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Getting Your Money's Worth: Negotiating with Research Agencies

ABSTRACT

When seeking grants from a funding agency, the grantwriter must first engage in some pre-proposal research. This stage includes communicating with the agency to make sure a project fits the funder's mission and that it meets eligibility requirements and other guidelines. A telephone contact or face-to-face contact may be appropriate. When writing the formal proposal, the grantwriter should indicate budget, methods of evaluation and dissemination, and follow other recommended techniques for effective proposal writing. After the proposal is written, it will be reviewed by the funding agency staff, and the grantwriter will have to answer any questions raised by the agency.

INTRODUCTION

One of the potentially most difficult tasks that any grantwriter faces is negotiating with potential funders. After all, they have the money, and you want some of it. Upon initial examination, this appears to be a power situation in which the grantseeker is at a definite disadvantage. However, upon further reflection, perhaps it is not so.

PRE-PROPOSAL RESEARCH

Before negotiation can begin, two parties have to want to accomplish a particular goal. On the part of the grantseeker, it is imperative to have articulated a project that clearly defines what is to be accomplished that fits the grantmaker's mission. Certainly you already know this because you have done your library research (after all—who is better qualified than a librarian to have made absolutely sure what previous grants have been made, to whom, and for what amounts).

Communication with the foundation, granting agency, or donor to ascertain sponsor interest begins the negotiation process. A clear understanding of eligibility requirements, proposal guidelines, deadlines for submission and review cycles, what can be funded (e.g., overhead, capital costs, books), funding levels and usual level of competition, and what similar projects have been funded (with insights gained by discussion with previous recipients and a thorough reading of annual reports) will ultimately assist the grantseeker in leveling the playing field upon which negotiation will take place. A telephone contact with the potential funder is appropriate to ascertain that your proposed project fits within the funder's guidelines—for sure.

If appropriate, you should inquire about visiting with the potential grantor or donor regarding your proposed research. Face-to-face contact provides another opportunity to minimize the power differential and thus facilitate the negotiation process. Building a relationship is crucial to long-term success. How you build rapport will often depend upon the type of foundation (large or small, corporate or private, family member living or dead, national or local in scope) or granting agency. There is no single foundation cultural. Being in the same community facilitates collaboration and partnerships. Too many proposals attempt to stretch the potential donor or grantmaker beyond their area of interest. The reverse can also be true. That is, the proposal writer, often under perceived pressure to get a grant in order to gain tenure, salary enhancement, or recognition, develops a proposal that does not fit the mission of the institution. Community foundations are a rapidly growing segment that library researchers should be reviewing.

If your telephone call and visit has indicated an interest in your work, a written pre-proposal to the funding agency is the best way to confirm interest and to open the dialogue that will lead to the major proposal. A short and concise two to three pages that clearly state what the grantor is being requested to fund, the significance of the research, who will be involved (Are there other researchers working on this issue? Are you collaborating?), why the issue needs to be researched, and how your research is supported by your home institution is all that is needed. A perceived fit between your request and the foundation's or donor's interest is a must to begin a negotiation.

THE FORMAL PROPOSAL

The formal proposal will ultimately be the document from which you and the grantmaker negotiate. Therefore, it is incumbent for you to indicate how much you are requesting illustrated in a reasonably detailed budget, how it is to be accomplished, and how the work will be evaluated and disseminated. Discussion of how you plan to disseminate your results is especially important because it is one of the major ways by which the funder evaluates if its resources will benefit the public good. The format for your formal proposal will, of course, vary depending upon the funder's guidelines and expectations. However, be sure to focus your project (do not try to solve the world's problems). But do not become parochial and certainly avoid what is commonly known in the grantmaker world as "continuing doctorate syndrome." What is it that you are doing that relates to the "public good?"

Among all the proposal tips or tricks offered by experts and from personal experience, I would emphasize techniques that guide the reader to what they seek. In other words, use a table of contents, key headings, and key phrases that address the issues that the funder has articulated. Use concise language with attention-getting statements. In other words, KISS—Keep It Short and Simple. Even though it is trite, it bears repeating since in our last review of proposals, at least half failed to do this very thing. It may be that so much of proposal writing and fund-raising falls under the rubric of "of course" information. That is, we skip over what we think we know and don't learn from it. Countless funders have been heard to echo the refrain—"They didn't learn what they already know." (See Gooch [1987], Grant & Berkowitz [1988], and Priest & Clark [1990] for other suggestions.)

REVIEW STAGE

Staff review of your proposal will often produce a set of questions and concerns for you to answer. This is really the point at which you get to test your negotiation skills. A careful review of the questions raised by the agency or donor mandates a response to those that you can address and an explanation of why you cannot meet certain other requests. Do not be timid in explaining why you prefer a certain approach or why "x" cannot be accomplished in this proposal. Forthright and honest responses will enhance your position. It is imperative to remember as you attempt to balance the power differential that the funder cannot carry out the project. They need you to do this. Without you and others like you, one part of the philanthropic equation would be lost, and thus no action could take place and the entire process would cease to

exist. Remember, however, if you are negotiating with a foundation program officer, they must also sell your proposal to their board before it can get funded. It behooves the grantmaker to work with you in building the strongest case for your proposal.

As in most negotiation, knowing why you may not win is important information to build your strategy upon, so is the case in grantseeking. The following eight reasons why your proposal may not succeed are offered as a review check:

1. The need has not been demonstrated.
2. The proposal does not fit the potential funder's goals.
3. It is poorly written.
4. The budget is not in the range of the funding source.
5. The project is too ambitious.
6. The guidelines for submission were not followed.
7. It does not appear that the grantseeker has the capabilities to carry out the project.
8. The methods and/or evaluation are not clear, or they are inadequate.

Finally, let me encourage you to keep trying. The fund-raising cycle is a constant one of developing relationships based upon a shared mission, asking, giving, and recognition. Such a process cannot take place without two parties at the negotiation table. Both are crucial.

REFERENCES

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