Writing for Dollars:
Researching Grants and Writing Proposals

By Marilyn L. Gross

With costs such as salaries, tuition, technology, and energy continuously rising, educational and other non-profit organizations are increasingly looking for potential sources of funding. And with organizational budgets being cut, units within those organizations are being pressured more and more to seek support for their programs from outside. One of the most frequently heard “solutions” to the need for new sources of funding is: “Why don’t you get a grant?” The first response to this rhetorical question is: “Easier said than done.” But since we must seek grants—here are some practical ideas and suggestions to help get you started. continued
First, a discussion about background and focus: As distinguished from “gifts,” “donations,” and “contributions,” grants generally come from institutions, rather than individuals, most often must be applied for in a complex written document (a grant proposal), and generally come with at least some strings attached. There are two overall types of grant sources: public (e.g., federal, state, county, and municipal government entities) and private (principal foundations, corporations, associations, and so on). Private foundations are themselves nonprofit organizations, as recognized by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). While huge examples, such as the Gates, Rockefeller, and Ford Foundations, come to mind, the vast majority of the 70,000-plus U.S. foundations are small (often run by family members on a volunteer basis) and both local and narrow in their focus (e.g., concern for a particular state, or even a specific county or town within that state; or support for research into a certain disease or social issue). To narrow things down still further, a large proportion of foundations limit their grant-making to “pre-selected candidates only” or accept requests “by invitation only.”

The world of corporate philanthropy is far more complex. Many companies, such as IBM and Hewlett-Packard, have separate foundations that operate in many ways like the independent and family foundations mentioned previously. Some businesses have established corporate giving programs, which are increasingly aligned with each company’s business priorities and desire to positively affect the bottom line. Other corporate dollars flow from a more vaguely defined “social responsibility” or “partners-in-the-community” funds, while the marketing and research-and-development departments are often supporters of events, providers of products, and sources of sponsorships.

While the focus of this article is on independent and corporate foundations, many of the principles and tips can be applied to the process of seeking grants from other sources.

**Myths and Misconceptions**

Misunderstandings and magical thinking about grants abound, and unfortunately, bosses and boards of directors are often their biggest proponents, making life even more difficult for grant seekers and proposal writers. Some of the most common “urban legends” follow this model:

- There’s “lots of money out there” for this subject;
- Foundation X has tons of money that it has to give away;
- They love to fund programs like ours;
- ABC University just got a grant from them, and our program is just like/even better than theirs;
- Foundation Y’s president is a

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Physical Entities—Libraries And Training Providers

The Foundation Center: foundationcenter.org
( Cooperating Collections, foundationcenter.org/collections/, are free funding information centers in libraries, community foundations, and other nonprofit resource centers that provide a core collection of Foundation Center publications and supplementary materials and services in areas useful to grant-seekers.)

The Support Center for Nonprofit Management: www.supportctr.org/
The Grantsmanship Center: www.tgci.com

Online Resources

Proposal Writing Short Course: foundationcenter.org/getstarted/tutorials/shortcourse/index.html
Proposal Budgeting Basics: foundationcenter.org/getstarted/tutorials/prop_budgt/index.html

Grant Proposal.com: grantproposal.com

Guide to Funding Research: foundationcenter.org/getstarted/tutorials/gfr/index.html

Foundations Today Tutorial: foundationcenter.org/getstarted/tutorials/ft_tutorial/index.html

Demystifying the 990PF: foundationcenter.org/getstarted/tutorials/demystify/index.html


The Chronicle of Higher Education: chronicle.com

The Chronicle of Philanthropy: philanthropy.com

Philanthropy News Digest (PND): foundationcenter.org/pnd/
PND’s RFP (Requests for Proposals) Digest: foundationcenter.org/pnd/rfp/

Books

Barnes and Noble Basics Getting a Grant: An Easy, Smart Guide to Writing A Grant Proposal by Barbara Loos

The Foundation Center’s Guide to Proposal Writing by Jane C. Geever

The Foundation Center’s Guide to Winning Proposals by The Foundation Center, Sarah Collins, editor

The Foundation Center’s Guide to Winning Proposals II by Judith B. Margolin and Gail T. Lubin

Grant Seeker’s Budget Toolkit by James Aaron Quick and Cheryl Carter New

Grant Writing For Dummies by Beverly A. Browning

Grant Writing for Educators: Practical Strategies for Teachers, Administrators, and Staff by Beverly A. Browning

Grant Writing in Higher Education: A Step-by-Step Guide by Kenneth Henson

How to Write a Grant Proposal by Cheryl Carter New and James Aaron Quick

The Only Grant-Writing Book You’ll Ever Need: Top Grant Writers and Grant Givers Share Their Secrets by Ellen Karsh and Arlen Sue Fox

Proposal Planning and Writing (2nd Edition) by Lynn E. Miner, Jeremy T. Miner, and Jerry Griffith

Successful Grant Writing: Strategies for Health and Human Service Professionals by Laura N. Gitlin and Kevin J. Lyons


Writing for a Good Cause: The Complete Guide to Crafting Proposals and Other Persuasive Pieces for Nonprofits by Joseph Barbato and Danielle Furlich
good friend of our president (…. and told him that she’s really interested in our proposal);

• Everybody knows it’s just a matter of who you know; and so on.

In short, you can take such assurances with a grain of salt. There are simply more needs—and worthy programs to address them—than there are grants available.

REALITIES AND RESEARCH REQUIRED

But the fact is that many thousands of requests do result in grants every year. How do their writers do it? The answer is—by observing and adhering to a few timeless rules:

Know your program

Know the need(s) it fills, the audience(s) it serves and the impact(s) it will have on them, the qualifications of its leader(s), how it works, what you are trying to accomplish, how you will recognize and measure success, the items and services the program will need in order to function optimally, how it will be funded (both now and in the future), and a realistic timeline.

Zero in on and summarize your program's salient features

Discipline yourself to capture—in writing—the essence of the proposed project or funding need in a single succinct sentence, paragraph, and “one pager.” Grant-makers are not known for their patience, and are so overwhelmed by requests that you must get to the point clearly, quickly, and concisely if you want to avoid the instant-reject pile. What will your work achieve—and perhaps more important from the potential funder’s perspective—why should they give you a grant? Study some of the resources in the sidebar (See “Grant Seeking and Writing Resources,” page 42) to understand the grant seeking and proposal writing processes and to learn from examples of “what has worked” for other applicants.

Identify and learn all you can about foundations and corporations that are realistic targets

The fact that the funders have interests and priorities generally similar to those of your institution (e.g., higher education; children and youth; the Pacific Northwest; scholarships; work readiness) is not enough. In the growing competition for grants, their criteria and restrictions are becoming more narrow and specific by the day. Ask colleagues or consult development-related listservs and blogs to determine which grants information resources are considered the best. Finally, check out the publications of organizations and programs similar to yours to see who is funding them.

But don’t stop there: Wherever and however possible go to “the horse’s mouth,” to learn the most accurate—and the most current—details from the funders themselves. Most significant grant-makers now have comprehensive web sites; you can link to them quickly by searching The Foundation Center’s Foundation Finder page at http://lnp.foundationcenter.org/finder.html. Extensive details on grants that were actually made can be found on foundations’ IRS tax returns (990 PFs), which you can access through the 990 Finder at http://foundationcenter.org/findfunders/990finder/.

Corporate grants and other support can be trickier to track, unless the company has an independent foundation or a formal corporate giving program. Google the company’s name, and go to the corporate (rather than the commercial) web site. If there is only one central company site, search for links with names like “Social Responsibility,” “Giving,” “In the Community,” “Neighborhood Partners,” and so on. Many times, grant information is provided in an online annual report found under an “Information for Investors” link.

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A growing number of foundations and corporate giving programs have web sites accessible to anyone from any computer. For the many funders who do not have web sites—or for whom you would like additional or third-party information—your best physical resources are the five Foundation Center Libraries. Next best are the many “Cooperating Collections” of The Foundation Center, which are located all over the United States. Each of these libraries and “Cooperating Collections” has a wide assortment of print and online grants-related resources, which may be used by the public for free. For locations, see http://foundationcenter.org/about/locations.html.

The Initial Approach

From your research you should get a good idea of how each funder wants—or doesn’t want—to be contacted. A few will want a full proposal right off the bat, but a growing majority insist on a preliminary proposal or “letter of inquiry” to start; and a small number prefer a brief e-mail or phone call. The increasingly popular required online submissions—while resulting in faster foundation responses, also restrict applicants’ ability to individualize their requests and make their programs “come alive.”

Although many popular how-to guides to grant seeking insist that no paper be sent until a lengthy conversation has been held with a program officer, the reality is that “I want to run this proposal idea past you” types of phone calls are futile at best, and can backfire by irritating a grantmaker who feels you should have “done your homework” prior to seeking their feedback or suggestions. Most likely it’s a matter of “send a brief overview first—and then we’ll talk, if we (the potential funder) feel like it.” Of course, a legitimate foot-in-the-door (such as a highly valued grant recipient who can vouch for the critical value of your work) may certainly help get your proposal a hearing—but it will never lead directly to a grant.

Whatever the format of your initial contact—whether it’s a “two or three-page letter of inquiry,” two-pager preliminary proposal with a brief cover letter, or rare-but-lucky personal hearing—the following questions need to be addressed:

- Who are you—your institution, department, collaborative partners, etc.?
- How much money are you seeking, and for what specific purposes?
- Who or what will you be helping, what is the problem or need, and why are you well-positioned to do it successfully?
- What impacts will your project have on your intended audience(s), what outcomes or results will follow, and how will they be observed and measured—and ultimately reported to the funder?
- (If the funder is a corporation): How will you recognize their support?

Examples of good preliminary and more detailed requests can be found in many of the online and print resources listed on page 42, as well as guidance on providing comprehensive proposals for grant-makers who have invited you past the initial phase.

In Conclusion

A few dos and don’ts to speed you on your way:

- Do uphold the key pleadings of most grant-makers: Keep your writings clear, concise, and brief.
- Don’t enclose any additional materials with an initial inquiry, unless specifically requested.
- Do take the time to read and re-read every request; don’t rely on spell-check!
- Don’t submit your proposal via fax, e-mail, or overnight delivery service unless you have verified that the recipient will accept it.
- Do make your writings reader-friendly: use headings, bullets, and plenty of “white space” whenever appropriate.
- Don’t give up! The vast majority of requests are turned down the first time, particularly if your organization is not known to the funding source. Try to determine why you were declined, research any rules the funder may have on re-submissions, and try, try again!