

Grant Writing Basics

by: Jonathan Fisk



Federal grant evaluators use multiple criteria to determine if they should award a grant. An organization must generate and submit an accurate and complete grant application.

They must also demonstrate their ability to provide the requisite financial resources, if they are required.¹ Finally, organizations may also increase the likelihood of receiving a grant by working collaboratively with academics, separate public agencies, non-profits, and other local groups.

In a real-world setting, a department or a community's ability to attract a grant ebbs and flows. If City A's governing body, for example, decided to emphasize road maintenance, it would affect the organization's capacity to operate and maintain safe roads, but also deliver social services.

In this scenario, the capacity of this public works department to provide safe and efficient transportation would expand. Such expansion, however, may coincide with a decrease in City A's social service performance. A grant to the city's social service department may offset a budget loss and enable it to continue providing its services. In other words, the grant allowed the city to enhance its public works department and maintain its social service capacity.

Grants present local officials a way to maintain or offer new services or build capacity during periods of budget reductions. During weaker economic cycles, budget gaps may occur between

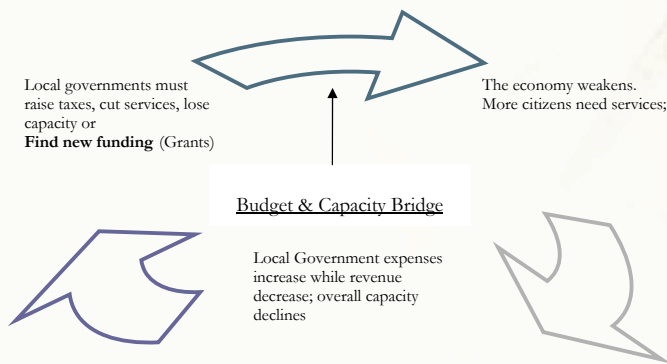
Table 1. City A's Grant Capacity Factors

INTERNAL CAPACITY FACTORS		EXTERNAL CAPACITY FACTORS	
Public Works	Social Services	Public Works	Social Services
New Funding	Stagnant or decrease in funding	Lowered sales tax, property taxes, decreasing federal & state aid	Lowered sales tax, property taxes, decreasing federal & state aid
New or better trained employees	Employee development will likely decline	Public pressure to increase infrastructure spending	Increasing poverty
High institutional commitment and support	Lower commitment and support	Prices for raw materials	Lower political support for social services
Regional government membership		Bond prices	
The ability to match federal funding levels with own-source contributions		Regional Membership	
		Collaboration with other stakeholders	
		Stimulus Funding	

Source: Hall, Jeremy. 2008. Assessing Local Capacity for Federal Grant-Getting. *American Review of Public Administration* 38, no. 4:463-479. EBSCOHost. University of Kansas Libraries. 20 Jan. 2009.

available organizational resources/capacity and customer/citizens wants/needs. Grants can facilitate the reallocation of funding from service and policy activities to other programs.² In other words, they help bridge the gap between funding and budget “wants.” Importantly, they do not have the “tradeoff” that accompanies general fund expenditures, which often diminishes departmental effectiveness.

Table 2.
Grants: Bridging the Funding and Capacity Gap



Working with Partners

As mentioned previously, working collaboratively can significantly elevate a community’s grant capacity. Cities and counties may join regional governments and act collaboratively within those groups to attract and secure grants or act upon other shared goals. Interlocal agreements supply the institutional framework to grow grant capacity and stimulate new grant awards.³

Collective action allows regional governments or a centralized body to apply for funds on members’ behalf and assist members with their grant applications or proposals.⁴ It demonstrates compliance for organizations or agencies that require grant sharing.⁵ Shared action also generates a number of positive externalities for members. It socializes grant search and application costs. Spreading costs also limits free-riders, someone who benefits without paying for the benefit. Regional governments also give member governments an incentive to work towards interjurisdictional solutions and policies. Finally, regional governance facilitates spillover benefits to adjacent and neighboring communities.⁶

Writing a Grant

Understanding the technical aspects of grant writing are necessary in a federal system in which states and localities depend on Washington for funding. In 2008, the Office of Management and Budget estimates that the Federal Government will distribute approximately \$460 billion in grants to local and state governments.⁷ Although grants are risky if used as a long-term budget strategy, they may provide a financial bridge for public projects. Local governments have used grants to help fund historic building renovation, green economic development, energy efficiency, substance abuse programming, and community development. They have also been used to help finance transportation projects, water and sewer programs, educational initiatives, and various other public programs.

A universal requirement of federal assistance is the submission of a formal application. As a general rule, large institutions tend to require formal application packets and operate under strict usage

rules and according to fixed deadlines. Smaller foundations and agencies typically operate more informally and offer assistance to grant seekers. Before an organization begins to write a grant, seekers should identify the organizations most likely to award a grant. The seeker may contact those organizations to determine if there is mutual interest. In fact, the federal government and many foundations will review preliminary grant proposals. Finally, the applicant should begin the application only after ensuring that the idea has not already been considered in the seeker’s region.⁸

Formal grant writing begins by identifying and defining the problem. During problem definition, a grant seeker should avoid defining the problem as the absence of a program or facility. For example, a grant seeking organization should not define the problem as the lack of an after school program. Rather, the problem should be that some school age children have little adult supervision after school and no activities.⁹ The solution, therefore, may be an after-school program. By properly identifying and defining the problem, the grant seeker builds support and increases the likelihood of receiving the grant.¹⁰

Grant writing includes relevant stakeholders.¹¹ It builds coalitions through citizen groups and stakeholder meetings. It should be noted that only one person should write the RFP or fill out the application. He or she should carefully proofread any document before submitting. The grant seeker should involve individuals or groups from academia, politics, professional and other interest groups. Their commitments should be in writing and included in the proposal’s appendix. Grant reviewers use the level and type of community support during initial and later review phases.

An actual proposal requires the submission of multiple documents.¹²

Table 3.

Section	Social Services
Cover Sheet	Should be concise and focus on goals and outcomes
Introduction	Problem identification, specifies the target population and location; provides a summary of goals and benefits
Problem / Needs assessment	Succinctly and cogently state the problem, and who the grant is expected to benefit, its social costs and budget, and the time needed for project implementation; relevant data and research
Objectives	Objectives section should state realistic goals, how the proposal assists the organization fill existing gaps; plans to demonstrate compliance
Data Analysis	Specific procedures and schedules for data collection and reporting; timeline and budgetary information
Other important documents	Resumes of grant team and other important personnel, third-party organizations who are supportive, preliminary budgets

Source: Gindes, Stephen. Maryland Municipal League. Nov 2004. Grants Writing. *Municipal Maryland*. IMCA. 20 Jan. 2009.

Grant objectives should not be confused with methods or strategies. For example, the objective should not be establishing an after school program for at risk youth. A strong objective statement would be increasing after school activity participation in City A to X% by a certain date.¹³ This section should include both long and short term goals and the budget required for goal implementation.

Finally, a strong proposal will include a mechanism to collect data so that program analysis and evaluation can be performed. The applicant's methods of measurement should reflect the project and may include standardized tests, interviews, questionnaires, and observation. The proposal should state the specific procedures and schedules for data collection and reporting. Applicant should be prepared to evaluate their "product" and "process." A product evaluation consists of measuring the projects results in comparison to its objectives. Process evaluation examines how the project's procedures with comparisons to the applicant's action plan.

Well-designed proposals share some similar traits. They have a clear and descriptive title and language. They realistically assess current conditions and state how the grant would assist in achieving a stated objective. Each section is as concise as possible but still provides the necessary information (extra and superfluous information should be in appendix).¹⁴ Finally, they utilize multiple readers during the editing process, have one writer but are developed by a team, are formatted with plenty of white space, and with important sections, bulleted. Ultimately, the proposal should be a cohesive and holistic document that flows logically and demonstrates the organization's grant capacity.

Some helpful sites are the following:

The Kansas Grants Clearinghouse (<http://www.kansasgrants.org/>) assists interested parties in identifying grant opportunities. The site includes tutorials on grant writing, research, and information on state and foundation grants.

The catalog of federal domestic assistance is free and accessible to the public. It covers approximately 1000 federal grant programs. The majority of grants are grants-in-aid to state and local governments. It is available at: <http://cfda.gov/>. After viewing possible grant programs from all 26 federal grant-awarding agencies, grants.gov facilitates applications online at <http://www.grants.gov>. The site allows seekers to check notices and receive e-mail notification. It requires registration.

There are also a number of private foundations that award grants: <http://foundationcenter.org/findfunders> offers visitors the ability to search for basic information on U.S. grantors. It includes community foundations, private foundations, corporate giving programs, and public charities.

For additional tips on grant writing check: <http://www.grantproposal.com/>.

About the Author

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- 1 Hall, Jeremy. 2008. Assessing Local Capacity for Federal Grant-Getting. *American Review of Public Administration* 38, no. 4:463-479, 468. EBSCOHost. University of Kansas Libraries. 20 Jan. 2009
- 2 Lowry, Robert C., and Matthew Potoski. 2004. "Organized Interests and the Politics of Federal Discretionary Grants." *Journal of Politics* 66, no. 2: 513-533, 517. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 11, 2009).
- 3 Bickers, Kenneth and Robert Stein. 2004. "Interlocal Cooperation and the Distribution of Federal Grant Awards." *Journal of Politics* 66, no. 3:800-822, 8817-818. EBSCOHost. University of Kansas Libraries. 20 Jan. 2009.
- 4 Hall, Jeremy. 2008. Assessing Local Capacity for Federal Grant-Getting. *American Review of Public Administration* 38, no. 4:463-479, 468. EBSCOHost. University of Kansas Libraries. 20 Jan. 2009.
- 5 Gerli, Merete. Congressional Research Service. Knowledge Service Group. May 2007. How to Develop and Write a Grant Proposal. Online at [http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/RL32159_20070525.pdf]. February 2009
- 6 Bickers at 817-818
- 7 United States. Department of Commerce. Census Bureau. Federal Grants-in-Aid to State and Local Governments: 1990 to 2008. Accessed Feb. 25, 2009. Online at [<http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/tables/09s0414.pdf>].
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