Demystifying the Grants Process

An Orientation
Portions of this presentation are adapted from materials developed by the University of Florida International Center, the University of Michigan School of Education and the UMass Amherst Office of Grants and Contracts
Demystifying the Grants Process

Grants, contracts, cooperative agreements, procurements, and other similar mechanisms are the way granting organizations (often called “sponsors”) provide funds to applicants.

Sponsors may be: federal or state agencies, private foundations or individuals, corporate entities, or a mix of these and other sources.

For this reason, grants, contracts, etc. are often referred to as “sponsored research”.
Terminology

- A **proposal** is a document that describes (according to the sponsor’s specified format and requirements) what will be done, who will do it, how much it will cost, and other details.

- A **prospectus** or concept paper - before a proposal is submitted, it is often helpful to develop the ideas and share these with your colleagues and the potential sponsor.

- **Letter of intent or inquiry** - concise but engaging; demonstrates awareness of the sponsor’s goals (check guidelines: if detailed budget required, contact ORE).

- Proposal **formats** vary. Some may be very short, others may provide significant documentation and back-up data. The sponsor dictates the format and required content.

- The **purpose** of the proposal is to persuade the sponsor that the applicant has the knowledge, the capacity/resources, the skill, and the qualified personnel to accomplish the work proposed. Sponsors also use proposals to justify why and how they made awards.
Why are you looking for funding?

- Research
- Instructional Development
- Travel
- Student Support
- Purchase Equipment
- Outreach
- Other
What can you offer?

Your expertise:
- Specialization in a specific area of scholarship
- Experience with particular approaches and methods
- Knowledge in a specific field that a sponsor wants
- Connections with others in the field

The resources of your institution
What Sponsors Look For

Sponsors make awards according to the mandate and mission of their organization

They usually look for:
- Good ideas
- Positive impact
- Potential benefit to their constituents
- Evidence of expertise and resources
How to determine if a sponsored opportunity fits your needs

- Read the program description and guidelines
- Talk to your department chair and the Associate Dean for Research and Engagement
- Contact the Program Officer
Basic Tips for Getting Started

- Read and understand the guidelines (if available)
- Review past awardees: particularly those who are similar to your organization
- Develop a preliminary prospectus/concept paper
- Identify the demographic and other supporting data you might need
- Establish a timeline for completion of the proposal
- Identify the primary writer and the role of the other collaborators
- Don’t be afraid to contact the granting agency and call again for information as needed
The 90% Rule of Grant-writing

- Understanding the guidelines, instructions and requirements
- Contacting the sponsor, whenever appropriate
- Developing a sound project concept, including data
- Identifying and correcting the gaps in required information
- Expanding the concept to match the guidelines
- Identifying costs

- Writing/Submitting the proposal
Starting with a Basic Concept Paper

- Brainstorm the project to develop a framework for the final proposal

- Answer basic questions relating to the project
  - Who will develop each section?
  - What other information is needed?
  - Are partners required to fill in the gaps?
The Function of a Proposal

- Presents a compelling argument for funding
- Represents the individual’s and the organization’s credibility and capacity
- Describes the project in persuasive terms
- Provides mechanism for evaluation
- Tests the ability of the individual to articulate/conceptualize
- Identifies the scope, timing and resources needed for success

*If you can’t state it well, you probably can’t do the project!*
Components of a Generic Proposal

- Introduction
- Statement of Need/Rationale/Thesis
- Goals/Objectives/Methodology
- Environment & Organizational Support
- Personnel
- Expected Outcomes
- Evaluation
- Budget and Budget Narrative
Description of the Approach to Solve the Problem

- Identifies then modifies, corrects, improves, expands, innovates, replicates or otherwise adapts previous efforts; may suggest a novel approach that has not been tried before
- Discusses specific actions, approaches, methods
- Justifies these in terms of the outcomes to be achieved
- Provides information as to how the process and outcome will be measured
Links Between Actions to be Taken and Statement of Problem

The problem you are addressing is always the essential element

- Each action should link the proposed solution to the problem
- Whenever possible, each action should also tie directly to how you will measure your success (Note: sometimes identifying the completion date of an activity can be evidence of success)
- Budgets evolve from the actions required
It is often helpful to develop a logic model.

Figure 1. Elements of the Logic Model.

- Situation
  - Inputs: What we Invest!
    - time
    - money
    - partners
    - equipment
    - facilities
  - Outputs: What we Do!
    - workshops
    - publications
    - field days
    - equipment demonstrations
  - Who we Reach!
    - customers
    - participants
  - Outcomes:
    - Short-term Change in:
      - knowledge
      - skills
      - attitude
      - motivation
      - awareness
    - Medium-term Change in:
      - behaviors
      - practices
      - policies
      - procedures
    - Long-term Change in situation:
      - environment
      - social conditions
      - economic conditions
      - political conditions

External Influences, Environmental, Related Programs
Who Will Perform the Work?

- Identify the persons/organization who will perform the proposed work
- Identify collaborators
- State their expertise, roles on the project, and capacity to do the work
- Network early with potential collaborators; you may need documentation from them that they agree to help in the project’s activities
When to Partner

- When the sponsor requires collaboration
- When elements of the work are being done in separate locations
- When facilities or expertise are not adequate to do all the work
- When an external evaluation component is needed
- When specific expertise is needed
- When the project design mandates comparisons
Outcomes

- Provides the sponsor with evidence that the project was completed
- Provides documentation of impact
- Identifies areas for future improvement
- Identifies “dead ends” – can be helpful in identifying what doesn’t work
- Describes how the outcome and useful information can be shared with others
- Sponsors are accountable for the investment of their funds; a well-defined evaluation or measurement of outcome is important!
Writing Backward for Progress

- Identify the reviewer’s criteria
- Highlight and define specific elements as priorities when appropriate
- Be redundant if the point is essential

*Remember, this is a sales tool!*
Key Considerations

- You are writing for the reviewers, not for a journal
- Page limits and deadlines are set in stone
- Follow the guidelines even if they don’t “flow” as you would like
- Get to know the program officer
- Try to get the guidelines for reviewers
- Cite recent papers by all competitors
- Have specific aims and objectives
Your ideas

- Must be interesting and understandable to a broadly-trained audience
- Clear communication - don’t get lost in the details or use jargon
- Concisely worded; easy to read
- Include one summary diagram or model early to highlight the problem and specific aims
You’re not alone

- Talk with your department chair and Associate Dean for Research and Engagement at the beginning of the process
- Include colleagues in your proposal when appropriate to your research; acknowledge their contributions.
- Ask colleagues to read your proposal for clarity before you submit it - this includes faculty, post-docs, graduate students and staff.
How Proposals are Reviewed

- Proposals are reviewed in a variety of different ways: most federal agencies use the peer review process – experts from backgrounds similar to the applicants evaluate proposals based on a set criteria.

- Proposals may also be reviewed by the sponsor’s own personnel, and judgment may be made based on personal interviews or knowledge of the applicant’s strengths. Certain foundation and corporate grants may be reviewed in this manner.
How Proposals are Reviewed

- At times the review process may not be used at all. **Procurements** issued to a specific entity may be used based on prior work done by the applicant or by the need for a quick turn-around. Usually the sponsor is required to have back-up for their decision to use this type of “sole source” awarding. Some sponsors issue a cooperative agreement or open contract to create a long-term relationship with an organization to facilitate procurement for specific tasks.
Some Final Guidance

- It takes a TEAM
- Seek advice from colleagues, mentors
- Complete all forms and get help from the Office of Research & Engagement
- Allow ample time for final review throughout the SOE Business office and OGCA processes (at least 10 business days prior to submission date)
When Failure is Not Failure

- Sometimes sponsors want to get to know you...your initial proposal may be a starting point for discussion.
- Some sponsors have a formal structure for resubmission; they expect it.
- Peer Review and Commentary are important pathways to eventual funding.