

# Journal

of the



## Editors' Note

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the 2017 edition of the *Journal of the Grant Professionals Association*. As the research publication of the GPA, the *Journal* provides a forum for scholarly examination of the profession, discussions of best practices, and presentation of case studies. The *Journal* is devoted to the improvement of the grants professional and our growing and changing profession. Like previous editions, this year's *Journal* mirrors the diversity of work in our profession, which provides a rich variety of experience from which to learn.

For the second year, we are including GPA *Strategy Papers* published in 2017. Launched in 2014, *Strategy Papers* stimulate discussion and innovative thinking about a single topic that furthers the knowledge, skills, and understanding of grant professionals. Published several times a year, *Strategy Papers* are shorter than full-length *Journal* articles and offer practical solutions to current and emerging issues. Like *Journal* articles, *Strategy Papers* undergo a double-blind peer-review process. In this edition, we are pleased to reprint the *Strategy Papers* published to date in 2017 to add to the body of research-based knowledge for the *Journal's* readership.

For the 2018 *Journal*, we invite you to contribute your valuable experience to these publications. We seek articles that address new ideas in our field, contribute research-based information, provide a case study or best practices, or examine any of the competencies and skills in the Grant Professional Certification Institute's *Table of Validated Competencies and Skills*. We also invite you to consider serving as a peer reviewer to evaluate manuscripts submitted to these publications. Please contact us at [journal@grantprofessionals.org](mailto:journal@grantprofessionals.org) if you are interested.

We thank the authors, editorial board, and peer review managers for contributing extensive time and effort to this year's *Journal*. We also deeply appreciate the time and effort of the peer reviewers for both publications; while anonymous, they are critical to ensuring the strong professional caliber of GPA's publications.

We welcome your comments on this issue of the *Journal*, and we look forward to your suggestions and article ideas for future issues.

David Lindeman and Andy Rawdon  
Co-editors, *Journal of the GPA*

## About The *Journal of the Grant Professionals Association*

The *Journal of the Grant Professionals Association* is devoted to the improvement of the grants professional and the profession. The *Journal* provides a forum for scholarly examination of the profession, discussions of best practices, and presentation of case studies. Papers submitted to the *Journal* are peer-reviewed by top professionals from around the country.

Proposals for articles may be submitted at any time to the *Journal's* Editorial Board via email to [journal@grantprofessionals.org](mailto:journal@grantprofessionals.org). Proposals must be no more than 300 words and follow the guidelines published on the GPA website ([www.grantprofessionals.org/journal](http://www.grantprofessionals.org/journal)). Both proposals and full articles must be submitted as email attachments in Microsoft Word format. Each full article must contain a short biography of each author (100 words) and an abstract (150 words). References, punctuation, grammar usage, and paragraph formatting must follow the *APA Style Manual for Publication* (6th Edition). Submissions are peer-reviewed anonymously. Once selected for publication, editors will work with authors to address reviewer comments and other necessary revisions. The Editorial Board reserves the right to delay or withhold publication of any article submitted.

All submissions accepted for publication (except reprints of articles) will remain the copyrighted property of the GPA. Written permission must be obtained from GPA to reprint any published article. Please email [journal@grantprofessionals.org](mailto:journal@grantprofessionals.org) with any questions. Submission requirements, annual cut-off dates, and other information are posted on the GPA website.

## Editorial Board

**David Lindeman, CFRE, GPC**

*Co-Chair*

President

Global Grant Solutions

Washington, DC

**Andrew S. Rawdon, JD**

*Co-Chair*

Development Consultant

Fairport, NY

**Barbara Roberts, MA**

*Chair, Publications Committee*

Grants Development Specialist

Maricopa Community College

Foundation

Phoenix, AZ

**Janell Harvey, DBA**

*Board Liaison*

Professor and Faculty Chair

DeVry University

Merrillville, IN

## Peer Review Team

**Dana Boe**

*Peer Review Manager*

Grants Specialist,

Casper College

Casper, WY

**Roberta K. Gibboney, PhD, GPC**

*Peer Review Manager*

Director of Grants,

Cincinnati Museum Center

Cincinnati, OH

## GPA Mission

The Grant Professionals Association (GPA) is a nonprofit 501(c)(6) membership association. It builds and supports an international community of grant professionals committed to serving the greater public good by practicing the highest ethical and professional standards. To achieve this mission, GPA:

- Serves as a leading authority and resource for the practice of grantsmanship in all sectors of the field
- Advances the field by promoting professional growth and development
- Enhances the public image and recognition of the profession within the greater philanthropic, public, and private funding communities, and
- Promotes positive relationships between grant professionals and their stakeholders.

GPA does not discriminate in its provision of services due to race, color, religion, national origin, ancestry, ethnic group identification, sex, age, sexual orientation, and/or condition of physical or mental disability in accordance with all requirements of Federal and State Laws.

# Validated Competencies and Skills

## *Grant Professionals Certification Institute (GPCI)*

Below are the GPCI professional competencies and skills covered in the *Journal*. For more detail on each competency, please visit the GPCI website ([www.grantcredential.org](http://www.grantcredential.org)).

**GPCI Competency 01:** Knowledge of how to research, identify, and match funding resources to meet specific needs

**GPCI Competency 02:** Knowledge of organizational development as it pertains to grant seeking

**GPCI Competency 03:** Knowledge of strategies for effective program and project design and development

**GPCI Competency 04:** Knowledge of how to craft, construct, and submit an effective grant application

**GPCI Competency 05:** Knowledge of post-award grant management practices sufficient to inform effective grant design and development

**GPCI Competency 06:** Knowledge of nationally recognized standards of ethical practice by grants professionals

**GPCI Competency 07:** Knowledge of practices and services that raise the level of professionalism of grant professionals

**GPCI Competency 08:** Knowledge of methods and strategies that cultivate and maintain relationships between fund-seeking and recipient organizations and funders

**GPCI Competency 09:** Ability to write a convincing case for funding

# Table of Contents

## Journal of the Grant Professionals Association Volume 15, Number 1

<b>Strategic Planning for Central Grants Offices: A Case Study</b> Colleen Bivona, MA, GPC, CRA.....	1
<b>Increasing Writing Efficiency by Employing Content Library Tools</b> Megan Snedden, MA, MLIS and Valerie Thomas, MA.....	11
<b>Using Service Learning to Teach Graduate Students Grant Development for the Cultural Sector</b> Antonio C. Cuyler, PhD.....	19
<b>Grant Readiness Score: Analyzing Strengths and Areas for Improvement</b> Diane H. Leonard, GPC.....	32
<b>Essential Features of Nonprofit Sustainability: Towards Clarity for Grants Professionals</b> William Moore, PhD.....	42

## GPA Strategy Papers, Volume 4

<i>Issue 1 (March 28, 2017)</i>	
<b>U.S. Department of Education Proposals: Preparing for the “New Normal”</b> Michael Preuss, EdD and Paul Tuttle, MA, CRA.....	58
<i>Issue 2 (August 22, 2017)</i>	
<b>The Use of Active Voice and Passive in Grant Applications</b> Barbara Roberts, MA .....	67



# Strategic Planning for Central Grants Offices: A Case Study

**Colleen Bivona, MA, GPC, CRA**

Maricopa County Community College District, Tempe, AZ

*GPCI Competency 02: Knowledge of organizational development as it pertains to grant seeking*

*GPCI Competency 07: Knowledge of practices and services that raise the level of professionalism of grant developers*

## Abstract

While strategic planning often occurs at the organizational level, grant offices can also benefit by conducting strategic planning at the departmental level while aligning with institution-level planning, mission, and goals. Using an illustrative case study approach, this article examines strategic planning processes for central grants offices, particularly at colleges and universities. In 2016, the Maricopa County Community College District Grants Office conducted a strategic planning process to align services and procedures with the institutional mission, priorities, and needs. Approaches to the process included peer benchmarking, stakeholder surveys, SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis, and alignment with larger institutional planning. This case study examines strengths and weaknesses of the process, as well as recommendations for grant professionals on adapting the methods for other types and sizes of organizations.

## Introduction

Organizations in many fields, including those in the nonprofit and public sectors served by the grants profession, typically undergo strategic planning processes, which may be conducted for the organization as a whole or for specific departments or functions. This article explores the benefits and process for conducting strategic planning specifically for a central grants office using a case study, the Maricopa County

Community College District (MCCCD) Grants Office. The MCCCD Grants Office's process followed a modified version of Richardson's five-stage model (Richardson, 2007) and conceptually incorporated aspects of McLaughlin's strategic positioning process (McLaughlin, 2006). MCCCD adapted both models to the needs of the grants profession and its organizational structure.

Many strategic plans are drafted in response to a specific requirement or simply because the period covered by the prior strategic plan has passed. Grants offices should consider conducting strategic planning apart from these external demands in order to allow time for a thorough and unconstrained outcome. As a process, "strategic planning affords stakeholders in an organization the opportunity to learn more about the organization, to share their perceptions of its strengths and weaknesses, and to discuss critical issues affecting, or likely to affect, the organization in the future" (Richardson, 2007, p.48). These discussions take considerable time and effort, especially when done on top of regular workloads.

### **Case Study Background**

Located in metropolitan Phoenix, Arizona, the MCCCD is one of the largest postsecondary educational systems in the country. The ten Maricopa Colleges serve over 200,000 students each year. MCCCD established the Grants Office in 1990 and the office currently includes five full-time personnel. The primary responsibilities of the office are grant development and writing; technical assistance and review of proposals written by other staff and faculty; technical assistance with non-financial grants management; grants training; and ensuring adherence to procedures and compliance requirements. The individual colleges have also invested in grant development and management personnel. Currently, eight of the colleges have at least one full-time or part-time position dedicated to grants; such positions are typically referred to as "grant coordinators."

In January 2016, the MCCCD Grants Office voluntarily began a strategic planning process to align services and procedures with institutional needs and priorities. Similar to many educational institutions, MCCCD faces reduced public funding, and grants are a strategic way to meet priorities under these circumstances. At the time the grants office began its strategic planning process, MCCCD was also in the process of developing its organizational strategic plan for 2017-2020. It also was concluding prioritization of operations under an initiative known as Maricopa Priorities, which involved a thorough analysis of all operations and programs, resulting in recommendations on whether to expand or reduce each of them.

## Process

As outlined in Table 1, the MCCCCD Grants Office followed a modified version of Richardson's (2007) five-stage process for strategic planning. The grants office also adapted aspects of the strategic positioning model for nonprofits suggested by McLaughlin (2006). For example, the grants office included mechanisms for maximizing efficiency of the process, such as clear-set agendas and using time outside of meetings for data gathering and preparatory work.

*Table 1. Five-Stage Strategic Planning Process*

	<b>Stage</b>	<b>Tasks</b>
<b>1</b>	Foundational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessment of Service Statement</li> </ul>
<b>2</b>	Benchmarking and Assessment of Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer Benchmarking</li> <li>• Grant Coordinator Survey</li> <li>• Project Director/Principal Investigator Survey (begun)</li> <li>• Departmental Logic Model</li> </ul>
<b>3</b>	Goal Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SWOT Analysis</li> <li>• SWOT Results Prioritization</li> <li>• Discussion of Projected Trends and Patterns</li> <li>• Project Director/Principal Investigator Survey (completed)</li> </ul>
<b>4</b>	Milestone Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Idea Generation to Meet SWOT Priorities</li> <li>• Draft Work Plan</li> </ul>
<b>5</b>	Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integration with Other Organizational Planning</li> <li>• Tracking and Follow-Up</li> </ul>

Figure 1 shows the all of the detailed steps taken as part of this five-stage process. The grants office found Richardson's first step of team formation to be relatively easy, as the planning team consisted of the central grants office's five full-time personnel. In the initial meeting, the team agreed that the scope of the planning would focus on the sphere of influence of the central grants office. The team also agreed that the individual colleges' Grant Coordinators would also provide input, along with other stakeholders. District leadership would receive updates throughout the process.

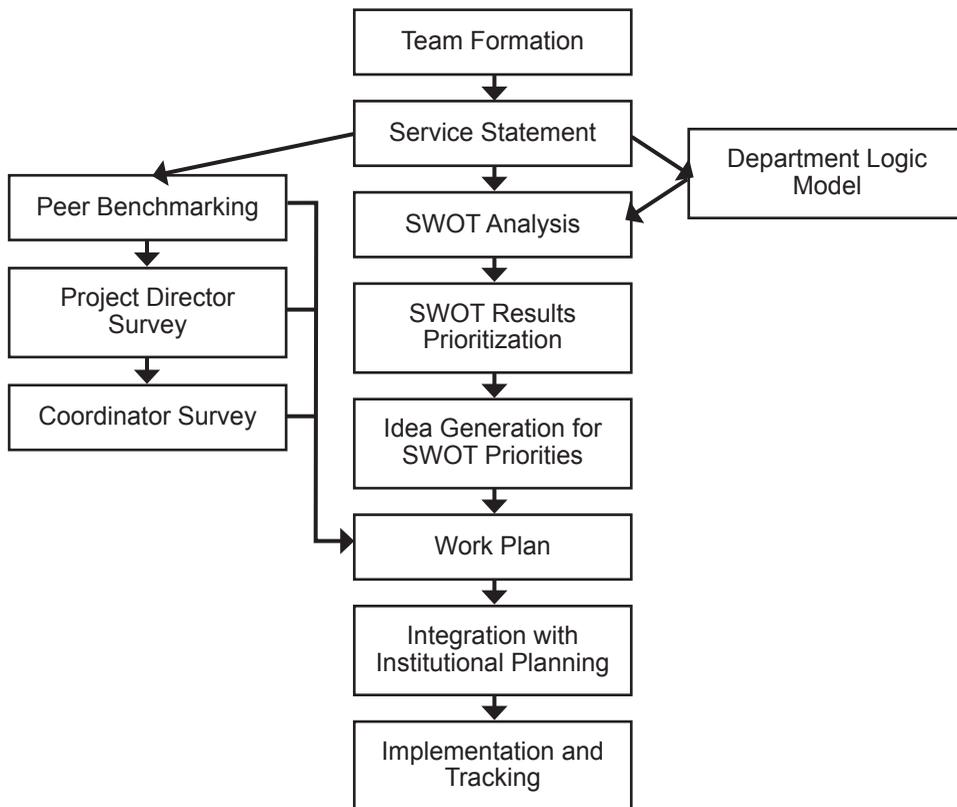


Figure 1. Strategic planning steps.

### Stage 1: Foundational

Reaffirming the mission statement is the first step of strategic positioning outlined by McLaughlin (2006). The team was already deeply familiar with the organizational and departmental background, including recent annual reports on the number, dollar amount, and subjects of proposals and grant awards. Therefore, rather than beginning with information gathering on history and values, the team started with an assessment of their service statement, the equivalent of a departmental mission or purpose statement and the primary message conveyed on the landing page of a department's website. With this as the starting base, the team came to a consensus on what is—and is not—the grants office's role within the larger MCCCDC organization.

### Stage 2: Benchmarking and Assessment

Under the first step in the benchmarking stage, the grants office set out to survey peer organizations across the nation—in this case, other community colleges with a similar size and structure. The team developed a survey with questions that would allow them to compare MCCCDC both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative questions

inquired about topics such as the number of public and private proposals submitted annually, the number of grants funded annually, and the number of grants office staff. Qualitative questions addressed aspects such as the grants office's placement within the organizational structure, proposal submission procedures, and alignment of grant proposals with institutional goals and priorities. Nine peers were contacted and seven responded over a five-week period, for a response rate of 78%. The team discussed the survey results and reviewed the responses to gain comparative insights on the level of MCCCDC resources for grants, the office's performance on proposals submitted and grants awarded, and effective strategies or services that could be adopted by MCCCDC.

The grants office conducted remaining benchmarking and assessment activities among internal stakeholders. Bauer (2001) recommends that college grants offices survey their faculty and staff to assess levels of familiarity on services and resources, and to obtain feedback on the quality of the services. To have a full understanding of the needs of MCCCDC faculty, staff, and grant coordinators, the team developed two surveys, one for project directors or principal investigators and one for grant coordinators. The team included questions specifically targeted to MCCCDC culture, organizational structure, and resources, rather than using the survey template provided by Bauer (2001). The surveys were anonymous but included questions to better assess the context of the answer, such as the number of years of project directors' grant experience, and which sponsors had funded them. The surveys also emphasized specific needs of the survey participants that the grants office could address, such as topics for training and technical assistance.

Due to the timing of the academic calendar, the grants office delayed the grant coordinator and project director/principal investigator (PI) surveys until after the summer break to ensure an adequate response rate. Therefore, although listed under Stage 2, these occurred simultaneously with, or even after, some steps in Stage 3. The coordinator survey went to approximately 20 individuals and received 13 responses, for a response rate of roughly 65%. The PI survey went to approximately 35 individuals and received 22 responses, for a response rate of roughly 63%. Once the surveys were completed, team members reviewed them individually and then discussed them as a group during scheduled meetings. The team then used the results to inform the goal setting and milestone creation stages.

During this phase, one team member suggested that the grants office develop a logic model of its operations, adapting a tool commonly used for grant proposal planning to the strategic planning process. With all in agreement, the team member drafted a logic model that showed the linkages between the grants office's resources, activities, outputs, and outcomes. The resulting logic model, shown in Figure 2, informed the discussion of how the grant office could be most effective (MCCCDC, 2016).

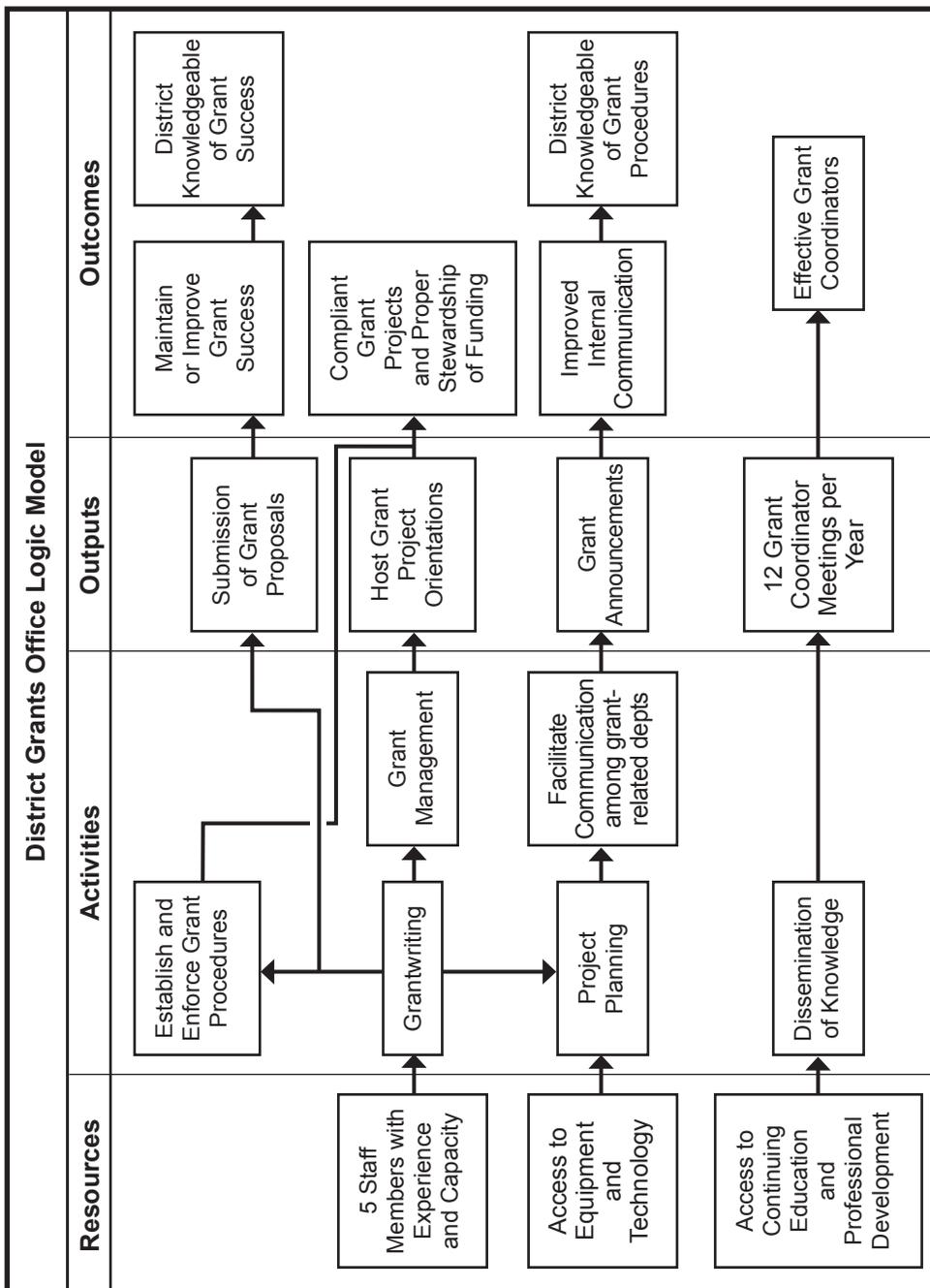


Figure 2. Grants Office Logic Model.

### Stage 3: Goal Setting

The Goal Setting stage began with the team conducting a standard SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats), a commonly used tool to identify an organization’s position based on internal and external factors. This step marked the transition to divergent

thinking, moving from facts and data-gathering to generating ideas (McLaughlin, 2006). The team conducted the process amidst a changing funding landscape and other institutional changes, including the hiring of a new Chancellor for MCCCDC. The emphasis on future trends and patterns suggested by McLaughlin (2006) was inherently part of the discussion. The team generated roughly a dozen ideas under each of the four categories of the SWOT analysis. In order to prioritize these ideas, team members individually identified their top six priorities for each category, which the team compiled and used to rank areas for discussion in subsequent group meetings.

#### *Stage 4: Milestone Setting*

Once the team identified priorities from the SWOT analysis, the meetings shifted to generating ideas for how to address these priorities. Some priority areas had many more actionable ideas generated than others, while some were difficult to address because of the complexity of the issue or because part of the solution lay outside the control of the grants office. For those areas where the grants office could exert little influence, the team still generated and captured ideas, acknowledging that the grants office would require the influence of other departments or leadership positions within MCCCDC to address those areas.

The team brought together these actionable ideas, along with the results of the peer benchmarking and internal stakeholder surveys, to create a work plan, the final step identified in McLaughlin's process (2006). The team chose to focus on the short end of McLaughlin's suggested timeframe of five to ten years, developing a plan of action for 2016 to 2020. This work plan serves as the grants office's strategic plan: it emphasizes a concrete plan of action rather than lofty goals, thereby avoiding the resulting "gap between intention and execution" (McLaughlin, 2006, p.13). The document contains very little text and instead primarily consists of a chart with essential information on each strategic priority and the actions required to achieve it. Table 2 shows an example of this format.

*Table 2. Sample Strategic Plan Table Headings*

<b>Strategic Priority 1 – Improve Communication Throughout MCCCDC About Grants</b>						
Action	Outcome	Start Date	Completion Date	Lead	Others Involved	Resources Needed

The team removed a few of the suggested actions during this process, determining that those actions were not feasible or were so far outside the grants office's sphere of influence that the team could not reasonably guarantee their execution.

The team designated a lead individual for each action, usually a member of the grants office staff. For the most part, staff members volunteered to lead the activities, and a few activities were assigned because they clearly fell within the duties of one staff member. Beyond the lead individual, almost all actions listed the rest of the grants office staff as involved, since implementation would require a team effort. Several actions required the leadership of a higher level of authority than the grants office. The team secured the support of those individuals. For example, one proposed action was to host an annual project director/principal investigator recognition event to celebrate the efforts made by these individuals to seek and implement grants. The assistance of the provost was required for this task, since the grants office had neither the funds nor the influence to make this a success. The Provost readily agreed and was designated as the lead.

Lastly, many actions were either a change in procedure or a process of continuous improvement, rather than a singular occurrence. Therefore, the team set a start date for each and either marked a completion date or indicated that it was ongoing through the end of the strategic plan timeframe.

### *Stage 5: Implementation*

The final step of implementation formally began in December 2016. However, during this year-long process, the planning team discovered it could prepare for or even begin many items in the plan without waiting for the entire process to complete sequentially. The team found a distinct advantage to taking early action on many items that were timely or responsive to the grant and organizational climate. These “easy wins” were also a motivational boost to the team. For example, one action identified the need to meet with the individuals responsible for certain topical areas related to grants, such as the Director of Healthcare Programs, to share information about changes and opportunities under the new strategic plan. The team began these meetings midway through 2016 to build momentum.

The implementation also required coordination with other institutional planning mechanisms. In Fall 2016, MCCCCD finalized a new organizational strategic plan to replace the one ending in 2016. That plan resulted in three “Strategic Commitments” to which all MCCCCD organizational activities should contribute. The grants office was able to demonstrate that its work supported those commitments. Furthermore, in January 2017, the grants office was asked to complete the implementation of a prior institutional planning initiative, Maricopa Priorities, as it relates to the grants office. The grants office demonstrated that much of the recommended work was already underway due to its own strategic planning process in 2016.

## **Process Strengths**

A key advantage of this process was that its adaptation fit the specific needs of the grants office, rather than being a template model provided to the grants office. Although the process ran from January to December 2016, the team took the time needed at each stage to accomplish its goals, rather than adhering to a strict timeline. Team members directed the process and made additional suggestions along the way. For example, the departmental logic model was suggested by a team member and was not part of the original planned process.

The availability of effective, free, or no-cost technology tools also facilitated the process. Surveys can now be done quickly and for free with online tools and responses are automatically compiled. Other online document sharing tools facilitated the process.

## **Process Challenges**

Conducting strategic planning in a large organization runs the risk of isolating stakeholders who would like to participate in the process. McLaughlin asserts that “for very practical reasons, it [strategy] must be produced by a manageably small group of people, but the preparation for it is an appropriate time to include a diversity of voices” (2006, p. XVII). Although the grants office team communicated with the larger grant coordinator group throughout the process, it was not feasible to involve the group in the planning itself. As a result, the level and timing of required communication was a challenge and required carefully balancing. Similarly, the team kept MCCCDC organizational leaders informed during the process and even asked for concrete support along the way. However, the team still risked that leaders would not support all of the recommended actions.

## **Conclusion**

The case study model outlined in this article is most appropriate for organizations that are large enough to have a multi-person grants office, but it can also apply to organizations much smaller than MCCCDC. The process can also be beneficial to nonprofits and public-sector agencies. The peer benchmarking is especially insightful and can be adapted to the particular focus of a grant-seeking organization. Since each stage does not necessarily rely on the prior one, organizations can adapt the steps that are most appropriate for their situations without compromising the quality of the outcomes. Lastly, grants offices should ensure that they have the support of organizational leadership in the process and a reasonable level of confidence that their ideas and work plans will be supported.

## References

- Bauer, D.G. (2001). *How to evaluate and improve your grants effort* (2nd ed.). Westport, CT: The American Council on Education and The Oryx Press.
- Maricopa County Community College District (2016). *Grants Department Logic Model*. Unpublished document.
- McLaughlin, T.A. (2006). *Nonprofit strategic positioning: Decide where to be, plan what to do*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Richardson, C. (2007). Strategic planning: Five steps to a more secure future. *Journal of the American Association of Grant Professionals* 5(1), 48-52.

## Biographical Information

**Colleen Bivona, MA, GPC, CRA** is Associate Director of Grants Development and Management for the Maricopa County Community College District. Before joining Maricopa, she worked in grant administration and program management at Arizona State University. She has developed and managed projects for a number of federal agencies and private foundations, including the National Science Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the US Department of Education. She is a graduate of Tufts University (BA, Anthropology and Communications), Arizona State University (MA, Anthropology and Museum Studies), and Northern Arizona University (Graduate Certificate, Professional Writing). The author can be reached at [colleen.bivona@domail.maricopa.edu](mailto:colleen.bivona@domail.maricopa.edu).

# Increasing Writing Efficiency by Employing Content Library Tools

**Megan Snedden, MA, MLIS**

Monterey Bay Aquarium, Monterey, CA

**Valerie Thomas, MA**

Monterey Bay Aquarium, Monterey, CA

*GPCI Competency 02: Knowledge of organizational development as it pertains to grant seeking*

## Abstract

Grant professionals must work quickly and efficiently to manage large volumes of information and meet deadlines. Creative reuse of previously written proposal and report content is key to delivering high quality products in a short timeframe. A common challenge for grant professionals is retrieving information created months ago from filing systems that are most often structured by funder and date, rather than by topic or program. A related challenge is finding resource documents used in a previous project that are applicable to a current context. An organizational knowledge base or content library commonly used in corporate settings can be a useful tool, but only when the grant professional creates a framework for entering and maintaining information in a systematic manner. The authors describe lessons they learned while setting up a content library and considerations for grant professionals who are interested in employing similar systems.

## Introduction

Grant professionals manage large volumes of information to create customized, unique documents to respond to funder interests during both the proposal and reporting stages. In the process of preparing an application, they acquire organizational and program descriptions, testimonials, demographic and program data, budgets, logic models, evaluation reports, scholarly research, and other information, melding all of these into a compelling argument for funding. Post-award, grant

professionals collect additional information to inform reports. To produce high-quality documents quickly and efficiently, the writer often revises and repurposes content, adapting it to the needs of a new audience and context.

A challenge for the grant professional is to find previously-written materials rapidly that will be useful and appropriate in the new situation. Maintaining an organized filing system is a challenge for any organization but is of special concern with a high volume of proposals and reports. For organizations with a large number of funders, including those providing grants to multiple and varying programs over time, a common practice is to store files in electronic folders organized by funder name and year. When trying to locate content for a new proposal or report on a specific program, the writer must recall which funders support the program, open a number of folders, and review a variety of documents to locate information for reuse. Beyond the time this process requires, it carries the risk of relying on material that is outdated or limited in detail due to the nature of the original context. The grant professional may overlook content developed about one program area that is applicable to another area. For example, a nonprofit educational organization preparing a proposal for a program that serves teachers might overlook useful information about the need for science education in a proposal written earlier for a summer youth program.

Despite the importance of efficient content retrieval for grant development, little discussion exists on this topic at professional conferences or in the literature. Gunning (2013) discusses the importance of a successful knowledge management strategy to help an organization reduce time spent on duplicative research and writing activities, and describes how knowledge management is common in large corporate settings, but less so in the nonprofit sector. Her research looked at knowledge management systems used or developed by grantseekers, including the use of blogs, cloud file storage, and collaboration platforms such as wikis or Google Drive, and briefly touched on grantseekers who developed or employed content databases, mentioning they are not always designed for grant proposal purposes.

Given the dearth of dialogue on the subject, the authors undertook a year-long exploration of the use of a knowledge base or content library in the grant setting. In the process, they identified questions and considerations that can be helpful to other grant professionals. The purpose of this article is not to promote one system over another, but to point to lessons learned about gathering, managing, and retrieving information that is valuable irrespective of a specific platform. While the authors' experience showed the utility of a content library in one particular context (a large organization managing at least 100 proposals and reports annually, on a variety of topics), the intent of this paper is to open the door to further dialogue about the use of content libraries across the diverse grant profession.

## **Phase 1: Articulating Needs and Evaluating Available Solutions**

Knowledge base tools for proposal content are available both in the nonprofit and for-profit sectors. Platforms outside the nonprofit sector are generally designed for sales professionals who develop proposals for potential customers describing their services and products. These platforms vary widely in features, design, usability, and intended use and may include tools for contact management, collaboration with topic experts, preparation of final documents, approval processes, or tracking of submitted documents. This article focuses on one key feature—a knowledge base or library of proposal and report content.

The greatest benefit offered by a content library tool is robust search capability well beyond that of a standard folder system or spreadsheet. Most offer keyword searching of the content piece, along with specific searchable fields, tagging options, and filters to limit results. Content libraries also provide a central place for sharing of important content with flexibility in how the grantseeker designs and structures the content library. Most provide search results in an abbreviated form, rather than as a list of discrete files, isolating a particular piece of information and showing it in the context of other similar content pieces. Some include versioning tools, making it possible for the writer to see how a particular content piece changed over a period of time.

With a large variety of platforms from which to choose, grant professionals need a clear understanding of their workflow to evaluate the best solution for their setting. Before starting the search for a specific product, it is useful to reflect on current methods of collecting, storing, retrieving, and using information as well as who will use the content library and what information is most useful in the library.

After identifying needs, the next step is a thorough evaluation of product options. Vendors of proposal tools from outside the grant profession are often unfamiliar with grant processes. A few questions to ask include:

- How do search functions, tagging, and filtering work? Since this is the most important element of a system, ask for multiple examples and scenarios.
- How are results displayed? How do users integrate use of the library into their writing process? Again, ask for examples or contact actual users.
- How is content exported from the content library into a proposal? What happens to formatting? Can templates or base proposals be created?
- Can content be marked for future review and updates? Does the product offer versioning?

- What other features does the product offer? Do features duplicate tools already in use at an organization?

Thorough vetting of any product is crucial, as these tools can be costly. Prices vary widely and are based on factors including the organization's budget, the number of proposals submitted annually, or the number of users. A nonprofit can expect to spend from \$500 to \$8,000 annually, depending on the platform. The cost of the tool should be balanced against expectations for efficiencies that will be gained, time freed for new prospect research, and intangible, but important, decreased frustration on the part of the grant professional.

## Phase 2: Building a Content Library

After selecting a platform, the next step is to determine which content to add to the library, how to break documents into useable content pieces, and what information to include in each record to maximize search capabilities. Best practices from the corporate world of knowledge management discourage adding full documents, as it will be harder to find specific information. Instead, these practices recommend adding unique elements that are “best-in-class” and worthy of repurposing in a new proposal or report, and breaking a proposal into topics or responses to questions that will apply broadly to future needs (Dickerson, 2017). This advice is reinforced by the fact that most tools found in both the for-profit and nonprofit sectors use a Question and Answer format for entering content, as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

The screenshot displays a web interface for entering content into a knowledge base. The main area is divided into three sections: 'Question', 'Response', and 'Tags'. Each section has a text input field and a red arrow pointing to a 'Enter' button. The 'Question' field contains the placeholder text 'Click to type question'. The 'Response' field has a rich text editor toolbar above it and the placeholder text 'Click to type response'. The 'Tags' field contains the placeholder text 'add tag, then 'enter''. To the right of the main form is a 'Details' sidebar with tabs for 'Details', 'Related', 'Review', and 'History'. The 'Details' tab is active and shows the following information: 'Created By: Valerie Thomas', 'Create Date: 08/15/17', 'Last Edited By: Valerie Thomas', and 'Last Edited Date: 08/15/17'. Below this, it shows 'Times Used: 0' and 'Times Edited: 0'. Red arrows point from the 'Related', 'Review', and 'History' tabs to a red text box that says 'By clicking these tabs, the user can view related content, set dates for review, and view revision history.' At the bottom of the interface, there is a 'SAVE KNOWLEDGE' button and three smaller buttons: 'Save & Add New', 'Flag for Review', and 'Delete'.

Figure 1. Example of question and response format for entering content in RFP365, much like what would be used in other content library or knowledge base tools.

### *Choosing Information to Enter*

It is important to view the library as a writing tool rather than an archive. Thus, the only content included in the library should be intended for reuse and adaptation in a new context (Iverson & Burkart 2007). Entering nearly identical documents is not helpful, nor is entering information created to address a question that is unlikely to come up in the future. The challenge is to determine what level of granularity in the question will make for the most efficient retrieval and reuse of information. Breaking a document into too many small parts results in fragmented content that does not make sense on its own. Yet, creating an answer that contains a proposal in its entirety makes it difficult to narrow the search results to a specific topic. In the end, the extent to which a document is broken into pieces should depend on expected use of the content. If future documents will contain the same collection of content, there is no sense breaking it up. If the program is complex and might be described in different ways for different funders, it helps to separate proposal elements. It also helps to delineate sections that might apply to multiple contexts, such as a needs statement.

Some flexibility in included content for an answer is beneficial. In some cases, it is helpful to include more than one answer to a question within a single content record, making it easier to compare equally effective ways of describing something. For example, it is useful to create a single content record with variations of the organizational profile, as this is often a short piece of content limited by a word count.

The library can also store relevant content that informs, but is not part of, a proposal or report. For example, staff may create general program updates with information useful in future proposals and reports. Similarly, email answers written in response to questions from funders may be useful in future contexts. Adding relevant content “eliminates the need to go through different sources to find content since everything is stored in one central location” (Sinclair, 2016). Providing the file pathway at the end of the content piece makes it easier to locate the original proposal or report. This applies to reference sources, too: it is not necessary to add the full article or data file as a content piece, as it is possible to provide a link to the original document.

### *Using Tags and Keywords Effectively*

It may take some experimentation with entering and retrieving content in the chosen platform to identify the best way to set up questions and tags that will help identify needed content. Most platforms provide the ability to search by keywords and tags, with each search method generating different search results. Developing a common set of keywords to use in the content piece may be helpful in finding all the relevant content. As an example, the term “results” could be used in all content pieces describing outcomes, accomplishments, completed activities, deliverables, and

evaluation findings, reducing the need for multiple searches. Tags can be added to each record to narrow the list of results to content written for a specific program area or funding source. When entering content pieces, it is important to enter certain identifying information both as a tag and in the content itself, such as funder name and program, as that information might be used either to generate or to filter search results.

### *Adding Placeholders and Flags*

Because a content library is not intended to be an archive, there is no problem in overwriting or deleting content that is no longer current. Instead, best practices recommend adding placeholders and flags to make sure content is updated to fit the context of use. Placeholders can replace a funder's name, a program name or other information that might vary according to the context. Flags can highlight dates and numbers that change with time, research or examples that may not be relevant in all contexts or should be refreshed, and assumptions that should be confirmed (Dickerson, 2017; Sinclair, 2016). Taking time to add placeholders and flags ensures out-of-date information is not inadvertently used in a new proposal or report (see Figure 2).

The screenshot displays the RFP365 content library interface. At the top, there is a search bar with the placeholder text "Start typing anything..." and a red arrow pointing to it labeled "Search Bar". To the right of the search bar is an "ADD CONTENT" button and links for "Upload Content", "Hide Filter", and "Download". Below the search bar is a table of content records. The first record is titled "Abstract: GPA Strategy Paper" and includes a red flag icon with the text "Flagged for review" and a red arrow pointing to it labeled "Content Record". The table columns are "INFO", "CREATED", "MODIFIED", and "ACCOUNT". The second record is titled "Introduction: GPA Strategy Paper". On the right side of the interface, there is a "Filters" panel with various checkboxes for filtering options, including "Tags", "Proposal/Profile", "Review Date", "Reviewer", "Review State", "Created Date", "Modified Date", "Times Used", "Created By", "Last Modified By", and "Accounts". A "FILTER RESULTS" button and a "clear" link are at the bottom of the filters panel.

*Figure 2" Content records in RFP365, showing keyword search bar and filtering options.*

### *Using the Content Library for Other Purposes*

Content developed for proposals and reports is often shared within an organization for other purposes such as board reporting, annual review publications, web pages, and so forth. Content libraries offer the ability to provide content to other staff within an organization, with varying

permissions. In addition, users may find that the robust search features of a content library have uses beyond the content needed for proposals and reports. For example, the library could be used to store shared information like prospect profiles or departmental procedures.

### **Phase 3: Employing and Maintaining the Content Library**

For veteran grant professionals, changing ingrained writing habits can be difficult. If pertinent content is challenging to find in the content library, it can reinforce the tendency to fall back on previous methods of locating content. Developing a procedure to guide the search process and conducting regular review and improvement can encourage use of the content library. Procedures might provide guidance on how to decide what content to add, format questions, use tags, and conduct searches. To begin, it is helpful to enter information into the content library while preparing a proposal or report, ensuring that the expected future usage informs the process.

Maintaining the content library should be a continual process. If it takes several attempts to locate useful content, best practices recommend taking the time to refine the questions used, add tags, or reconsider how the content was segmented to make the next search more productive. Another best practice is to reserve time following the completion of a proposal or report to consider whether information from the document should be added to the library or whether existing content should be revised or updated (Sinclair, 2016). When content from other sources becomes available that can be useful in a future proposal or report, including emails, data or research, a best practice is to make time to add it to the library before it is filed away and forgotten.

### **Conclusion**

After using a content library for some months, the authors concluded that a content library is an excellent resource that facilitates crafting winning proposals and informative reports. After the initial investment of time to plan the structure of the library, adding new content takes a matter of minutes and becomes part of the standard filing process for completing a project. The library makes retrieval and sharing of well-written content among users more efficient. It does not replace good writing and judgment about when to reuse information and when to develop new content. Cobbling together content fragments as a means of quickly creating a proposal or report is always ineffective and risky. Effective writers must carefully assess a funder's needs and interests and use their content libraries to find the best pieces to use as a source of inspiration and foundation for a new, high-quality proposal or report.

## References

- Dickerson, Carl. (2017). *How to prepare proposal content for reuse*. Capture Planning.com. Retrieved from [http://www.captureplanning.com/store/index.cfm?fuseaction=feature.display&feature\\_ID=157](http://www.captureplanning.com/store/index.cfm?fuseaction=feature.display&feature_ID=157)
- Gunning, S.K. (2013). Knowledge management in proposal development: Grant professionals' innovations in information storage, retrieval and sharing. *Journal of the Grant Professionals Association* 11(1), 27-41.
- Iverson, J. & Burkart, P. (2007). Managing electronic documents and work flows: Enterprise content management at work in nonprofit organizations. *Nonprofit Management & Leadership*, 17(4), 403-419.
- Sinclair, S. (2016). *5 Tips to manage your RFP content library*. Retrieved from <https://www.loopio.com/blog/5-tips-manage-rfp-content-library/>

## Biographical Information

**Megan Snedden** is Director of Institutional Giving at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. She has worked in the nonprofit sector for nearly 20 years and has firsthand experience with varying organizational strategies for seeking and managing funding from federal, state, foundation and corporate sources. Snedden has a Master of Library and Information Science from San Jose State University and a Master of Arts in Anthropology from New Mexico State University. She can be reached at [msnedden@mbayaq.org](mailto:msnedden@mbayaq.org).

**Valerie Thomas** is Grants Officer for the Monterey Bay Aquarium. Prior to joining the Aquarium, she taught proposal writing to undergraduate and graduate students at the University of New Mexico for 12 years. Over the past 16 years, Thomas has developed grant proposals for a variety of nonprofit and educational organizations both large and small. She holds a Master of Arts in English with a concentration in Professional Writing from the University of New Mexico. She can be reached at [vthomas@mbayaq.org](mailto:vthomas@mbayaq.org).

# Using Service Learning to Teach Graduate Students Grant Development for the Cultural Sector

**Antonio C. Cuyler, PhD**

Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL

*GPCI Competency 01: Knowledge of how to research, identify, and match funding resources to meet specific needs*

*GPCI Competency 02: Knowledge of organizational development as it pertains to grant seeking*

*GPCI Competency 03: Knowledge of strategies for effective program and project design and development*

*GPCI Competency 04: Knowledge of how to craft, construct, and submit an effective grant application*

*GPCI Competency 09: Ability to write a convincing case for funding*

## **Abstract**

Scholarly literature exists on teaching grant proposal writing in higher education settings and on the use of service learning to enhance this teaching. However, almost no literature is available on the teaching of grant proposal writing in the cultural sector and the use of service learning to achieve this educational aim. This study surveyed graduate students (N=40) to answer the research question, "Does service learning help graduate students learn how to write grant proposals for the cultural sector?" In addition to assessing students' acquisition of Grant Professionals Certification Institute (GPCI) competencies 1, 2, 3, 4, and 9, this study measured the benefits students gain when an educator used service learning to teach a graduate course on "Grant Writing & Development in the Arts." The study also identified ways to improve the service learning experience for students.

## Introduction

Nonprofit organizations expect managers to have a variety of skills. Among these, the ability to write effective grant proposals is critical, especially if the manager's role requires grant seeking (Sisk, 2011). Indeed, as Johncock (2011) stated, "learning by doing' and 'trial by fire' are commonplace experiences for many beginning grant professionals. (p.100)" However, if the development of professional skills is the focus of many graduate programs (Griffith *et al.*, 2006), then colleges and universities could enhance the professional preparedness of nonprofit managers by offering substantive education in grant proposal writing. This resource is especially necessary for aspiring managers of cultural organizations that are vulnerable to fluctuations in cultural policies (Smith, 2011) and in economic changes that have made grant proposal writing more urgent and challenging (DeVereaux, 2011).

According to the National Endowment for the Arts (2012), nonprofit cultural organizations in the U.S. obtain approximately 25% of their organization's budget from grants—9.5% from private foundations; 8.4% from corporations; and 6.7% from government. Consequently, specialized education in grant proposal writing for the cultural sector is especially vital. The Association of Arts Administration Educators (AAAE) (2014) acknowledged that students must learn to create and present comprehensive grant proposals in support of cultural institutions and projects. Yet, it provides little direction on how educators might assist their students in accomplishing this goal. Therefore, this study investigated the research question: "Does service learning help graduate students learn how to write grants for the cultural sector?" and offers suggestions for improving the service learning experience for graduate students.

## Method

To conduct this research, the investigator used Qualtrics survey software to develop a confidential, 17-question electronic survey. The survey asked about students' previous experience with service learning and about their perceptions of whether service learning helped them to learn how to write grant proposals for the cultural sector. The survey also asked demographic questions, such as age, disability status, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. The sample size (N=40) represents a convenience sample of graduate students from a public, research-intensive, university in the southeastern United States. The researcher obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, and opened and disseminated the survey on April 17, 2017. The survey closed on May 1, 2017. The researcher also sent three reminders to students to encourage the largest response rate possible. Fifty-five students completed the Grant Writing & Development in the Arts course, 40 of whom (72%) completed the survey.

## University Teaching in Grant Writing

Though the scholarly literature on teaching grant development in higher education is limited (Falk, 2011), Johncock (2011) identified seven key factors that grant educators must consider when designing courses. These include: delivery formats; alignment strategies of curriculum with national standards; textbook selection; significance of technology; curriculum development and lesson planning; product development; and peer reviews. Multiple studies provide insight on how those who teach grant proposal writing navigate these seven issues with different aims and in different disciplines (Blair *et al.*, 2007; Eisenberg, 2003; Falk, 2011; Kraus, 2007; Reynolds *et al.*, 1998; Sisk, 2011; Wark, 2008).

Service learning is among high-impact practices necessary for an effective undergraduate education [National Survey of Student Engagement (2016)], as is teaching grantsmanship with service learning to graduate students (Addams *et al.*, 2010; Cook, 2008; Griffith *et al.*, 2006; MacTavish *et al.*, 2006; and Mennen, 2006). However, the literature is devoid of research on teaching grant proposal writing for the cultural sector specifically (DeVereaux, 2011). This study seeks to add to the literature by investigating the extent to which service learning helped graduate students learn how to write grant proposals for the cultural sector and to achieve specific GPCI competencies.

## The Course

The researcher first taught Grant Writing & Development in the Arts as a special topics course. In Fall 2013, the institution's Curriculum Review Committee approved the course and gave it a permanent course number. According to the *Graduate Bulletin*, "Grant Writing & Development in the Arts explores the fundamental processes that influence the conceptualization, design, development, review, and management of a grant funded project in a nonprofit cultural organization. This class also features a service learning component that allows students to prepare their assignments on behalf of and in consultation with a nonprofit cultural organization" (Florida State University, 2017). The instructor categorizes course outcomes into three areas:

- *Nonprofit organizational theory*: students discuss and evaluate theories of the process of grant-related writing and development in nonprofit cultural organizations.
- *Application of theory*: students 1) reflect on and apply the planning and research process a nonprofit cultural organization considers before targeting grant funders, 2) study and compose grant proposals to corporate, foundation, and government funders, and 3) examine and assume the roles of a grant review panelist and presenter of a grant proposal.

- *Skills development*: students will demonstrate the professionalism expected of a practicing arts administrator by coming to class on time, dressed appropriately, and prepared to participate in course activities.

Geever (2012) and Miner and Miner (2008) provide most of the course content for the Grant Writing & Development in the Arts course. The instructor uses the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* (2017) to introduce students to current trends in grant-related writing. Writing for cultural organizations is very particularized. Therefore, the instructor supplements the texts with readings from *Grantmakers in the Arts* (2017), DeVereaux (2011), and peer-reviewed journals in arts administration.

The 16-week course has five units: 1) grant seeking and prospect research, 2) corporate grants and sponsorship proposals, 3) foundation grant proposals, 4) government grant proposals, and 5) funder reviews. There are six assignments. Table 1 describes these assignments and the percentage of students' overall grade.

*Table 1. Assignments and Percentage of Overall Grade*

<b>Assignment</b>	<b>%</b>
Corporate Grant or Sponsorship Proposal	20%
Foundation Letter of Inquiry	20%
Government Grant Proposal	20%
Grant Review Panel	15%
Professionalism	15%
Funder Prospect Research Report	10%

Each course session is two hours, 45 minutes, which allows for several collaborative exercises including peer reviews. On due dates, students conduct between two and three in-class peer reviews and revise their work before submitting it for grading. By doing this, the instructor strives to emphasize practices taught during the course, while developing students' ability to identify and correct their mistakes. They also refine their ability to review grant proposals.

The grant review panel simulation is the most innovative assignment in the course. In the next-to-last week of the course, students submit their most favored grant proposal to their peers via Blackboard. Students then prepare questions about their peers' proposals in preparation for the simulation. On the last day, students present their grant proposal and take turns serving as a panelist, asking each presenter questions about the proposal.

Once students present their own grant proposals, they leave the room, and the panel discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal. Lastly, each student completes a score sheet voting “yes” or “no” to fund the proposal. At the end of the simulation, the instructor tallies the votes and reports to the students the funding results. During the reporting of the funding results, the instructor asks students to share with classmates their motivations for choosing to fund or not to fund each proposal.

## **Service Learning**

Furco (1996) distinguished service learning from other types of experiential education by defining it as equally benefitting the provider and recipient of the service. He also argued that instructors must provide some academic context and design service learning in a way that ensures that service and learning are mutually enhancing (Furco, 1996). The instructor incorporated service learning into Grant Writing & Development in the Arts after receiving feedback from the students in the first semester the course was available in Fall 2012, that it was too theoretical and not practical enough.

The instructor decided to pilot a service learning project by allowing the students to choose an organization with which they wanted to work. Students chose to write a South Arts grant proposal for the African Caribbean Dance Theatre because of the mission, low-cost programming, and responsive executive director. To ensure that all nine enrolled students actively participated in the project, the instructor organized the students into three teams: research, writing, and quality control. The students reported that the service learning project enhanced their grant-related writing skills. This is important because in previous research, students reported that internships had greater value than service learning. This finding confirms that service learning has educational value of which students are not always cognizant (Cuyler & Hodges, 2015).

Turner (2006) maintained that students gain academic learning skills, experience in civic and democratic participation, critical thinking skills, degree and career planning opportunities, interpersonal skill development, exposure to solving social problems, leadership skill development, and an understanding of diversity issues—all through service learning. Instructors must be cognizant of effective practices in implementing service learning to maximize positive service learning outcomes for students.

Tannenbaum and Berrett (2005) articulated the following as characteristics of effective service learning: 1) service that is connected to the curriculum; 2) involving a specific action; 3) requiring reflection at the end of the service; 4) ongoing reflection throughout the course; 5) choice in selecting the service; 6) training in the service area; 7) involvement for

a minimum of 10 hours; 8) faculty training in the use of service-learning; 9) ongoing communication between the faculty member and community service-learning partner; 10) assessment to determine if program outcomes were achieved; and 11) recognition of student contributions. Grant Writing & Development in the Arts uses these practices.

Students submit an evaluation of their host organization, a time log, and evidence that they reported their hours into ServScript, a platform the university uses to maintain a record of students' service in the community. The university reports students' service on their transcripts. In addition, host organizations submit an evaluation of the student. The service learning component of the course is a unique opportunity for students to learn in an actual organizational setting while providing meaningful service to the community by bolstering cultural organizations' capacity to fulfill their missions.

Although grant-seeking activities are vital to organizations' sustainability, none of the organizations employed a professional grant proposal writer (Griffith *et al.*, 2006), nor did many have office space available for students. They mostly worked remotely. For example, to support students' understanding of how to conduct grant research, the instructor brought in guest speakers or provided a demonstration on how to use the Foundation Center Directory Online to conduct prospect research. As most could not afford to purchase this software, access to and practice with it provides students with a competitive edge as they enter employment post-graduation and ensures their preparedness to provide meaningful service to their organizations.

## Demographic Characteristics of the Students Surveyed

Table 2 shows the number of students from each semester who completed the survey. Approximately 45% of enrolled students majored in Arts Administration, while 55% majored in Art, Audio Production & Composition, Dance, Integrated Marketing Communications, Museum & Cultural Heritage Studies, and Science Education. Most students identified as millennials (born 1981–2000), and as a person without a disability.

*Table 2. The Number of Students and Semester Enrolled*

Semester Enrolled	Count
Fall 2012	6
Fall 2013	9
Fall 2014	6
Fall 2015	13
Spring 2017	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>

Students who completed Grant Writing & Development in the Arts served between 1,380–2,180 hours through the service learning program.

### Cultural Organizations

Students completed service learning placements at 23 cultural organizations in and beyond Tallahassee, Florida, including in the neighboring counties of Gadsden and Jefferson; three in Columbus, Georgia; and one in Branson, Missouri. The service learning host organizations included the African Caribbean Dance Theatre; Anhinga Press; Artist Series of Tallahassee; Asian Coalition of Tallahassee; Boys' Choir of Tallahassee; Capital Chordsmen; Gadsden Arts Center; John G. Riley House Museum; Journey to Dance; LeMoyne Visual Arts Center; Monticello Opera House; 621 Gallery; Tallahassee Bach Parley; Tallahassee Ballet; Tallahassee Community Chorus; Tallahassee Youth Orchestra; Southside Arts Complex; Tallahassee Writer's Association; Taneycomo Festival Orchestra Inc.; Theatre With A Mission; World Ballet; Youth Orchestra of Columbus; and Young Actors Theatre. The service learning host organizations' budgets ranged between \$50,000 and \$1.5 million.

### GPCI Competencies and Educational Benefits

As shown in Table 3, service learning does help most students in achieving GPCI competencies 1, 2, 3, 4, and 9. In all competencies, more students strongly agreed that their host organizations assisted them in

Table 3. GPCI Competencies

GPCI Competency	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
01. Knowledge of how to research, identify, and match funding resources to meet specific needs	45%	40%	12.5%	2.5%	40
02. Knowledge of organizational development as it pertains to grant seeking	47.5%	37.5%	12.5%	2.5%	40
03. Knowledge of strategies for effective program and project design and development	40%	32.5%	15%	12.5%	40
04. Knowledge of how to craft, construct, and submit an effective grant application	62.5%	22.5%	10%	5%	40
09. The ability to write a convincing case for funding	50%	30%	15%	5%	40

acquiring these competencies than either agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed. Of the five competencies evaluated in this study, service learning significantly assisted students in gaining knowledge of how to craft, construct, and submit an effective grant application, as well as in increasing the ability to write a convincing case for funding.

Students gained additional educational benefits from service learning. As shown in Table 4, 75% of students reported that service learning let them explore an aspect of their professional field they would not have otherwise explored in their graduate program. Approximately 70% reported that service learning enhanced their learning, and 67.5% reported that service learning deepened their critical thinking abilities. Just above half (52.5%) reported that service learning fostered a commitment to service and community, but fewer (37.5%) reported that service learning allowed them to impact the community positively. Only 2.5% reported none of the above additional educational benefits.

*Table 4. Educational Benefits*

<b>Answer</b>	<b>%</b>
Exploration of an aspect of my professional field	75%
Enhanced learning	70%
Deepened critical thinking	67.5%
Commitment to service and community	52.5%
Positively impacted the community	37.5%
None of the above	2.5%

Most students (80%) did not know if their host organizations received funding for any of the grant proposals they wrote. The remaining 20% reported that their host organizations received funding for grant proposals that they wrote.

When asked how the instructor could improve the service learning experience, 58% of students reported the need for better communication with their host organization supervisor. In addition, 50% reported a need for greater mentorship from their host supervisor. Forty-five percent reported a need for greater access to their host organization's documents. Although 18% of students reported no suggested improvements, 15% of students who chose "other" indicated the following:

"Screen the organization to ensure that they are capable of TEACHING instead of looking for free labor. Service learning at... was complicated and confusing as they didn't have it together. They needed a pro, not a student."

“More specific needs to write grants for.”

” Guidelines or a checklist for organizations for documents/information to have ready to provide the student during the grant writing process.”

“Better classroom leadership.”

“More individual mentoring with the instructor. Encouraging the students to only write grants that are actually going to be submitted by their host organization, due to appropriate timing and grant application suitability. This will create a more realistic experience. If no grant application seems appropriate for the organization, the student should write an explanation why, and assist the organization with a strategy for targeting future grants, including a timeline and roadmap with specific targets, goals, initiatives, and objectives.”

“This grant was completed as a class group, which only allowed a few group members to interact with the service learning organization directly.”

## **Limitations of the Study**

Limitations to this study exist. First, not all students who completed the course participated in this study due to unreliable e-mail addresses. This negatively impacted the response rate, which may have altered the study’s results. Second, due to the longitudinal nature of this study, students’ responses may have been impacted by their ability to recall their service learning experience accurately. In addition, the instructor changed the service learning experience based on students’ feedback every semester. This also may have impacted the results. Third, the duality of the instructor/researcher role in this study may have biased students’ responses. To avoid this potential bias, the researcher sought and received IRB approval to ensure students’ anonymity before collecting data. Although these limitations exist, students gained a great deal from the course. In addition, the instructor can enhance the service learning experience for future students.

To address students’ concerns about better communication, more mentoring, greater access to host-organizations’ documents, and screening host organizations, the instructor could create an orientation for prospective host organizations.

Organizations will be asked: 1) are you prepared to host a service learner? 2) are you ready to provide a service learner access to pertinent

documents needed to write grants? 3) are you ready to mentor a service learner? 4) are you prepared to respond to your service learner's e-mails within 24 hours? 5) are you prepared to meet with your service learner at least three times over the semester either face-to-face, by phone, or through video conferencing software?

The instructor added numbers 4 and 5 (above) to the service learning agreement. Adding numbers 1-3 should significantly enhance the service learning experience for all students. Although educators should expect students to learn in less-than-ideal situations, a student's preparedness is an important factor in the learning process. In earlier iterations of Grant Writing & Development in the Arts, some students may not have had the ideal placement. Using student evaluations of their host organizations will help the instructor determine the most effective placements to maximize student learning.

Only 37.5% of students reported that service learning allowed them to positively impact the community. This may have been because students do not fully understand the value of their service. The instructor can help students better understand how their service is positively impacting the community by reinforcing the importance of each organization's capacity to fulfill its mission. Implicit in the host service learning organization's mission is the goal to enhance quality of life by providing access to culturally enriching opportunities. This goal positively impacts the community.

Finally, one student commented that better classroom leadership would improve the service learning experience. In the absence of further elaboration from the student, one could perceive a cognitive dissonance between the instructor's approach to teaching and the student's approach to learning. Several students matriculated straight to graduate school from their undergraduate studies, and they took Grant Writing & Development in the Arts in their first semester of graduate school. Future instructors who teach a similar course should consider a student's maturation level and reinforce educational approaches that stimulate their professional growth. The student's comment also warrants an inquiry into how host organizations experience students during service learning. A subsequent study should seek to understand the benefits of service learning placements to cultural organizations, and what organizations in general gain from service learning placements when they educate with specific GPCI competencies in mind.

## **Conclusion**

This study answered the research question, "Does service learning help graduate students learn how to write grants for the cultural sector?" Using service learning in the Grant Writing & Development in the Arts course assisted students' acquisition of GPCI Competencies 1, 2, 3, 4, and 9. Service learning also provided students with additional benefits,

the most important being the opportunity to explore an aspect of their profession that they would not otherwise have explored in their graduate program.

## References

- Addams, H.L., Woodbury, D., Allred, T., & Addams, J. (2010). Developing student communication skills while assisting nonprofit organizations. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 73(3), 282-290.
- Association of Arts Administration Educators. (2014). *Standards for arts administration graduate program curricula*. Retrieved from <http://new.artsadministration.org/uploads/files/AAAE%20Grad%20Standards%20v11-14.pdf>
- Blair, B.G., Cline, G.R., & Bowen, W.R. (2007). NSF-style peer review for teaching undergraduate grant-writing. *The American Biology Teacher*, 69(1), 34-37.
- Chronicle of Philanthropy. (2017). *Chronicle of Philanthropy*. Retrieved from <https://www.philanthropy.com/>
- Cook, A.S. (2008). Global dimensions in service learning: A collaborative grant-writing project. *International Education*, 37(2), 6-16.
- Cuyler, A.C., & Hodges, A.R. (2015). From the student side of the ivory tower: An empirical study of student expectations of internships in arts and cultural management. *International Journal of Arts Management*, 17(3), 68-79.
- DeVereaux, C. (2011). Fundraising and grant-writing basics for arts managers. Brindle, M. & DeVereaux (Eds.), *The arts management handbook: New directions for students and practitioners*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.
- Eisenberg, T. (2003). Teaching successful grant writing to psychology graduate students. *Teaching of Psychology*, 30(4), 328-330.
- Falk, A. (2011). Teaching grantmanship in a nonprofit leadership class. *Journal of the Grant Professionals Association*, 9(1), 78-87.
- Florida State University. (2017). *Graduate Course Bulletin*. Retrieved from [http://registrar.fsu.edu/bulletin/graduate/departments/art\\_education/](http://registrar.fsu.edu/bulletin/graduate/departments/art_education/)

- Furco, A. (1996). Service-learning: A balanced approach to experiential education. Taylor, B. & Corporation for National Service (Eds.), *Expanding Boundaries: Serving and Learning* (pp. 2-6). Washington, DC: Corporation for National Service. Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1104&context=slceslgen>
- Geever, J. (2012). *The Foundation Center's guide to proposal writing* (6th ed.). New York, NY: Foundation Center.
- Grantmakers in the Arts. (2017). *About us*. Retrieved from <http://www.giarts.org/about-us>
- Grant Professionals Association. (2017). *Validated competencies and skills, Grant Professionals Certification Institute*. Retrieved from <http://grantcredential.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/GPC-Competencies-Skills.pdf>
- Griffith, J.D., Hart, C.L., & Goodling, M.M. (2006). Teaching grant writing with service learning. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 18(3), 222-229.
- Johncock, P. Issues in teaching and learning about grants. *Journal of the Grant Professionals Association*, 9(1), 99-110.
- Kraus, P.L. (2007). The evolution of instruction in grant writing and research in the libraries at the University of Utah. *Library Philosophy and Practice*, 1-4. Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/155/>
- MacTavish, K.M., McClelland, M.M., Gray, L., Bowman, S., Moran, P., & Burgy, L. (2006). Community-linked teaching strategies: Promoting experiential learning in human services. *Human Services Education*, 26(1), 99-111.
- Mennen, K. (2006). Use service learning to add real-world writing experience to your course. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 69(2), 192-195.
- Miner, J., & Miner, L. (2008). *Proposal planning & writing* (4th ed.). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- National Endowment for the Arts. (2012). *How the U.S. funds the arts*. Retrieved from <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/how-the-us-funds-the-arts.pdf>

- National Survey of Student Engagement. (2016). *Engagement insights: Survey findings on the quality of undergraduate education-annual results 2016*. Retrieved from [http://nsse.indiana.edu/NSSE\\_2016\\_Results/pdf/NSSE\\_2016\\_Annual\\_Results.pdf](http://nsse.indiana.edu/NSSE_2016_Results/pdf/NSSE_2016_Annual_Results.pdf)
- Reynolds, C.F., Martin, C., Brent, D., Ryan, N., Dahl, R.E., Pilkonis, P., Marcus, M.D., & Kupfer, D.J. (1998). Postdoctoral clinical-research training in psychiatry: A model for teaching grant writing and other research survival skills and for increasing clarity of mentoring expectations. *Academy of Psychiatry*, 22(3), 190-196.
- Sisk, A. (2011). How critical is training? Impact of a semester-long proposal writing course on obtaining grant funding. *Journal of the Grant Professionals Association*, 9(1), 66-77.
- Smith, D. (2011). Signals of support: Cultural policy's shifting rationales for funding of the arts. *Journal of the Grant Professionals Association*, 9(1), 1-14.
- Tennenbaum, S.C., & Berrett, R.D. (2005). Relevance of service-learning in college courses. *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, 9(1), 197-201.
- Turner, M.K. (2006, January). *Experiential Learning*. Presentation presented at the PIE Spring Teaching Conference Tallahassee, Florida.
- Wark, L. (2008). Introduction to grant writing for undergraduates and community professionals. *Human Services Today*, 5(1), 1-10.

## Biographical Information

**Dr. Antonio C. Cuyler**, Assistant Professor of Arts Administration & Coordinator of Internships at Florida State University (FSU), has used service learning to enhance his graduate students' learning in his Grant Writing & Development in the Arts course since 2012. To date, 55 students have written 139 grant applications for 33 cultural organizations, accruing more than 2,000 hours of service in and beyond Tallahassee, FL. He has received more than \$40,000 in grants to support his own research, including a grant to study the internship program at the Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing Arts. As a grants panelist, he has reviewed 217 grants for the US Department of Education, Florida Division of Cultural Affairs, Arts Council of Fairfax County, and the Council on Culture & Arts (COCA). The author can be reached at [acuyler@fsu.edu](mailto:acuyler@fsu.edu).

# Grant Readiness Score: Analyzing Strengths and Areas for Improvement

**Diane H. Leonard, GPC**

DH Leonard Consulting & Grant Writing Services, LLC, Clayton, NY

*GPCI Competency 02: Knowledge of organizational development as it pertains to grant seeking*

## Abstract

Grant professionals recognize the importance of grant readiness to ensure competitiveness in grant seeking. While many useful self-evaluation questionnaires are available, most require individual interpretation of the results to determine grant readiness. Grant seeking needs a more widely used and distributed tool consistently scored for comparative analysis that is objective in its assessment. The author developed the proprietary Grant Readiness Assessment Strategy Preparedness (GRASP) Tool in 2015 to provide grant-seeking organizations with an unbiased evaluation of their grant readiness. Data from 65 grant seeking organizations initially validated the GRASP Tool. In the following year, 244 grantseeking organizations used the tool to identify strengths and areas for improvement. This article demonstrates how the use of subjective data for assessing grant readiness of an organization allows for analysis by individual groups. Using it, they can assess their changes as an organization over time and how they compare to other groups competing for grant funds.

## Introduction

“Grant readiness” is one way to analyze organizational development and preparedness to apply for grants. Whether specializing in one type of grant, grantmaker, or grant seeking organization, the grant professional’s role is to advance the grant readiness of an organization (Kurup & Butler, 2008).

Whether a consultant or an employee, grant professionals play a fundamental, yet often discounted, role in the grantseeking process:

assessing an organization's capacity to apply for, implement, and manage grants (Kurup & Butler, 2008).

Grant readiness is defined as “a relative level of preparation to pursue grant activity, both in general and in respect to specific projects and opportunities” (Preuss, 2015).

An organization's level of grant readiness is an important factor in considering whether to invest resources in pursuing a specific grant opportunity, or when analyzing post-mortem why grant applications are being awarded or denied by grant makers. Grant readiness impacts all aspects of grant seeking, including how an organization:

- Decides what the program priorities are for seeking grant revenue;
- Decides which grant makers to research;
- Approaches the creation of a proactive grantseeking strategy;
- Engages colleagues in the grant-seeking process as a grant team;
- Highlights its strengths to grant makers in relationship building; and
- Positions its programs and organizational capacity in a grant application.

### **History of Assessing Grant Readiness**

Grantseeking organizations rely on several metrics for assessing their performance for grantseeking including the percentage of proposals approved, dollars secured, percent of budget met, and percent of grant makers renewed or increased annually. These metrics address the post-award work and imply strength of the pre-award work and best practices utilized which is commonly described as the grant-readiness of an organization.

For more than a decade, grant professionals have created self-assessment checklists and questionnaires to assist grantseeking organizations in understanding their grant readiness. These checklists assess a wide range of factors related to readiness to pursue grants including documentation, fiscal capacity, strategic planning and vision, and partnerships. Two checklists in the field that are well respected that gather information critical in assessing grant readiness are:

- Butler Consulting's “Checklist for Success” (<https://butlerconsulting.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/checklistforsuccess5-11rev.pdf>)
- The Kester Group's “Self-Assessment for Federal Grants” (<http://www.kestergroup.com/assets/Uploads/Organizational-Self-Assessment-for-Fed-Grants.pdf>)

These two checklists assist grant professionals in identifying red flags and areas for improvement in an organization before beginning the grant seeking process. The tools are useful for the grant professional in judging the grant readiness of an organization. They serve as the basis for recommendations on how an organization increases its grant readiness and competitiveness in their grantseeking efforts.

Despite the existence of numerous self-assessment checklists and questionnaires, grant readiness is traditionally assessed based on an individual grant professional's personal interpretation. Preuss (2015) reported that "assessments of grant capacity and readiness...are based on past experience." The experience of a grant professional assessing the grant readiness of an organization is critical to the successful interpretation of the self-assessment tools currently available.

Grant readiness has not been quantified through a validated tool and used as a metric in a publicly available tool. Preuss also found a "lack of identifiable published work on assessment of grant capacity." However, based on interviews with grant professionals about their approach to grant readiness, it is apparent that in addition to published tools, there may be other internally developed and validated mechanisms in the field that are not public or are not intended to be public.

## **The GRASP Tool**

The GRASP Tool provides a metric and scale for measuring grant readiness and for identifying specific areas for improvement within a grantseeking organization. The 20 elements and list of questions analyzed through the Tool build upon the successful questionnaires utilized, but they take the grant-readiness assessment conducted by a single grant professional a step further. The Tool has a weighting system assessing responses for each of the 20 factors within the four categories of grant readiness. Each element is not of equal importance in the overall assessment. The weighting system differentiates between grantseeking organizations interested in both government and foundation grants as opposed to those that only seek government grants or private foundation grants. The Tool provides a grant-readiness score and visualization of that score as a spider/radius chart showing the specific grantseeking strengths and areas for improvement for each grantseeking organization.

The GRASP Tool was initially validated in 2015 by a beta group of 65 nonprofits of varying sizes, communities, types of work, grantseeking experience levels, and staffing models. The geography, budget, experience with grants, and staffing models of the 65 nonprofits varied significantly. Respondents provided feedback on the score received and the results of their radius charts illustrating their organizations' strengths and areas for improvement. The feedback provided by the beta group was tested and integrated into the Tool prior its public launch.

## Scoring Grant Readiness

The GRASP Tool yields a range of scores which indicate grant readiness based on the responses to the questionnaire seeking information about the 20 grant-readiness elements. As these elements are often related and interdependent, a range of acceptable outputs is possible for each measure, and organizations may fall along a continuum of scores that indicate grant readiness. A new organization, or one with no experience in grant funding, can use the grant-readiness score as an indicator of whether they are ready to pursue grants. The score can serve as an indicator of areas of strength for existing grantseeking organizations where best practices are followed and should be continued, or indicate areas for improvement where attention and effort would make them more competitive in grant seeking efforts.

The data illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 are based on the 244 grantseeking organizations that voluntarily used the Tool over the 18 months following its formal release. These organizations learned about the Tool from a variety of sources including: The Grant Professionals Association National Conference, CharityHowTo.com webinars, GrantHub.com webinars, social media and blog posts, and colleague referrals.

The strengths exhibited by the organizations include engagement of partners and registration with state and federal agencies. The areas for improvement include lack of grant teams, lack of grant policies, and lack of focus on pre-planning for grant applications.

Figure 1 displays the GRASP Tool output for a hypothetical organization that is considered grant-ready. The organization scored at the top of the grant-readiness range with a score of 100. However, the organization did not achieve the maximum score of 120. There is still

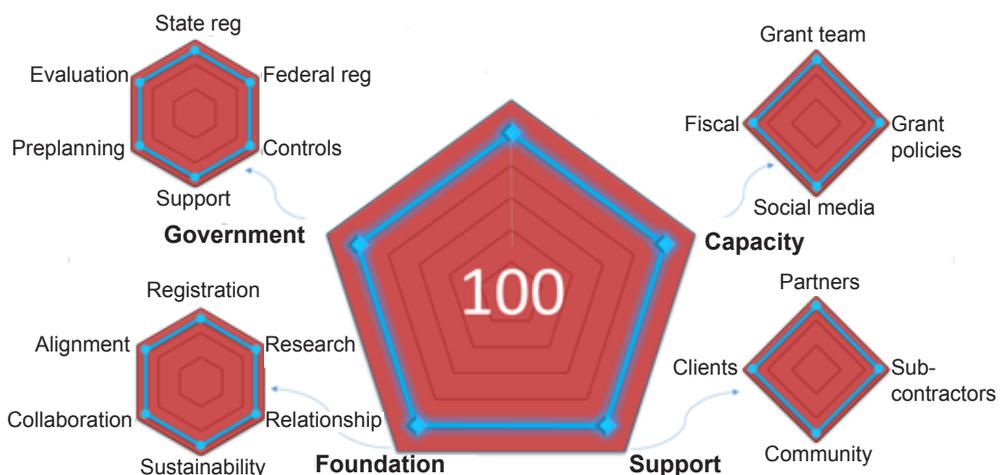


Figure 1. Simulated GRASP Tool output for a hypothetical grant ready organization.

room for improvement for implementation of best practices in the field, even with an organization as grant-ready as that depicted below.

### **Analyzing Grant-Readiness Scores**

A grant-readiness score from the GRASP Tool is weighted based on the answers provided by each organization in response to the questions. A spider chart/radius graph illustrates the strengths and areas for improvement. The closer the line on the chart is to the outside of the plot, the stronger the element, and the closer the line on the chart is to the inside of the plot, the stronger the need for improvement. There is not one single score that indicates a grant-ready organization as there are nearly infinite response combinations for the Tool. Rather, there is a range of scores from 20 to 120, and an organization is considered grant-ready if its score exceeds 75. An organization is exceptionally grant-ready if its score exceeds 100.

### **Distribution of Grant-Readiness Scores**

A grantseeking organization needs first to understand its own areas of strength and areas for improvement based on the GRASP Tool spider/radius chart visualization and how it scored compared to the maximum of 120. It is also critical to consider how the grant-readiness score for an organization compares to that of other organizations, due to the competitive nature of grantseeking, to understand in which areas of grant readiness an organization excels compared to another.

The grant-readiness scores of the 244 organizations that used the Tool over the past 18 months follow a standard bell curve when plotted against one another. Figure 2 illustrates the percentage of grantseeking organizations that fall into specific ranges along the continuum of scores.

The average grant-readiness score was 63.1, and the median score was 62.8. Based on the 20 grant-readiness elements, a score greater than 75 indicates an organization that is in the range of being grant-ready, with a score of 100 being the true score of grant readiness. However, the surveys submitted by the 244 organizations indicate that a score of 75 puts an organization in the 75th percentile of grantseeking organizations. The grant-readiness score is an indicator of the strength of grantseeking success metrics of an organization. This score is an unbiased assessment of the structure of a grantseeking strategy and of the larger organization. An organization can successfully generate grant revenue without having all the grantseeking best practices in place, which would elicit a score indicating grant readiness.

An acknowledged limitation of the current GRASP Tool is the collection of self-reported grantseeking success rates and dollars awarded and a comparison to best practice utilization. That limitation for further analysis aside, there are common grant-readiness strengths and areas for improvement indicated by the data.

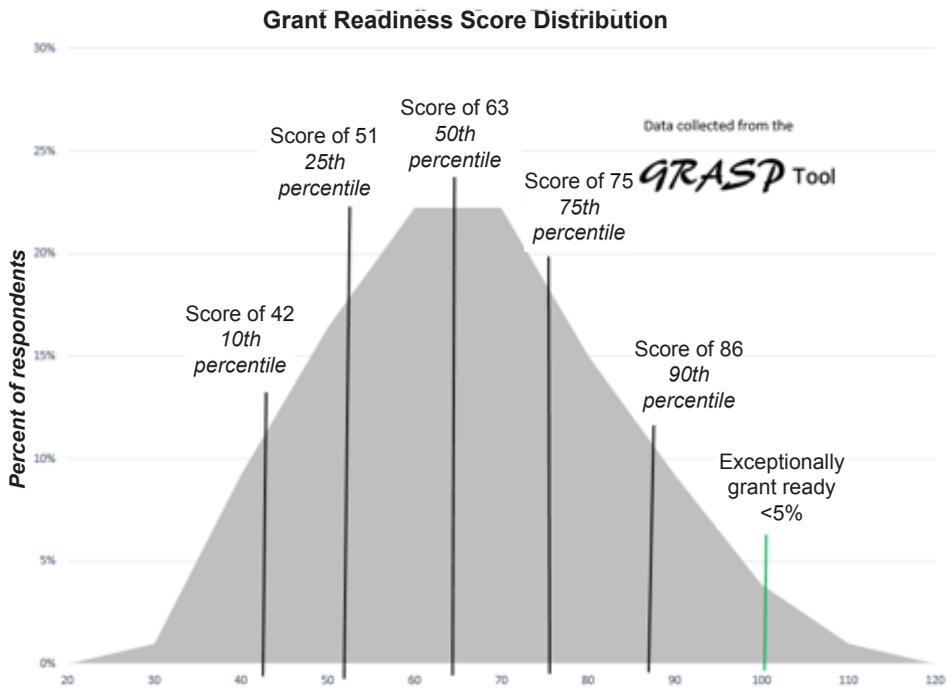


Figure 2. Distribution of grant-readiness scores for 244 grantseeking organizations.

## Assessing Common Grant-Readiness Strengths

Reviewing the data provided by the 244 nonprofits, it is apparent that grantseeking organizations have several strengths in common. The 20 grant-readiness elements are broken into four categories: internal capacity, external support, government grants, and foundation grants, although there is overlap in many factors across categories. Each of the four categories of grant readiness is further defined to show common strengths.

### *External Support*

External support analyzes the engagement of the grantseeking organization with partners, community members, clients, and subcontractors in their pre-award grantseeking work. This grouping of grant-readiness elements is where the greatest difference is shown by groups that took the GRASP Tool. The survey responses show the greatest variation in the application of best practices with a range of points from the completed surveys of 95 points. The significant variation in scores shows the large disparity in how grantseeking organizations approach the engagement of their external stakeholders in the grant seeking process. Fifty-nine percent of organizations are grant ready for their engagement of partners in their grant application process.

### *Government Grants*

Government grants analyzes the preparedness of the formal registration processes necessary to apply for grants as well as the capacity of an organization for compliance-related activities and evaluation capacity. The survey responses show the least variation in the application of best practices by grantseeking organizations, with a range of 48 points. The proximity of the scores shows that most of the organizations interested in government grants established a base level of capacity for seeking government grants. Seventy-four percent of organizations are prepared and registered with their states not just as charitable or tax-exempt organizations but are registered as required individually in each state to be eligible to apply for and receive grants from state agencies.

### *Internal Capacity*

Internal capacity analyzes the existence of up-to-date grantseeking policies and procedures as well as the existence and utilization of a grant team to support the efforts of the grant professional. While it will be noted below that having Office of Management and Budget (OMB)-compliant policies is an area for improvement, a common area of strength is the day-to-day accounting and tracking of grant dollars in place with grantseeking organizations. Sixty-six percent of organizations are grant ready based on the internal financial procedures and accounting principles that are being followed.

### *Foundation Grants*

Foundation grants analyzes the capacity to research, build relationships, and demonstrate sustainability. A common area of strength exhibited through the Tool sample is documentation, paperwork, and registrations. Sixty-two percent of organizations are grant ready related to their documentation and attachments for potential grant applications.

## **Assessing Common Grant Readiness Areas for Improvement**

Review of the data indicates common areas for improvement by most grantseeking organizations.

### *Internal Capacity*

- Only 48% of respondents have a grant team in place; and
- Only 30% of organizations have grant policies in place that they review and update at least annually.

### ***Government Grants***

- Only 25% of organizations meet grant readiness standards related to financial controls and evaluation and OMB-compliant policies;
- Only 20% of organizations are actively involved in preplanning for future grant applications; and
- Only 6% of organizations are adequately engaging their elected officials as a mechanism of support for their organization.

### ***External Support***

- Only 30% of organizations are grant ready vis-a-vis engagement of subcontractors in design, planning, or application processes for grants;
- Only 30% of organizations are grant ready vis-a-vis engagement of clients in the design, planning or application processes for grants; and
- Only 39% percent are grant ready vis-a-vis engagement of their community in the design, planning, or application processes for grants.

### ***Foundation Grants***

- Only 42% of organizations are grant ready and following best practices with grantmaker relationships;
- Only 30% of organizations are grant ready and following best practices in sustainability and diversification; and
- Only 20% of organizations are grant ready and consistently following best practices with regards to understanding and confirming alignment with grantmakers before applying.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the Grant Professionals Association Code of Ethics and the Grant Professionals Certification Institute's Competencies, a grant professional must assess an organization's readiness to seek, implement, and manage grant-funded projects, and implement practices that advance its readiness (Kurup & Butler, 2008).

Grantseeking organizations rely on metrics for assessing their performance for grantseeking including the success percentage, dollars secured, percent of budget met, and percent of grantmakers

renewed. The grant-readiness score is a supporting metric that can be used by grantseeking organizations to assess their internal processes and practices and identify areas for improvement. The GRASP Tool is unbiased and provides clear direction to a grantseeking organization on practices to maintain and practices for which improvement is indicated.

## References

- Butler Consulting's Checklist for Success (<https://butlerconsulting.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/checklistforsuccess5-11rev.pdf>)
- Kurup, R.S. & Butler, L.G. (2008). Get your organization grant-ready. *Journal of the American Association of Grant Professionals*, 6(1), 7-14.
- Preuss, M. (2015). Assessing grant capacity and readiness: A systematic review of the periodical literature of research administration. *Research Management Review*, 20(2), 1-18.
- The Kester Group's Self-Assessment for Federal Grants (<http://www.kestergroup.com/assets/Uploads/Organizational-Self-Assessment-for-Fed-Grants.pdf>)

## Biographical Information

**Diane H. Leonard, GPC** is an experienced certified grant professional who has provided grant development counsel to nonprofit organizations of varying size and scope for more than a decade. She founded DH Leonard Consulting & Grant Writing Services, LLC in 2006 to focus on increasing nonprofit capacity related to grant seeking and grant management. Her passion for providing customized technical assistance and capacity-building support to nonprofits was fostered in her role as a program officer at the Michigan Women's Foundation, a statewide public foundation, early in her career. That passion is what fuels Leonard's approach today to best meet and support each client's grant seeking and grant management capacity.

Ms. Leonard is an active member of the Grant Professionals Association serving on both its Social Media Committee and Grant News Committee. She became an "Approved Trainer" through the Grant Professionals Association in the fall of 2014. She is a graduate of Cornell University in Ithaca, NY, with a

Bachelor's of Science in Industrial and Labor Relations, and became a Grant Professional Certified through the Grant Professionals Certification Institute in April 2013. She can be reached at [diane@dhleonardconsulting.com](mailto:diane@dhleonardconsulting.com).

# Essential Features of Nonprofit Sustainability: Towards Clarity for Grants Professionals

**William Moore, PhD**

The Moore Strategy Group, Olathe, KS

*GPCI Competency 02: Knowledge of organizational development as it pertains to grant seeking*

*GPCI Competency 04: Knowledge of how to craft, construct, and submit an effective grant application*

## **Abstract**

Sustainability for nonprofit professionals is a vaguely defined and misunderstood concept, often described by proposal authors as securing sufficient funding to maintain programmatic or organizational operations. Recent attempts to define and identify key features of sustainability have contributed to a richer understanding of the complexity of sustainability and the factors that influence longevity and potential for impact. This article offers the perspective that financial stability is a necessary but insufficient condition for organizational sustainability: other factors are essential for long-term stability and impact. Well-regarded models of sustainability go beyond effective management and engaged boards to include dimensions such as adaptive capacity, innovation, and other practices. In short, sustainability is the result of a complex interplay of many interdependent practices, behaviors, and decisions. This article synthesizes the dominant characterizations and features of sustainability and presents several common dimensions. Grant professionals, nonprofit leaders, and stakeholders can examine these key dimensions of sustainability, use the provided rating scales to assess their own organizational status, and plan for future internal capacity building.

## **Introduction**

Sustainability, a construct historically defined in an ecological or environmental context, reflects the belief that some things should be protected and preserved—not necessarily because of the inherent value in the object’s being protected, but because it is essential to other important commercial, environmental, cultural, or societal goals (National Research Council, 2011). For example, sustainable energy resources are renewable (i.e. replaceable once used), leave a small footprint on Earth’s atmospheric protective layers, and are cost-effective to produce and distribute to consumers. Sustainable energy resources (e.g., solar, wind, hydroelectric, geothermal, and biomass) are “good” precisely because they contribute to the long-term longevity and viability of the planet, its inhabitants, and the important dimensions of life.

The idea that an item should be sustained is deeply embedded in the perspective of what is good, valuable, and necessary to survival. This cultural and value-laden context contributes to a diversity of understanding of what sustainability means and what is worth sustaining. An examination of the published literature about nonprofit sustainability suggests that the construct has to do with longevity, resiliency, mission fulfillment, relevance, resources, adaptation, and leadership (Barr, 2012). Adding to the complexity of conceptualizing sustainability is the interaction between sustainability and success or impact. While a sustainable organization is more likely to be one that exhibits a history of success (i.e. fulfilling its mission, having a strong impact), many organizations that experience early success are not able to sustain that success over time.

## **Conceptions of Nonprofit Sustainability**

The National Council on Nonprofits (*Nonprofit Sustainability*, n.d.) notes that the term sustainability commonly describes a nonprofit organization able to sustain itself over the long term, perpetuating its ability to fulfill its mission. In this context, sustainability is largely focused on finances, but the National Council on Nonprofits acknowledges the importance of leadership succession planning, organizational adaptability, and strategic planning to an organization’s longevity.

Zimmerman and Bell (2015) define sustainability as both financial (the ability to generate resources to meet the needs of the present without compromising the future) and programmatic (the ability to develop, mature, and cycle out programs to be responsive to constituencies over time). They note that the two are not independent of each other; rather, they intersect and contribute to overall organizational sustainability. The authors believe that truly resilient organizations recognize and adjust to environmental changes that may affect their future.

The TCC Group (York, 2010), in its study of over 700 nonprofits participating in an assessment of their organizational capacity, found

that sustainability is a function of three capacities: 1) leadership—the ability to create and sustain a vision, to inspire, model, prioritize and make decisions, and to provide direction and innovate; 2) adaptability—financial and program adaptability; and 3) program capacity—adequate resources (staff and facilities) to run and deliver programs and services. York’s work suggests that effective senior leadership situated in a learning culture is a significant contributor to organizational sustainability.

The Public Interest Management Group (PIMG) (Schaffer, 2015) developed a multidimensional conceptualization of highly successful nonprofits reflecting the practices associated with sustainability and success. Schaffer defines organizational success as “performing its mission-related work effectively...achieving positive outcomes through its efforts. It is also operationally stable and well positioned for longevity” (Schaffer, 2015, pp. 5, 8). Schaffer proposes five dimensions:

1. *Strategy*: a systematic approach describing an organization’s future business activity;
2. *Culture*: the values, beliefs, and shared assumptions as well as practices by members of the organization;
3. *Operations*: the structure and actions to administer and deliver services;
4. *People*: the policies and practices to engage staff and volunteers; and
5. *Business Model*: the economics of services and revenue. PIMG’s *Success Factor Analysis* model has a strong orientation toward efficiency, performance accountability, and diversity of revenue sources (Schaffer, 2015).

In their book *Forces for Good*, Crutchfield and Grant (2008) reported finding patterns of behavior and practice among high-impact social sector organizations. The authors note that of the six practices or patterns of behavior, four are external or outwardly facing and reflect the belief that great organizations expand their influence and share their lessons broadly. According to the authors, great social sector organizations reflect the following six practices (Crutchfield & Grant, 2008, pp. 21-22):

1. *Advocate and serve*: influence and shape policy as well as provide high quality services, realizing that serving more and more people never changes the underlying social problems;
2. *Make markets work*: operate to create greater leverage of market forces to generate earned income revenue, create public-private partnerships, and influence business practices;

3. *Inspire volunteers and donors:* inspire volunteers and donors to become evangelists to engage more deeply around the organization's mission and core values and to expand the network of individuals and organizations who passionately work to create solutions;
4. *Nurture nonprofit networks:* high impact social sector organizations play a leadership role in the sector, building relationships, connecting individuals and organizations, and collaborating with and helping other organizations be successful;
5. *Master the art of adaptation:* highly successful organizations adapt to the changing priorities, needs, and conditions in their community; and
6. *Share leadership:* distribute leadership throughout their organization and network, empowering others to lead.

The REACH Healthcare Foundation (RHF) (Moore, 2016), a health conversion foundation mandated to exist into perpetuity, defines sustainability as an organization's viability and relevance and its likelihood of successfully achieving its mission. Sustainability requires the consistent execution of organizational behaviors and practices that cross many dimensions—some that necessarily occur before others can be implemented. It can be thought of as a collection of related practices, behaviors, or features of an organization; the resultant outcome of this collection is the extent to which mission fulfillment, success, and impact occur. RHF's sustainability approach poses a set of "essential questions" about the presence of practices and behaviors within an organization and uses those questions as an entry point to gaining clarity and understanding of how an organization is positioned for long-term viability and strategic impact (Moore, 2016).

WolfBrown, a consulting organization working with nonprofits, foundations, and government agencies, argues that nonprofit arts organizations are much better positioned to achieve long-term sustainability when they effectively balance three interdependent but sometimes competing priorities: 1) community relevance; 2) artistic vibrancy; and 3) capitalization. Brown *et al.* (2011) observe that community relevance is the primary element of sustainability, but the extent to which an organization is able to focus simultaneously on all three elements largely determines the level of success (p. 2). Artistic vibrancy "is the fuel that drives sustainability...and the lifeblood of any arts organization" (p. 3). Capitalization and sound fiscal policy are important elements of sustainability but, the authors note, financial distress is a symptom of, not a reason for, its lack.

## Common Dimensions of Nonprofit Sustainability

With this background on the conceptions of sustainability, this article now examines seven of the most frequently mentioned models of sustainability, proposes a process for organizations to better understand and improve the likelihood of sustainability, and provides readers with rating scales to assess their organizational journey towards a sustainable future. The selected models are not exhaustive but do represent a diversity of opinions and perspectives. For example, one model, PIMG (*Success Factor Analysis*, Schaffer, 2015), provides an extensive list of factors that have been associated with successful nonprofits. Another model (*Sustainability Mindset*, Zimmerman & Bell, 2015) explores the interdependency between two factors related to strategic and programmatic decision making.

The authors of these seven models raise several general observations in their writings about the nature of this complex construct (Schaffer, 2015; Brown *et al.*, 2011; Moore, 2016; National Council on Nonprofits, n.d.; York, 2010; Zimmerman & Bell, 2015). First, there appears to be awareness of the interdependency among dimensions of sustainability. Most of these authors point to the need to balance dimensions that are necessary but can work in opposition to each other. Second, each model includes financial stability and effective fund development, indicating that these components are and remain important features of sustainability models. Third, organizational adaptability is central to many definitions and descriptions of nonprofit sustainability, impact, and success.

Table 1 (on the next page) includes common dimensions found in the models of sustainability of these frequently-referenced authors. In order to synthesize the models, some assumptions were made to determine whether a model feature implied a core dimension. For example, Brown *et al.* (2015) argue that capitalization is a key feature of sustainability; this implies sound fiscal policy, seeking new forms of revenue, and being financially adaptable.

A synthesis of these seven models revealed 49 specific practices and behaviors of nonprofits that authors propose are related to nonprofit sustainability (see Tables 1 and 2). The 49 practices are grouped into eight dimensions:

1. *Relevance and Connection to Community*: The extent to which an organization's mission and services are relevant to community needs, responsive to the cultural and linguistic needs of potential consumers, and leveraged to maximize impact in the community through partnerships and collaborations. Connection to the client or consumer of an organization's services, supports, or programs is a centrally important practice that not only informs the most

Table 1. Eight Dimensions of Nonprofit Sustainability Reflected in Different Models

Dimension	Practices	REACH Foundation	TCC Group	Wolf Brown	PIMG	Bell & Zimmerman	Crutchfield & Grant	Weingart Foundation
Relevance/ Connection to Community	5	•••	•	••••	•		•	•• Nine Areas
Organizational Adaptability	3	•	•	••	•	••	•	•
Strategic Orientation	7	••••		•	•••••	•	•••	•
Leadership	9	•	•••••		••••		•	•
Operations	7	••			•••••••			
Board Governance	4	••••			•			•
Culture	5	•		••	••	•		•
Financial and Funding	9	••••	•••••	•••	•••••••	•	•	••

Note: • = one practice or behavior; empty cells indicate that the model does not explicitly address the dimension.

appropriate service mix but also adds the voice of the consumer to strategic planning, program design, and service delivery.

2. *Organizational Adaptability:* The organization's responsiveness and resiliency, both programmatically and financially, to changing community needs and factors influencing supply and demand of services. Each model endorses the dimension of adaptability in the form of flexibility, resiliency, evolution, and innovation. Central to an organization's adaptability is the tolerance of the organization's personnel to adjust. Constant change in a chaotic environment can erode tolerance to make adaptations. Organizations need to allow for time to make needed adjustments in the face of a rapidly changing policy and resource environment.
3. *Strategic Orientation:* The organization's orientation toward strategy and community impact as reflected in the adoption of board-approved strategic plans. Organizations use tools such as theory of change to communicate organizational focus and intent, engage in strategic and operational collaborations and partnerships to expand potential impact, and recognize that policy and grassroots advocacy is central to mission success.
4. *Leadership:* The organization's leadership embodies the mission and core values of the organization, regularly motivates and inspires others, manages staff turnover, and is keenly aware of the accountability to be cost-effective and successful. Leaders strike an effective balance of inclusive decision-making and decisive action when facing challenges.
5. *Operations:* The organization's leaders create clear operational plans for service delivery with established systems of support for staff, clear job definitions, and accountabilities for each role. Leaders are effective at recruiting staff and volunteers to meet organizational needs, have well-defined internal controls and processes for operations, and have a passion for developing emerging leaders.
6. *Board Governance:* The organization's board of directors sets the strategic direction of the organization, supports leadership, and creates plans for retaining leaders as well as succession plans. Interestingly, several model authors noted this dimension but did not include them per se in their sustainability models. Regardless, as most successful CEOs acknowledge, the strategic partnership between the CEO and board chair and key leaders on the board is important in advancing a vision and strategic direction for an organization. Taking advantage of the board's expertise and community connections can significantly improve the chances of strategic success.

7. *Financial and Funding:* The organization's financial decision making and fund development are evident in all of the models (see Table 1). Reflecting the importance of revenue generation and sound financial management, most models note financial stability and the need to keep capital flowing to support the mission. Effective fund diversification and the use of sophisticated financial management practices that inform both operational and program decisions are essential features of successful nonprofits. (York, p.11).
8. *Learning Culture:* The organization's cultural expression to keep learning at the center of strategy and operations is reflected in six of the eight models. The two models that do not explicitly reference a learning culture instead focus on organizational features that highlight adaptability, programmatic vibrancy and innovation, and authenticity of personnel and their interactions in the community. In one of those models, culture includes integration of business practices that ensure efficiency, performance accountability, and effective operations. Finally, organizational culture centered on learning and data generation creates a dynamic, innovative, and authentic workplace where ideas are tested and questions posed about the quality and value of the work.

## **Assessing the Dimensions of Sustainability**

Organizations can assess the presence and execution of dimensions of sustainability through an inclusive, dialogue-driven process in three phases: 1) awareness and knowledge-building; 2) questioning and clarifying; and 3) assessment and target setting.

In each phase of the process, the organization benefits from the inclusion of many voices and perspectives. Nonprofits must engage a diverse set of stakeholders to learn about, assess, and set targets for improving the likelihood of organizational sustainability. The following stakeholder groups should be included in the process: board chair and members, community advisors or advisory board, chief executive, chief financial officer and leadership team, program and operations staff, consumers or clients receiving services, key community partners, collaborators, representatives from the organization's networks, and representatives from key funding partners and investors.

### *Phase I: Awareness and Knowledge Building*

The purpose of this phase is to invite stakeholders to participate, to provide direction on the intent and scope of the sustainability planning process, and to build their understanding of sustainability. This phase should provide ample opportunity for stakeholder groups to share perspectives and experiences and to engage around their questions about their role in the process and why their voices are important.

### *Phase II: Questioning and Clarifying*

This phase provides stakeholders, especially board members and staff, with a set of questions (see Table 2) that can be used to explore organizational strengths as well as areas that can be improved. This process contributes to a better understanding of why the organization structure and operations may or may not lead to long-term sustainability and impact.

The REACH Foundation refers to these questions as the *Essential Questions of Nonprofit Sustainability*. Each question is a point of entry into one of the Eight Dimensions of Sustainability. The *Essential Questions* provide organizational leaders with a tool for a deeper discussion of what it means to be a sustainable organization. Stakeholders should expect an authentic and transparent dialogue about the key dimensions of sustainability and come away from the experience more knowledgeable about areas for development and strength.

*Table 2. The Essential Questions of Nonprofit Sustainability*

<b>Sustainability Dimension</b>	<b>Practices and Behaviors</b>	<b>Essential Questions</b>
Relevance and Connection to Community	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Community engagement to seek input; ensure client-centered focus</li> <li>2. Services/programs are high quality and responsive to cultural and linguistic needs of the community</li> <li>3. Engage internal and external stakeholders in strategic planning</li> <li>4. Build corporate and public-private partnerships</li> <li>5. Community relevance/ broadly shared aspirations</li> </ol> <p>•Do we have a regular, participatory planning process to engage partners, stakeholders and consumers of our services?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Do we have partnerships with other nonprofits and corporations?</li> <li>•Are our partnerships only transactional or are they focused on strategy and shared goals?</li> </ul>
Organization Adaptability	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Financial and programmatic adaptability</li> <li>2. Organizational resiliency</li> <li>3. Change tolerance</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•How adaptive have we been in the past?</li> <li>•How have we responded to changing conditions and needs of our clients?</li> <li>•What tolerance do we have as a staff to make significant changes or innovations to better serve our clients?</li> </ul>

*continued*

Table 2. The Essential Questions of Nonprofit Sustainability (continued)

Sustainability Dimension	Practices and Behaviors	Essential Questions
Relevance and Connection to Community	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Community engagement to seek input; ensure client-centered focus</li> <li>2. Services/programs are high quality and responsive to cultural and linguistic needs of the community</li> <li>3. Engage internal and external stakeholders in strategic planning</li> <li>4. Build corporate and public-private partnerships</li> <li>5. Community relevance/ broadly shared aspirations • Do we have a regular, participatory planning process to engage partners, stakeholders and consumers of our services?</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do we have partnerships with other nonprofits and corporations?</li> <li>• Are our partnerships only transactional or are they focused on strategy and shared goals?</li> </ul>
Organization Adaptability	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Financial and programmatic adaptability</li> <li>2. Organizational resiliency</li> <li>3. Change tolerance</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How adaptive have we been in the past?</li> <li>• How have we responded to changing conditions and needs of our clients?</li> <li>• What tolerance do we have as a staff to make significant changes or innovations to better serve our clients?</li> </ul>
Strategic Orientation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Impact or desired results are identified and shared widely</li> <li>2. Deeply held commitment to positive impact</li> <li>3. Organizational strategy (e.g., theory of change) creating organizational cohesion and focus</li> <li>4. Adoption of board-approved multi-year strategic plan</li> <li>5. Collaborations and partnerships; support and nurture nonprofit networks</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have we identified and publicly communicated the impact we want to have with our clients?</li> <li>• Do we have a recent strategic plan?</li> <li>• Would a theory of change help us communicate our focus and intent better to stakeholders?</li> <li>• Are we engaged in issue advocacy and, if not, what would it take to be engaged?</li> </ul>

*continued*

*Table 2. The Essential Questions of Nonprofit Sustainability (continued)*

<b>Sustainability Dimension</b>	<b>Practices and Behaviors</b>	<b>Essential Questions</b>
Strategic Orientation <i>(continued)</i>	6. Engagement in both advocacy to change systems and service delivery  7. Key issue urgency/priority in community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do we have important strategic partnerships or collaborations?</li> <li>• Have we created any new public-private partnerships?</li> <li>• Are we part of a network of nonprofits working to bring about systemic change?</li> </ul>
Leadership	1. Effective and consistent leadership 2. CEO as a distinguished external brand 3. Inclusive decision making 4. Decisive action when needed 5. Leadership embodies mission and core values 6. Motivate/inspire others toward mission and vision 7. Management of staff turnover/succession plans 8. Decisions and accountability informed by cost effectiveness 9. Accountability for strategic success evidenced in program success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do our leaders embody our mission and core values?</li> <li>• What are our core values?</li> <li>• Do we have a turnover problem with leadership or key staff positions?</li> <li>• To what extent are we examining our cost effectiveness and how does that affect service and programmatic decisions?</li> <li>• Are our leaders engaging staff and key advisors and board when considering important changes?</li> <li>• In crisis or urgent situations, are our leaders decisive?</li> </ul>
Operations	1. Engagement of volunteers in appropriate roles 2. Systems of support for staff 3. Developing emerging leaders/professional development 4. Clarity of roles and job definitions 5. Effective recruitment 6. Application of consistent performance accountability standards across positions 7. Operational plans for program and service delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do we have a clear operational plan (programming and services)?</li> <li>• How effective are our support systems for staff?</li> <li>• Are job definitions and role accountabilities clear and well understood?</li> <li>• Do we have one or more positions for which we have trouble recruiting?</li> <li>• Does staff have an opportunity to be supported/mentored to become leaders in the organization?</li> </ul>

*continued*

Table 2. The Essential Questions of Nonprofit Sustainability (continued)

Sustainability Dimension	Practices and Behaviors	Essential Questions
Board Governance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Governance best practices (see <i>Board Source</i>, 2005)</li> <li>2. Leadership succession plan in place</li> <li>3. Plans developed to retain key leaders/staff</li> <li>4. Appropriate board involvement in strategic and management decisions</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How engaged is our board in setting the strategic direction of the organization?</li> <li>• Has the board executed a strategic planning process in the last 4-5 years?</li> <li>• Has the board created plans for key position succession and for retaining leaders?</li> <li>• Does the board implement governance best practices (see <i>Board Source</i>, 2005)?</li> </ul>
Financial and Funding	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sound fiscal policy and capitalization</li> <li>2. Investment in revenue generation infrastructure</li> <li>3. Emphasis on new revenue sources (diversification)</li> <li>4. Cost-efficient operations and service delivery</li> <li>5. Financial analysis used in decisions regarding service mix and programs</li> <li>6. Leverage market forces to achieve large-scale social good</li> <li>7. Collaboration and long-term relationships central to the business model</li> <li>8. Engagement of board and other community leaders in fund development</li> <li>9. Data collection around national, regional, and local funding trends</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have we been able to diversify our funding?</li> <li>• Are we investing in infrastructure and staff to support fund development and revenue generation strategies?</li> <li>• Do we have a fund development plan?</li> <li>• Are there any concerns with current financials or audit results?</li> <li>• How many months of reserve funds are available?</li> <li>• Are we using financial analysis and management processes to identify cost effectiveness and leverage financial opportunities?</li> <li>• Do we make decisions about programs and services based in part on the cost effectiveness and expected impact on consumers?</li> </ul>
Learning Culture	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Learning culture includes data use, monitoring, and evaluation</li> <li>2. Vibrancy/innovation</li> <li>3. Board/staff reflect the diversity of people and interests in community</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do we operate with learning as a shared goal of our work?</li> <li>• Do we use our learnings to adapt, refine, innovate, and improve?</li> </ul>

*continued*

Table 2. The Essential Questions of Nonprofit Sustainability (continued)

Sustainability Dimension	Practices and Behaviors	Essential Questions
Learning Culture (continued)	4. Institutional/individual authenticity  5. Cultural integration of established business practices throughout organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do we over-promise or over-represent the benefits of our services and programs to consumers?</li> <li>• Does our culture include the integration of established business practices to ensure effective operations?</li> <li>• How data-informed are we?</li> <li>• How can we do a better job of using data to make decisions about our services?</li> <li>• Do we intentionally and regularly set aside time to be reflective, share our learnings, and discuss ways to improve our quality?</li> </ul>

### Phase III: Assessment and Target Setting

In the third phase, all stakeholders assess the organization's current state on the eight dimensions of sustainability and set priorities for where the organization should focus capacity building efforts over the next 12 months. The REACH Foundation found that among its grantees, focusing on one or two capacity areas per year is substantial work for most organizations.

To aid in guiding assessment and target setting, the author provides rating scales to be used with the 49 distinct practices/behaviors of sustainability in the eight dimensions. Stakeholders rate each practice within the dimension based on the learning gained from the *Essential Questions* in Phase II. Then, stakeholders collaboratively set improvement targets and prioritize the sustainability dimensions for the organization's focus on over the next 12 months. The following rating scales assist stakeholders to assess the current state, targets for improvement, and prioritization for improvement:

- *Current State:* Use the following scale to rate the extent to which a practice or behavior is fully executed with quality: 1 = Not executed at all; 2 = Internal discussion of this practice but not executed; 3 = Internal and external discussion of the practice and with no or only isolated execution; 4 = Executed in a limited way or in larger scale but with minimal attention to quality; 5 = Fully executed with attention to high quality.

- *Target Setting:* In setting targets for improvement or capacity building, consider the current state and what increment would represent a meaningful improvement in execution and quality after 12 months of attention and focused capacity building. For example, a current state rating of 1 (no execution) might warrant an improvement target of 2 (initiation of internal discussions and planning).
- *Prioritization:* Prioritize the target improvements to be undertaken from 1 to N (with 1 being the highest priority action) for each practice or behavior within each sustainability dimension. Organizational leaders and board members, informed by staff and stakeholder experience and knowledge of the community and those receiving services, prioritize the capacity building actions of the organization during the next 12 months.

## **Conclusion**

The complex nature of nonprofit sustainability creates significant variations in how grant makers frame their need for information about the sustainability of nonprofit organizations. In addition, grant proposal writers struggle to describe organizational sustainability effectively due to lack of clarity and shared understanding of the dimensions of sustainability. This article's review of different sustainability models provides a synthesized set of dimensions across various models that provide clarity that grant professionals need. This paper identifies and discusses eight distinct dimensions that organizations and their grant professional and fund development staff can use to conceptualize sustainability and focus internal capacity building. Both funders and grant seekers can refer to and utilize the various models in this article. Organizational leadership and board members can use the *Essential Questions* and the process described to increase understanding and to focus internal learning and capacity building, creating a sustainability orientation for long-term viability and impact.

## **References**

- Barr, K. (2012, November 28). Sustainability - Not a myth, but not what you may think. Retrieved from <https://www.nonprofitsassistancefund.org/blog/2012/11/sustainability-not-myth-but-not-what-you-may-think>
- Board Source (2005). *The Source12: Twelve principles of governance that power exceptional boards*. Washington, D.C.: Author.

- Brown, A., Kluger, J., Palmer-Wolf, D., Wolf, T., Mandeles, L., & Woronkowicz, J. (2011). Is sustainability sustainable? *Sounding board: Perspectives on nonprofit strategies from WolfBrown, 30*. Retrieved from [http://wolfbrown.com/images/soundingboard/documents/WB\\_SoundingBoardv30\\_1114\\_d.pdf](http://wolfbrown.com/images/soundingboard/documents/WB_SoundingBoardv30_1114_d.pdf)
- Crutchfield, L.R., & Grant, H.M. (2008). *Forces for good: The six practices of high impact nonprofits*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.
- Moore, W.P. (2016). *Dollars and Sense: The Essential Questions of Nonprofit Sustainability* [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from <http://www.grantprofessionals.org/content.asp?admin=Y&contentid=408>
- National Council on Nonprofits (n.d.). *Nonprofit sustainability*. Retrieved from <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/tools-resources/nonprofit-sustainability>
- National Research Council. (2011). *Sustainability and the U.S. EPA*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. doi:<https://doi.org/10.17226/13152>.
- Schaffer, S. (2015). *Success factors for nonprofit organizations: A new approach to the development of thriving mission-driven enterprises*. Seattle, WA: Author.
- Union of Concerned Scientists (April 8, 2013). *Benefits of renewable energy use*. Retrieved from [http://www.ucsusa.org/clean-energy/renewable-energy/public-benefits-of-renewable-power#.WRDK5\\_nyuUk](http://www.ucsusa.org/clean-energy/renewable-energy/public-benefits-of-renewable-power#.WRDK5_nyuUk)
- York, P. (2010). *The sustainability formula: How nonprofit organizations can thrive in the emerging economy*. Retrieved from <http://www.tccgrp.com/pdfs/SustainabilityFormula.pdf>
- Zimmerman, S., & Bell, J. (2015). *The sustainability mindset: Using the matrix map to make strategic decisions*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

## Biographical Information

**William Moore, PhD** is Principal at The Moore Strategy Group, a nonprofit and philanthropic consulting organization. He is the former Vice President of Program and Evaluation at the REACH Healthcare Foundation where he worked with hundreds of nonprofit leaders on organizational effectiveness and sustainability. Moore is

the outgoing Board President for SupportKC, a nonprofit organization, and served on numerous nonprofit boards during his career. Moore is a former research director for two urban school systems and a nonprofit education reform think tank as well as a former professor at two research universities. An accomplished researcher, Moore has published in such respected journals as *The Foundation Review*, *Applied Measurement in Education*, *Medical Care*, *Health Education and Behavior*, *The Gerontologist*, *Breast Cancer Research and Treatment*, and *the Journal of Cellular Biochemistry*. Moore earned his PhD in Educational Psychology at the University of Kansas. Contact him at [wmoore@thestrategygrp.org](mailto:wmoore@thestrategygrp.org).

## *GPA Strategy Papers Volume 4, Issue 1*

# **U.S. Department of Education Proposals: Preparing for the “New Normal”**

**Michael Preuss, EdD**

West Texas A&M University, Canyon, TX<sup>1</sup>

**Paul Tuttle, MA, CRA**

North Carolina A&T State University, Greensboro, NC

### **Abstract**

Since Spring 2014, U.S. Department of Education educational programming grant solicitations have included many new patterns. To understand the changes taking place and to identify common themes, the authors conducted a thorough review of solicitations for 15 opportunities. This Strategy Paper examines the themes and their implications for grant professionals and provides recommendations for preparing to meet the new standards—the “new normal.”

### **Introduction**

The U.S. Department of Education (ED or the Department) offers many grant opportunities that are targeted by community colleges, liberal arts colleges, private universities, and state-funded universities; these include the Title III Part A strengthening institutions program and the TRIO outreach and student services programs. In the last several years, anticipating ED solicitation requirements has become difficult as changes occurred within the Department. These changes are causing alterations in longstanding patterns of project planning and narrative construction. To be successful in obtaining funding, applicants need to adapt to these alterations moving forward.

### **Background**

Public Law 107-279, enacted in 2002, directs the establishment of the Institute for Education Sciences (IES) and describes the intention to

<sup>1</sup> At the time of original publication, the author was affiliated with Hanover Research, Arlington, VA.

develop what would become the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC). This law, amended and reauthorized in 2004 (National Board for Education Sciences, 2008), directly impacts the current situation for ED applicants, as both IES and WWC, entities established by the Act, have become important influences on solicitations released by the Department.

The George W. Bush administration's concerns for accountability and cost reduction, both separately and in combination, also played a role in the changes at ED. Accountability concerns emerged in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001, more commonly known as No Child Left Behind, and in federal budgets like that proposed in 2005 (Allen & Baker, 2005). The Obama administration's policies also reflected both of these patterns as part of the federal response to the financial crisis of 2007-2008.

For example, the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA) increased the grantee community's data gathering and reporting responsibilities for federal grant programs; this became the "new normal" across the federal grants spectrum after ARRA ended. Specifically, ARRA's ED grants included a variety of funding opportunities like Race to the Top, Investing in Innovation, State Educational Technology Grants, School Modernization, and Vocational Rehabilitation State Grants (ED, 2013). These funding opportunities mandated new and more involved data gathering and reporting standards. In addition, during ED-hosted webinars explaining these opportunities' new standards, ED informed applicants that reviewers from IES, as ED's research arm, would be specifically tasked with vetting the degree of fit with WWC standards and, for some competitions, with determining the validity and usefulness of the expected research results.

Emphasis on cost reductions grew stronger during the recession in 2007-2008 (Economic Policy Institute, n.d.). This financial crisis led to federal investments to stimulate recovery, like the ARRA grant opportunities (White House, n.d.) and restrictions on funding of government agencies known as sequestration. Sequestration was first approved as part of the Budget Control Act of 2011 and was intended to be an incentive to stimulate compromise (Matthews, 2013). While it failed to bring about a compromise in Congress on cutting \$1.5 trillion from the federal budget, it succeeded in limiting federal spending. Domestic discretionary spending, the portion of the budget in which significant grant programming falls, decreased by 5.1%. In addition to this initial sequester, the Budgetary Control Act of 2011 also included "cap sequestration," caps on discretionary funding" (Matthews, 2013). For those in the grants realm, these actions resulted in disruption in the typical appropriations process and decreases in the actual dollar amounts available for awards.

Accountability and cost reduction were integrated into the OMB Uniform Guidance, the stated intention of which was to align with "a larger Federal effort to more effectively focus...resources on improving

performance and outcomes while ensuring the financial integrity of taxpayer dollars in partnership with non-Federal stakeholders” (Federal Register, 2013). This involved a standardization of practices across multiple federal grantmaking agencies.

The cumulative effect for grant professionals is change—including new emphases on accountability, increased cost consciousness, new standards, and new formulations of federal guidance. All of these mandate new and more rigorous expectations of ED applicants.

## **Method**

To identify patterns and general themes of activity, the researchers performed a review of ED solicitations (excluding IES solicitations) from spring 2014 to late fall 2015. These two experienced grant professionals have over 25 years of combined experience with ED solicitations. They noted changes to requirements from previous years and then compared changes in ED educational intervention solicitations. They formed groupings of similar changes, articulated general themes summarizing them, and identified three general categories of change from the material gathered: 1) an emphasis on innovation and evidence, 2) a focus on resources and replication, and 3) changes in guidelines and application standards. The researchers cross-checked these against the list of specific changes and presented them to multiple grant professionals as a means of verification. As both researchers have extensive experience in higher education, they then generated recommendations for adapting institutional and grant professional practice to meet ED’s new expectations.

## **Emphasis on Innovation and Supporting Evidence**

The researchers identified five themes relevant to innovation and supporting evidence: 1) innovation/educational reform, 2) higher standards of evidence, 3) data collection and analysis changes, 4) What Works Clearinghouse standards, and 5) evaluation as research. Each exists across multiple programs and funding opportunities.

The combination of emphases in this category, originally encountered in ED’s initial First in the World (FITW) grants competition to encourage development of educational innovations, has been a disruptive change. ED applicants had been familiar with the concepts of innovation and proposing educational reforms, recognizing them as “innovative and creative thinking...that improves...significantly upon outcomes” (ED, 2014). However, applicants encountered a shift in meaning for the phrase “significant outcomes.” Originally meaning “of local consequence,” its definition changed to having strong evidentiary support, being statistically verifiable, and having the potential to “ultimately reach

widespread effective usage” (ED, 2014), thus raising the bar for corroborating information in proposals.

In addition to the higher level of supporting evidence, the new standards involved learning to provide a global “conceptual framework” by creating a logic model portraying theoretical relationships among project elements (ED, 2014). This “framework” intended to show links “between at least one critical component and one relevant outcome” in a “statistically significant or substantively important...favorable association” (ED, 2014). The favorable associations required must be found in studies that employed specified research methods in a manner meeting What Works Clearinghouse standards.

This higher level of scientific rigor changed the playing field for ED applicants. As they learned, meeting these standards expands the variety of data they gather about projects and substantially increases the rigor required in data assimilation and analysis. This pattern also affects project evaluation as the application of WWC standards extends to reporting on project outcomes and results. Some programs like the Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISI) initiative have included WWC language without altering the rigor of evaluation required (ED, Feb 22, 2016). Others—for example, FITW, Hispanic-Serving Institutions: Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (HSI STEM), and Title III and V—have elevated the role of evaluation by requiring the project be structured in a manner consistent with a WWC-level research project so that evidence regarding outcomes yields publishable research. This effectively expands the role of project evaluation from being a thorough investigation of implementation and reporting achievement of objectives (ED, Feb 22, 2016) to including production of evidence that meets WWC standards (ED, March 4, 2016).

### **Focus on Resources and Replication**

Demonstrating the presence of adequate institutional supports for projects is a longstanding review criterion for programs like Title III, Title V, and TRIO opportunities. This criterion is now generalized to a broader set of programs. Related to this are cost-consciousness (“expected cost-effectiveness of the practice,” ED, April 9, 2014) and concern that costs be “reasonable” (ED, April 9, 2016; ED, Feb 22, 2016; ED March 4, 2016). Both enable continuation of grant-funded processes and practices, which ED refers to as institutionalization (ED, n.d.#1). In fact, ED expects its grantees to go beyond absorbing funded projects into their institutions and producing replicable and scalable reform strategies; that is, ED wants projects that can be implemented at other institutions and at different levels of complexity and size (ED, n.d.#1; ED, n.d.#3).

## Changes in Guidelines and Application Standards

The researchers grouped changes in guidelines and application standards into two main categories, technical and content, each of which included departures from earlier ED application guideline norms.

They found technical changes in four primary areas. First, changes occurred in eligibility practices and standards (e.g., one eligibility calculation stated in the FY 2015 Title III/V competitions was “core expenses per FTE student” versus the earlier “educational and general expenses”). Second, in some competitions, applications from Minority Serving Institutions were filtered out and set aside from the rest of the applicant pool. Third, IES became part of the review process for the initial FITW competition and later for other opportunities like the Title III (ED, n.d.#2) and Title V (ED, April 9, 2016) programs. The final technical change was proposed tiered standards of evidence that could result in tiered funding levels, as described in the initial FITW solicitation.

The researchers found content changes in four areas:

1. Changes to Competitive Preferences Priorities (CPPs). One CPP was eliminated from the FY 2014 Title V competition, and standards of evidence for the other two CPPs (increasing post-secondary success and increasing productivity, respectively) increased. Since 2014, CPPs continue to change and are a means of demonstrating project alignment with a WWC-level study that had a statistically significant and positive impact for the proposed intervention (ED, n.d.#2; ED, April 9, 2016).
2. A new requirement for “a project design supported by Strong Theory,” a phrase meaning “a rationale for the proposed process, product, strategy, or practice that includes a logic model” (ED, n.d.#1).
3. A new emphasis on “evidence of promise,” indicating that “there is empirical evidence to support the theoretical linkage(s) between at least one critical component and at least one relevant outcome presented in the logic model” (ED, n.d.#2; ED, 2014). Additionally, applicants were required to adhere to WWC standards in providing evidence of promise and told to “ensure that the citations and links are from publicly or readily available sources” (ED, 2014).
4. Increased emphasis on more explicitly research-based standards. Both the need (i.e., the literature review) and the solution (i.e. the applicant’s approach and plan of work) were mandated to be grounded firmly in the education research literature, to utilize evidence that met WWC standards, and to be formulated specifically to provide appropriate levels of evidence for future education research projects (ED, 2014). These requirements have subsequently been applied to other programs (ED, March 4, 2016; ED April 9, 2016).

## Recommendations and Conclusion

The changes outlined in this article reflect an increased emphasis on appropriately gathering and analyzing data, understanding how those data provide evidence for current and future conclusions, and determining ways in which those conclusions impact policy and implementation. Interestingly, this is also occurring in disciplines other than education and in other sectors than grants at the federal level. This is not a coincidence. Across all fields of intellectual inquiry, there is an increased emphasis on valid and reproducible research results.

Many U.S. Department of Education applicants, including former awardees, were taken aback by the speed and comprehensiveness with which the Department moved from a programmatic, activities-focused approach to a more theory- and research-based approach. Like it or not, this is indeed “the new normal” as the changes have persisted and have been applied within more ED programs.

Therefore, the authors offer the following recommendations for competing in this changed environment. To address the challenges presented by changes to ED expectations, grant professionals and nonprofit leaders should consider the following approaches, grouped into a *proposal development set* and a second group that can be described as *organizational adaptations*.

### *Proposal Development*

In a proposal development process, it is important to ask regularly and repeatedly about the material being presented in support of assertions and the level of academic rigor those sources represent. A related concern is that project evaluation be planned as educational research, both the investigation of the effectiveness of implementation and the analysis of the outcomes of the project. Project planners and narrative writers will find that maintaining a familiarity with the following topics is increasingly important: commonly deployed social science data collection patterns, research methods and assessment processes, conceptions of replicability and scalability, and general statistical analysis terminology.

Cost analysis must be part of the proposal development discussion. Along with the ability to replicate and scale up proposed interventions, applicants’ approaches and work plans should be cost-effective at all levels from pilot to broad implementation.

Applicants must also adapt to changes related to information patterns required in proposals. More rigorous requirements regarding evidence and method make greater expertise in multiple fields necessary. As this is the case, it is advisable to identify persons within organizations who can function as resources. One important group is education research specialists. People with these skills can be found within schools of education in the research and assessment departments and among researchers in sociology and psychology departments. While ED currently

emphasizes quantitative methodology, the inclusion of qualitative methodologists in the group of “consultants” maintains the ability to consider all project practices. Rigorous investigation of the outcomes and quality of a project often call for mixing quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

### *Organizational Adaptations*

Because data gathering, analysis, and the level of evidence produced is an expanding concern, information about institutional capability and practice in tracking and analyzing data is also important. Institutions should consider the types of proposals they produce, the forms of data required for each, and draft templated language describing applicable data storage, access, security, sharing, and retention practices. Templated language of this type requires annual review to maintain currency.

Competitive Preferences Priorities (CPP) appear to be the new approach for demonstrating methodological rigor. Consideration of studies demonstrating statistically significant positive impacts for the proposed interventions will need to enter project planning and proposal production earlier than in the past. They are the foundation of the project plan in the “new normal,” rather than being preferred patterns of supporting evidence. It also appears that CPPs are following White House policy commitments like the ideas in President Obama’s 2020 College Completion Goal.

Institutions should seek a strong relationship with an external evaluator or evaluation consulting group. The increasing standards of evidence and analysis of outcomes mandate the inclusion of an evaluation specialist in project planning.

Grant professionals and nonprofit leaders must alter longstanding patterns of project planning and narrative construction in order to respond to changes at ED in the last several years. These recommendations will aid grant professionals and ED applicants in adapting to this “new normal.”

### **References**

- Allen, M. & Baker, (2005, February 7). \$2.5 trillion budget plan cuts many programs. *The Washington Post*, p. A01. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A3319-2005Feb6.html>
- Economic Policy Institute. (n.d.). The Great Recession. Retrieved from <http://stateofworkingamerica.org/great-recession/>
- Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002, Public Law 107-297, 107th Congress. (2002). Retrieved from <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-107publ279/html/PLAW-107publ279.htm>

- Federal Register. (2013, December 26). Uniform administrative requirements, cost principles, and audit requirements for federal awards. Retrieved from <https://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2013/12/26/2013-30465/uniform-administrative-requirements-cost-principles-and-audit-requirements-for-federal-awards>
- Matthews, D. (2013, February 20). The Sequester: Absolutely everything you could possibly need to know, in one FAQ. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2013/02/20/the-sequester-absolutely-everything-you-could-possibly-need-to-know-in-one-faq/>
- National Board for Education Sciences. (2008). Markup of Education Sciences Reform Act reflecting board recommendations for reauthorization - May, 2008. Retrieved from <https://ies.ed.gov/director/pdf/ESRAreauth.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.#1). First in the World Program Application for Development Grants FY 2014. Washington, DC: Office of Postsecondary Education.
- U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.#2). Fiscal Year 2015 Application for Grants Under the Strengthening Institutions Program. Washington, DC: Office of Postsecondary Education.
- U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.#3). FY 2013 Race to the Top-District Competition Background. Washington, DC: Office of Elementary and Secondary Education.
- U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.#4). No Child Left Behind-Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Retrieved from: <http://www2.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2013). American Reinvestment and Recovery Act of 2009. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/leg/recovery/programs.html>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2014, May 16). Applications for new awards: First in the World Program-developmental grants. *Federal Register*, 79(95), 28495-28504.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2016, March 4). Applications for new awards: Hispanic Serving Institutions STEM and articulation program. *Federal Register*, 81(43), 11532-11539.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2016, April 9). Applications for new awards: Developing Hispanic Serving Institutions Program. *Federal Register*, 79(68), 19604-19610.

U.S. Department of Education. (2016, February 22). Applications for new awards: Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions program. *Federal Register*, 81(34), 8702–8709.

White House. (n.d.). The recovery act. Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/recovery/about>

## Biographical Information

**Michael Preuss, EdD** is Executive Director of the West Texas Office of Evaluation and Research at West Texas A&M University and an adjunct graduate faculty member in the School of Education at Liberty University. He was previously a Grants Consultant at Hanover Research. He has worked in research development for 12 years, developed proposals that secured over \$60 million in funding, and had oversight responsibility for large grant-funded programs. He received the 2009 Developmental Education Publication of the Year award from the *Journal for Developmental Education*, served for two years as co-editor of the *NADE Digest*, led international nonprofits, held faculty positions at six higher education institutions in the US and Europe, and served as a consultant for nonprofits in the Czech Republic. He is a frequent presenter at conferences and professional development seminars. Contact him at [mpreuss@wtamu.edu](mailto:mpreuss@wtamu.edu)

**Paul Tuttle** holds an MA in English. After 15 years as a writing tutor and instructor, he began his research administration career in 2001 as a funding opportunities specialist at North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University. Later, he managed proposal development at Winston-Salem State University and The University of North Carolina at Greensboro and grants administration at the North Carolina Research Campus. In 2011, he joined Hanover Research as a Grants Consultant, providing proposal development and strategic consultative services to university, healthcare, K-12, and nonprofit clients. In 2013, he became Hanover's first Managing Grants Consultant, hiring and supervising what became a team of 16 consultants. In 2015, he returned to NC A&T as Director of Proposal Development. To date, he has helped to win over \$100 million in grants from federal, state, private, and corporate sources. Contact him at [petuttle@ncat.edu](mailto:petuttle@ncat.edu).

## *GPA Strategy Papers Volume 4, Issue 2*

# The Use of Active Voice and Passive in Grant Applications

**Barbara Roberts, MA**

Maricopa Community Colleges Foundation  
Phoenix, AZ

### **Abstract**

There are significant reasons to develop the skill of writing in active voice for grant development. Passive voice has its place, and it can be an effective way of emphasizing a point, protecting a source, and reporting information, such as in a final grant report. Active voice, on the other hand, enlivens a narrative, draws the reader's attention, clarifies, and uses fewer words and characters, such as when writing to request funding for a project. Both voices are valuable tools in the grant development tool chest. Together they give writers options for presenting agency histories, community needs, project descriptions, goals and objectives, and other application information and for reporting outcomes when grant periods end. Grant professionals will benefit by developing skills in using both verb forms, by using them judiciously, and by using active verb formations more frequently than passive formations.

### **Introduction**

A good writer is a smart writer, choosing exact words to describe a need, a project, and a population. Writers control the tone and expression of their documents, at least in part, by using active voice, passive voice, or a combination of the two. *The Writers Handbook*, online, defines active voice as writing so that “the subject of the sentence performs the action” and passive voice as when “the subject receives the action.”

Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL) is a rich resource for information about grammar, syntax, and writing styles. It describes the two voices in the following way:

Active voice is used for most non-scientific writing. Using active voice for the majority of your sentences makes your meaning clear for readers, and keeps the sentences from becoming too complicated or wordy. Even in scientific writing, too much use of passive voice can cloud the meaning of your sentences (2013).

An example of similar sentences comparing active and passive voice are:

- *Active voice:* The agency serves people who have disabilities.
- *Passive voice:* People who have disabilities are served by the agency.

These simple sentences demonstrate the difference between the two voices including that active uses fewer words and characters (seven words; 47 characters) than passive (nine words; 54 characters). In this case, active voice saved two words and seven characters. This is a consistent pattern when comparing active and passive formations.

### **Benefits of Passive Voice**

Sometimes passive voice is advisable (*The Writer's Handbook*). Although it uses more words, passive voice emphasizes an action over an actor, which is proper when reporting a board or committee action, for example. Standard in scientific writing, researchers report upon actions taken to gather data or to apply theories and about data and outcomes. The researchers themselves are insignificant in the reporting.

There are other instances when passive voice is the superior choice, for example to protect someone's identity. When protecting partners in a final report to a funder, one might write, "The goal was missed because some tasks were not complete at the end of the grant period." This passive construction hides the identity of the actor better than the more explicit active construction, "GLB agency did not hire the new project coordinator for three months into the grant period and therefore, did not recruit the targeted number of clients."

Sometimes passive voice is the choice that makes sense in a particular context. One illustration is if there is no identifiable actor. When describing the need for a community health project for instance, necessity might dictate writing: "Families living downwind from the town have been experiencing increased rates of asthma, cancer, and other lung disorders for six years."

### **Advantages of Active Voice**

Active voice is clear and concise wording. Clarity and brevity have increasing import in writing proposals and applications. This is true, in part, because of word, character, and page limits in online and hard copy letters of inquiry, applications, and reports. Many of those limits are stringent, forcing writers to trim adjectives, lengthy descriptions,

and details once considered critical. Limiting the content that applicants supply helps program officers and reviewers minimize the time they devote to reading and evaluating submissions.

Restricting words and characters forces applicant agencies and their writers to create clearer plans, goals, and objectives. It demands they describe their projects and programs, their histories, the needs, and all required sections in well-defined, succinct terms. However, these restrictions have what writers and agencies might consider negative impact. The result is the loss of meta-narrative, the “broader explanation that encompasses the history and beliefs of the writer” (Northrup, 2010). By developing dexterity in using active voice, a writer minimizes character and word counts and potentially benefits by creating additional space to add some meta-narrative.

Active voice uses the sharpest, most efficient language, drawing the reader into a topic by painting a picture. It saves space and meets the needs of modern readers, who want the most information for the smallest investment of time and energy. In “You Won’t Finish This Article,” F. Manjoo describes these readers: “In this age of sound bites and life on hyper-speed, people don’t read, they skim or they begin reading and then lose interest, get interrupted, move on...” (Manjoo, 2013). Although grant reviewers anticipate reading narrative descriptions, and the hope is they will devote complete attention to each proposal, the “new normal” for readers may also impact reviewers’ expectations and reading habits. Therefore, grant professionals must become adept writing in the more compelling active voice, because a reviewer might be a foundation board member, a staff member, a family member, or a community volunteer; and reviewers can be part of Gen X, Gen Y, or the Baby Boomer generation. Active voice reaches out to all readers.

### **Editing to Transform Passive to Active Voice**

When first writing a narrative section of an application, let the words flow. Then the editing begins. Avoiding passive voice necessitates being self-aware, being a good editor, having a good editor, or all three.

As a rule of thumb, if there is a passive construction, simply ask, does this sentence make sense, and is it clearly stated so that any reader would easily follow its rationale? Are there too many characters or words? Is there a better, clearer, briefer way to make the relevant point?

Eliminating passive voice requires awareness of three cues. First, if a sentence describes an action on an actor, such as “Veterans are served by the project,” it is a passive voice construction. At first glance, the word “veterans” appears to be the subject of the sentence, but it is the object of the action. To convert to active voice, rewrite it as “The project serves veterans” reducing six words to four and 34 characters to 27.

Second, look for the word “by.” Something happens to the veterans because of the project. The veterans are served *by* the project. This small word is a potential sign of passive voice.

When reading to identify passive constructions, examine the verb forms looking for participles. This part of English class puts most people to sleep, but it is important for understanding passive voice. A participle is “a form of a verb, often ending in “-ed” or “-ing” and used with auxiliary verbs to make verb tenses, or to form adjectives” (Participle. *Cambridge Dictionary*. n.d.). Examples of auxiliary verbs are: have, is, have been, and were. Examples of their use for passive constructions are: have talked; is talking; have been obtained; were received.

Examples of verb forms are:

*Table 1: Regular Verbs*

<b>Regular Verbs</b>		
<i>Present</i>	<i>Past</i>	<i>Past Participle</i>
Talk	Talked	Talked
Obtain	Obtained	Obtained
Award	Awarded	Awarded

As so often happens with the English language, some verb forms look alike but play more than one role: past tense and past participles appear to be identical in Table 1. Then there are participles that do not have these endings...verbs that are known as “irregular.”

*Table 2: Irregular Verbs*

<b>Irregular Verbs</b>		
<i>Present</i>	<i>Past</i>	<i>Past Participle</i>
Feed	Fed	Fed
Sing	Sang	Sung
Swim	Swam	Swum

Because irregular verbs appear frequently in English, checking the dictionary is an easy way to verify their forms. An excellent online source specifically listing irregular verbs and their forms is [EnglishPage.com](http://EnglishPage.com), which provides 370 commonly-used English verbs and access to those less-commonly-used.

The easiest approach to taking passive to active is to look for a present or past participle and a form of the verb “to be”:

- The children are swimming and being fed through the club. (10 words; 60 characters)
- All people who come to the shelter have said how grateful they are for the help. (16 words; 81 characters)

Rewrite them to:

- The children swim and eat through the club's services. (9 words; 56 characters)
- All people who come to the shelter say thank you for the help. (13 words; 64 characters)

## Conclusion

Learning to blend the use of active and passive voice can help writers develop more compelling narratives and more succinct reports.

Remember that passive is most effective when reporting or creating a more formal tone. Active is most effective when appealing for an emotional connection. Using these two tools wisely will help writers achieve the goal of a given format, whether it is a narrative appeal for funding or a report on a project's outcomes.

## References

- Active versus passive voice. (2012). Purdue OWL. Retrieved from <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/539/02/>
- EnglishPage.com. (n.d.) Retrieved from <http://www.englishpage.com/irregularverbs/irregularverbs.html>
- Manjoo, F. (2013). You won't finish this article. Slate.com. Retrieved from [http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2013/06/how\\_people\\_read\\_online\\_why\\_you\\_won\\_t\\_finish\\_this\\_article.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2013/06/how_people_read_online_why_you_won_t_finish_this_article.html)
- Northrup, B. (2010). Responding in the twitter age: Proposal writing for electronic applications. *Journal of the Grant Professionals Association*, (8)1, 1-10. Retrieved from [http://www.grantprofessionals.org/rc\\_files/75/2010GPAJournal.pdf](http://www.grantprofessionals.org/rc_files/75/2010GPAJournal.pdf)
- Participle. (n.d.) *Cambridge Dictionary*. Retrieved from <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/participle>
- Use the active voice. (n.d.) *The Writer's Handbook*. The Writing Center. Retrieved from [http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/CCS\\_activevoice.html](http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/CCS_activevoice.html)

**Biographical Information**

**Barbara Roberts** is the Grants Development Coordinator for the Maricopa County Community Colleges District Foundation in Arizona and is the GPA Publications Committee Chair. She has 18 years' experience in grant development in many nonprofit sectors in Arizona, Ohio, and California and 10 years' experience editing for GPA publications. Contact the author at brobertsgrantpro@gmail.com.