering research, transformative teaching, increased opportunity and diversity, and building an environment for excellence. For more information, visit <https://audacious.tulane.edu>.