

The View from Grant Writers Or, don't ever be afraid to give it a go and if you are afraid of rejection find another line of work!

Many of us write grants, not because we were trained as grant writers, but because someone needs to do it. Our organization needs funding for the great programs we hope to do. Our research may need funding. The outreach we hope to do can't happen without external funding. So, how does one develop the skills needed for grant writing?

This semester as graduate students in UML's grant writing course we sought out accomplished grant writers to learn more about their perspectives on grant writing. Many of the people we interviewed are people who are attending this conference. We want to share with you some of what we learned from them.

Although most first graders don't stand up on career day and announce that they would like to be grant writers when they grow up, many people grow up and do find themselves thrown into grant writing at some point in their careers. By interviewing experienced grant writers, reviewers and implementers we can become more polished at the grant writing process, and in turn, obtain funding that will bring our creative ideas to life! Let us share with you some of the wisdom of those who have ventured into the wild and crazy world of grants!

Getting Started in Grant Writing

We learned that most people who write grants as a part of their jobs didn't expect to be doing this! They didn't train as grant writers. They didn't wake up one morning and say to themselves that their life's ambition was to write grants. In most cases they came to grant writing out of necessity. Someone needed to do it and they were the ones that ended up with the grant writing task for their organization.

Some of the grant writers had this to say:

- **I'm an artist** and came to grant writing as a way to support art in the community.
- **"Trial by Fire!" "Out of necessity."** The organization I work for has no centralized grant writer so there is much pressure on the staff. Staff need to raise money so their programs can continue to run.
- **I was working as a consultant** for a homeless women's program and they needed assistance with fundraising and grant writing. I have never imagined that I would be writing grants.
- **I was working for a local affordable housing nonprofit** that was very established in their funding. So, it was a wonderful experience to learn by reading successful grants and being editing by talented writers.

- **I started writing grants** because there were projects I wanted to undertake for which there were no funds. I don't know that I expected to do it from the start, but it was a welcome opportunity to shape ideas for projects and then when successful, get to carry them out.
- **I was a volunteer member** of a civic association; we wanted a community playground so I wrote a proposal for a grant. We didn't get the money but I loved the experience. I love solving puzzles: logic puzzles, crossword puzzles, sudoku puzzles: for me RFP's offer an opportunity to solve a multidimensional puzzle. Today most of my grant writing is out of necessity.
- **I submitted my first grant** while enrolled in a grant writing course at UML. I was so proud. It was to the Parker Foundation. I didn't get the money but they came to Lowell to see my program. I am a program director first, my role as a grant writer is second to this. We are state funded through DPH and Mass Health but we may seek other funding. When I have time and I hear of a grant that fits I will submit a proposal. Why not? Grant writing is easy for me.
- **I started 15 years ago** on "soft" money- grant money. A soon as I got here I was drawn into the process because the group was always looking for grants to write. So, while I did not expect to do this, it was definitely part of life where I was employed. It started with helping pull parts of the grant together. One of the first grants was helping with the city's community policing grants. We also wrote the city's Enterprise Community designation grant. This required facilitating many community planning meetings. Same with the policing grants. It was just what we thought was part of our job to help the city with capacity building, transformational change, etc.
- **Although I had done some** grant writing in the late 1960's and early 1970's when I was director of an advocacy planning firm, my real start from an academic base began when I was at the University of Connecticut and decided that the only way I would have any resources to do projects that I wanted to do would require raising some money from foundations. The University was not terribly interested -- I was.
- **My first academic position** after completing my doctorate was a Postdoctoral Fellowship at a university-based research center. One of the main tasks of the position was to identify and pursue funding opportunities to support youth violence prevention and intervention efforts. My very first exposure to the grant writing process was as a supporting member of an experienced grant writing team. My role was to write the literature review, compile references, format the final application, assemble the grant appendices, and walk the grant proposal through the necessary university channels (e.g., securing Dean and Provost signatures, receiving budget approval.) On each successive grant over a one-year period, I assumed more and more responsibility.

- **I learned from my father.** He learned a lot on the job for many years, not as a grant writer, but as a commitment. He's been working for many, many years so I benefit from that, that's part of the research assistant job. I also learned a lot from the union workers and the community members.

Did You Have A Mentor?

Just my high school English teachers!

I had 3 mentors over these many years. In all cases the person worked closely with me and he/she had a track record in working on the same or similar type proposals. Also, they knew how to best address the proposal and its specific aims to meet the funding agency's guidelines.

No. I had prominent friends who were willing to lend their names to proposals when I was still new at the game.

Early in my career, I did have an excellent mentor in counseling that helped me to learn patience and to continually improve my listening skills. My psychology background has been tremendously helpful in dealing with a wide range of personalities and work styles.

Proudest Moments!

We asked people if they had a proudest moment in grant writing. They had interesting responses:

- **Receiving a very competitive grant:** Best grant writing experience would have to be receiving the Adams grant, which is extremely competitive in the arts community.
- **Having Janet Reno come to town** to announce the award. I was sitting at hairdressers when my boss (Chief of Police) called me and told me "You did it. Janet Reno, Attorney General of the U.S. is coming to the City of Lowell to make an announcement for all of these grants." Not just an announcement for Lowell but the announcement of all other cities across the nation as well that had gotten grants. This gesture was extremely symbolic. Janet Reno did the announcement at the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association. Having the announcement made here in Lowell was an affirmation of the good work we had been doing and that we were successful as an agency and successful as a community.
- **I think my proudest moment** was at my nonprofit job when I was given a grant for green building from the Kresge Foundation and was told that it was a long shot and to not expect much. The detailing of statistical data about the organization for the application was torturous, but in the long run we got the grant because we made a clear case for why we wanted this SRO to be built in a sustainable fashion and the positive effects it could have on the community in various ways.

- **My first successful grant** from the Parker Foundation of \$20,000 for the Angkor Dance Troupe. It was the Angkor's first major grant and the start of a 20-year relationship with Parker.
- **My proudest moment** came three years ago when our latest five-year cycle proposal was given the best score by the review committee and the smaller group that used the review committee's recommendations to determine the level of our support. Ultimately, our Principal Investigator and I decided to focus our proposal on one of four priority funding and training program areas. Our feeling was that we would do better with one very strong proposal rather than applying for different program areas. It was a calculated risk and it paid off for us. It supported us in the areas where we feel most comfortable and it did not over-extend the project.
- **I worked on a presentation/grant** for a cash award for outstanding health programs. It was a tremendous team effort and a lot of work went into it. It was my first project at my current job. A good deal of time and effort went into the project, and though we did not receive the award, I worked with a fantastic team, and now have a central document that I can refer to when I need information on our immigrant health initiatives. In the end, it worked out.
- **I am most proud** of my first grant and I didn't get it. It was to the Parker Foundation. It was for \$35,000. It was an Educational Grant for homeless women and children with Spanish as their first language. They liked my proposal enough to come and see my program but they ran out of money.
- **One great moment** was working with lots of colleagues to receive a very large grant to develop community-university partnerships. This was written nearly 10 years ago and even though the grant has long ended the work is still going on! At the time I did not think we had any chance to get funded - so what do I know.
- **I think being** a part of all the community policing grants was very satisfying because it meant real systems change for the city.
- **I do not think of grant writing in this way.** Writing grants to me was bread and butter—there was no way a public university would ever have the resources to do what I wanted to accomplish. So, some of the grants were written simply to provide sufficient overhead so that less fundable projects could be undertaken. I had no "favorites".

What Types of Grants Have You Written

Many types. Consider some of their comments:

I have done long and short proposals, simple and complicated ones, ones asking for a lot of money and ones asking for a pittance, proposals to foundations and proposals to government agencies.

Over the years I have applied to numerous private foundations or federal and state funds when I worked for the Connecticut Citizen Action Group (CCAG), the New Hampshire People's Alliance (NHPA), the Granite State Coalition, the New Hampshire Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health (NH COSH), and The New England Consortium at UMASS Lowell (TNEC/UML). All of these grants went through 501c(3) organizations.

At UConn, I wrote proposals concerned with community environmental education and technical assistance. The successful proposals went to private foundations. When I was at Harvard I wrote proposals to Federal agencies and continued to do that when I came to Lowell.

My grant writing experience has covered a multitude of topics - workforce development, capital needs, gang mediation, technology, immigrant advocacy organizations, operating costs, programmatic expenses, prisoner re-entry, women's health, immigrant health, research etc. I have worked on grants for a number of Greater Lowell organizations. My experience has been about 75% foundations and 25% federal/state funding.

I have written to federal agencies such as the NIH, and to non-federal agencies like the Kellogg foundation.

Finding Suitable "Requests for Proposals" or Other Funding Solicitations

Everyone talked about how hard this is and how time-consuming. They mentioned that you need to be very resourceful. Be sure to get on every mailing list and grant directory service. Other suggestions:

- **Government List Serves:** Screen them and get in the loop with government RFP's
- **Daily email from list serves:** I receive daily emails from Listservs which include RFP and grant notices. This way the notices come to you. Some good ones include "Center for Health and Health in Schools Weekly Insider", "Campus and Community Partnerships for Health"
- **Join a listserv** such as fedgrantalert, which gives you information about federal grants.
- **Get hooked into agencies:** Get on their email servers"
- **Private Foundations:** Know when their deadlines are. Good grant writers know what particular focus a given foundation may have for a given year. (The focus will change periodically as Trustees change their funding priorities for various reasons.)
- **Networks:** Create a good network of practitioners. This is one of the best policies but hard to do. But, if you're sending out RFPs you find to folks working in similar fields to your own and they will do the same, and then the world of grant research becomes much wider.
- **Form a collaborative** because some groups are big and established and have ways of getting funding, but they need to team up with smaller newer groups that are going to be running programs that use that funding.

- **Funding Libraries:** We have a funding library at UT which has catalogues of grant research such as the Foundation Center (www.fdncenter.org). These sorts of databases are really wonderful resources. In Texas, there is also a state resource center that helps with grant funding- www.nprc.org and I would imagine there is something like this in every state.
- **Pay for Memberships:** One is to pay membership to Association of Grantmakers or any other online library of RFPs.
- **Look to see** who funded studies in the literature that are in a related field
- **Read Annual Reports** of programs like yours, paying close attention to the people who are larger funders of their programs
- **Go to a Database such as COMPAS** (which is a state funding database) or go to mass.gov and on the front page is a link to grants and solicitations
- **Hire a grant writer.** This is sometimes the best way when you are in a position to do so. If you do, what you are hiring is basically a researcher and a fund-raiser.

Countries Differ in Their Funding Opportunities

People in the USA are fortunate to have a robust private philanthropy sector. Non US states and non developed states do not have the same opportunities. Grant seekers often ponder the question 'how do we move forward with our programs and project. In the US, I write the majority of my organization's grant proposals to private foundations. For my Canadian and Eastern European clients, I write proposals mostly for government grants. I have written proposals in T&T (Trinidad & Tobago) for UNDP funding.

It may be that what you have as a highest priority simply will not gain funding. I was never able to achieve serious funding for international work but had to do other projects of less interest to me which then enabled me to do the international projects. But you can maintain clarity about your own priorities even as you pursue an opportunistic funding strategy. In addition, it is essential that you publish the results of your work.

Grant writing in South America, in developing countries is difficult; it's difficult; it's not like in the US. There are not too many RFPs for research. For example you can get a grant for waste management, but not for research. When we look for funding we consider the project over staff budget. Sometimes researchers go months without getting paid.

Think About the Ethics of Applying to Certain Funders

You should consider who is awarding the money. This is an ethical issue. If you are conducting environmental research to ultimately eradicate pesticides from floriculture, and Dow is soliciting...well I don't accept it; it's a question of ethics. You have to be selective. Grants involve a lot of ethical issues. I cannot accept General Motors or Ford Motor companies wanting to fund a grant. They cannot stay at both sides [of the problem and the solution]. Also consider who your partners are; will a funder accept that you are partnering with a trade union? You should also consider in the end who will own the research and the results.

Grant writing is *not* the final step it's the first step. Many say We've submitted the grant! But that's the first step for other bigger steps. Also when you write a grant, think about ethics. Select where your money comes from. It's not just the funder who is selective. If the money does not fit into your ethical strategy don't take the grant. Some people are given grants to find results favorable to the funder. So again, be selective.

Best Experience, Worst Experience

My best experience was receiving a large grant for my organization (ten thousand from a foundation), and this experience also was my worst. The paperwork and the hoops that they required us to jump through for the funding were extremely challenging!

Being unsuccessful is sometimes really important. I try to take each process as a chance to learn something even if I don't get what I want.

Some people would say a great grant proposal is a funded grant proposal. But, I have written what I thought were wonderful grants only to have them rejected and written mediocre ones that got funded. So, who knows? Once you write it you are at the mercy of the reviewers and if you are offering a new approach or idea they may not 'get it' and you lose.

Generally our best experiences have come with grants for youth mapping projects with strong partners to share the writing burden, university partners who have more access to GIS, National Geographic grants where teamwork leads to multiple eyes to review the proposal, and to strong players in the project. Worst experiences are associated with last minute mail-outs of proposals where you're scrambling or racing to catch the post office.

My best experiences were with banana planters to show the hazards of pesticides on planters even when they wear protective clothing. It was very hands on and very participatory. We worked with the planters from the pilot project to the research. The project was also good. We had an excellent project. We had the cooperation we could do research together. We created a publication manual about contamination of pesticide and importance of wearing protective clothing while advocating for the eradication of hazardous substances.

Most Challenging Experience

My most difficult grant was written with a large assortment of folks—some of whom were struggling to get their homes rebuilt just after Katrina—and finding ways to make each of these stressed out people smile and feel confident that I could take on the administrative duties if they conveyed their hopes for their budget, etc to me made the tension break. Always try to think of ways that things can be made easier on those with the most stress, and try to find moments of laughter to hold onto. Of course, if writing a budget for someone else, make sure they feel very comfortable with every detail before submission.

My most difficult grant was the first one. I found someone who had already applied for one of the EPA technical assistance grants who was willing to give me advice and explain some of what I didn't understand. I also found another person to help and we worked together to finish the proposal. It was funded, by the way.

My most difficult proposals involved an organization that I knew very little about. Also, to complicate matters, the organization required very specific and detailed uses. The only way to tackle this challenge was to dive in and focus on learning about the organization and how it may be applied to the project.

My most difficult grant involved a community-university partnership. Some of the difficulties could be ironed out, but some involved fundamental personal differences which were extremely difficult to overcome. The project remained successful because (1) we called on other partners (there were more than one) to help in dealing with the difficult one; (2) we called in an outside "evaluator" to get at the bottom of the differences; (3) I hired an excellent manager who worked to remedy the problems with greater patience than I could ever manage.

My most difficult grant was one where I tried to organize four major partner organizations across the country for a competitive renewal grant. Each partner had community CBO's that needed to approve missions and goals, also, each partner had to describe their previous achievements and why they needed more funding and how their goals were consistent with the goals of other sites and did they justify this need enough; was their previous progress compelling enough to score high enough. It was also necessary to divide up the budget among all partners and trying to do this with ethical equitable decision-making was challenging, as well.

How Do You Get Better At What You Do?

Over the years we have attempted to tweak things. When we go into the next grant we think about how to improve upon the process of the last. It is best to let people know you work with that are not involved in the grantwriting that this intense thing is going on for x amount of time. This way they will know why you might be crabby or that you cannot talk about coffee filters until the grant goes in at the end of the week. When I am not directly involved, if I can remember what supported me during that process, then I am more able to support others (i.e. ask if I can help, get people dinner, don't ask them about things that can wait).

Working on timing. Timing is a huge issue because writing a grant is a very time consuming process. The more people at the table, the harder it is to get everyone to agree on things. Managing time to guide the process in way to make incremental progress towards meeting the guideline is very important. Different partners are busy with so many different things and writing grants may not be the top on their priority list. Getting them to respond in a timely manner is hard.

I've learn to not give more than what the funder is asking for and be succinct in giving what the funder is asking for. If I could choose the format for proposals I would not use narratives. I would use bullets or a fact sheet format, cut right to the chase. If you have twenty pages to state your case and you have said it all in ten or fifteen pages leave it. Make a list of what the funder wants. Address each point. When they are all checked you're done.

I learn from collaborating with others, developing RFPS, and managing grant programs. Managing grant reviews and serving as a grant reviewer have been the most valuable learning experiences. I continue to review grants for many different programs.

Large Grants Versus Small Grants: Which Should You Do?

I used to apply for small grants but since they take the same amount of work as larger grants, I now tend to shy away from the small grants.

Sometimes You Succeed, Sometimes Not

I wrote a large grant and was funded the first time. I wrote my post-doctorate application and was funded the first time. I knew I needed money- so I just did it.

If You Only Had One Minute

One effective strategy is to imagine that you have only one minute (or one paragraph) to describe your project or proposal to a potential funder that is completely unfamiliar with your area. What would you say? What are the most innovative, unique elements of your idea? Your response should demonstrate how there is an existing need and your program/project is uniquely positioned to respond to that issue.

'Show Horses and Work Horses'

Know your partners! There are 'show horses' and 'work horses'. 'Show horses' are well known experts you use to increase your chances of getting the funding. They will most likely not be involved in the day-to-day phone calls, emails or drudge work. They will show-up and speak at conferences, attract other parties or serve as experts to your project. One renowned tobacco expert agreed to present a grand rounds training using the curriculum we developed. It was a resounding success. People who never came out for these types of trainings flooded the university and we had to book a huge conference area-and still had standing room only. The best part is that the presentation occurred while a category 3 hurricane was barreling up the gulf coast toward the university! Yes, this expert was not available on a daily basis, but he really came through when we needed him.

Dead on Arrival: Not Paying Attention to What the Funder Wants

Part of what you stress in a grant comes from having a clear understanding of what the funder is looking for. You can have great ideas and a very strong organization behind you. But if this expertise does not match what the funder is asking you to do, you will not get

the grant. It is important to check out who the funder has given money to in the past and if possible get a good idea about the overall goals and objectives of the funding organization. This helps you to avoid writing a grant that is 'dead on arrival' because it misses completely what the funder sought.

There are only the funder's needs. It doesn't matter how great your program is if it doesn't fit the funders' criteria. I have seen people go crazy writing proposals that try to convince funders that what they really want is the grant writer's program or not what is in the RFP. You need to know your program; you need to know what parts can be bent to fit the offered RFP because you cannot change the RFP. You also need to think about what you cannot change in your program...you do not want to destroy your program in an effort to secure funding because it will not work and the RFP's review board will know it.

But What Does the Funder Want? Magic Crystals?

We had a funder ask after all the descriptions and explanations of the program, "But, what makes it all work?" And since we had described and explained everything, we couldn't figure out what they were looking for with that question. I walked around for days asking myself, "But, what makes it all *work*?" I felt like I wanted to say "The magic crystals!" or something!

Evaluation and Sustainability: Are They Important?

A strong proposal takes strong demonstrated evaluative measures built into the project. Sustainability of the project is very important; funders want to see that the project will live beyond the life of the grant. Funders look for partnership, multi sources, matching funds, and like to fund direct project expenses, not just overhead. Depending on the foundation, funders want to see how your award will be spent on the project.

Honesty About What You Can Get Done In A Year

A great proposal is in line with the funder's goals and the community's needs. It's concise and well written. And it's honest. You must clearly identify your needs and honestly ask yourself: "What can I do in one year (or whatever the funding timeframe is)?"

Don't Underestimate the Importance of Budget

A good proposal is an articulate business plan. A lot of people don't realize that nonprofits are a *business*. There's money coming in and going out, you have goals and objectives and supervision of employees is involved. However, many directors are not business managers and don't know how to be business managers when they become directors. If you have a well thought-out and articulated business plan, you take the piece of that plan that matches the RFP and you make that your proposal.

I have only ever reviewed Federal grants. There are various types of grants from Full Year Continuation grants, to start up grants, program improvement monies, facilities

purchase grants along with all sorts of grants that support construction, improvements etc. Of course, immediately I ask: Is this fiscally sound? Is this the best possible space for a center? What's the justification of owning a Head Start Center vs. renting a space? I always look to a match for source funds. Without this, simply we do not go ahead.

Don't Tell the Funder That They Have Been Going in the Wrong Direction!

With funders you can't go in and tell them that they're moving in the wrong direction i.e. Gates Foundation - you can't say a little pill to cure malaria is not the answer here, we need reasonable programs about xx. You have to accept their quirks and say 'what is the next step.' They don't want to be disagreed with but they want to be understood and then you can move on and propose something.

Fit!

The 'fit' is what makes a good grant proposal. If it looks like to the funder that they've been searching around for a solution to something and here it comes in the mail. Or they've been looking for a new direction in research and they can tell that you have followed the research that they have funded. Remember these people think of themselves as shapers of thoughts and if they have funded a particular stream of research and you say to them things like 'I've read that' from that stream and I think the next step is... they want the feeling that they've been understood, they want the feeling too that not only that they've been understood but that they have been right all along.

It is essential for the grant writer to have a very good idea of the foundation funding criteria and to highlight the aspects of the proposal to address those criteria. For example, the Angkor Dance Troupe has an excellent after school program where students learn traditional dance. If a grant is written to a foundation that funds projects to keep at-risk youth off the streets and in school, the grant would highlight the relation between positive recreation opportunities and success in school. Conversely, the preservation of traditional arts and multiculturalism would be emphasized in a grant proposal to an arts foundation.

Keep Your Audience in Mind! Tailor Your Wording

Every funding source, whether federal or private, has priorities. Sometimes they are broad, other times they are very specific. You need to tailor the wording of your proposal to clearly indicate how your project will specifically address these areas. For our nutrition education project, for example, one funder might be interested in school-based education, while another wants to improve access to health information for immigrant families. We are doing both tasks on our grant, but we will place emphasis on the one that they are interested in funding.

People need to understand, for a foundation, a foundation officer presents this to the board. Put yourself in the place of the foundation officer - what would be the presentation

of this to the board, what would you say, why would the board care about this proposal. A funder, who works with a very wealthy woman, gave feedback that when the woman read the proposal she said "I was on the edge of my seat. I couldn't wait to turn the page and see what they were going to do next."

Know all the selection criteria for the proposal. Maybe I have written a proposal and part way through I find out we're not a good match. But that comes with experience. We have to be selective, too. When you write a grant you're not just looking for the money, you're looking for support.

Simplify!

I find that simplicity is the key. We can get so excited about the intricacies of our projects that we write out every detail and relish in the interrelated beauty of it all but a grant funder just gets confused by this sort of intricacy. Try to think about the true foundation of what you are doing and work very hard to convey that as simply and clearly as possible.

Seek Feedback

My bosses at the nonprofit were really wonderful. They showed me previous examples of successful applications and then edited me into humility with their red pens!

Look for your mentors, work with others, do anything you can to be a part of the process and take on more as you become more familiar with it. Don't take feedback personal.

When you write a grant, have two people review it before submission (1) Someone in your field who will understand the content and the project outcomes & (2) Someone who knows nothing about the technical issues but will read it as a "story." Feedback from each will help you see if you have clearly stated and supported your project and if it makes sense to an unfamiliar reader. Always get feedback on rejected proposals. Don't take it personally; learn from it.

I've gotten help from a wide range of people, most of whom helped me to focus, be clear, and prioritize the important parts of the project throughout the writing process. But even people who are not experienced but know you and your projects well can also be really helpful, go get people outside of your process to read and comment on your proposals in addition to those your work with more closely.

I have always worked with groups of people who write grants to fund the work they do and also to pay their own salaries. We share advice and experience, provide encouragement and support. We also share expertise. One person I work with is good at budgets, and I'm hopeless at budgets. I'm good at details and editing, and she misses the little details

Raising money is essential to be able to do the invaluable work of the projects. Do your best to generate innovative ideas; put them out there to a wide range of funder audiences

to get feedback. Call funders' offices to see if your ideas resonate with the funder and don't waste time with misaligned proposal/funder goals. Be selective and be smart. People have a tendency to look at many RfPs and think they could have linkage. Be mindful it might push your work in a different direction than you want it to go. It's not just about money.

What Kind of Feedback Can the Funder Provider?

For our agency (part of the federal government), there are specific regulations in how this is addressed. Generally there is a pre-application meeting conducted by phone. All details specific to the grant are outlined on the web. If a consistent question is asked, we post a response on the web or in writing. We must answer that same question for everybody even if someone didn't ask. We have to make the same information to all candidates.

Do Your Homework

You have to do your homework on the foundation or whatever funder it is and really read the RFP. Then you highlight things that make your program a great match—almost like a marriage—you are made for each other. You've got to anticipate their questions and answer them in your proposal.

I try to look back to see what the make-up of proposal review committees have been in past years and funding cycles. It's like going for job interview. I look carefully at what kinds of support and funding decisions that the grantor agency has made in prior years. Then, having this kind of information, I evaluate how our project members' different strengths meet the funder's priorities.

How to Sink a Funding Proposal

I'm on the funding end. What I see is that grant writers need to follow instructions laid out in funding guidelines. At least 10% of the applications we received were eliminated for such things as page requirements, spacing, late submissions, and program oriented issues.

Things I Wish I had Known from the Very Beginning

To follow the directions!

I wish I had known what a gift it is *to the funders* to find a good program that is a good investment for them. I would have been more confident. It's not about groveling or being snotty. Site visits are an opportunity to educate the funder about what you do and the challenges that are involved. It can help them become better funders.

I think I wasn't aware early on that complicated projects—projects that had subprojects within it or many facets—confused and frustrated many funders. Early on in my work at a university, I would just write grants based on the desires of all the varying professors involved—and they were just too complicated and obscure for many funders. The deliverables can get lost in the wording if you are not careful!

I wish I had known how to make a checklist of details that need to be in the written proposal. What the donor wants you to do, a checklist of what you have to send with the proposal for example: bios of key players, resumes, number of pages and type size, some even want a particular font.

Write a draft, get away from it for a little while (a day or two), and read it (when you read it, try to read it as if you are the reviewer). All this should be done ahead of time, do not wait until the last minute! "Any proposal going in at the last minute is probably not a good proposal". Now, would you fund it? What needs to change to improve?

I wish I had understood how helpful it is to actually speak with a member of the funding organization. This provides you with an opportunity to put a personal touch to your organization and allows you to discuss the feasibility of your proposal with the person who will (hopefully) be funding it.

I wish I had known to be cautious about over extending. Be cautious of promising more than you can deliver, "underfunding" the project, and over burdening your staff. Also, keep true to the goal of your organization and avoid programs that may not be in alignment with what your organization is trying to accomplish.

I wish I had more training about what is needed for developing a budget, training on how to 'cost out' a project, how to realize the full expense of line item budgeting. It is something that gets easier if done in blocks of time.

I wish I had known how much TIME it takes. And you cannot do it alone, you need a team. And you have a right to ask for help from your team.

I wish I had known that it is *so* helpful to call the funder on the telephone, to make absolutely sure what their priorities are, to try to "personalize" your organization with your personality and to run your idea past them to see if they think it would be competitive. Don't be an anonymous grant seeker.

In some of my earlier grant proposals I proposed more deliverables than made sense for the organizations where I worked. Usually, it entailed not seeking enough funding and putting too much extra work on myself and other employees. Also, I feel that it only makes sense to apply for grants that meet a distinct organizational need and that the organization has the capacity to carry out the project as successfully as possible.

Bottom line: Know your funder and funding goals.

Sometimes the Indirect Way Pays Off

We got the City of Boston to sell us a house for \$1 (Yes, one dollar) to start our homeless women's transition program. *After* we had the property (which was a mess at the time), funders were really excited about lending us money for capital improvements, programs, etc.

Partnership Grant Proposals

More and more funders want to see collaboration and that the funding goes to a whole community as opposed to just one organization in a community. At one point while I was with my previous organization a group of community providers (some coalitions, some "cap" agencies providing multiple services) received a grant that needed to be shared among the partnership members. We had to have regular meetings where we made decisions about how the money would be spent among us.

I can't state too strongly the importance of building good relationships with other professionals and organizations for the sake of having them rather than just to apply for funding together.

This can be difficult if everyone comes to the table with very different ideas particularly based on their own interests. It is best from the university end to be good listeners and not impose too much what we think. It takes a lot of brainstorming, putting it up on big paper, seeing what fits what does not, what fits into the budget too. Many of the grants we are a part of need to include a process that involves community input so while you have to have a strong idea it has to be seen as flexible enough to react to the needs of the target group/audience, etc. Or, the front/ground work needs to be already done. Often the funder wants all this to be done already so you have to decide if you can do it- you can't fake it because what if you get the grant and then you have to ask for partners to work with you. This can backfire real quick.

I have found that the most successful partnerships develop from ongoing relationships with organizations working on similar issues and projects. The partnership exists and communication is established through ongoing contact prior to a financial partnership.

Pitfalls can arise from misunderstanding about the nature of the collaboration, from serious personality differences, and from differences in approaches to problem solving. The first and the last can be overcome - sometimes with the help of outside facilitators; the second is most difficult and in my experience most destructive. Successes: there are people who are temperamentally better suited than I to negotiate differences. The successes I have had have been my ability on occasion to choose the right folks.

Partnerships can be challenging in the sense of the allocation of funds. When you are writing a grant you have to decide who is administering the funds, who hires the people in the research, and how much do they get paid. On all this you have to reach a consensus through participation and discussion. I write grants being a part of a university and community partners have their own views about how the university behaves. The historical precedent which they have is that the university simply uses the community for their research and when completed they are done with the community. I have to overcome this perception.

I think what makes a project really attractive is it being clearly grounded in existing relationships and connected to other projects. Funders want to know that what they give

will matter over a longer period of time, more than just the grant period, and one way to do this is to nest it with other initiatives and relationships.

Most of the grant writing we do involves other organizations since our mission is to facilitate partnerships between university and community organizations and be good partners ourselves. This kind of process always takes more time than doing something by yourself in many cases as you may know. Getting everyone on the same page, or coming up with the ideas, or making sure everyone is treated fairly, figuring out who is the lead agency, etc. Divvying up parts of the grant to do can be easy or hard. You need to make sure there is process that everyone understands. You will need a point person to collect information all in one place, a way to title and save versions of parts of the document, etc. It is useful to make sure everyone feels valued in the process because it really is a team effort. There is a job for each person. Another pitfall: sometimes you think you have buy in from the right people (i.e. school department wants to partner for example) but when you get the grant you have to work with a school- the principal might not know they have been volunteered by the school administration and feel some animosity over it. Thankfully the school department we work with has a process for this now.

The synergy within a group can lead to a great success. There are sometimes problems as would be expected when combining multiple organizations into a single project. Expectation, administration, and funding can be major project complications. Partnerships have to see if they are able to weather the storms and continue to grow the project. A key step in the conflict resolution seems to be open lines of communication and working with project sub-committees.

Sometimes partnership grants can require extremely detailed financial reporting and tracking requirements. There can be competition between involved agencies for funding levels and responsibility issues. All of this makes it difficult to develop a competitive proposal. It is a constant battle to regularly come up with new and interesting initiatives, while at the same time working to keep the objectives of all involved groups in mind. In developing what would be considered a "great" proposal, you need the participation of everyone involved. The proposal should reflect the pride and commitment of your organization, and display the benefits to the workers and community at large. Even an expertly written proposal will most probably fail without these facets.

I truly enjoy working as a team on collaborative grants. My biggest issue with this type of grant writing is that I hate chasing people. I feel we are all adults and if you say you will get a job done by a deadline you should do so or be held accountable. I think in order to ensure that deadlines are met by all parties; each organization has to have buy-in from its senior management. I know it sounds awful, but when people know they will be held to task, they are usually more willing to pitch in and get you the information you need. For some reason, getting information for grants is like pulling teeth at times. There will be times you have a week to get an application formulated and out to the funder, but if you plan enough, ALWAYS try to give yourself lead time. Things will get lost; people will forget

to get you information. It happens. Make sure you have time built into your deadline for the "what if's". And, don't get discouraged if you miss a deadline. That has happened on more than one occasion. I will be waiting for information and no matter how much you ask, plead and beg for it, you never get it - or you get it and it is wrong. It is not your fault, you just have to move on to the next one.

What Kind of Leadership is Needed for Partnership Grant Writing?

The co-operative model seems ideal, but in reality including everyone's voice takes ten times longer and you can't ensure that everyone will be happy. What's important is the right leadership. A leader in these situations needs to understand the complexities of the issues involved. We had a few different leaders in a partnership I'm in and they were very good for the most part. What I have been concerned about is that none of the leaders were very reflective of the communities being served in terms of race, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and immigration status. What I do in these situations is bring in people from the affected communities so that they could be seen and heard on the issues.

Someone has to be the lead writer and lead organization and it's not always easy to get someone to take that responsibility. Sometimes members of a partnership have varying degrees of experience and ability to participate in a joint proposal. There may be differences of opinion about how a proposed project will unfold, although that doesn't happen too often. It can be difficult deciding the various roles that each partner will assume in a joint program and the roles may not always be equal. That leads to the question about how to divide the budget. Do you divide it equally, or do some people/organizations get a larger share because they have a larger role?

Using A Contract Grant Writer

In one collaborative project, a collaborative submission between two universities, we employed a contractual "grant writer" to synthesize the ideas of the researchers into the proposal format. I found the entire process of working with a third party grant writer to be ineffective and a practice that I would not attempt again. The grant writer was skilled and competent so this assessment is not an indictment of his work quality. Rather, I felt that the distancing from the writing process itself did a disservice to the final product. We are often experts in the content areas that we write proposals for, so it makes sense that having our hands in the work lends depth and credibility that a third party cannot impart.

What Makes for a Great Grant Proposal?

A great grant proposal is one that is compelling and convincing for the funder to read, that exposes and highlights a pressing need that the funder appreciates, and one that is very clearly written.

With such intense competition for limited funds recently, it is important to make your organization/project stand out from the rest. Make sure that you align yourself with the funder's goals and priorities, highlight the uniqueness of your organization, and promote your past successes. It is important to highlight your strengths and past successes. Also, you must carefully read the RFP and be sure to maintain the focus of the funding organization. Evaluate the funder's past funding decisions and priorities, which helps to show which characteristics of your organization should be highlighted

My view? When everyone pitches in. I think the last US Dept. of Ed GEARUP grant we submitted was a great example of everyone contributing. This was a second round of 6 years of funding. I was charged with doing all the budget pieces. I enjoy doing this and this one was particularly complicated with budgets for a university, a community college, and five other partners as well as in-kind budgets for everyone. All of this had to be done on line. It was always satisfying when each part was completed and uploaded. Then we got the grant which was great! It meant 6 more years of funding, that four people on our staff would not be laid off, that kids in the city would benefit by this great program again.

I try to highlight those aspects of the program or project that are most in synch with the funder's priorities, those that are unique to my organization and set it apart, and those that illustrate success and/or stability in the organization.

And Some Final Words of Wisdom From These Talented Grant Writers

Start early and don't be intimidated, go ahead and strike out with your best ideas and see what happens. Read examples that other people have - both successful and not - and use them to inform your own process. Developing proposals can in itself be a great learning experience even if you are not successful.

Don't ever be afraid to take a shot and if you are afraid of rejection find another line of work.

You need to give them the funders the information they ask for and nothing more. Answer the questions that are important to them. People say too much.

Seek out a mentor or at least network with others who have been successful in the past. You should learn lessons from those who have come before you. Although you will make mistakes, by learning from more experienced writers you can avoid some of the more common pitfalls that the inexperienced encounter. Also, always work closely with your partnering agencies and the program evolves and develops.

Seek out someone who can mentor you in the process. If that's not possible, try to meet with different people who have had success in developing good proposals and programs. It's useful to identify those people who may not have succeeded on the first go-rounds but learned key lessons in the process that helped them later on in their careers. The other key is to work closely with your partnering organization(s) and to involve them in different ways as the proposal evolves. Those investments of time, effort and creativity will give you

a sense of what it will be to work together programmatically Each partner will feel that they co-owned the process. And you will already have laid a foundation based on trust and a common desire for an effective and meaningful program.

We make a difference in people's lives... so give yourself time to absorb and learn...this is a profession in which you increase your knowledge and skill base with each new proposal and opportunity. Some we get funded and some we don't --- it's the quality of the proposal not the quantity of what we submit that counts! Patience and perseverance...and some good luck too!

Don't get scared off about grant writing. Don't forget what you already know, some skills are transferable to grant writing. I was able to use my business proposal writing in grant writing. Research.....and make sure you are applying for the right grant...Use statements that are positive and concrete language. Use active voice vs. passive. Ask Questions. Call the funding agency and make a personal contact.

I think that grant writing is mythologized. It is not difficult to do if you know what you want to accomplish. The hard part is in figuring out what it really is that you want to do -- once that's clear, you are more likely to find avenues to obtain funds.

Grant writing is such a hands on learning process, it is difficult to learn in theory. It is like writing on anything else, the more you do the better you get. My advice is to just do it. If you engage in it, the more you will become familiar with the process.

As important as grants are to your organization's contributed revenue mix, the most important thing *of all* to that mix is donations from a reliable and ardent constituency of individuals whom you have cultivated to care whether the organization lives or dies. Foundations are "fickle" - they usually don't like to support the same organization repeatedly. But loyal donors can be counted on - specifically for the unsexy, general operating aspects of your budget such as overhead, maintenance, salaries, etc. Grant funders, on the other hand, are more interested in special projects usually, ones that help *them* manifest their *own* missions.

People are so important. The people involved in the organization have a personal stake in its success, and this makes them an invaluable asset. Also, make your best efforts to find the appropriate funding sources, whether they are grant funders or another source of revenue. Always attempt to find the funding sources that will accomplish both your goals and the goals of the funding organization.

If you are responding to an RFA, read the RFA carefully, note the criteria for judging the proposals, and write to the criteria. Frankly, writing the proposal is easy if you pay attention to the funder's desires. Accomplishing the project once it's funded is much much harder.

Look for your mentors, work with others, do anything you can to be a part of the process and take on more as you become more familiar with it. Don't take criticism personally.

Keep at it, don't get discouraged, ask for help, never let them ask "why should we fund your program" when they read a grant - if the information is right, they will just know.

I wish I had more therapy, meaning don't take rejection personally.

Grant writing is a necessary evil. I wish I have more time dedicated to finding grants, but I have to wear many hats.

It's not just about money!

Good programs are more important than great writing!

When you submit a grant, you're developing the seeds for the future!

Grant Writers Interviewed

It is rare to have the opportunity to learn from so many talented grant writers. The people below gave generously of their time to share with us their thoughts about grantwriting. Thank you, Everyone!

Lenore Azaroff, Bill Bochnak, Joan Becker, Brenda Bond, Barbara Brown, Susan Brauhn, Armand Carriere, Suzanne Cashman, George Chigas, Cathy Crumbley, Rachel DeMott, Khanh Dinh, Stephen Engle, Mary Evans, Bob Forrant, Jim Frabutt, Rosemarie Franchi, Varkey George, Mary Graci, Susan Halter, Homero Harari, Charmaine Hickey, David Kronberg, Janice Lacroix, Gretchen Latowsky, Chuck Levenstein, Mary Mader, Jacqueline Moloney, Marianne Miller, Anita Moeller, Dane Netherton, Judith Oleson, Marianne, Pelletier, Bev Perna, Catherine Powers, Dianne Quigley, Doug Raleigh, Rob Rosenthal, John Saltmarch, Erin Sheehan, Deborah Shelton, Mansoureh Tajik, Steve Tello, Robin Toof, Joan Whitney, Jessica Wilson, Steve Wing, and Larissa Zoot.

Graduate Students in the Grant Writing Class

We are the graduate students who contacted and talked with the grant writers listed above. We are students in graduate programs in Community Social Psychology, Engineering, Health, and Regional Economic and Social Development:

Joyce Abelson, Robert Andrews, Kerryn Armstrong, Yajaira Blanco, Danielle Bergeron, Patty Coffey, Marion deLaubenfels, Heather Derby, Rob Kilroy, Ekaterina Konovalova, Pete MacNeil, Susan Mutua, Michelle Richards, Jean Russell, Jay Santos, Andrea Scalise, Denise Umphrey, Mark Umphrey, Julie Villareal, Robert Williams, and Marina Winkler