Best Practices in Grant Seeking
Beyond the Proposal

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Edited By
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This book is dedicated to my husband Nasir, and my children Mubashir and Mariam, who endured silently while this book was being researched and written. Thank you.

My gratitude also extends to all those grant writers, development directors, executive directors, and foundation officials who participated in my research, and spent countless hours answering my questions over the phone and via email. Your involvement is a true indication of your passion for grant seeking and your eagerness to benefit the nonprofit community.
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Saadia Faruqi, president of Faruqi & Associates, has almost 10 years of grant writing and development experience in the nonprofit sector, including at-risk youth, women’s health, domestic violence, science education, adult and family literacy, and the arts. She also has extensive experience in public relations, communications, marketing, and finance.

Prior to founding Faruqi & Associates, Saadia worked as Grants Administrator and later Grants Consultant for Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Houston. She has also served as Development Director of Literacy Advance of Houston. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration from the University of Central Florida and a Bachelor of Business Administration from the University of Karachi, in her native country of Pakistan. In 2001, she received the prestigious President’s Student Service Award, granted by George W. Bush for volunteerism and student leadership.

Saadia has always focused on improving the nonprofit sector; her research projects include a study on the relationships between funders and grantee organizations and how this impacts the grants awarded. This study, entitled “Grantor-Grantee Relationships—A Research Study” was published in the Journal of the American Association of Grant Professionals, Fall/Winter 2004 Issue. Saadia is a member of the American Association of Grant Professionals, and founder and past Chair of the Grant Writers’ Network of Greater Houston, an organization dedicated to providing professional development, training, and networking opportunities for grant writers in the Houston area.

Saadia works and lives in Houston, Texas, with her husband and two young children.
Before we even get to the proposal, my advice is to really know what you are applying for, and who you are applying to, and then to align your request with the mission of the foundation. You can have the best organization or the best program in the world but it won’t get funded if you don’t do the homework and the research before applying.”

Deena Epstein, Senior Program Officer
George Gund Foundation

Grant writing can be an art or a science, depending on who you ask. The artist chooses each word with the utmost care, weaving stories and vivid descriptions into the proposal, and making sure each finished product is a living, breathing entity capable of inspiring the reader to give. The scientist relies on extensive data and studies to create powerful documents that, once complete, will not be tampered with except to be updated with more current information. The average grant professional lies somewhere in between the two ends of this spectrum. The three types seem like a mixed bunch, were it not for one unifying factor: the grant proposal itself.

As a grants consultant, I find that the majority of my time is spent writing. That is not surprising, since I love to write. In fact, many grant professionals initially enter this profession because it gives them permission to hide behind their computers crafting words and sentences into case statements, proposals, and other written documents. They converse with other grant professionals, but mostly to seek their advice about how to write better; they attend networking sessions, but mainly those that have an educational component such as foundation research or persuasive writing. In their early days, they attend courses and read books that promise to teach them how to create the perfect proposal. After a few years, they may even begin teaching the same techniques to newcomers.
Introduction: The Call for Grant Seeking Strategies

What seems wrong with this picture? Absolutely nothing! I doubt that I would be where I am today without that almost obsessive drive to improve my grant writing skills and share my knowledge with others. But I also learned something valuable along the way, as I navigated the path from newbie to resident grant writer at a large organization, and later consultant to many smaller nonprofits. It is rarely enough to write excellent proposals and sit back, waiting for them to get funded. No matter how brilliant the writer, it is not the proposal that gets accepted—or rejected—but the program and the people who run it. A colleague once remarked that expecting a grant professional to produce grant funding in a vacuum is like asking them to spin gold from straw.

Yet that is exactly what many grant professionals across the country experience almost every day in their jobs. Be they trained writers, consultants, volunteers, or program staff, these hardy individuals bear the burden of supporting a large portion of their organization’s budget; their only motivation a rallying cry from their leaders: “let’s apply for grants!” At the same time, as the competition for private foundation dollars becomes increasingly more intense, nonprofit organizations are struggling to find competent grant professionals who can show results. Even organizations with multimillion dollar budgets and entire development departments at their disposal are sometimes unsuccessful in raising the funds they need through foundation grants. It would be extremely simplistic, even naïve, to suggest that the person who wrote the grant proposal is to blame.

At the beginning of my career, I often felt guilty if my proposals on behalf of any one organization consistently failed to bring in money. As my experience grew, so did my appreciation of the various factors influencing institutional funding. It took me a while to realize that while my skills and expertise were certainly important, I could not achieve the results I sought unless I had the support of my board, and my organization was conducting ongoing community engagement. My proposals could sing the praises of my agency, but when funders showed up for a tour, reality would raise its head—and it may not be as pretty as my words. In a nutshell, I could be the best writer possible, but it would never be enough without strategies and plans created at the top involving all departments and programs.

During a study of U.S. and Canadian nonprofits in 2004, I learned that organizations typically do not provide sufficient support and involvement to the grant seeking process at the leadership level, leaving grant professionals to be researchers, relationship-builders, community advocates, program designers, reporters, and grant managers (1). Many grant professionals use the training they receive to write cookie cutter proposals and send mass mailings to foundations that “fit the profile.” Very few organizations, regardless of size, create grant seeking strategies that include not just the writer, but programs and public relations staff, board members, volunteers, and even
clients. This is done in many cases for other fundraising activities, such as major gifts or capital campaigns and even special events, but almost never for grants. Many organizations endeavor to get small grants from multiple foundations for the sake of covering operating costs; others strive for a few big contributions to keep them afloat. There is often a lack of strategic planning when it comes to grant seeking, and grant professionals are expected to work in a vacuum without a deeper understanding of what affects foundation giving and why.

Research Methodology

This book uses the collective voice of organizations and foundations throughout the United States to bring home the importance of grant seeking strategies. In late 2007, our company embarked upon a nationwide research on 240 nonprofit organizations (200 organizations participated in an online survey and 40 organizations in telephone and in-person interviews), as well as 20 foundations to assess the factors that lead to successful grants. The study utilized a mixed method research methodology that first surveyed nonprofit organizations throughout the country on a number of topics, and then conducted in-depth interviews on the same topics. The factors under investigation were:

• Board and senior staff relationships with foundations
• Site visits by potential funders
• Nonsoliciting contact and stewardship practices
• Public relations efforts by nonprofits
• Experience of grant writers
• Quality of grant proposals
• Quality of programs and outcome measurement
• Collaborative efforts between nonprofits

During an 18-month period, grant writers, development staff, and nonprofit leaders who participated in the research disclosed their challenges and shared best practices. At the same time, foundation officials revealed what was important to them in terms of proposal content, site visits, collaborations, and sustainability. While the grant proposal was discussed, its value was proved to be secondary in most cases. The aim of the research and this subsequent book is to learn from the profiled people and organizations and identify areas where one’s own boards and staff can improve.

For the purpose of the research, we categorized nonprofits based on their budget size in order to identify needs and challenges (see Figure A). The category of small budgets ($500,000 or less) was created because these are
mostly grassroots organizations with severe budget and expertise constraints that discourage them from adopting grant seeking strategies. Such organizations typically have program boards and a high amount of volunteer involvement, leaving little understanding or ability to approach foundations or to raise funds strategically. The next category is medium budgets of $500,000 to $1 million, created because these organizations have typically taken the next step and progressed to more advanced fundraising and programmatic practices and may have the resources for a dedicated development staff person. Public relations efforts of such nonprofits are also somewhat sophisticated.

The third category consists of organizations with large budgets between $1–5 million. The differentiation of this type of organization also has a rationale: at this level, most organizations have development staff of more than one person, and grant writers are usually not involved in other development, marketing, or program areas. At this level, nonprofit boards are somewhat fundraising boards, but the attention to grant seeking is still lacking. However, they typically have more sophisticated public relations practices and programwise have attained a high level of expertise. The final category of very large budgets (above $5 million) may seem simplistic to some, as many of our respondents—and probably readers of this book as well—belong to organizations with $20–50 million budgets; some may even have budgets of $100
The reasoning behind the lumping together of larger organizations is this: above the $5 million level, and certainly beyond that, organizations typically seek a large portion of their funds through government sources, and their individual and major gifts fundraising practices are highly advanced. Therefore, for the purposes of our research (with an emphasis on foundation grants), we felt that it was feasible to categorize them together.

Results

We discovered through our research that the major factors affecting grant funding include board relationships with funders, positive community image, successful site visits before the grant award, nonsoliciting contact with funders, good reporting practices, and well-designed programs. Intuitively as well as through experience, most grant professionals realize some or all of this on their own; convincing their supervisors and implementing new practices within their organizations is another matter altogether. Hence, the research promises to give proponents of the grant seeking approach a tool to take to decision-makers for added support of their arguments.

Further, the real world examples in this book are valuable for organizations who do believe that change is necessary but are unsure as to how to bring about that change. Rather than lecture about techniques and processes, this book highlights numerous best practices of organizations that have achieved a high level of expertise in the factors under investigation, and gives countless examples of how to bring about small improvements in one’s own backyard. Whether the reader belongs to a grassroots agency or a multi-million dollar nonprofit, he or she should be able to adapt some of these best practices and see the results before long. Currently, no other research exists to offer hard evidence of factors affecting foundation funding; therefore, the information provided here is not only invaluable but also cutting edge. It promises to add a powerful boost to the knowledge and anecdotal evidence currently available to grant professionals and nonprofit leaders regarding successful grant seeking.

A third benefit of this book is the funder viewpoint: analyses of several private and community foundations across the nation and Funder Perspectives or interviews related to each factor under review. For the purposes of our research, we have focused heavily on three types of foundations: private foundations, family foundations, and to a lesser degree corporate foundations. A few community foundations have also been profiled, but only those that award discretionary grants independent of their donor-advised funds. The responses of individual foundations can be used to understand how
foundations in general make their decisions, and what motivates them to give. Funders may also find these interviews interesting as they seek to improve their own grant making strategies. Foundation officials can use this book as a resource for understanding how nonprofits are continually reinventing themselves and making improvements for the benefit of the people they serve.

Book Layout

If you are looking for a book on basic grant writing, this is not the one for you. But if you are seeking to take your organization to the next level through sustainable grant seeking practices, you will find the following pages extremely useful. This book is designed to assist nonprofit organizations in the creation of strategies for improving institutional contributions that go beyond the grant writer or even the grants department. It attempts to change the mindset that grant seeking is a staff function and that the responsibility of acquiring grant funds is the sole responsibility of grant professionals (see Figure B). For this reason, although Chapter 7 offers a refresher course for the writing process, the main thrust of the book is best practices rather than checklists.
and lesson plans. One caveat is that a few basic concepts have been elaborated, which many readers may already be familiar with. These concepts have been included only if the topic is of strategic value and correlates with either the research or the underlying theme of the book. Some fundamentals have been included if they belong to a discipline that grant professionals may not be familiar with, such as public relations or evaluation design. Further, some ideas—such as board involvement in relationship building—may be understood by many organizations but not put in practice. In that case, too, these basics have been expounded so that grant professionals can bring evidence-based knowledge back to their leadership. Other than that, this book assumes that you or someone else at your organization already has basic technical grant writing skills.

The book has been laid out into parts, each corresponding to a time period which may be weeks, months, or in some cases even years, and may vary by organization as well as by department within the same organization. Part I is the period before applying for a grant, aptly named “Laying the Groundwork” because it includes chapters related to relationship building, public relations, and program design. These practices should occur well before foundations are approached, and they should be ongoing in nature, meaning that nonprofits should not stop when a proposal has been funded. This part is the longest and has the most chapters—appropriately so, because laying the groundwork is the most important part of any grant seeking strategy and also the least understood and practiced.

Part II deals with “Creating the Request” which should only happen once the homework has been done and all internal and external stakeholders are ready for action. The chapters in this section of the book discuss not only what constitutes a winning grant proposal but also a winning grant writer, whoever it may be in the organization. Since this is not a how-to guide, we have not included every section of a grant proposal in this discussion—only the areas that are most important or which typically are the weakest in terms of writing. With just one chapter about site visits, Part III is thankfully short, since it encompasses the time period called “While the Jury’s Out.” Finally, Part IV discusses what should occur “After the Grant Award,” such as stewardship and reporting, as well as ways of continuing to attract grant investments in the future.

I hope some or all of what lies in these pages will be of use to your organization or your clients. The research findings, best practices, and interviews in this book can help nonprofit leaders and consultants determine agency-wide activities—both short and long term—that support and enhance the efforts of the grant professional. Our data has been collected from a wide variety of organizations ranging from grassroots organizations, community
Introduction: The Call for Grant Seeking Strategies

Based nonprofits, and faith-based groups to academic institutions and hospitals. While grant professionals working for all sizes and types of nonprofits will most definitely benefit from the findings, the true value of this book lies in the collaboration of almost all departments or functional areas within each nonprofit, including public relations, marketing, programs, and even finance and operations.

ENDNOTES