

Eight Mini-Lessons in Budgeting for Grant Proposal Writing



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ABSTRACT

As education funding becomes more the responsibility of faculty members at higher education institutions and teachers at public and private K-12 schools, writing successful grant proposals is an essential skill. With several years experience as a productive grant proposal writer, Project Director, and Principal Investigator, the author shares eight lessons learned when writing the budget of a grant proposal.

With the financial crises that many higher education institutions and public and private K-12 schools are facing, schools must increase resources by receiving grant and foundation funds. Faculty and teachers that previously concentrated on teaching and research are now additionally responsible for procuring monies for their institutions. Neophyte grant writers need assistance, especially in creating budgets. Krathwohl (1977) defines budget as "an operational statement of the project in monetary terms (p. 47)." New project directors who have "inherited" budgets not developed by them can attest to the difficulty of administering grants with poorly designed budgets.

Most grant proposal writers include the major components of the budget such as salaries, fringe benefits, travel, and supplies. Many authors have written articles on how to excel in grant proposal writing (Bayley, 1995; Krathwohl, 1977; Sexton, 1982; Ward, 2002). These usually include several general suggestions. First, grant proposal writers must find funding agencies that have the same interests and goals as the school and make sure these are targeted in the proposal, such as bolding key words

or phrases from the Request for Proposal (RFP). Second, all guidelines must be met (including submission deadlines) and the proposal must be written in the required format. Third, for proposals with limitations to the length of the proposal, charts, timelines and graphs can often present more information than a narrative in the same amount of space. Fourth, grant proposal writers must make sure that the proposal has enough time to go through the proper channels of the institution for administrative approval. Finally, as all successful grant proposal writers will agree, the proposed budget must match the narrative and neophyte applicants must be careful that their estimated costs are accurate and not inflated; however, inexperienced writers may not be able to foresee items that should be included (Sexton, 1982; Ward, 2002).

As a grant evaluator for over fifteen years and an experienced project director and principal investigator, the author has learned several small lessons in budget development that grant proposal writers need to address which are usually not addressed in general grant proposal writing.

Mini-Lesson #1: Make sure you have a more than adequate number of positions to implement the project.

It is far easier to cancel positions originally allocated and relocate those personnel monies elsewhere than to ask your funding agency for more money for new positions not in the proposal. In one project the author spent six months gathering personnel data to justify a new position. Be sure and investigate the number of positions and their duties from similar grants to determine the number of positions needed in the proposal.

Mini-Lesson #2: If possible, allocate higher salaries for grant employees than regular institution employees, particularly in the final year of the grant.

Because grant funds are considered “soft monies,” and workers are only guaranteed employment as long as the grant continues, it can be difficult to find people willing to work without job security. This is especially true in the last year of the grant, when workers will be looking for jobs after the grant expires. As employees find work throughout that last year, the grant administrator might lose key personnel before the end of the grant; salary incentives and commitment to the project help keep essential people. Before starting to create a personnel budget for a proposal, the grant proposal writer should meet with the institution’s Human Resources Office (HR); many institutions have salary regulations regarding specific positions (Sexton, 1982). For example, although the author had allocated reasonable salaries that had been approved by the grant funding agency, due to institution restrictions, she was unable to use the salaries in the budget. Check with Human Resources about longevity salary incentives and if possible, include those in the proposed budget. At the very least, fund several temporary or part-time positions in that final year of the grant. Don’t forget to include generous estimated annual salary increases for all personnel even though this has usually not yet been nego-

tiated. “Estimate costs slightly on the high side to account for inflation” (Brewer, Achilles, Fuhrman & Hollingsworth, 2001).

Mini-Lesson #3: Put as few restrictions as possible in your requirements for top administrative personnel.

While you want highly qualified people and the grant readers will want assurance that employees hired will be able to meet the grant’s objectives, the author learned that candidates with graduate degrees, particularly minorities who have numerous other job opportunities, can be difficult to hire for grant administration. The grant funding agency is not enthusiastic about changing the position requirements once the grant proposal has been accepted. In addition, it was discovered that a graduate degree does not necessarily guarantee success; employees should be hired on their merits, experience, and performance.

Mini-Lesson #4: Try to elevate the administrative assistant position to the highest level possible.

After losing several good administrative assistants to regular institution positions, the author realized that the position was being used as a “holding position” until a regular position could be secured. This was solved by changing the job description to a higher level position (Office Manager, including grant fiscal responsibilities and personnel supervision) that was not so easily obtained in the university.

Mini-Lesson #5: Include money in the budget for personnel recruitment.

Costs for advertising open positions as well as bringing candidates to the university or school district must be included in the projected budget. The more extensive the search, the better pool of candidates. Personally interviewing final candidates assures a better “fit” in the organization.

Mini-Lesson #6: Money should be allocated for office equipment, including more funds for the first year of implementation.

When the administration indicated that it would provide office furniture and equipment should the grant be funded, the author did not expect to be rummaging in the basement for second-hand desks and chairs. Make sure you get something in writing from your administration regarding their commitments to the grant as well as a clause regarding the quality of those commitments. It would have been better to include the furniture and equipment in the grant budget proposal. Should the grant run multiple years, include equipment upgrading.

Mini-Lesson #7: Assure you have adequate funding for travel.

In addition to the regular traveling fees such as transportation, per diem for meals, hotels, etc. don't forget to include several other items: registration fees for those attending conferences, fees for booths at conferences, and travel for student and/or personnel recruitment. While the author estimated transportation costs often based on low-fee restricted airfare (such as non-refundable tickets and/or Saturday night stays) she learned that staff, particularly single parents, often cannot stay the extra days due to family commitments. Make sure you include the regular airfares when creating your budget.

Mini-Lesson #8: Should your grants include tuition payments for students, don't forget the numerous additional fees for which students are responsible.

At the university level, estimate annual tuition increases. Include student fees such as monies for: on-line courses (many universities charge extra for the privilege of taking a course on-line); required professional exams such as the PRAXIS and the preparation courses for such

exams; fingerprinting and criminal investigation reports; student teaching and/or graduation applications; and costs for graduation such as gown rental and matriculation fees.

While not every project need can be anticipated in the grant proposal budget, and budgets are always annually revised, the above eight mini-lessons should assist new grant proposal writers in preparing budgets for their proposals. These small lessons are secondary to the major budget components that most proposals include; however, they can save the project director or principal investigator many hours of budget revision and administrative frustration. A well thought-out budget is a necessity in grant success.

Not only can grant proposal writing secure much needed monies for educational institutions, receiving a grant can lead to future research projects, professional articles, and conference presentations, not to mention the advantages of a professional collaboration with those involved in the grant. It is well worth the author's time and effort. In today's world, grant funding is not a luxury; it's a necessity.

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