Common Elements of Grant Proposals – Tips and Best Practices

Each funding agency has specific guidelines and instructions for preparing a proposal. This information is typically found in the Solicitation or Request for Proposals (RFP). Some agencies will also have additional resources that guide proposal development (e.g., the NSF's Grant Proposal Guide). Despite these differences, most grants will contain common elements, including:

- Project Summary
- Need Statement
- Goals and Objectives
- Project Description
- Support for the Project
- Management Plan
- Evaluation Plan
- Key Personnel
- Sustainability of Project
- Budget and Budget Justification

Project Summary

The project summary is generally a brief (one page or less) section of a grant that describes the key points of the proposal. While the summary is usually the first section of a proposal, it is best to write this section after the remainder of the proposal has been developed. This better enables the writer to more easily capture all of the key components without the need for constant updates as changes to the project are made.

Grant reviewers have numerous proposals to review and grade, and often do not have time to meticulously review each section of every proposal. A poorly written and constructed summary could lead to a proposal being dismissed, even if the more meaty sections are excellent and fundable.

Summaries typically begin with a concise description of the need for project services for targeted participants. The key activities that will be carried out by the project are then presented. Care should be taken when discussing activities to ensure they are clearly linked to specific needs. Finally, this section should address the results or consequences of the project, including factors associated with sustaining services after the funding period.

A final thought: Carefully review the grant Solicitation or RFP prior to writing the summary. The contents of the summary described above are general and apply to most grants. However, some funding agencies look for specific information in project summaries. For example, the NSF first requires an overview of the project highlighting the most important aspects, followed by statements speaking to intellectual merit and broader impacts.

Needs Statement

Usually included in the first or second paragraph of the project summary and/or introduction, a needs statement speaks to the specific need the project is trying to address. This statement will include reference to the target population to be served, as well as the activities that will address their needs.

A final thought: In writing a needs statement, be sure to carefully align the needs and services of the project with BCTC's strategic plan and the funding priorities of the agency from which you are requesting funding.

Goals and Objectives

Goals speak to the purpose of the project. What are you trying to achieve? Generally, a grant proposal will only have one or two broad goals that state what the project hopes to accomplish.

- Example Goal: The goal of this project is to increase the completion rate for low-income, first-generation college students.

Objectives, on the other hand, are the 3-5 measures you will meet in order to accomplish the goal. Objectives should be SMART, or Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound.

- Example Objective: 80% of students served by the project will persist from one academic year to the beginning of the next academic year.
- Example Objective: 90% of students served will achieve a cumulative GPA of 3.0 or above by the end of the first project year.

A final thought: While there is typically no limit on the number of goals and objectives a project can include, it is generally recommended to have no more than 1-2 goals and 3-5 objectives. There are certainly exceptions to this rule, but an excess of goals and objectives can be a red flag for grant reviewers, indicating that the project is overly ambitious.

Project Description

The project description should describe in detail the steps that will be taken to meet each objective. This will include all of the activities the project will utilize. If the Solicitation or RFP requires certain activities to be performed, make sure these are addressed in full in the project description. On a similar note, be sure to carefully review the RFP to make sure all activities are allowable under the grant. The inclusion of non-allowable activities and expenses will result in a rejected proposal.

Activities should be based on research and best practices, not anecdotal evidence. Funding agencies want assurances that the money they are allocating will be well spent. The best way to address this concern is to make sure project activities are based on research that has demonstrated the effectiveness of the techniques to be used on the target population. It is also important to discuss the timing and duration of each activity. Tables, charts, and figures are helpful tools in providing a comprehensive summary of what each activity is, how it will be carried out, who will be involved, and when it will take place.

A final thought: One of the most straightforward ways to approach this section is to use major activities as headings and/or subheadings. This helps to organize the project description, but more importantly, makes it easier for the reviewers to navigate and understand how your project will meet its objectives. A comprehensive timeline should be included at the end of this section that outlines each activity, when it will initiate, and how long it will last.

Support for the Project

Most grants, whether large or small, are enhanced by support for the project being proposed. This may include support from college leadership; the dedication of facilities, equipment, personnel, supplies, and other resources to the project; support and/or commitments to participate from community-based organizations; and support and/or participation from local industry. Depending on the guidelines of the funding agency (usually specified in the RFP/Solicitation), support may be documented in the text of the proposal (e.g., a table summarizing support and commitments to the project), via letters of support/commitment, or through alternative agreements (e.g., MOA, MOU).

Some funding agencies also want to know about the prior funding support the project, project personnel, and/or organization has received in the past. For example, NSF proposals require that a section be included on *Current and Pending Support*, which includes all Federal, State, local, private, etc. funding each PI and other senior personnel on the grant have received in the past.

A final thought: This tends to be one of the easier sections of a grant to write; however, it can also be one of the most burdensome. It takes a lot of legwork to communicate internally and externally about the project in order to obtain the commitments and support needed for success. This is why it is so important to obtain buy-in from all relevant stakeholders early in the proposal development process (preferably before any writing takes place!).

Management Plan

The management plan details the location of the project in the organization's structure, including identifying the specific individuals that will be responsible for carrying out and monitoring activities. This typically includes the qualifications and responsibilities of project personnel, as well as their time commitments to the project (generally presented as a percentage of total effort).

Other aspects of the management plan include the project's fiscal management, personnel management, records management, and coordination with other units of the college and/or community organizations and industry. The NSF also requires a data management plan that describes how the project team will manage and disseminate data from the project. This includes discussing the types of data that will be collected, how data will be stored, how data will be disseminated, protocols for data sharing and public access, and the roles and responsibilities of the project team with regard to data (during and after the project period).

A final thought: Many college policies are the same regardless of the project. For example, fiscal and personnel management processes tend to stay the same, even for projects that are grant funded. As such, this section of the proposal will be similar across all grants. There is no need to reinvent the wheel – contact your Director of Grants to see what information is readily available prior to getting started on this section of the proposal.

Evaluation Plan

The evaluation plan describes how the project will be assessed and measured. Funding agencies are placing increased emphasis on a strong evaluation plan as it is the primary means by which to judge whether the money they are spending is having the desired impact. A good evaluation plan will clearly outline what type of data will be collected, who will collect the data, how the data will be collected,

when the data will be collected, how the data will be analyzed, how the data will be disseminated, and how the data will be used (e.g., to improve project services, to identify successful/unsuccessful project activities, etc.).

Evaluation plans typically contain a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data may be obtained via surveys, focus groups, interviews, and a variety of other methods, and tends to be more open-ended (e.g., what do you think about a particular service?). This information often provides a means of improving project services and gaining an understanding of areas of the project that need further investigation. Quantitative data refers to hard numbers, measurements, and statistical analyses. Quantitative data can be obtained from a variety of sources, such as surveys, test scores, and institutional records, and if properly collected and analyzed, can provide an objective means of evaluating the effectiveness of a project.

Funding agencies generally look for both formative and summative evaluation techniques when judging the quality of an evaluation plan. Formative evaluation refers to any evaluation that takes place during the project. The goal of formative evaluation is to improve the project's design so that better outcomes can be obtained. Summative evaluation, on the other hand, refers to measuring the outcomes of a project. In other words, it speaks to how much improvement or development occurred in relation to the project's goals and objectives. To help further clarify the distinction between formative and summative evaluations, consider the following example:

- You have decided to cook gravy for your family and your goal is for everyone to enjoy their meal. While cooking the gravy you may try several bites to make sure it tastes as good as possible. In doing so, you notice that it needs more salt and pepper, so you add these to the dish. This would be an example of a formative evaluation. During the cooking process you evaluated the taste of the gravy and make modifications as necessary to enhance its quality.
- Everyone has finished dinner and the gravy is all gone. You go around the table and ask each family member how the gravy tasted. The overwhelming consensus is that it was the best gravy they have ever had! This is an example of a summative evaluation. After the food was gone you evaluated how good it tasted by asking members of your family.

A final thought: The evaluation plan should stem directly from the goals and objectives of the project. Since goals and objectives represent the impact a project is hoping to achieve, each should be carefully measured and evaluated.

Key Personnel

It is important to demonstrate that qualified individuals will be carrying out project activities. Should the head chef of a restaurant be performing surgery? Definitely not. The same applies to grants. Funding agencies want to make sure that the individuals designated to oversee and manage a project are appropriately qualified. How one demonstrates qualifications of key personnel differs depending on the funding agency; however, several common elements can be found, such as education level and degree, years of experience, and so on. In some cases, such as proposals submitted to the NSF, a resume or biographical sketch is required.

A final thought: For many proposals, key personnel will be hired using grant funding. In these cases, the educational requirements, experience levels, and other qualifications must be identified and described (usually in a table or chart).

Sustainability of Project

For most grants, funding agencies want to know that the project will be continued once grant funds are expended. In other words, how will the project be sustained after the grant period? This is particularly true of developmental/improvement grants whose purpose is to provide funding to create or enhance services to a specific population. Demonstrating sustainability typically includes a discussion about how grant funded personnel, activities, and services will be continued after the grant period ends. This often involves the college or community absorbing these costs.

A final thought: This section will not apply to some grants. Many times, grants have specific start and end dates and are not expected to continue. For example, a grant for a one-time science fair to promote STEM education would not require a sustainability plan.

Budget and Budget Justification

A carefully constructed budget and budget justification are key elements in all grant proposals. Funding agencies are primarily concerned with ensuring that all costs are reasonable, necessary, and allowable. Determining which costs are reasonable, necessary, and allowable depends on the specific grant for which one is applying. For example, the Department of Education will allow construction/renovation costs for some grants (e.g., Title III grants), but not others (e.g., TRIO grants). It is important to carefully review the grant RFP/Solicitation and any applicable rules and regulations prior to writing the budget and budget justification.

When writing your budget be sure to identify everything you will need to make the project work, and what you expect to spend. A typical budget may include personnel (salary and fringe), equipment, travel, supplies, contractual, construction, training, other, and indirect costs, although it is unlikely you will be requesting funds in each of these categories for one grant.

A budget is entered into standardized forms on most federal grants. The RFP/Solicitation can provide guidance on how your expenses fit into these standardized categories. The budget justification is typically provided in narrative form and includes your explanation for why each item is reasonable and necessary. Some aspects of the budget and budget narrative, such as fringe and indirect rates, are based upon agreements at a particular institution. For example, the current fringe rate at BCTC for full-time employees is 40.6% of salaries, and the indirect cost rate is 55.5% of salaries and wages, excluding fringe benefits (these rates expire 06/30/2017). Additionally, it is important to note that many funding agencies put a cap on indirect costs (e.g., the Department of Education limits indirect costs to 8% of total modified direct costs). Contact your grant's office for the most recent rates available and for assistance in determining calculations.

A final thought: If the institution seeking a grant is going to be devoting its own money or resources to the project, this should be included in the budget as well. These "leveraged resources" are generally viewed favorably by funding agencies as they demonstrate the organization's commitment to the project.