



# Proposal Development Handbook

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American Association of State  
Colleges and Universities

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In an increasingly competitive funding environment, OFP provides a Washington presence, supplements campus resources, and saves staff time.

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**PROPOSAL  
DEVELOPMENT  
HANDBOOK**



Office of Federal Programs  
American Association of State Colleges and Universities

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# PROPOSAL DEVELOPMENT HANDBOOK

## 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. Foundations have much greater discretion in disbursing their funds. Although they do have to operate within the boundaries established by the Internal Revenue

Service to maintain their tax-exempt status, each foundation is basically free to dictate how and on what it spends its money. No legislative overseer determines what the foundation's funding priorities will be for a given year or how it must dispense its funds.

Both private foundations and government agencies are alike, however, in that they want to spend their money wisely and support projects that hold the greatest promise of making a real contribution to their area of concern. Consequently, whether you are applying to a government program or a private foundation, it is important to propose a well thought out project that addresses a topic of interest to the agency or foundation and that will result in an outcome that can be objectively measured.

#### **STEPS IN PROPOSAL DEVELOPMENT**

Proposal development activities fall into the following sequence:

- putting an idea into a project format;
- identifying potential sponsors;
- ascertaining sponsor interest; and
- preparing a full proposal.

### **PUTTING YOUR IDEA INTO A PROJECT FORMAT**

Sponsors fund activities, not ideas. No matter how good your ideas or noble your intentions, you must translate them into a specific set of activities in order to get funding. Potential 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 set up 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 work space 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. It 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 Office of Federal Programs' GrantSearch), government-sponsored funding guides (such as the *Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance*), or subscription 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. They, 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 information sources listed in the back of this publication identify a few of the basic reference works in this area.) The World Wide Web also has made it easier to identify funding organizations. Most 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.

### **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, or 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, the proposal may be reviewed by readers who are not specialists in your area and who must evaluate many similar proposals in a short time. Therefore, your proposal must be well-organized and concise and must avoid any 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 directive. Whenever sponsors provide guidelines or direc-

tions, 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 for why 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 diminished. 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 publications 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, 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 evaluation criteria for each section thoroughly. When evaluation points are assigned to the different sections, one weak section can eliminate you from the competition.
- 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 which you are dealing with 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 review your outline, funding strategy, and draft proposal. Their suggestions may strengthen your proposal and help you avoid a resubmission.
- Explore relationships other than that of grantor-grantee. Investigate summer residencies or sabbatical internships. Serve as a consultant to or subcontractor on a colleague's funded project. 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**

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 Office of Federal Programs' Web page, accessible to all OFP subscribing institutions, provides gateway access to numerous 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, usually for a fee, 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 (September 1997).

**ANNOUNCEMENTS OF FEDERAL GRANT  
AND CONTRACT OPPORTUNITIES**

*Federal Register*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office. A daily publication of notices of federal government rules, regulations, and application deadlines for federal agency grant programs. (Available both in hard copy and over the Internet at: [http://www.access.gpo.gov/su\\_docs/aces/aces140.htm](http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/aces/aces140.htm).)

*Commerce Business Daily (CBD)*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office. A daily listing of federal government solicitations for research, development, and training contracts. (Available both in hard copy and over the Internet at: <http://cbdnet.access.gpo.gov/>.)

*NIH Guide for Grants and Contracts*. Washington, D.C.: National Institutes of Health. A weekly electronic announcement of National Institutes of Health research opportunities, as well as policy and administrative information. (Available over the Internet only at: <http://www.nih.gov/grants/guide/index.htm>.)

*NSF Bulletin*. Washington, D.C.: National Science Foundation. A monthly bulletin of program deadlines, new initiatives, and policy and administrative announcements at the National Science Foundation. (Available electronically at <http://www.nsf.gov/od/lpa/news/publicat/bulletin/bulletin.htm>.) While NSF does provide hard copies of its materials, it is moving toward a totally electronic information system, accessible over the Internet at: <http://www.nsf.gov/>.

## RESOURCES FOR IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL SPONSORS

*Annual Register of Grant Support.* New Providence, N.J.: R.R.

Bowker. Includes general information on over 3,000 federal and private foundation giving programs. Information is indexed by subject, program area, and geographic locations. An index of foundation personnel is also provided.

*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 level, and contact persons. Published annually.

(Available over the Internet at: <http://www.gsa.gov/fdac/>.)

*Corporate Foundation Profiles.* New York, N.Y.: The Foundation

Center. Provides in-depth information on over 200 company-sponsored foundations, all of which have assets over \$1 million or give at least \$100,000 or more each year. Published biennially.

*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.

*Directory of Grants in the Humanities.* Phoenix, Ariz.: Oryx Press.

Lists over 3,500 programs that specifically support research and study in the humanities, including such fields as literature, history, anthropology, ethics, religion, and folklore. Listings are indexed by subject, sponsoring organization, program type, and geographic location. Published biennially.

*Directory of Research Grants.* Phoenix, Ariz.: Oryx Press. Provides

information on almost 6,000 funding programs and includes a brief guide to planning and writing proposals. Information is indexed by subject, sponsoring organization, program type, and geographic location. A list of useful World Wide Web sites is included. Published biennially.

*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®.)

#### **“How To” GUIDES FOR DEVELOPING PROPOSALS**

Geever, Jane and Patricia McNeil. *The Foundation Center's Guide to Proposal Writing*. Revised Edition. New York, N.Y.: The Foundation Center, 1997. Offers basic, step-by-step advice on how to develop a proposal, cultivate funders, and follow up if the proposal is not funded. Especially useful are the perspectives and opinions contributed by foundation and corporation executives.

Hall, Mary S. *Getting Funded: A Complete Guide to Proposal Writing*. Portland, Oreg.: Continuing Education Press, 1988. Provides a thorough review of the grantseeking process, including an explanation of the advantages and disadvantages of federal and private sources of support, and sample pages from various kinds of applications.

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. A telephone directory of the executive branch of the federal government, this guide provides a helpful overview of the federal bureaucracy, listing individuals by agency, office, and title. (Separate versions are published for Congress and the States.)

*The United States Government Manual*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office. The official federal government handbook, this manual provides background information on the structure and functions of all the federal agencies, as well as some quasi-governmental organizations.



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in AASCU's Office of Federal Programs  
and edited by Anthony Foster.  
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Dean Kleinert and Libby Costello.



Office of Federal Programs  
American Association of State  
Colleges and Universities  
1307 New York Avenue, NW ■ Fifth Floor  
Washington, DC 20005-4701