Proposal Development Handbook

American Association of State Colleges and Universities
Grants Resource Center (GRC) . . .
provides colleges and universities with grants information and technical assistance services. Each member works with a GRC Program Associate who provides individualized assistance, such as researching special issues and monitoring priority programs.

Through a variety of publications and an up-to-date Web page, members stay informed on the latest grants-related news. In addition, GRC hosts spring and fall conferences, provides an online funding database, and offers campus workshops.

For additional information, contact the GRC Director at 202.295.7070.

Contents

Introduction ................................................. 4
The Rationale for Grantmaking ......................... 4
Steps in Proposal Development ......................... 5
Putting Your Idea into a Project Format .......... 5
Developing a Project Outline ......................... 6
Reassessing Your Position ............................ 9
Identifying Potential Sponsors ....................... 9
Ascertaining Sponsor Interest ...................... 10
Preparing a Full Proposal ............................ 12
Elements of a Full Proposal .......................... 13
General Considerations ............................... 17
Final Thoughts ......................................... 17
Selected Information Sources
and Web Addresses .................................. 19
Resources for Identifying Federal Grant
and Contract Opportunities ......................... 19
Resources for Identifying Private
Grant Opportunities .................................. 21
“How To” Guides for Developing Proposals .... 22
Other Resources of Interest
  to Grant Writers .................................. 25
Introduction
The ability to secure external funding for research or service projects has become a necessary skill for many in academic careers. This booklet is designed to help individuals understand the process by which government agencies and private foundations support research and service activities on our nation’s campuses. In addition to explaining the conditions under which agencies and foundations make grants, this booklet outlines an easy-to-use process for transforming research project ideas into grant-winning proposals.

The Rationale for Grantmaking
Government agencies and private foundations have long recognized the value of using academic talents to assist them in meeting their goals. Funding from both sources has supported a wide range of activities to expand scientific knowledge, promote social equality, and foster economic development. Although it can appear that virtually any activity will be supported, in reality, sponsors fund projects that fit within specified parameters.

Government agencies disburse tax dollars to meet public needs that have been recognized by Congress or state legislatures. In many cases, the authority to spend is very broadly defined. However, in all cases, an agency can fund only those activities that fit within its mission. Each agency also wishes to support worthwhile projects so it can persuade Congress or the state legislature that continued, or even increased, funding each year is in the best interest of the state or nation.

Foundation grantmaking is a bit more idiosyncratic than that of government agencies, but it is not without its own inherent logic. Founda-

...
sponsors must know what you actually plan to do in order to determine whether investing in your project represents an effective use of their resources. Whether you want to establish a training program, demonstrate a novel approach to service delivery, or conduct basic research, the task of moving from an idea to a practical work plan is the same. You must define the problem or need you wish to address, formulate the goals and objectives of your response to that problem, and then decide what specific actions have to be undertaken to fulfill those goals and objectives.

An excellent way to start is to develop a concise outline containing each of the elements discussed below. An outline allows you to organize your thoughts into a coherent action plan and will help you formulate your arguments to persuade a potential sponsor of your proposed project's value. Work on each section until you have established a strong, logical connection between the activities you propose to undertake and the resolution of the problem you have defined. Try to look at the project from a potential donor's perspective. Why would someone support this activity? Who might benefit from it? What might the project accomplish? Finally, you also can share the outline with colleagues who can provide valuable feedback and guidance.

Developing a Project Outline

✓ **Statement of Need or Problem to be Addressed**
What really needs to be done? What significant need(s) are you trying to meet? What services need to be delivered to whom, or what gaps exist in the knowledge base of your field? Thinking critically about these questions will allow you to “carve out” a workspace for yourself by defining the problem you want to address. Remember the problem must be both significant and manageable. Potential sponsors must be convinced not only that a problem is important enough to deserve attention but also that some impact on the problem is possible and that you are the person who can make that happen.

✓ **Goals and Objectives**
Set an overall goal for your project by delineating what you actually intend to accomplish. Think about what impact you hope to make on the problem. What caused the problem, or what factors contribute to it, and how could these factors be modified to alleviate the problem? What specific measurable changes could be made? Your answer will allow you to develop a set of project objectives—i.e., a statement of specific outcomes that could be measured to determine actual accomplishments.

✓ **Plan of Action, Project Design, or Methodology**
What specific activities would enable you to meet the objectives you have set? How can they be conducted? How realistic is your plan of action? For a research proposal, you must select an appropriate methodology and then establish a clear rationale for its adoption. For a service or demonstration project, you must think about the number and types of people who would be served and who would provide the specific service components.

✓ **Budget and Personnel Requirements**
For many applicants, especially those writing a research proposal for the first time, estimating a project's budget and personnel needs can be daunting. However,
your campus’ sponsored programs office (also often called the grants or sponsored research office) has expertise in developing project budgets and will be glad to assist you in putting together a realistic estimate.

The sponsored programs office can help you answer such questions as:

- How many people with what types of qualifications are needed to carry out the project?
- What space, equipment, and travel resources are required?
- How much time is necessary to complete each of the project activities?

Once these questions have been answered, you should be able to generate a fairly accurate estimate of the project's financial requirements.

✓ Title

Choose a simple title that explains, to the extent possible, what you plan to do. Avoid cute or catchy titles or fancy acronyms. If potential sponsors find your title silly, it may prejudice them against looking further to see what your project is all about.

After you have thought out each of these elements, review your entire plan for logic and consistency. Now it should be relatively easy to write a brief, two- or three-page outline to use in discussions with potential sponsors or academic colleagues. The outline can also serve as the basis of the full proposal.

To summarize, the outline should include the following:

✓ title of the proposed project;

✓ statement of need or problem to be addressed;

✓ overall goals and objectives;

✓ plan of action, project design or methodology; and

✓ budget and personnel requirements.

Reassessing Your Position

Before you begin to identify potential sponsors, take time for two additional steps. First, conduct a thorough bibliographic search, not only to avoid unnecessary duplication, but also to uncover information that may strengthen your proposal. Second, evaluate your qualifications in relation to the requirements of the project. Be realistic in assessing whether you have the necessary experience, interest, and ability to carry out the project and to compete for funding. It is equally important to assess how the project fits with your institution’s mission, size, and resources. Grants normally are awarded to institutions, not individuals, and in most cases sponsors require evidence of institutional commitment before they will consider supporting a project, however impressive the individual proposal may be.

Identifying Potential Sponsors

Having written your project plan and estimated the financial resources needed, next you should identify particular sponsors that might have an interest in funding your work. Although it is possible to research sponsors on your own, the sponsored programs office on your campus should be able to assist you with your search. Most offices maintain extensive files and other information resources that describe both public and private funding
organizations. These resources may include searchable electronic databases (such as the Grants Resource Center's GrantSearch), government-sponsored funding guides (such as the Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance), or directories (such as The Foundation Directory). The information they contain may range from the funding priorities and award sizes of an agency or foundation to its geographic limitations on giving and other eligibility requirements. This information should enable you to match your interests with those of potential sponsors. Your sponsored programs office also can help you find information on a particular agency or foundation. Finally, because your campus sponsored programs office is familiar with prior awards made to your institution, it may be able to refer you to people on campus who have successfully applied to funders of interest to you. The previous applicants, in turn, should be able to provide insight into what worked and what did not as they proceeded through the sponsor's application process.

If you do not have access to a campus sponsored programs office, a reference librarian at any larger library can generally provide assistance in locating information on possible funding organizations. The Web also has made it easier to identify funding organizations. All federal agencies and many foundations and private organizations now post their information on the Web. These sites can be located by using almost any Web browser and may include everything from general program information to full application packages. (The information sources listed in the back of this publication identify a few Web pages of interest as well as basic reference works in this area.)

Ascertaining Sponsor Interest

Once you have identified potential sponsors, it is important to obtain as much information as possible in order to ascertain their likely interest in your project (and to help you develop a proposal that dovetails with their stated goals and priorities). Fortunately for grantseekers, the information needed can usually be found in publicly available materials since government agencies are subject to stringent reporting requirements and foundations are required by law to make information on their giving practices available to the Internal Revenue Service and the public.

The following information is essential to know before starting to write a proposal for submission under a particular program:

✓ the program's purpose;
✓ stated program priorities;
✓ recipient eligibility requirements (including geographic restrictions);
✓ types of activities eligible for funding;
✓ particular funding mechanisms used (grant, contract, cooperative agreement);
✓ total funds available and projected number of awards;
✓ availability of application forms or specific proposal guidelines;
✓ evaluation criteria, review process, and/or reviewer guidelines;
✓ application deadlines and review cycles (length of time between receipt of application and award of grant); and
✓ giving history (types of organizations, individuals, and activities funded in the past).
If you decide that an agency or foundation program is relevant, it is, in most cases, appropriate and advisable to contact the program staff. You will want to verify your project’s suitability for the program, discuss points that need clarifying, and determine the program’s current status (application deadlines, any changes in program priorities, anticipated funding levels, etc.). Your sponsored programs office can help you locate the appropriate contact person. Many agencies and foundations also provide program contact information on their Web sites.

You may initially get in touch with a potential sponsor by telephone, letter, e-mail, a scheduled office visit, or any combination of these approaches. The method of contact you choose should depend on the sponsor’s stated preference. For example, well-staffed federal agencies usually will respond to phone calls, as well as written or e-mail inquiries; however, many foundations with few full-time staff require that all inquiries be submitted in writing. If the sponsor does not express a preference, contact it in the manner you prefer. If you choose to submit a letter of inquiry, keep it concise, usually no more than one or two pages, but include all the information contained in your outline.

You should not expect a commitment for funding at this point, but you should be able to obtain an indication of your work’s relevance to the sponsor’s funding interests. The sponsor’s reaction to your preliminary inquiry will allow you to assess whether it is worth your time and effort to submit a full proposal.

**Preparing a Full Proposal**

No secret formula exists to guarantee a winning proposal. You can prepare a more effective document, however, if you keep certain general principles in mind. First, the proposal document is the primary basis for evaluating your project and determining whether financial support is justified. You must be sure it not only represents the need for action, but also includes all the information needed to evaluate the proposed activity and your ability to conduct the project. Second, keep in mind that reviewers must evaluate many similar proposals in a short time. Your proposal must be well organized and concise, and must avoid technical jargon that could confuse lay readers. By following these guidelines, you should be able to develop a convincing and competitive proposal.

**Elements of a Full Proposal**

The proposal format or presentation will depend on the individual sponsor’s requirements. Most government agencies publish application forms and very specific proposal guidelines, while private foundations can be less direct. Whenever sponsors provide guidelines or directions, follow them explicitly. “Follow the directions” is the first, sometimes the only, grantseeking tip provided by virtually all program directors and experienced reviewers.

Whether or not a sponsor publishes guidelines, all proposals should contain certain elements, which are outlined below. More detailed discussions of each can be found in some of the reference works listed in the back of this publication.

**Narrative**

The main body of the proposal should be a narrative laying out exactly what you plan to do and why and how you propose to do it. The narrative should include all of the
elements in your outline, with supporting information and elaboration. Generally, you begin with a statement of the need or problem you will address. It is important that you make no unsupported assumptions. For service projects, you should document the need through a needs assessment. For research projects, you should provide a clear rationale as to why the work in your particular area is likely to be fruitful. Next, state the overall goals and specific objectives of the project, making sure there is a clear, logical connection between the problem you have defined and the response you are proposing.

Finally, describe your plan of action or methodology, providing sufficient detail for the reader to judge whether your project can be run both efficiently and effectively. The narrative should demonstrate that you have carefully thought through all aspects of the project. It must convince the reviewer of the significance of the problem, the appropriateness of your proposed response, and your ability to conduct the planned activities. Be sure its logic is cogent, its organization strong, and its writing convincing and concise.

✓ Evaluation
Effective program evaluation has always been important, but it is now crucial because the funding for research and social action projects has become more competitive. Evaluation methodologies have evolved in recent years, and most sponsors recognize that an evaluation leads to more effective project operations and outcomes. Many will specifically request a separate description of your planned evaluation process. If they do not, be sure to address this element in the narrative. Many publica-

operations on evaluation are available to help you select an appropriate methodology.

✓ Timeline
To help the reviewer understand what you plan to do, include a well-developed timeline for project activities. A realistic, careful timeline demonstrates to the reviewer your thorough organization and planning. It also shows that you have thought through your project’s long-term needs and goals.

✓ Budget
Although too often viewed as a tedious technicality, the budget is, in fact, a key element of any proposal. It presents your project in quantitative terms and, along with the timeline, is often used by reviewers for a quick sense of a project’s organization. Personnel costs are usually the major budget item. They should be broken down to indicate the number of professional and support staff, their salary levels, and the percentages of their time to be devoted to the project.

Other typical budget items include travel, equipment, materials, and facilities and administrative costs (also called indirect costs or overhead). Your budget also must show any proposed institutional or third party matching funds or cost-sharing contributions, which sponsors increasingly expect or require.

Accurately estimate all costs. Reviewers know the cost of doing work in their field and figures that are too high or low may cause them to question your familiarity with your specialty and your abilities as a project manager. Consult your sponsored programs or business office staff for
guidance in compiling realistic budget estimates.

 ✓ Abstract
 Prepare a brief proposal abstract, keeping in mind that readers often rely on it heavily. Be sure to cover all the proposal's key elements within the stipulated length limitations. Although in the final document the abstract will appear first, it is best to write it last after you have completed the main sections of the proposal.

 ✓ Appendices
 If allowed, place in appendices any materials that add important data but would prevent a smooth reading of the narrative, such as charts, graphs, tables, or illustrations. Letters of recommendation, always important to give the reviewer a sense of your credibility as a program director, should be included in this section. You also may want to include endorsements from institutional officials, preferably the chief executive officer. Curricula vitae of key project personnel also should be included here, but bear in mind that the sponsor is interested only in relevant work and experience, not entire career histories.

 ✓ Table of Contents
 Always include a table of contents as a service to your readers. Like the project timeline, this document serves a dual purpose. It aids the reviewer in quickly locating the various elements of your proposal (this can be especially valuable when proposal sections are sent to reviewers out of sequence), and it reinforces the reviewer's impression of you as an organized and capable project manager.

 ✓ Letters of Interest
 Foundations often require a two- or three-page letter of interest as their application for funding. This document should describe your project, budget and institution, and what societal contribution the sponsor will make by funding your project. You should be thoroughly knowledgeable about the foundation's priorities so you can directly link your project to the foundation's funding interests. Many private foundations publish annual reports that describe their priorities and the projects they have funded in the past year.

 General Considerations
 As you write the full proposal, keep the following points in mind:
 ✓ Follow application guidelines explicitly.
 ✓ Address stated review criteria thoroughly.
 ✓ Use clear, precise language. Avoid jargon or unnecessarily technical terminology.
 ✓ Include a table of contents and clearly identify the various proposal sections.
 ✓ Avoid fancy covers or a slick presentation.
 ✓ Ask a colleague to review your proposal for format and readability.
 ✓ Go to your sponsored programs office for help with internal clearance and sign-off procedures well before the submission deadline.

 Final Thoughts
 If you are fortunate enough to succeed on your first application attempt, notify your institution's appropriate offices so that the administrative requirements can be met. If
your proposal is turned down, however, do not give up.

Contact the agency or foundation and ask for the reviewers' comments, the program officer's feedback, and any suggestions for improving your proposal. Many successful proposals are the result of revision and resubmission.

Remember the following to improve your chances of funding success:

✔ Be creative in examining the applications of your work. If you are used to providing services in one institutional setting, to one particular group, think of other settings and groups that could also benefit.

✔ Become thoroughly familiar with the federal agencies and foundations most likely to fund your project. While the overall structures of federal and state governments may appear hopelessly complex, often the specific offices with which you are dealing can be much less complicated and quite approachable. Focus on those offices or foundations most relevant to your interests. Get on their mailing lists for annual reports and other material. Check their Web sites regularly. If they have advisory groups, monitor their deliberations.

✔ Volunteer to serve as a proposal reviewer. Review other projects funded by your potential sponsors. Look over final project reports and lists of funded proposals. Many of these documents are available on the World Wide Web.

✔ Ask colleagues with prior funding or reviewing experience to examine your outline, funding strategy, and draft proposal. Their suggestions may strengthen your proposal and help you avoid a resubmission.

✔ Explore summer residencies or sabbatical internships; serve as a consultant to or subcontractor on a colleague's funded project; or consider what other services you could provide to agencies that might have a long-term interest in your work.

✔ Utilize the myriad of funding resources available to you. Visit your sponsored programs office early to start discussing your potential for external support. Let the professionals in that office know your interests and concerns and find out how they can assist you.

Selected Information Sources and Web Addresses
Most federal, state, and private sponsors provide printed information regarding programs and application deadlines. These materials are also increasingly available over the Internet and can be easily downloaded.

The Grants Resource Center's Web page, accessible to all GRC subscribing institutions, provides gateway access to a wealth of federal and foundation Web sites. Program materials may be requested at no charge from sponsors that have not made their information available electronically. In addition, a number of print and electronic publications exist to alert subscribers to funding opportunities and offer tips on how to obtain funding. A sampling of these publications follows. Readers are cautioned that Web site addresses are subject to change; the ones cited below are current as of the date of this publication (Dec. 1999).
Resources for Identifying Federal Grant and Contract Opportunities


*NSF E-Bulletin and Custom News Service.* Washington, D.C.: National Science Foundation. E-Bulletin is a monthly electronic publication of program deadlines, new initiatives, and policy and administrative announcements at the National Science Foundation. (Available at http://www.nsf.gov/home/ebulletin/) Through its Web site, NSF also provides a Custom News Service, through which interested individuals can register for, and design, a customized “Home page,” which posts new NSF announcements in chosen disciplinary areas or across the foundation. (Available at http://www.nsf.gov/home/cns/start.htm.)

Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance (CFDA). Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office. Contains the government’s most complete listing of federal domestic assistance programs, including descriptions of their purpose, eligibility requirements, funding levels, and contact persons. Published annually. (Available over the Internet at: http://www.gsa.gov/tdac/)

FEDIX. *Federal Information Exchange* (FEDIX) is a free on-line information retrieval service of federal opportunities for the education and research communities. The following agencies are covered: U.S. Department of Defense; Air Force Office of Scientific Research; Office of Naval Research; NASA; Agency for International Development; U.S. Department of Agriculture; and National Institutes of Health. (Information is available at http://web.fie.com/fedix/)

Resources for Identifying Private Grant Opportunities

*Annual Register of Grant Support.* New Providence, N.J.: R.R. Bowker. Includes general information on over 5,000 federal and private foundation giving programs. Information is indexed by subject, program area, and geographic locations. An index of foundation personnel is also provided.

*Corporate Giving Directory.* Detroit, Mich.: The Taft Group. Describes approximately 1,000 of the nation's largest corporate giving programs, including contact information, giving priorities, typical recipients/grants, and areas of operation. Published annually.

*The Foundation Center.* The Foundation Center's Web site contains a publication page listing over 75 publications and CD-ROMs for
identifying potential sources of funding. An abstract and order information is given for each resource. The resources are categorized by subject area, including arts and culture, community development, international, libraries, literature of the nonprofit sector, social services, women and girls, and others. The Web site is located at http://fdncenter.org/.

_The Foundation Directory._ New York, N.Y.: The Foundation Center. Describes over 6,000 private and community grantmaking foundations whose assets exceed $2 million and who annually grant over $200,000. (Foundations with assets less than $2 million are published in The Foundation Directory, Part II.) Entries are listed by state, with a useful subject index. Published annually. (Also available in electronic format, with other Foundation Center directories, in FC-Search(r).)

**“How To” Guides for Developing Proposals**


Lief-Lehrer, Liane. _Grant Application Writer’s Handbook._ Boston, Mass.: Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 1995. Though designed primarily for applicants to the National Institutes of Health, this guide includes application principles and suggestions that are pertinent to most agencies and many foundations. Appendices include, among other things, examples of proposal sections, information on NIH and NSF, and a listing of resources for grantseekers.

**Other Resources of Interest to Grant Writers**

_The Federal Yellow Book._ Washington, D.C.: Leadership Directories, Inc. This guide is a telephone directory of the executive branch of the federal government. It provides a helpful overview of the federal bureaucracy, listing individuals by agency, office, and title. (Separate versions are published for Congress and the states.)