

Achieving Grant Success: The Winning Proposal

PART I: DEVELOPMENT OF A GRANT PROPOSAL

Preparation

A successful grant proposal is one that is well-prepared, thoughtfully planned, and concisely packaged. The potential applicant should become familiar with all of the pertinent program criteria related to the grant program from which assistance is sought. It can also be helpful to make contact with the grant program and administrative contacts listed with the program description before developing a proposal to obtain information such as the availability of funding, applicable deadlines, and the process used by the grantor agency for accepting applications. Applicants should remember that the basic requirements, application forms, information and procedures vary with the agency making the grant award.

INITIAL PROPOSAL DEVELOPMENT

Developing Ideas for the Proposal

When developing an idea for a proposal it is important to determine if the idea has been considered in the applicant's jurisdiction, region or even state. A careful check should be made with other stakeholders who may currently have grant awards or contracts conducting similar work. If a similar program already exists, the applicant may need to reconsider submitting the proposed project, particularly if duplication of effort is perceived. If significant differences or improvements in the proposed project's goals can be clearly established or if the project can serve the jurisdiction or region in a unique way, it may be worthwhile to pursue the assistance.

Community (Regional) Support

Community support for most proposals is essential. Once a proposal summary is developed, it is important to pursue individuals or groups representing academic, political, professional, and lay organizations which may be willing to support the proposal in writing. The type and quality of community support is critical in the initial and subsequent review phases. Many agencies require, in writing, affiliation agreements (a mutual agreement to share services between agencies) and building space commitments prior to either grant approval or award. A useful method of generating community support is to hold meetings with the top decision makers in the community who would be concerned with the subject matter of the proposal. The forum for discussion may include a query into the merits of the proposal, development of a contract of support and or commitment for the proposal, the generation of data in support of the proposal, or development of a strategy to create support from a large number of community groups for the proposal/project.

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Identification of a Funding Resource

A review of the Objectives and Uses and Use Restrictions sections of the grant program description can point out which programs might provide funding for an idea. Do not overlook the related programs as potential resources. Both the applicant and the grantor agency should have the same interests, intentions, and needs if a proposal is to be considered an acceptable candidate for funding. For example, FEMA grants have a wide variety of acceptable uses; however, when identifying State Homeland Security and/or Urban Area Security Initiative funding, terrorism should be the key nexus identified within the proposal.

Deadlines for submitting applications are often not negotiable. They are usually associated with strict timetables for agency review. Some programs have more than one application deadline during the fiscal year. Applicants should plan proposal development around the established deadlines.

Getting Organized to Write the Proposal

Throughout the proposal writing stage keep a notebook handy to write down ideas. Periodically, try to connect ideas by reviewing the notebook. Never throw away written ideas during the grant writing stage. Maintain a file labeled "Ideas" or by some other convenient title and review the ideas from time to time. The file should be easily accessible. The gathering of documents such as articles of incorporation, tax exemption certificates, and bylaws should be completed, if possible, before the writing begins.

REVIEW

Criticism

At some point, perhaps after the first or second draft is completed, seek out a neutral third party to review the proposal working draft for continuity, clarity and reasoning. Ask for constructive criticism at this point, rather than wait for the grantor agency to volunteer this information during the review cycle. For example, has the writer made unsupported assumptions or used jargon or excessive language in the proposal? It is not the intent of the review committees to grade or score the proposal for the writer's creativity or professionalism as it pertains to grant writing. In other words, stakeholders are not expected to hire professional grant writers or be one themselves. The intent of the reviewer is to have a clear understanding of the project and associated details.

Signature

Often signatures of chief administrative officials are required. Check to make sure they are included in the proposal where appropriate. However, at the project proposal submission it is acceptable for the Project Manager to sign the form, if it falls into the structure of the project managers organization.

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Neatness

Proposals should be typed, collated, copied, and packaged correctly and neatly (according to agency instructions, if any). Each package should be inspected to ensure uniformity from beginning to end. Check with the agency to determine its preference. A neat, organized, and attractive proposal package can leave a positive impression with the reader about the proposal contents.

Submission

Make sure there is enough time for the proposals to reach their destinations. Otherwise, special arrangements may be necessary. Always coordinate such arrangements with the grantor agency project office (the agency which will ultimately have the responsibility for the project), the grant office (the agency which will coordinate the grant review), and the contract office (the agency responsible for disbursement and grant award notices), if necessary.

PART II: WRITING THE GRANT PROPOSAL

The Basic Components of a Proposal

There are eight basic components to creating a solid proposal package: (1) the proposal summary; (2) introduction of organization; (3) the problem statement (or needs assessment); (4) project objectives; (5) project methods or design; (6) project evaluation; (7) future funding; and (8) the project budget. The following will provide an overview of these components.

The Proposal Summary: Outline of Project Goals

The proposal summary outlines the proposed project and should appear at the beginning of the proposal. It could be part of the form, in the form of a cover letter, or a separate page, but should definitely be brief – no longer than two or three paragraphs. The summary would be most useful if it were prepared after the proposal has been developed in order to encompass all the key summary points necessary to communicate the objectives of the project. It is this part of the proposal that becomes the cornerstone of your project proposal, and the initial impression it gives will be critical to the success of your venture. In many cases, the summary will be the first part of the proposal package seen by agency officials and very possibly could be the only part of the package that is carefully reviewed before the decision is made to consider the project any further.

The applicant must select a fundable project which can be supported in view of the local need. Alternatives, in the absence of State or Federal support, should be pointed out. The influence of the project both during

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and after the project period should be explained. The consequences of the project as a result of funding should be highlighted.

Introduction: Presenting a Credible Applicant or Organization

The applicant should gather data about its organization from all available sources. Most proposals require a description of an applicant's organization to describe its past and present operations. Some features to consider are:

- A brief summary of regional partners (geography).
- The organization's goals for this project and how they have worked together successfully in the past.
- The data should be relevant to the goals of the grantor agency and should establish the applicant's credibility.

The Problem Statement: Stating the Purpose at Hand

The problem statement (or needs assessment) is a key element of a proposal that makes a clear, concise, and well-supported statement of the problem to be addressed. The best way to collect information about the problem is to conduct and document both a formal and informal needs assessment for a program in the target or service area. The information provided should be both factual and directly related to the problem addressed by the proposal. Areas to document are:

- The purpose for developing the proposal
- The beneficiaries – who are they and how will they benefit
- The social and economic costs to be affected
- The nature of the problem (provide as much hard evidence as possible)
- How the applicant organization came to realize the problem exists, and what is currently being done about the problem
- The specific manner through which problems might be solved (including a review of resources needed, considering how they will be used and to what end)
- The remaining alternatives available when funding has been exhausted (including an explanation of what will happen to the project and the implications)

There is a considerable body of literature on the exact assessment techniques to be used. Any local, regional, or State government planning office, or local university offering course work in planning and evaluation techniques should be able to provide excellent background references. Types of data that may be collected include: historical, geographic, quantitative, factual, statistical, and philosophical information, as well as studies completed by colleges, and literature searches from public or university libraries. Local colleges or

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universities which have a department or section related to the proposal topic may help determine if there is interest in developing a student or faculty project to conduct a needs assessment. It may be helpful to include examples of the findings for highlighting in the proposal.

Project Objectives: Goals and Desired Outcome

Program objectives refer to specific activities in a proposal. It is necessary to identify all objectives related to the goals to be reached, and the methods to be employed to achieve the stated objectives. Consider quantities or things measurable and refer to a problem statement and the outcome of proposed activities when developing a well-stated objective. The figures used should be verifiable. Remember, if the proposal is funded, the stated objectives will probably be used to evaluate program progress, so be realistic. There is literature available to help identify and write program objectives.

Program Methods and Program Design: A Plan of Action

The program design refers to how the project is expected to work and solve the stated problem. Sketch out the following:

- The activities to occur along with the related resources and staff needed to operate the project (inputs).
- A flow chart of the organizational features of the project. Describe how the parts interrelate, where personnel will be needed, and what they are expected to do. Identify the kinds of facilities, transportation, and support services required (throughputs).
- Explain what will be achieved through 1 and 2 above (outputs); i.e., plan for measurable results. Project staff may be required to produce evidence of program performance through an examination of stated objectives during either a site visit by the grantor agency and or grant reviews which may involve peer review committees.
- It may be useful to devise a diagram of the program design. For example, draw a three column block. Each column is headed by one of the parts (inputs, throughputs and outputs), and on the left (next to the first column) specific program features should be identified (i.e., implementation, staffing, procurement, and systems development). In the grid, specify something about the program design, for example, assume the first column is labeled inputs and the first row is labeled staff. On the grid one might specify under inputs five staff members to operate a Mass Care shelter. The throughput might be to maintain occupants, feed the occupants, and set up a daily routine; outputs might be to discharge 25 occupants to permanent living arrangements per day. This type of procedure will help to conceptualize both the scope and detail of the project.
- Wherever possible, justify in the narrative the course of action taken. The most economical method should be used that does not compromise or sacrifice project quality. The financial expenses associated with performance of the project will later become points of negotiation with the program

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staff. If everything is not carefully justified in writing in the proposal, after negotiation with the grantor agencies, the approved project may resemble less of the original concept. Carefully consider the pressures of the proposed implementation, that is, the time and money needed to acquire each part of the plan. A Program Evaluation and Review Technique (PERT) chart could be useful and supportive in justifying some proposals.

- Highlight the innovative features of the proposal which could be considered distinct from other proposals under consideration.
- Whenever possible, use appendices to provide details, supplementary data, references, and information requiring in-depth analysis. These types of data, although supportive of the proposal, if included in the body of the design, could detract from its readability. Appendices provide the proposal reader with immediate access to details if and when clarification of an idea, sequence or conclusion is required. Time tables, work plans, schedules, activities, methodologies, legal papers, personal vitae, letters of support, and endorsements are examples of appendices.

Evaluation: Product and Process Analysis

The evaluation component is two-fold: (1) product evaluation; and (2) process evaluation. Product evaluation addresses results that can be attributed to the project, as well as the extent to which the project has satisfied its desired objectives. Process evaluation addresses how the project was conducted, in terms of consistency with the stated plan of action and the effectiveness of the various activities within the plan.

Most Federal agencies now require some form of program evaluation among grantees. The requirements of the proposed project should be explored carefully. Evaluation designs may start at the beginning, middle or end of a project, but the applicant should specify a start-up time. It is practical to submit an evaluation design at the start of a project for two reasons:

- Convincing evaluations require the collection of appropriate data before and during program operations; and,
- If the evaluation design cannot be prepared at the outset then a critical review of the program design may be advisable.

Even if the evaluation design has to be revised as the project progresses, it is much easier and cheaper to modify a good design. If the problem is not well defined and carefully analyzed for cause and effect relationships then a good evaluation design may be difficult to achieve. Sometimes a pilot study is needed to begin the identification of facts and relationships but often a thorough literature search may be sufficient.

Evaluation requires both coordination and agreement among program decision makers (if known). Above all, the grantor agency's requirements should be highlighted in the evaluation design. Also, grantor agencies may

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require specific evaluation techniques such as designated data formats (an existing information collection system) or they may offer financial inducements for voluntary participation in a national evaluation study. The applicant should ask specifically about these points. Also, consult the Criteria For Selecting Proposals or Proposal Selection Criteria section of the program description to determine the exact evaluation methods to be required for the program if funded.

Future Funding: Long-Term Project Planning (Sustainment)

An applicant should give particular attention in their proposal to the long-term plans of their project. Most grantors want to see a plan for continuation beyond the grant period and how other resources could be utilized to support the initiative beyond grant funding. It is particularly important in construction projects to discuss maintenance and the availability of future funding. Projects with equipment purchases should consider budgets that include items such as maintenance and warranties but also how those items will be sustained after the end of grant funding.

The Proposal Budget: Planning the Budget

Funding levels in assistance programs may change yearly. It is useful to review the appropriations over the past several years to try to project future funding levels. However, it is safer to never anticipate that the income from the grant will be the sole support for the project. This consideration should be given to the overall budget requirements, and in particular, to budget line items most subject to inflationary pressures. Restraint is important in determining inflationary cost projections (avoid padding budget line items), but attempt to anticipate possible future increases.

A well-prepared budget justifies all expenses and is consistent with the proposal narrative. Some areas in need of an evaluation for consistency are: (1) the salaries in the proposal in relation to those of the applicant organization should be similar; (2) if new staff persons are being hired, additional space and equipment should be considered, as necessary; (3) if the budget calls for an equipment purchase, it should be the type allowed by the grantor agency; (4) if additional space is rented, the increase in insurance should be supported; (5) if an indirect cost rate applies to the proposal, the division between direct and indirect costs should not be in conflict, and the aggregate budget totals should refer directly to the approved formula; and (6) if matching costs are required, the contributions to the matching fund should be taken out of the budget unless otherwise specified in the application instructions.

Our goal in the VDEM Grants Office is to assist our stakeholders to the best of ability in understanding the concept of a good project proposal. The project proposal is the first of many steps with the grant management life cycle and can be the most important and beneficial part of the cycle if developed properly.

Good Luck!