

This was prepared to assist those who have not had much experience and/or success in preparing and submitting proposals to various competitive programs. This information is generic in the sense that it lays out a number of principles, recommendations, and hints that are based on common sense and over 20 years of experience. The hints and recommendations are useful, regardless of the type of grant program being considered or sponsoring organization. It goes without saying that there is no guarantee of 'successfully submitting and receiving a grant if all the principles, hints and suggestions are followed, but at the same time, the information presented should not be cause for any proposal to be rejected.

### **Ten Things You Gotta Do To Get Money**

The following recommendations provide a logical approach to organize one's activities and thoughts while going about the process of preparing a proposal for submission to a grant program.

1. Find the program right for you and your idea.
2. Become a "student" of the RFA/RFP /NOFA Request for applications, Request for Proposals, Notice of Funds Availability)
3. Develop a calendar of key proposal preparation and submission. , Events.
4. Understand criteria used to evaluate your proposal.
5. Write the proposal logically and clearly.
6. Develop a plan by which you will evaluate your project against expected Outcomes,
7. Prepare budget with, strong justification-a budget narrative.
8. Know about the review process and your reviewers.
9. Fill out forms completely and correctly.
10. Schedule enough time when you, are "finished" for others to provide an honest and objective critique and for administrative requirements. Send to arrive on time.

### **General Rules of the Game**

Before getting into the things you need to do to get money, it is important that anyone contemplating preparing and submitting a proposal ensure that their idea incorporated the following before they begin preparing a proposal. Can you meet the following tests with regard to your proposal?

- Is your idea appropriate to the program to which you wish to apply to?
- Is your idea relevant to the purposes of the funding program?
- Are you and your organization eligible to even apply (Some programs are limited to particular target groups or organizations)?

Have you obtained and read program materials (if not, how will you answer these questions)?

- Have in your mind an exciting and informative project description for the program manager and reviewers.

- Are you aware of what forms and other paperwork is required as part of your proposal?
- Do you know what the deadlines and time frames are of the program? Can you get everything done in time?
- Do you feel comfortable calling the program manager or director with questions?

### **Finding the Right Program**

Many Federal/and State agencies and other organizations may have an array of various programs? The National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, and the National Research Initiative have numerous programs they sponsor. The Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service also has a number of other programs that are not research based, such as the Community Food Projects Program, Agricultural Risk Management Education Program, the SARE Program, and others. The USDA with its many agencies has many funding opportunities. Does your idea fit the aim' of the program you are thinking about applying to?

- National Research Initiative (NRI-CSREES)
  - Federal-State Marketing Improvement Program (FSMIP-AMS)
  - Capacity Building (CSREES Higher Education Programs)
  - Community Food Projects
  - Challenge Grants (CSREES Higher Education Programs)
  - Integrated Programs (CSREES research, extension or combinations thereof)
  - Small Business Innovation Research Program (Government-wide, including CSREES)
  - Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers' and Ranchers (CSREES-often referred to as the "2501 Program")
  - Multicultural Scholars Program (CSREES-Higher Education Programs)
- Agricultural

- Risk Management Education Program (CSREES. and the Risk Management Agency, USDA)

### **Finding the Right Program for You and Your Idea**

How do you find out about all of these programs?

- Network-Talk to friends, colleagues; university folks-ask them what they know about available funding programs and if your idea fits.
- Examine some RFAs even if they are a year or two old. Programs rarely change significantly year-to-year. Does your idea fit somewhere?
- When you think you've found the right program for your idea or project, get the most 'recent Request for Applications.
- In the RFA-Check on eligibility ... but this is not totally critical; it does not matter who gets the grant as long as you get some bucks, right? Partnering goes a long way here and actually many programs have partnerships and' collaborators as important parts of their evaluation criteria; if you or your organization are not eligible, then work with someone who is eligible.

***"Deadlines are NOT made to be broken. A deadline is a deadline"***

- Outline the main purposes of the program-Determine where your idea fits in; mainstream? Or is it on the fringe? This increases the challenges!
- Find out where the abstracts of previously funded projects are. These are a great source of information (most are now online somewhere).
- Call the program contact and discuss your ideas relative to the program in which you think it fits.
- If your idea is covered, but does not appear mainstream, you have got a big challenge-competition is tough and tight, and being on the periphery of a central theme or major program goal does not help you.
- Eligibility-Do not waste your 'time if you are not eligible. Your proposal will be sent back or trashed. Call the program contact if you are not sure.
- Deadline Dates: receive date vs. transmittal (postmark) date (most programs now use receipt dates). If your proposal is late without any mitigating' circumstances, it will be sent back or trashed.
- Indirect Costs-Allowed? Limits?  
Talk to your office of sponsored programs or call the program contact and discuss.
- Is a Funding Match Required? Critical-if a match is required and you have none, guess what?
- Major Goal of Purpose(s) of the Program- Will you be addressing it?

**Become a "Student" of the RFA**

The Request for Applications (RFA), including Notice of Funds Availability (NOFA) and Request for Proposals (RFP), is the key document that provides all the information you need to develop, organize, and prepare your proposal. Most include a format outline as well as evaluation criteria.

- You have to understand the main purposes of the program before you begin your proposal-that is usually, upfront in the RFA!
- Does your idea fit within the main purposes?
- Do not waste time applying to the, wrong program. Square pegs do not fit in round holes.
- Never hesitate to call the program contact-there is always a point of contact in every RFA; if the program contact says your idea fits, then it is up to you to properly represent that idea in your proposal.
- Once you are pretty sure your idea fits, then the fun begins, the drudgery, the toil, the work, the boredom, the challenge!
- The RFA holds the info you need to prepare a competitive proposal. .
- Directions; outline, evaluation criteria, deadlines.
- Know the RFA forward and backward. If' something is confusing, whom do you, call? The program contact.
- Most RFAs contain directions as to how to prepare a proposal, often times including a topical outline.
- Use this topical outline also for your Table of Contents format.

- If no outline, look at the evaluation criteria for these often give good hints as to what folks are looking for and their relative importance.
- By becoming a student of the RFA you become seeped with understanding the key components of the program- its goals and areas of emphasis.
- Your proposal will (better) reflect the key components in a logical, coherent way.

Reviewers first read the proposal summary to see if the proposal fits within the program; so your project summary is one of the most important paragraph(s) you will write.

### **A Calendar of Events is Your Friend**

A calendar can help you organize your work schedule. Note the following:

- Deadlines are NOT made to be broken.

A deadline is a deadline is a deadline-no flexibility here!

- "Back plan" two-three weeks from the deadline noted in the RFA-that is when your proposal writing needs to be done,
- Establish a non-revocable "I am finished" deadlines for various sections of your proposal.
- Allow 2-3 weeks for review by calloused, insensitive experts who could care less, whether they hurt your feelings. Also allow time for administrative review at your university or organization.
- Develop a detailed outline of your proposal and establish time periods for each major section; crosscheck your outline with RFA instructions and evaluation criteria. If you hurry a proposal, reviewers will see this and will raise questions about your scheduling and organizational skills. If they raise questions on these issues, they will not be kind

### **Criteria Used by Reviewers You Must Know!**

Nearly all RFAs contain the criteria by which proposals will be judged; it is imperative that you understand and are familiar with the criteria, and their weights if they are so noted.

- RFAs ordinarily contain a section on the criteria that will be used by reviewers to evaluate your proposal. If you do not see such criteria, call the program contact.
- Understand these criteria BEFORE you begin preparing your proposal.
- Write them down; put them on mirrors, windows, desktops ... get them down good these are a major guide, for you.
- Criteria often come with "weights" or percentages, or some other means of measure.
- Provides you with great understanding as to where you really need to put your efforts. Put yourself in the shoes of, a reviewer, contemplating the evaluation criteria, and then reading your proposal.

### **Writing the Proposal**

Logic and Clarity. Easy to say hard to do. This is hard and difficult work. Every word counts. Each sentence counts.

- The most important 250 words (or other limitations' as provided by the RFA you are working with) in the entire proposal: THE SUMMARY or ABSTRACT.

- The summary or abstract captures the essence of your proposal-it must be clear, concise, well articulated, and logical-usually limited to half of what you "need" to write!
- Write the summary after everything else is completed. Make sure it does what you need it to do ----excite your reviewers!
- The summary is often the only item read by all reviewers.
- The summary sets the tone for your proposal.
- Organize the proposals around the RFA provided outline or evaluation criteria whichever is most logical.
- Reviewers will at least know you read the RFA (in some proposal evaluation panels or sessions, the author has heard reviewers wonder out loud as to whether the applicant 'had actually read the RFA).
- Following the prescribed format makes reviewers happy and more generous: an easier to read proposal when compared to others gives the former a significant advantage (assuming of course the idea has relevance and legitimacy).

Making reviewers work hard is like shooting, one's own foot and that hurts!

#### **Remember**

- You make reviewers work hard by not following directions and formats and that gives rise to one of many of Bailey's idioms: The degree to which you make a reviewer work hard decreases the probability of success exponentially.
  - Be logical in proposal construction.
  - Your background description establishes the need for your project and that it fits the program.
  - The need can be readily identified with the purposes of the program. Make sure you tell them that 'in the proposal-be explicit.
  - Follow Directions-it is amazing how many proposals do not follow directions!
- Have your proposal flow logically

Goals

Objectives

***"Bailey's Idiom: The degree to which you make the reviewer work hard decreases the probability of success exponentially. "***

- Methodologies with associated timelines

Expected Outcomes and Impacts

- Evaluation-how you' will measure expected outcomes
- Your proposal's mission is to make sure reviewers are convinced that:  
The proposal goal (s) reflect major purposes of programs.
- That if you accomplish your stated objectives, you will, attain t goal(s).
- That if methodology IS followed, objectives will be attained.
- That the expected results are directly related to overall goals and purposes of program.

That you can do the job!

Reviewers must be convinced:

~ The evaluation plan you present will keep you on track and will identify problems that are subject to solutions.

- That the probability of your project success is acceptable reviewers think the project can be successfully accomplished, thereby making it a contributor to the programs purposes and goals
- That the proposal needs to be funded (relative to other proposals)
  - Another Bailey idiom: If, through your proposal you create a reviewer champion(s), the probability of success increases exponentially!

**The Budget and Narrative** Many proposal submitters have a hard time with this part of a proposal. Budgets vary by type of proposal, region of the country the proposal comes from, and myriad other variables and factors. The test usually followed is the "test of reasonableness!" Look at your budget, given what you propose to do, and the people and supplies, travel, etc. included-is it reasonable? Many programs do not use budgets as an evaluation factor, but a poorly justified budget or an inadequate narrative raises questions that go far beyond the budget per se. So look at previous funded projects. What did they get? Is your budget over that maximum specified in the RFA? Often your office of sponsored programs or, the equivalent will have some sound advice!

- Use the timelines to compute amount of time various people will spend in carrying out the project (person months, for example).
- While usually not part of the evaluation, unreasonable budgets kill proposals for they create skeptics within reviewer ranks.
- Keep budgets within guidelines as provided in the RFA; budgets are judged on the degree of reason, able ness given the proposed amount of work.
- Understand what you are allowed to spend on and what you are not allowed to spend on.
- Use the budget form provided and then provide detailed justification for each line item in a budget narrative; follow the budget line order found on the form (do not make reviewers work hard).
- The Narrative, or justification, should spell, out how you compute each line item.
- Salary: hourly rate times number of hours times days or on a monthly basis.
- Provide percentage of benefits if not computed in indirect costs.
- Make sure the numbers add up.
- Talk to program contact about summer salaries-are they allowed?
- Put yourself in the shoes of a reviewer who has read about 25 proposals and their accompanying budgets.

#### **Understand the Review Process-Who Are the Reviewers?**

In various competitive programs, proposals may be reviewed using many different techniques. CSREES' National Research Initiative" for example, as does the National Science Foundation and the, National Institutes of Health use peer panels to review proposals. In programs where relatively few proposals are received, the program may use a system of merit reviews, in house with usually an independent, out-of-house reviewer or two. It is important to understand how your proposal will be reviewed.

- Reviewers depending on programs are provided guidance on evaluating proposals using evaluation criteria as published in the RFA. Most times, you have what the reviewers have.
  - Reviewers discuss each proposal strengths, weakness, qualifications, probability of success, etc.
  - Remember, you can fool some of the people some times, but you cannot fool reviewers!
  - Reviewers give individual scores and then when they meet as a group, they discuss the proposal and arrive at a "consensus score".
  - Reviewers are looking for proposals they can champion and those they can dismiss-make it hard for them to dismiss yours.
  - By following directions found in the RFA, you help the reviewers review. They really like that!
  - Not following directions makes them work hard-they get angry, cheap, unforgiving, mean, and cranky!
  - Proposals in any given year are judged against all other proposals reviewed in the program in that year.
  - For the most part, reviewers are people like you and me. Always busy, no time for extras.
  - They take on the additional burden of reviewing proposals gratis, thereby making great contributions to the professions.
  - Your goal is to have your proposal make at least one reviewer champion, so think like one. For the most part (and I really mean most part) reviewers are fair and objective; in panel situations, they police each other.
- Dumb but Important Stuff** Filling out the Forms: Often a proposal will be accepted for review, but certain information is missing, or the forms are filled out incorrectly. When this happens, questions are raised that go far further than the form being reviewed. If the abstract or summary guidance says 250 words, and you provide 500 words, that is not looked on positively!
- Fill in all the required forms completely. If you have questions who do you call? The program contact!
  - When the form asks for telephone numbers, provide the telephone numbers and not FAX numbers and vice versa.
  - Make sure email addresses are complete exceedingly important in the e-GOV / e-GRANTS world!
  - The amount requested on the Coversheet should be the amount you computed for your total budget. Make sure the numbers are the same and consistent throughout your proposal.
- "Fill out all the required forms completely. "*
- Make sure the Project Director signs the Proposal Cover Page.
  - Make sure the Authorized Organizational Representative (he or she who can approve expenditures) signs as well
  - Make sure the Summary Page (or equivalent) is filled out completely. The Summary is the most important words you will write as part of the proposal. Again, if have questions, call the National Program Leader or the program contact.

## **Critique and Submission**

Most proposals that receive in-house critical reviews are often those that fare the best when evaluated. Most of us have experienced the situation where we become "too close" to that which we are doing, and fail to see some pretty stupid stuff. Stuff that the conscientious reviewer will invariably see. So:

- Make sure you allow time for an in-house critique before submission. Send it to someone who is not your good friend. Someone who:
  - talks frankly, bluntly and clearly; you do not want someone who beats around the bush .
  - has little sympathy for you or your ego
  - is smart, crafty and wise
  - is insensitive to your sensitivities
    - has had success in obtaining grants in the past
- incorporate - relevant - critique comments as appropriate.
  - eGOV / eGRANTS proposal system will be implemented by all government agencies in the relatively near future. Make sure you submit proposal using correct media (paper? Electronically?)
- DO NOT miss the deadline-and make sure you understand when that is. If an "Act of God" occurs resulting in you being unable to make the deadline, call the program contact immediately. You must document the circumstances if you are to receive an extension.

## **Final Proposal Preparation Words** Some final words ...

- Always assume luck is on your side, for luck never hurts.
- If at first you don't succeed, don't take it personally; be persistent and try and try again.
- If have any questions, who do you call? The program contact, of course!

## **Leveraging Your Grant Dollars**

When resources are constrained, which they most often are, it makes sense to leverage any grant dollars you may receive. One project in one program can lead to another project in another program. The proposal that can show some leveraging of funds, when compared to an equal quality proposal without leveraged funds, usually wins the tiebreaker. Often, your proposal discusses an idea that may have application in other programs. So learn the differences, and-submit another proposal to that program. Do not send the same proposal to two different programs without informing both programs that you have done so. This should not prejudice either proposal but not informing both programs can pose great problems in the future. Most funding agencies are precluded from funding the same proposal that has or is being funded by another agency or program.

The following may prove useful as you go about the process of developing, writing, and submitting a proposal:

- Learn the details of as many programs as you can- do not limit yourself to one agency or one program, per se.
- One program may fund an initial study or project that leads to funding a continued project by another program.

- If you find two similar programs in one or more agencies, use your basic idea and develop two related but not duplicate proposals and submit to both programs.
  - Make sure you tell each program what you are doing. Proposals are judged similar relative to the similarity of their objectives. Different objectives basically mean different proposals.
  - Be an entrepreneur- market your idea or proposals to other programs.
  - Call and discuss basic ideas with the program contact-the key is to find out whether your idea is mainstream.
  - Work the program contact hard-pump for hints for success; ask specific questions relative to your proposal or similar, previously submitted proposals.
  - Partner with those who have similar projects, thoughts, or ideas.
  - Use collaborations to bring in missing expertise-this adds credibility to the proposal (get specific letters of commitment; make sure it is part of your budget and budget narrative).
  - Be persistent in most competitive programs, funding is not available to fund all the proposals that reviewers recommend funding; hence you may have a very good proposal but because of limited funds, your proposal ends up falling below the funding loan. Use the reviewer comments to improve your - proposal and resubmit during the next solicitation period.
  - Do not limit yourself to just one source of funding; - go after multiple sources!
- Pester non-governmental organizations-Ford, Kellogg, Aspen, and other foundations/grant-making entities with your thoughts and ideas.
  - Use results of one study to bolster the need for an additional study.
  - Documented outcomes and impacts of those outcomes from previous grants provide your best credibility; if just starting, make sure reviewers know that (your vitae).

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A Couple of organizations that provide grants:

Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working

Group whose website is - <http://www.nesawg.org/> . They may be a good source for locating funding. My other suggestion is Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program of USDA. Their site is <http://www.sare.org/>.

Both provide funds or at the very least can provide you with more ideas. You may also want to call or write to the White Dog Café Foundation in Philadelphia. Their site is <http://www.whitedogcafe.foundation.org/>. This group is interested in helping farms in Pennsylvania. They are particularly interested in humanely raised pork.

That will get you started anyway. I would suggest if you are looking to do anything major, get yourself a copy of the Environmental Grantmaking Foundations CD-ROM. This was a resource that we often used to find grants

for building exhibits at the zoo.