Mystery or Magic--A Grants Review Process that Works

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Mystery or Magic--A Grants Review Process that Works

Abstract
For Extension professionals involved with Extension or community funded grant programs, the grant review process can be mysterious or open and informative. An open review process that includes interviewing grant applicants in a collegial setting can better position reviewers to make decisions and provide a learning experience for the applicants. It takes the mystery out of the process and provides grant applicants with valuable insights to assist them in future applications. This article outlines a grants review process that both reviewers and applicants have found useful.

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Background

Extension organizations award grants to seed innovative programs. Many Extension professionals serve on community boards that fund grants. The review of these grants can be mysterious and secretive, or it can be a magical, open learning process for the reviewers and grant applicants.

At Ohio State University, the mystery is taken out of the grants review process for two grants programs that support outreach and engagement projects. Since 1997, OSU CARES (Community Access to Resources and Educational Services) and University Outreach and Engagement have awarded over $1 million in grants to support expanded outreach. OSU CARES provides $10,000 grants to fund outreach partnerships between OSU Extension and University departments. The University Outreach and Engagement grants support departments to expand their outreach and engagement mission and range from $10,000 to $100,000.

Review Objectives

The grants process is a means to seed new initiatives and to educate both applicants and reviewers. Reviewers broaden their understanding of outreach/engagement. Applicants expand their understanding of a well developed initiative. Both learn about potential partnerships across units.

Grants Review Preparation

With these objectives in mind, an open review process is used. A review team is identified that represents the diversity of Extension (for OSU CARES) or the university (for University Outreach and Engagement). Because the reviewers vote for what they perceive as the strongest grants throughout the review process, it is important to have a committee large enough so that when the reviewers vote there are a sufficient number of ballots to allow for natural clustering of votes around the strongest grants. Yet it is important to have the committee small enough to be manageable. This is usually nine to 12 members.

For the first step, the reviewers score grant proposals as "fund," "maybe fund," or "do not fund." This initial review reduces the number of applications to a manageable number. Reviewers are assigned grants to score in this initial review. At least three reviewers should read and score each proposal. By summarizing the scores and facilitating a discussion with the reviewers the grants can

be grouped into three categories:

1. Invite for an interview,

2. Maybe invite for an interview, or

3. Do not invite for an interview.

This facilitated discussion is especially useful for the "maybe invite" category. It gives the committee an opportunity to debate and discuss the merits of the proposals which then impacts who is invited for interviews.

When it is decided which grants will be interviewed, a reviewer is designated as "lead questioner" for each grant. The team then discusses the questions reviewers have about each grant. This helps the "lead questioner" ask meaningful questions during the interview process.

Interviewing Grants

Next, the reviewers meet to interview the grant applicants. For this meeting, the reviewers read and review all applications, and the lead questioners finalize their questions for the grant authors. This meeting is divided into three sections. First the reviewers meet for 45 minutes to preview the questions. Then the committee meets with all grant applicants to ask the questions. Finally the committee meets to make decisions on funding which usually take 45 minutes.

During the interview section, all grant applicants and reviewers meet together. The grant applicant comes forward, and the lead questioner spends 7 to 8 minutes asking the grant applicant questions.

The facilitator is essential. She or he needs to clearly articulate and manage a very collegial environment. The facilitator manages the time so each applicant receives equal interview time. This is aided by encouraging applicants to provide concise answers with new information when responding to questions, rather than rehashing their proposal.

The review process gives the applicants an opportunity to learn about each application and to meet possible future collaborators. The reviewers have a stronger base to make decisions since their questions about the proposals are answered.

Making Final Decisions

After interviewing the applicants, the reviewers identify grants they wish to fund. The grants are listed on a flip chart, and reviewers give their top grants a hash mark. With a review of the scores and a facilitated discussion, the reviewers can make their funding decision usually in less than an hour.

It is the role of the facilitator to ensure that the reviewers conduct a sound review. The facilitator must identify key decision-making points and ask reviewers to validate their decisions. These points may include when reviewers identified grants to invite for interviews, when lead questioners identified questions, and when reviewers identify grants for funding. The facilitator must make sure reviewers are comfortable with their decisions by asking questions such as the following.

- Do the grants fit into the mission of the grants program?

- Do these grants represent the diversity of the applications?

- Are you proud of your decisions?

Conclusion

Does the process work? The feedback from both the reviewers and grant applications affirms the process. Each year new members of the review committee comment that they did not think it would work to include all the applicants in the interviews, but to their surprise it worked well, and the applicants were intently listening to their "competition." As mentioned previously it has allowed for linkages among applicants. The interview often alters the team's decisions because of the new information gained through the interviews.

Since this process was put into place, questioning about why an applicant did not receive funding has decreased. During the review, applicants see the difference between their grants and that of the award winners. Also, the facilitator can use the review as a teaching moment. At the end of the interviews, the facilitator summarizes the questions asked and discusses the essential information the reviewers saw in proposals. This discussion reinforces the objectives identified in the grant program and takes the mystery out of applying and awarding grants.