Grant Writing as a Funding Source and Collaborative Endeavor

Bonnie V. Daniel, Joan K. West, George E. Daniel, Patty Flowers[*]

Grant writing provides not only financial rewards but also insights into the living mission of an institution, and points toward collaborative opportunities within and among various units across a campus. In the future, more and more grant funded programs will be a necessary part of our work in student affairs. This manuscript offers basic tools for understanding best practices of grant writing and the principles that should guide student affairs personnel in grant writing endeavors.

Financial constraints throughout academe create heightened attention on external sources of funds. While typically associated with faculty and research, grant writing represents a substantive way in which student affairs personnel can demonstrate their abilities as educators. In terms of professional development, student affairs staff members can benefit from collaboration in writing grants, managing the grants, and in conducting research associated with the project. Their insights to the cocurricular lives of students are a salient perspective that other segments of a campus can benefit from as the dialogue unfolds regarding a grant proposal.

The nature of requests for proposals (RFPs) has changed in ways that encourage student affairs to participate actively. For example, many agencies now approach programmatic project ideas from a collaborative viewpoint of the campus, as opposed to non-collaborative, isolated projects. In addition, the evaluation and research components now required in many RFPs necessitate a perspective on the students' holistic experiences, rather than data such as grade point average or retention rates. The agencies are equally concerned with questions of "how" and "why," as they are with questions of "what" and "how much." Even if student affairs professionals do not take the lead on a grant project, their collaboration with other campus components will become more vital to ensure that co-curricular concerns are addressed. Currently, a dearth of literature exists regarding the involvement of student affairs professionals involved in grant writing endeavors.

Guiding Principles

Begin with an Idea

To receive funding, a proposal must demonstrate fit between the institutional strategic plan, the goals of the sponsor, and the objectives of the project. The

[*] *Bonnie V. Daniel is a senior research associate in the Office of Research, Grants, and Contracts; Joan K. West is director of the Office of Research, Grants, and Contracts; George E. Daniel is director of the Student Success Center; Patty Flowers is a senior research associate in the Office of Research, Grants, and Contracts; all at University of Tennessee at Martin. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to bdaniel@utm.edu.*

strongest proposals demonstrate a rigorous alignment with guidelines of the sponsor. Even an idea with a great deal of merit and research will not be funded if the program goals do not align with those of the sponsor. A writing team should critically examine sponsors that possibly align with a project idea and institution. Many sponsors will post past awardees, including institution, name of project, and contact information.

Identify Sponsors

Funding sources for grants include federal (e.g., U.S. Department of Education at www.ed.gov) and state agencies (e.g., State Department of Human Services), private foundations (e.g., John and Catherine T. McArthur Foundation at www.macfdn.org, Coca-Cola® at www2.coca-cola.com/foundation), and professional organizations (e.g., SACSA at www.sacsa.org). Campuses may also be members of national search agencies that will research sponsors for a particular idea or niche. When the proposal is ready to be submitted, the team may choose to submit it to one agency or to more than one. If the proposal is accepted by more than one agency, the campus must choose one and decline the other.

Write with a Team

Once a project has been generally defined and possible sponsors have been identified, a writing team should be established that is representative of the project stakeholders. The team leader may be pre-determined or designated by the group. For an effective writing team, the project requires personnel familiar with the institutions or departments involved and who also have authority to commit resources on behalf of their units. Once the team is assembled, the members must read through the RFP carefully to identify the requisite components of the proposal. RFP guidelines may include operational definitions and will range from specifics such as font and page length to required partners and eligible/ineligible activities.

At this stage of the process, it is imperative that communication foster collaboration throughout the organizational flowchart to ensure all parties involved are accountable and informed. The team itself should include effective writers who are able to write according to the parameters outlined in the RFP and who can complete the assignments parceled to them in a timely manner. The leader facilitates the writing process by maintaining focus on the requirements of the RFP. A list of generally accepted standards for effective grant writing would include the following:

1.   Develop a thorough outline before writing that includes each section (in order) that is specified in the RFP.

2.   Include as much information as possible in the first draft to ensure completeness.

3.   Write with language that engages the readers' interest.

4.   Employ the same language that is contained in the sponsor's RFP. Explain any technical terms. As much as possible, write in active voice.

5.   Make it very obvious early in the proposal that your project matches the interest of the funding agency. Staffs of both government and private funding sources say that the lack of a clear fit with their priorities is the single most common reason for rejecting applications.

6.   Answer essential questions regarding what the project will accomplish, how, and what evidence will demonstrate that the goals have been accomplished.

7.   Follow a logical and linear presentation of the project idea. Organize goals, objectives, activities, and outcomes so that each activity has a measurable outcome and is linked to a specific objective that is linked to a specific goal. A good proposal will have only one or two overarching goals.

8.   Present an evaluation design that generates the data needed to show that the project has been successful. The evaluation is essential to both the budget and the timeline. Weak evaluation sections also provide the basis for many rejected proposals.

9.   Pay close attention to instructions. Things such as page limitations, font size, margins, spacing, submission methods, deadlines, numbers of copies, limitations on numbers of or pages of appendices, etc. are very important. Failure to follow formatting directions can result in a proposal being rejected before it is even read. (Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 2005; Hall & Howlett, 2003; National Endowment for the Humanities, 2005; National Science Foundation, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

Campus Resources

On campuses with an Office of Sponsored Programs/Research, appropriate personnel may assist in both pre- and post-award activities such as identifying funding sources, providing technical assistance, assembling a writing team, and facilitating grant management. On campuses without such an office, the basic functions of grant seeking may be folded into another office such as Development, Business Affairs, or Institutional Effectiveness or Research.

On many campuses the Office of Institutional Effectiveness/Research, or one serving a similar function, collects data that may be relevant to a justification statement or other areas where intended impact is discussed. Many RFPs require a needs assessment for the proposed project that necessitates quantitative data. The data required may be longitudinal institutional, demographic (i.e., state and federal census data), economic, community, or educational (i.e., K-12).

Other Resources

Increasingly, sponsors require that applicants include partners to increase the impact of the project. Some RFPs stipulate that a partner must be external to the

campus (e.g., community agency, local school system), while others require or permit cross-disciplinary collaborations. For example, a campus proposes to institute a new model for responding to alcohol abuse by female students, and the RFP requires internal and/or external partners. The student affairs personnel might partner with faculty in counseling, health and human performance, sociology, or members of the counseling center staff, the women's center, student health center, and/or members of the local law enforcement agencies. Once resources are identified, the team is ready to write.

Write the Proposal

All grant proposals basically follow a similar format, regardless of sponsor. The components may be entitled differently, but typically they consist of a summary, abstract, table of contents, introduction of the organization, the problem statement or needs assessment, goals/objectives, management plan, evaluation plan, and budget and budget narrative. Sponsors provide a grant writing guide that is useful for writing teams to review (e.g., http://philanthropy.com; www.cdpublications.com; http://www.fipse.aed.org; http://www.fdncenter.org/marketplace). The RFP provides the outline the writing team must follow.

Writing a proposal should begin with the end in mind. Once the core issue or problem has been identified, the writing team should develop the budget. Because the RFP specifies how funds may and may not be spent, determining how money will be allocated leads the team to focus on objectives, timeline, personnel, and evaluation. The budget should provide sufficient detail to communicate effective planning, ethical and appropriate use of funds, and allocation of resources. The budget allocation provides foundation for determining program goals and objectives aligned with the RFP's eligible and ineligible activities.

An RFP establishes the priorities from which goals are derived. Usually, goals of a sponsor are specific. Project objectives must support sponsor goals. Writing effective objectives ensures communication of what the project will do, by when, by whom, and to what extent. In other words, the objectives must follow the acronym SMART: sensible, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time-bound. Table 1 provides an example of how two campus proposals would address some of the sponsor goals.

Grant writing can be a time-consuming process that spans an entire year, or it can occur within a week. Different sponsors allow various intervals between the posting of RFPs to the due date for proposals. To meet guidelines, writing teams must factor time to collect all necessary data, letters of support, and other pieces of documentation specified by the RFP and the processes unique to campus administrative offices.

Table 1

Example of Aligning Agency Goals with Campus Goals

Agency	Campus A Goals	Match	Campus B Goals	Match
Will fund innovative projects that addresses alcohol abuse by college students.	Replicate the same educational approach to alcohol abuse used by three schools across the state.	No	Design a new program targeted to reduce alcohol abuse by college women.	Yes
Program must demonstrate anticipated impact.	Data provided includes impact of similar program implemented at other campuses.	Yes	While the program will be new, proposal includes logical presentation of data from campus, as well as research on similar projects.	Yes

Develop Evaluation Plan

The evaluation plan of an RFP necessitates that the program demonstrate whether it has met the program goals and objectives and whether or not the program has been effective. While the specifics of what each sponsor may require for evaluation differ, a careful examination shows some common threads. Most sponsors require an evaluation plan that, at a minimum, evaluates and modifies methods over the course of the program (i.e., formative evaluation), and states criteria for success (i.e., summative evaluation).

The following steps offer a template to follow in designing an effective evaluation plan:

1. What to evaluate.

- Determine the main purpose(s) of and the audience for the evaluation.
- Identify what questions to ask.
- Set performance targets, if appropriate.
- Decide from whom evaluation data must be collected and make sure you have access to them and their information.

2. What information is needed and how to collect it.

- Identify the specific information needed to answer the evaluation questions of the different audiences.
- Select general methodological approaches.
- Clarify from which populations and sources the information will be gathered.
- Select data collection techniques and determine what clearances and permissions will be needed.
- Establish data collection timelines.

3. How to analyze and report the data.

- Select appropriate methodologies for analysis and synthesis.
- Determine what reports to produce for which audiences and decision makers.
- Determine what reports to provide to funding source and when.
- Lay out data analysis and reporting timeline.

4. What resources are needed?

- Determine who will play what roles in performing the evaluation.
- Identify how much evaluation activities will cost and include this amount in the appropriate places in the proposal budget.
- Identify external evaluator, if applicable.

Increasingly, sponsors require a research component in the evaluation plan. The writing team may be required to submit a literature review, hypothesis(es), and overview of research design. In reviewing the literature, the writing team should carefully explain the current state of knowledge regarding the topic. The literature review should lead the reader in understanding why the proposal is unique, important, significant, and worth supporting.

In developing a research design, the writing team must again refer to the RFP to ensure that the design complies with the parameters of the sponsor. Some evaluation requirements may require qualitative and quantitative data collection, while some leave that decision to the applicant. Others ask for documentation that the campus has some experience in conducting the type of research being proposed by the project.

With the increasing demands for accountability at all levels, sponsors are looking more critically at the quality of evaluation plans in applications; however, the best reason for doing a careful job of planning evaluation during the proposal stage is that the evaluation is a critical part of competent management. It provides the roadmap to the destination. The proposal writing team may elect to utilize a checklist like the one developed by Hall and Howlett (2003) for judging the adequacy of their evaluation plan.

Some grants, in their evaluation component, include data collection utilizing human subjects (e.g., students or parents). If this is the case, the writing team members must receive authorization from the campus Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research, prior to collecting these data. This process insures that high ethical standards are followed in collecting data from human subjects. Likewise, the sponsors require this authorization as part of the negotiation for the funding and may require a docket number be included as a part of the grant application. Sponsors have the prerogative to send auditors to campus and investigate whether or not compliance has been followed.

Align Proposed Expenditures to Program Objectives

Developing a budget for a grant necessitates a careful review of the RFP to discern what costs are allowed by the sponsor, and what expectations the sponsor has concerning matching resources (e.g., funds or facilities) from the institution or third parties. The grant writing team must insure that the budget they develop follows campus fiscal policies and procedures. The Office of Sponsored Research and Office of Business Affairs can assist grant writers in developing appropriate budgets. In addition to the actual budget figures, the grant must also include a budget narrative that explains all proposed expenditures.

Submitting a Grant Proposal

The grant writing team does not have the authority to submit a grant proposal to a sponsor on behalf of their institution. Before a grant proposal leaves campus, it must have the signature of the authorized official who can commit the campus to contracts. Individual campus policies may also require signatures from the Offices of Sponsored Programs and Business Affairs. There are a number of grant application forms that must accompany the grant proposal itself (e.g., the Application cover page, Assurances, and a required budget form). Communication throughout the organization flowchart during the writing process expedites this critical component of the submission process.

In the past, proposals were submitted in hard copy to the sponsors. The RFP would specify the number of copies required and the method(s) of delivery. Increasingly, sponsors require electronic submission of proposals. While team members may regard this as a simplification of the process, time must be factored in to allow for delays caused by server activity on due date (the campus' as well as the sponsor's). Additionally, sponsors vary in their electronic submission formats. Many formats require the division of the proposal into sections and have file size limitations.

Post-award Issues

Despite the merit of the idea and the hard work of the writing team, not all proposals are funded. If the proposal is rejected, the team may or may not receive reviewer comments. Although most sponsors automatically send reviewers' comments along with the notice of declination, others allow teams to request this

feedback. Private foundations seldom provide this information. The reviewers' comments can be helpful in determining how the proposal might be reworked and resubmitted in the next cycle or to another sponsor.

If a proposal is funded, a sponsor may negotiate the budget. As a result, in developing a budget, the writing team must consider those elements that are critical to the success of the program objectives and those which enhance the program, but could be reduced or eliminated if necessary. As part of the budget negotiation process, the institution has the prerogative to negotiate a reduction in the scope of work should the agency reduce the requested budget amount.

Although a grant contract is awarded to the institution, the project director and personnel are expected to manage the grant through both the campus's policies, and the sponsor's guidelines. The management is best facilitated if the grant writing team did a comprehensive and thorough job in communication, developing the budget, developing the management and timeline, and the evaluation component.

Benefits of Grant Writing

Professional development

Numerous benefits result from grant writing. Not only do grants typically produce financial incentives, but they also provide rich opportunities for professional development in the way of research and presentations. The research associated with writing a proposal (e.g., literature review, needs assessment) introduces student affairs professionals to current trends, innovative programs, and alternative solutions to common problems. The results of the evaluation component provide data and findings that advance the field or prompt areas meritorious of further research.

Collaboration

The process of grant writing is typically collaborative and requires that participants write with staff within their unit or across several units. Writing grants brings together representatives from the campus community to address common problems or issues and provides a clearer vision of the mission and goals of the individual departments and units within the institution itself. These shared experiences also foster interpersonal relationships that are vital to campus communication between people and offices. This collaboration highlights the interconnectedness that exists among campus entities (e.g., athletics, alumni and development, faculty, and student affairs) and enables student affairs staff to apply a problem-based approach to finding creative solutions.

Strategic planning

While planning is a routine component of student affairs work, grant writing creates possibilities to interface with other campus units to achieve campus goals more effectively. RFPs typically require the writing team to focus on institutional

strengths and weaknesses to define the need for the project, describe the outcomes of the project, and understand the anticipated impact on the campus. For example, if a team wrote a proposal addressing the "Strengthening Institutions Program" (U.S. Department of Education, Title III), the members determine strengths and weaknesses of three, specified areas of the campus: fiscal stability, academic programs, and institutional management. Identifying the weaknesses assists in articulating the problems that are associated with each of those three areas. From the problems, the team can then develop the project goals and objectives, which should support the institution's strategic plan. The scope of this particular program necessitates comprehensive communication across and between campus divisions. Projects of this magnitude typically require one to two years to write with consistent communication from the writing team with key administrative leaders, numerous meetings and re-writes, and a profound commitment to the strengthening of the institution by all parties.

Conclusion

The following websites provide additional examples of how projects might affect various departments within student affairs and other campus divisions: (a) Funding for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education Grant Database at http://www.fipse.aed.org/index.cfm, or (b) Office of Postsecondary Education TRIO programs at http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html. The range of projects highlights how grants can provide the impetus for significant change in campus culture.

With increasing costs of higher education and pressures to do more with less, grant writing represents an investment of time and effort that provides more than financial reward for student affairs personnel. Grant writing offers avenues for professional development, fosters campus-wide collaboration, enhances strategic planning efforts, and positions student affairs professionals in a non-traditional role within the learning community.

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