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Editors' Note

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the 2025 edition of the annual Grant Professionals Association *Journal*. This year's *Journal* articles reflect on how grant professionals can partner with local institutions of higher education to serve their local community, ways to improve rural community health through grants, the effects that AI is having on the profession, and the strengths that neurodiverse grant professionals can bring to their organizations. We greatly appreciate this year's collection of authors for offering their time, expertise, and research to deliver new insights for others in the grants field.

In addition to this slate of articles, the *Journal* also includes the year's collection of GPA *Strategy Papers*, with topics ranging from best practices in program and project design to the value of maintaining DEI initiatives and discussing how grants can play a role in an organization's sustainability efforts. *Strategy Papers* are briefer than full-length *Journal* articles and offer actionable solutions and/or feedback on specific topics, current points of interest, and/or challenges within the grants profession. Like *Journal* articles, *Strategy Papers* undergo a double-blind peer-review process.

For the 2026 *Journal* and *Strategy Papers,* we invite you to contribute to these publications as an author or peer reviewer. GPA's Publications Committee calls for articles that address new concepts in our field, offer research and literature-based analysis of a topic, examine best practices in grantsmanship, or evaluate any GPCI competencies and skills through the lens of an author's unique experiences. We are also happy to recruit new peer reviewers to review *Journal* and *Strategy Paper* manuscripts. Please contact us at publications@grantprofessionals.org if you are interested in either of these roles.

Lastly, thank you very much to the authors, editorial board, and peer review manager for contributing their time and effort in crafting this year's *Journal*. We also greatly appreciate the insights offered by peer reviewers in editing both *Journal* articles and *Strategy Papers.* While they are anonymous, the peer review team members have a major role in maintaining the high professional caliber of GPA's publications.

We welcome your comments and feedback on this year's *Journal,* and look forward to receiving your thoughts and article ideas for future editions.

Sean M. Kirby	Karen Norris	Joshua Einhorn-Castillo
Editor	Associate Editor	Associate Editor

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. Proposals must be no more than 300 words and follow the guidelines published on the GPA website (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* (7th 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.

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The Grant Professionals Association (GPA) is a nonprofit 501(c)(6) membership association. The mission of GPA is empowering grant professionals and those they serve through:

- **Advocacy**—Advocating for members, the grants profession, and those they serve
- **Community**—Creating powerful communities and connections
- **Professionalism**—Fostering excellence in professional practice.

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.

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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).

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 grant developers

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

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

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GPA Strategy Papers, Volume 12

Bridging the Health Divide: The Critical Role of Grants in Improving Rural Community Health

S. Kimberly Jones, MAS, GPC
Nationwide Children's Hospital, Columbus, OH
Ohio University, Athens, OH
Level Field Consulting, LLC, Circleville, OH

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

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

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

Abstract

Rural communities in the United States face persistent health disparities due to geographic isolation, limited access to healthcare providers, and socioeconomic barriers. Federal and state grants play a pivotal role in addressing these inequities by funding health-care infrastructure, telehealth expansion, workforce development, and social determinants of health interventions. This paper examines the role of grants in bridging the health divide in rural America, highlighting their impact on access to care, behavioral health, maternal health, and broader economic and infrastructure improvements. Drawing from case studies, including international models like Australia's grant-funded rural health programs, this article underscores the importance of strategic investments and capacity-building initiatives to ensure sustainable rural health improvements. Despite progress, challenges such as administrative burdens, funding limitations, and policy constraints continue to hinder rural communities from fully leveraging grant opportunities. Strengthening grant

accessibility, increasing rural grantwriting capacity, and implementing policy reforms are pathways to enhancing rural health equity and long-term sustainability of rural health infrastructure that results in positive health outcomes.

Introduction

Rural communities across the United States face significant challenges in accessing and maintaining the infrastructure and resources necessary for improving overall health and well-being. Many rural regions experience underfunding, limited access to healthcare, and severe disparities in public health outcomes compared to urban areas. Grants, particularly federal and state-funded initiatives, play a crucial role in filling this gap, providing financial support for rural healthcare services, infrastructure improvements, and health education.

This paper examines grants as a vital mechanism for improving community health in rural areas. It considers evidence from existing studies, government reports, and policy analyses, focusing on how targeted funding can address the complex challenges these communities face. Through the lens of public health data, economic challenges, and successful case studies, the paper emphasizes the transformative role of grants in enhancing the health and well-being of rural populations.

Health Disparities in Rural American Communities

Although the definition of rural varies widely across different government agencies (Center on Rural Innovation, 2023), the United States Census Bureau defines rural areas as communities with populations under 50,000 people, often spread over vast geographic regions. Approximately 57 million Americans, or 17% of the country's population, live in rural areas (Rural Health Information Hub, 2023). Despite accounting for a significant portion of the population, rural communities frequently experience poorer health outcomes than their urban counterparts. Rural residents are more likely to face health disparities in access to medical services, quality care, and economic stability, contributing to higher rates of morbidity and mortality.

Rural health disparities are widely documented and multifaceted, with communities in these areas typically experiencing lower life expectancy, higher rates of chronic diseases, and significant barriers to healthcare access (CDC, 2022; Rural Health Information Hub, 2023). Rural populations have higher incidences of heart disease, stroke, respiratory conditions, and mental health issues. For example, the age-adjusted death rate for rural populations in 2019 was 834 deaths per 100,000 people, compared to 703 deaths per 100,000 people in urban populations, representing a 19% higher mortality rate in rural areas (CDC, 2022).

Such disparities are driven by factors like geographic isolation, socioeconomic challenges, a shortage of healthcare professionals, and limited public health services (CDC, 2022). A 2022 study by Bain and Adeagbo also validated how rural populations face greater burdens of chronic disease. This phenomenon, often termed the "rural mortality penalty," also identified a life expectancy gap of approximately three to five years between rural and urban residents (Bain & Adeagbo, 2022; Headwaters Economics, 2023).

Disparities develop across multiple dimensions of health. However, they are seen in four primary areas, which include access to care, behavioral health, maternal health, and social risk factors or "social determinants of health." These inequities are entrenched in rural settings, highlighting the urgent need for targeted interventions to address the complex interplay of factors that disproportionately affect these populations. A close examination of these factors helps us better understand the systemic barriers rural communities face and coordinate advocacy for strategies that promote health equity in underserved areas. The following data points provide evidence of these challenges in rural community health.

- *Access to Care.* Approximately 60% of rural counties lack access to basic healthcare services, including primary care physicians, specialists, and mental health providers. For example, a 2023 report highlighted that more than half of counties in Wyoming, New Mexico, and Idaho fall below the national median in healthcare access metrics (Headwaters Economics, 2023; Moloney et al., 2025; Roberts et al., 2021). Geographic isolation worsens the issue, as patients often must travel hours for specialty care (CDC, 2022).

- *Behavioral Health.* Rural communities report higher rates of substance abuse and suicide. According to CDC data, suicide rates in rural areas are nearly double those in urban regions, partly due to isolation and limited mental health services. A study in rural Appalachia found that opioid misuse was significantly more prevalent compared to urban regions, highlighting an urgent need for targeted behavioral health interventions (Moloney et al., 2025; Zigman Suchsland et al., 2024).

- *Maternal Health.* Severe maternal morbidity rates are disproportionately high in rural areas due to the absence of obstetric care in more than half of U.S. rural counties. A 2022 CDC report noted that maternal mortality is up to 60% higher in rural counties compared to urban counterparts (CDC, 2022). In addition, racial disparities exacerbate maternal health outcomes, with Black and Native American women in rural areas experiencing even greater risks (Bain & Adeagbo, 2022).

- *Social Risk Factors.* Limited transportation, educational barriers, and geographic isolation compound health inequities, making preventive care and chronic disease management difficult. A study by Roberts et al. (2021) revealed that rural communities often face financial constraints, leaving households to choose between healthcare and basic needs like housing or food.

These disparities highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions and investment in sustainable health infrastructure.

Grants as a Vehicle for Rural Health Improvement

Grants play a transformative role in improving rural community health by addressing systemic barriers and promoting equity in healthcare access and infrastructure. Rural areas often face unique challenges, including limited healthcare resources, a shortage of medical professionals, and geographical isolation, which exacerbate health disparities (Braverman et al., 2022).

Grant funding provides vital support for initiatives like the expansion of telehealth services, construction of community health centers, and enhancement of emergency response systems, directly improving health outcomes in underserved populations (Zigman Suchsland et al., 2024). Furthermore, grants enable rural communities to tackle broader determinants of health, such as clean water access, broadband connectivity, and transportation infrastructure, which are essential for overall well-being (Moloney et al., 2025; USDA, 2024). Additionally, targeted grant programs help reduce inequities in historically marginalized rural areas, such as Native American communities, by ensuring resources are directed to areas with the greatest need (Bain & Adeagbo, 2022).

By alleviating the financial burden on resource-limited municipalities, grants empower rural communities to build sustainable health systems, reduce disparities, and improve quality of life for residents (Mohr & Whitcomb, 2024). Some examples include:

- *Healthcare Access*
  - Grants, such as those facilitated by programs like the USDA Rural Housing Service and HRSA initiatives, directly improve healthcare access through community health centers and telehealth services. For example, the HRSA supports Community Health Centers, which serve over 28 million patients in rural areas, improving care access for underserved populations (Braverman et al., 2022).
  - The Rural Health Initiative in Idaho utilized grants to develop community-driven health priorities, such as improving healthcare access, demonstrating tangible community benefits when funding aligns with local needs (Suchsland et al., 2024).

- *Infrastructure Development*
  - Federal grants from initiatives like the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act contribute to upgrading critical infrastructure, such as broadband, water systems, and healthcare facilities, thereby addressing systemic barriers in rural areas. This improves health outcomes by ensuring consistent access to resources and emergency services (Mohr & Whitcomb, 2024).

- *Workforce Support*
  - Programs like the 6for6 initiative use grants to train rural healthcare providers in research skills, increasing their capacity to address local health challenges. These programs foster community networks, enhance professional development, and create a ripple effect in improving community health outcomes (Anaraki et al., 2024).

- *Disaster Preparedness*
  - Grants allocated for disaster preparedness, such as those under the Infrastructure Act's $47 billion resilience fund, equip rural areas to mitigate the impact of floods, wildfires, and other climate risks, reducing long-term health burdens (Mohr & Whitcomb, 2024).

- *Equity Initiatives*
  - Rural development grants provide resources to reduce disparities in healthcare access and social determinants of health, such as transportation and housing. For example, programs targeted at vulnerable populations have led to increased utilization of preventative care and better health outcomes (Bain & Adeagbo, 2022; Braverman et al., 2022).

These examples illustrate the broad utility of grants in mitigating the rural health crisis. The long-term effects of this mitigation can also result in improvement in health outcomes for rural populations.

The rural communities of Australia have seen this firsthand. Over the past two decades, Australia has made significant strides in addressing rural health inequities through targeted, grant-funded initiatives (Australian Government, 2020). One notable example is the Remote Area Health Corps (RAHC), launched in 2008, which has deployed more than 5,000 health professionals to underserved rural communities. These efforts have contributed to improved vaccination rates and a reduction in preventable hospitalizations (Australian Government, 2024). Additionally, digital health initiatives—particularly government-supported telehealth programs—have expanded access to specialist care in remote regions. A 2023 evaluation found that patients in these areas received specialist consultations 40% faster via telehealth, leading to better chronic disease management and reduced wait times (U.S. Department of Health and

Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, 2024; Roberts et al., 2021).

These successes offer valuable lessons for the United States. First, flexible funding mechanisms in Australia are designed to accommodate regional diversity, including the unique needs of Indigenous populations. This tailored approach has resulted in measurable gains in health equity (Zigman Suchsland et al., 2024). Second, integrated community partnerships play a critical role in aligning funding with local cultural and regional needs. This strategy enhances the sustainability and relevance of health programs—an approach that rural U.S. communities could adopt to improve the effectiveness of their own health initiatives (Bain & Adeagbo, 2022).

Limited Funding for Rural Economic and Health Infrastructure

Despite comprising 19% of the U.S. population, rural communities historically receive a disproportionately small share of federal health and infrastructure funding. This long-standing trend, underscored in Figure 1, shows how urban areas have received millions of more dollars than their rural counterparts.

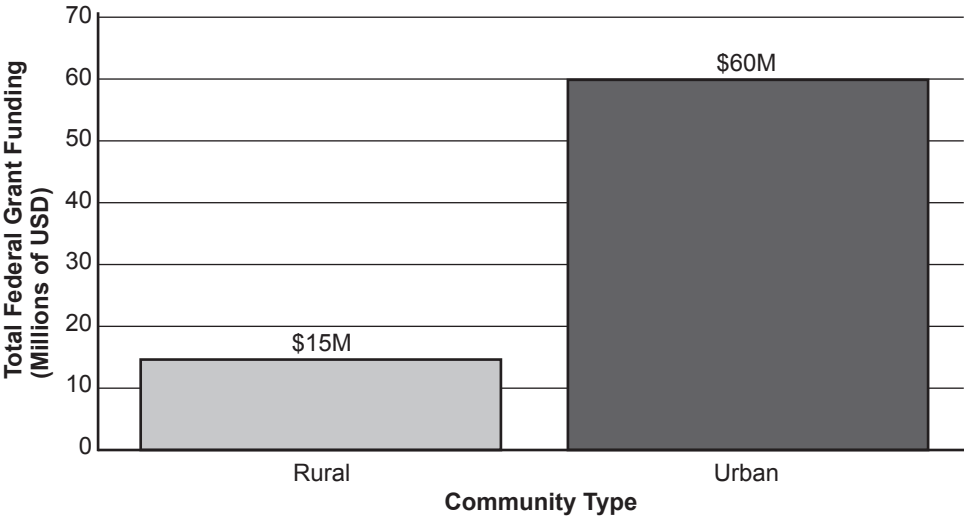

Figure 1: Grant Funding Disparity. Adapted from Braverman et al. (2022); Mohr & Whitcomb (2024).

In this example, urban communities receive $60 million in total federal grant funding compared to just $15 million for rural communities. This four-to-one ratio reflects broader patterns documented in research, where only about 7% of grant funding from the largest U.S. foundations reaches rural areas, despite rural communities comprising nearly 20% of the population (Braverman et al., 2022; Mohr & Whitcomb, 2024).

The chart emphasizes the structural funding inequities that contribute to persistent health and infrastructure gaps in rural America. It serves as a visual call to action for policymakers, funders, and development professionals to prioritize more equitable distribution of grant resources to meet the growing needs of rural populations.

According to a 2023 analysis by Headwaters Economics, more than half of rural communities in Western states also lack the capacity to apply for and manage federal grants (Headwaters Economics, 2023). This significantly limits the amounts of funding realized by these communities.

Accessing federal grants is critical to addressing health disparities, improving infrastructure, and fostering community development. These barriers are rooted in administrative, economic, and policy-related constraints that disproportionately affect small and resource-limited areas. For example, many rural areas lack the administrative capacity to manage the complexities of grant applications and compliance. The absence of trained grantwriters and full-time staff in smaller municipalities often hinders their ability to compete for and secure funding opportunities (USDA, 2024; Mohr & Whitcomb, 2024).

Additionally, rural economies reliant on volatile industries such as agriculture, mining, and forestry experience fiscal instability, making it difficult for communities to maintain consistent investments in healthcare and infrastructure during economic downturns (Headwaters Economics, 2023; Zigman Suchsland et al., 2024). Further compounding these challenges are federal matching fund requirements, which disproportionately burden municipalities with limited tax bases. Counties like Carter County, MT, exemplify how these financial constraints translate into low rural capacity scores, limiting their participation in competitive grant programs (Moloney et al., 2025; Headwaters Economics, 2023). These barriers collectively perpetuate disparities in health, infrastructure, and economic development across rural America. The following accounts provide some examples of how these difficulties affect health outcomes in some rural communities.

- *Administrative Capacity*. A report by the USDA in 2024 emphasized small rural communities often lack full-time staff who can dedicate time to grant applications and compliance (USDA, 2024; Mohr & Whitcomb, 2024).

- *Economic Reliance on Volatile Industries.* The boom-and-bust cycles of agriculture, mining, and forestry exacerbate fiscal instability, leaving communities underfunded during downturns. This issue was highlighted in case studies of Montana and New Mexico, where reliance on these industries often prevents consistent tax revenue streams for healthcare investments (Headwaters Economics, 2023; Zigman Suchsland et al., 2024).

- *Matching Fund Requirements.* Federal grants often require matching funds, which rural municipalities with limited tax bases struggle to provide. For instance, counties like Carter County, MT, score below 50 on rural capacity indices partly due to financial constraints (Moloney et al., 2025; Headwaters Economics, 2023). These funding challenges limit the ability of rural areas to participate in competitive grant opportunities, perpetuating health and infrastructure deficits.

Expanded Grant Opportunities Over the Past 20 Years

Over the past two decades, the amount of grant funding available to rural communities in the United States has grown significantly, reflecting an increased recognition of the challenges these areas face. Federal initiatives, state programs, and nonprofit organizations have made substantial investments in healthcare, infrastructure, education, disaster preparedness, and economic development to address persistent rural inequities. Federal initiatives such as the Broadband Initiatives Program (BIP) under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 and the Rural Partners Network (RPN) launched in 2024 are examples of significant funding streams (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, 2024; USDA, 2024). Additional areas of focus and the types of projects supported include:

- *Growth in Federal Grant Allocations*
  - **Overall Increase.** Federal funding for rural development projects has increased by an estimated **35%** over the past two decades, driven by new legislative programs such as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (2009) and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (2021). These initiatives directed significant resources to support rural community development and health (Mohr & Whitcomb, 2024).
  - **Health and Healthcare Access.** Grants allocated to rural health initiatives, such as the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) programs, grew by **25%** between 2010 and 2020. These funds have been instrumental in expanding telehealth services, building community health centers, and supporting rural hospitals (Braverman et al., 2022; USDA, 2024).
  - **Infrastructure.** Funding for rural infrastructure projects, including broadband, water systems, and transportation, increased by approximately 40% during the same period. The Infrastructure Act alone allocated $65 billion for broadband expansion, with a large portion designated for rural areas (Moloney et al., 2025).

- *Allocation by Industry and Project Type*
  - **Healthcare and Public Health**
    - Approximately 30% of rural grant funding has been directed toward healthcare projects, including telehealth, rural hospital modernization, and opioid crisis management (Braverman et al., 2022; Zigman Suchsland et al., 2024).
    - Investments in community health centers have resulted in over 1,200 new facilities in rural regions since 2000 (Mohr & Whitcomb, 2024).
  - *Infrastructure Development*
    - 35% of total rural grants have been allocated to infrastructure projects, with funding directed at broadband expansion, clean water initiatives, and transportation improvements. For example, programs like the USDA's ReConnect program address the rural digital divide, helping to expand broadband in areas with limited connectivity (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2024).
  - *Economic Development and Workforce Support*
    - Nearly 20% of rural grants focus on economic development, targeting industries like agriculture, manufacturing, and renewable energy. Investments in renewable energy projects increased by 50% from 2005 to 2020, largely through the Rural Energy for America Program (Headwaters Economics, 2023).
    - Workforce development programs, such as the Rural Workforce Innovation Network (RWIN), have supported skills training in sectors like healthcare and IT (Mohr & Whitcomb, 2024).
  - *Disaster Preparedness and Climate Resilience*
    - Climate resilience projects, funded through grants, account for about 10% of rural funding. These include flood mitigation, wildfire management, and drought preparedness initiatives. The Infrastructure Act (2021) allocated $47 billion specifically for disaster resilience, with rural areas prioritized due to their heightened vulnerability (Moloney et al., 2025).
  - *Education and Community Facilities*
    - 5% of funds have been invested in building and upgrading schools, libraries, and community centers. Programs like the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) have provided resources to improve educational outcomes in small, isolated districts (Braverman et al., 2022).

- *Key Trends in Grant Administration*
  - **Targeted Rural Policies.** Recent federal initiatives, including the Rural Partners Network, aim to streamline the grant process and increase access for underserved communities. By embedding federal staff in rural areas, the program provides hands-on

guidance for navigating complex funding systems (Mohr & Whitcomb, 2024).

- **Focus on Equity.** Increasingly, funding has been directed toward historically marginalized rural populations, such as Native American communities and predominantly Black rural regions. This shift is reflected in targeted programs addressing health and infrastructure disparities in these areas (Bain & Adeagbo, 2022; Moloney et al., 2025).

Building the Case for Investment in Grantwriters

The absence of skilled grantwriters is one of the most significant barriers preventing rural communities from accessing grant funding. A 2022 report highlights that fewer than 20% of rural counties employ grantwriting specialists, leaving federal dollars untapped (Headwaters Economics, 2023; Mohr & Whitcomb, 2024).

Investing in grantwriters can yield substantial returns for rural communities including enhancing access to federal programs, as well as produce a substantial return on investment. Dedicated grantwriters can help communities overcome the administrative barriers to funding. For example, Missoula County's high rural capacity score in Figure 2, denoted on the Y axis, correlates with its investment in full-time grant staff, shown on the X axis (Headwaters Economics, 2023; USDA, 2024).

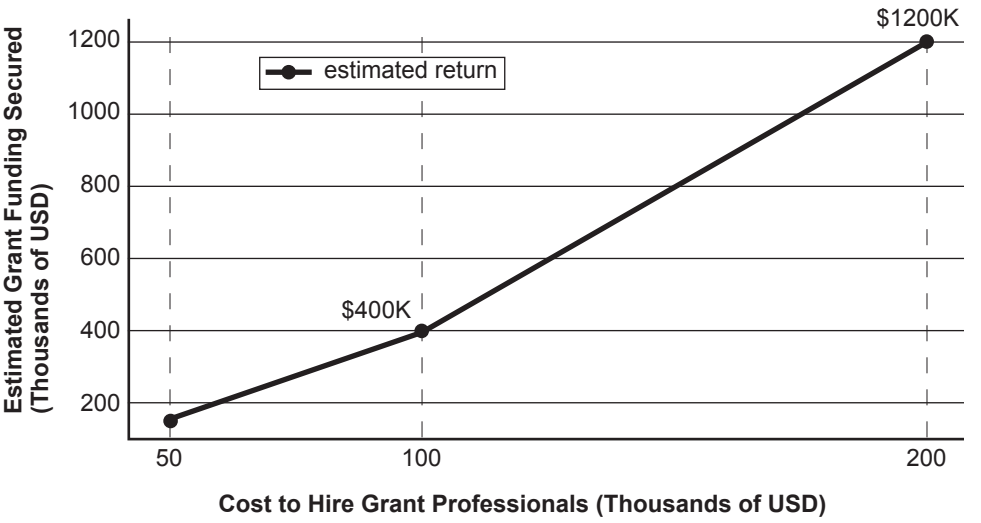

Figure 2: Grantwriter Return on Investment. Source: Inferred from Headwaters Economics (2023); Zigman Suchsland et al. (2024)

For every dollar spent on grantwriting services, communities could potentially secure $100 in grant funding (Headwaters Economics, 2023). Programs like the Rural Partners Network, which embed grantwriters

directly into communities, are addressing this gap effectively. Additionally, training local community members as grantwriters creates sustainable funding mechanisms (Mohr & Whitcomb, 2024). Key recommendations to further increase the sustainability of rural health grant programs are:

- *Strengthen Local Capacity*
  - **Invest in Grantwriting and Planning Expertise.** Provide training programs to develop grant-writing skills among local government officials and community leaders. Rural communities often lack experienced grant writers, which is a significant barrier to accessing funds (Mohr & Whitcomb, 2024).
  - **Leverage Community Partnerships.** Encourage collaboration between academic institutions and rural organizations to co-develop grant proposals. Academic institutions can offer technical expertise and mentorship to local leaders, enhancing their ability to submit competitive applications (Suchsland et al., 2024).
- *Simplify Grant Application Processes*
  - **Advocate for User-Friendly Applications.** Work with funders to create streamlined grant applications tailored to rural settings, reducing complexity for communities with limited administrative resources (Braverman et al., 2022).
  - **Promote Pre-Award Support.** Funders should provide pre-award technical assistance, including training on eligibility criteria and application preparation. This can help level the playing field for communities with fewer resources (Mohr & Whitcomb, 2024).
- *Develop Community-Based Research Programs*
  - **Engage Communities in Priority Setting.** Use participatory methods, such as forums and surveys, to identify and prioritize local health needs. Community-driven approaches ensure that grant proposals align with local priorities, increasing the likelihood of funding approval (Suchsland et al., 2024).
  - **Encourage Local Data Collection.** Equip communities with tools to gather and analyze health-related data, enabling evidence-based proposals that demonstrate clear needs and potential impacts (Anaraki et al., 2024).
- *Advocate for Policy Changes to Increase Accessibility*
  - **Eliminate Matching Fund Requirements.** Advocate for policy changes that remove or reduce matching fund requirements, which often exclude rural communities with limited budgets (Mohr & Whitcomb, 2024).

  - **Encourage Flexible Funding Models.** Push for funding agencies to award grants directly to high-need communities without requiring applications, especially in areas with the lowest capacity (Mohr & Whitcomb, 2024).

- B*uild Infrastructure for Long-Term Sustainability*
  - **Invest in Digital and Administrative Tools.** Expand broadband access and provide digital platforms to support virtual collaboration and grant management. Digital tools can overcome geographic barriers and improve grant submission processes (Moloney et al., 2025).
  - **Support Rural Leadership Development.** Create leadership development programs for local officials and community leaders, focusing on resource mobilization and strategic planning (Bain & Adeagbo, 2022).

- *Promote Interdisciplinary Collaboration*
  - **Foster Academic Partnerships.** Universities and research institutions should establish long-term partnerships with rural communities to co-create health improvement strategies and secure funding (Anaraki et al., 2024).
  - **Integrate Rural Voices into Policy Advocacy.** Support rural leaders in participating in national policy discussions, ensuring that grant criteria and priorities reflect rural realities (Bain & Adeagbo, 2022).

Conclusion

Grants serve as a critical mechanism for reducing health disparities in rural America by funding healthcare access, workforce development, infrastructure, and community well-being initiatives. However, many rural communities struggle to secure and manage grants due to administrative capacity constraints and financial limitations. While increased federal investments and policy initiatives have expanded rural grant opportunities, persistent inequities remain, necessitating more targeted strategies. Lessons from successful domestic and international programs, such as Australia's rural health initiatives, highlight the value of flexible funding mechanisms and community-driven approaches. Moving forward, enhancing local grantwriting expertise, simplifying application processes, and advocating for policy changes—such as reducing matching fund requirements—can help ensure that rural communities receive equitable funding. By prioritizing long-term sustainability and capacity building, grants can become a transformative tool in bridging the rural health divide and fostering healthier, more resilient communities.

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Biographical Information

Susan Kimberly Jones MAS, GPC is a dedicated advocate for rural health and community development, bringing more than 25 years of experience in grant strategy, public health initiatives, and nonprofit capacity building. She has successfully secured more than $100 million in funding to support critical rural healthcare, education, and economic development projects. As an expert in community-driven grantmaking, Jones has led initiatives addressing social determinants of health, maternal care, behavioral health, and school-based wellness programs, ensuring underserved populations receive equitable access to healthcare resources in rural communities.

Currently serving as the Administrative Director of the Institute for Mental and Behavioral Health Research

at Nationwide Children's Hospital, she oversees a $20 million research budget and drives strategic funding priorities to expand mental health access. Her previous roles include leading community health strategy for Adena Health System, where she facilitated regional partnerships and implemented innovative community and mobile health solutions in Appalachian Ohio. In 2025, she also launched Level Field Consulting, LLC, a fundraising and capacity building firm supporting rural nonprofits.

Jones is a nationally recognized speaker and published author on rural grant funding and nonprofit sustainability. Her passion lies in empowering rural communities by building local grantwriting capacity and advocating for policy reforms to enhance funding accessibility. Through her work, she continues to bridge the rural health divide, fostering stronger, healthier communities. She can be reached at skjones219@gmail.com.

Rewriting the System: Neurodiversity, Inclusion, and the Future of Grant Work

Hannah Carswell, MA, GPC
Raksha, Decatur, GA

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

This article examines the intersection of neurodiversity and the grants profession by highlighting both the barriers neurodivergent professionals face and the unique strengths they contribute. Drawing on current research and practice-based insights, it explores how cognitive differences such as those associated with ADHD, autism, and dyslexia interact with the structural demands of grant work, including high-stakes deadlines and compliance-heavy reporting.

While many workplace environments are not designed with neurodivergent professionals in mind, the core competencies of grant work such as pattern recognition, systems thinking, deep focus, and ethical alignment often align closely with neurodivergent strengths. The article outlines how rigid expectations around communication, professionalism, and emotional regulation can create chronic strain and offers concrete strategies for building more inclusive and sustainable systems. It also considers how academic and professional norms can inadvertently exclude narrative, relational, and embodied forms of know ledge that are central to many neurodivergent experiences.

Ultimately, the article argues that inclusion requires a redefinition of expertise and accountability for how systems function. By centering neuroinclusion in its policies and practices, the grants profession can model what meaningful, equity-driven work looks like for any field striving to build more just and responsive systems.

Introduction

The term neurodiversity, first introduced in the late 1990s, refers to the naturally occurring variation in how people think, process information, and engage with the world. It encompasses a wide range of neurological profiles, including attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), dyslexia, and other cognitive or learning differences (Child Mind Institute, 2025). Rather than positioning these differences as deficits, the neurodiversity movement recognizes them as meaningful forms of human diversity that have often been marginalized within educational, medical, and professional systems.

In workplace settings, neurodivergent professionals may approach communication, task management, and problem-solving in ways that differ from dominant professional norms. While this divergence can create friction in environments that prize speed, multitasking, and uniformity, it is also associated with significant strengths. These may include pattern recognition, deep focus, creative reasoning, systems-level thinking, and ethical alignment (Austin & Pisano, 2017).

This article examines how these strengths intersect with the demands of the grants profession. It explores the mismatch between existing systems and neurodivergent working styles, identifies common structural barriers, and highlights inclusive practices that support both individual sustainability and organizational effectiveness. It also acknowledges the role of lived experience as a source of insight, and the importance of designing systems that recognize the full range of cognitive diversity.

Positionality and Voice

Academic and professional conventions also play a role in exclusion. The expectation to write in a detached or impersonal voice often sidelines knowledge that is narrative, relational, or rooted in embodied experience. These ways of knowing are central to many neurodivergent communities, where lived experience is a primary source of insight and making meaning. In privileging distance over depth, traditional scholarly norms may unintentionally erase the voices most needed in conversations about inclusion (Bertilsdotter, Rosqvist, et al., 2023). While this article follows standard academic form, it seeks to honor the legitimacy of practice-based knowledge and lived expertise.

Access Note

This article was written with noise canceling headphones, breaks between paragraphs, many, many body doubling sessions, and way too many browser tabs open. And then one final late night of hyperfocus. You can read it that way, too. Skim, scroll, jump around. Your brain is welcome here.

Working the System: Structure and Strain

Grant professionals work across every stage of the grant lifecycle. Some specialize in pre-award or post-award phases while others manage from prospect research to closeout. Whether working with government agencies, private foundations, or corporate partners, they are expected to translate programmatic work into persuasive and data-backed narratives, ensure compliance with detailed guidelines, and coordinate systems that rarely align with the real-time delivery of services.

The field often rewards those who write quickly, communicate clearly, and maintain a high degree of control amid shifting demands. However, the daily demands of a grant professional's job are rarely predictable. Application portals crash. Budget templates conflict with internal accounting systems. Programmatic work must be monitored and adjusted to ensure alignment with funder expectations and the realities of delivering service in an unpredictable world. Grant professionals often navigate writing, planning, logistics, and problem-solving all in the same day.

Therefore, success in this field can demand adaptability, emotional regulation, and the ability to work under pressure with limited resources and ambiguous expectations. These pressures affect all grant professionals, but they may place particular strain on individuals whose working styles are nonlinear, sensitive to sensory input, or dependent on systems that support clarity and flexibility.

Recognizing the actual scope of what grant professionals are asked to do and how often that scope expands without support only strengthens the case for reimagining systems that keep neurodivergent professionals included and thriving. Designing with neurodivergent sustainability in mind ultimately benefits the entire field by fostering more flexible and effective ways of working.[1]

Neurodivergent Strengths in Grant Work

Neurodivergent professionals bring a wide spectrum of strengths that often map directly onto the realities of grant work. They can be especially successful when those strengths are seen, supported, and given space within systems that work with their unique ways of perceiving and interacting with the world. One of the most well-documented traits is hyperfocus or the ability to concentrate deeply on a task for an extended period (Austin & Pisano, 2017). When conditions support it, this kind of sustained attention can be invaluable for writing, research, data review, and meeting urgent deadlines.

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[1] This paragraph was brought to life with the help of a Pomodoro timer and a Focusmate session.

Pattern recognition and systems thinking are also common strengths amongst neurodivergent grant professionals. These abilities support high-level grant work, such as identifying trends in funder behavior, translating complex program models into logic models, and detecting inefficiencies or inconsistencies in compliance systems. Neurodivergent individuals—especially those with autism—often use compensation strategies that rely on advanced pattern recognition and contextual modeling to mask or navigate social and cognitive expectations (Corbett et al., 2021). Similarly, systematic reviews have found that autistic professionals often excel in tasks requiring structured, visual, or nonlinear reasoning, including those that demand high levels of accuracy, complex data synthesis, or sustained focus (Lindsay et al., 2021).

Creative problem-solving is a well-documented strength among neurodivergent individuals, particularly those with autism and ADHD (Austin & Pisano, 2017). Divergent thinkers often approach challenges from unconventional angles, question established assumptions, or integrate information in novel and compelling ways. Research further suggests that these strengths are not just anecdotal. Many autistic individuals excel at pattern-based and systems-level reasoning that supports innovation (Corbett et al., 2021), and perform well in roles requiring technical precision, novel solutions, or nonlinear thinking (Lindsay et al., 2021). In a field that increasingly values innovation and cross-sector solutions, drawing on these abilities can be a significant advantage to secure funding.

In addition to cognitive strengths, research suggests that many neurodivergent professionals are guided by a strong sense of empathy and justice. These values often shape their paths toward mission-driven work and can foster deep alignment between internal ethics and external responsibilities. In grant writing, where the work frequently centers equity, storytelling, and systemic change, this alignment can be a powerful source of motivation and resilience. As Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al. (2023) describe, many neurodivergent individuals are drawn to collaborative, care-oriented practices grounded in mutual recognition and ethical responsibility—frameworks that resonate deeply with justice-driven professional roles.[2]

These strengths are not universal, nor should they be framed as compensations for difficulty. Instead, they reveal the untapped potential of cognitive diversity in a profession built on strategic communication, structured creativity, and sustained focus. Recognizing and supporting these abilities not only helps neurodivergent professionals thrive—it also strengthens the field itself through deeper insight, precision, and purpose.

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[2] This paragraph was shaped across two afternoons, a few tabs of rabbit hole research, and a lofi playlist. Focus isn't always linear.

Barriers and Burnout

Despite the strengths neurodivergent professionals bring to grant work, many still face barriers that are the result of a mismatch between how people think and what the system expects.

One common issue is executive dysfunction which includes difficulty getting started, switching tasks, or managing timelines. For example, a grant professional might know exactly what needs to happen next on a proposal but still find it nearly impossible to open the file or begin typing.[3] The longer the task waits, the heavier it becomes, and the more self-doubt creeps in. Additionally, grant work often requires rapid toggling between abstract strategy, technical requirements, and administrative detail. Without clear expectations or scaffolding, that kind of mental gear shifting can lead to overwhelm or paralysis (Raymaker et al., 2020). Cognitive overload is another pressure point. Grant professionals juggle moving deadlines, shifting priorities, emotionally heavy subject matter, and multiple channels of input. For neurodivergent professionals, especially those with sensory sensitivity or slower processing speed, this can create a kind of cumulative fatigue that's hard to recover from.

Without space to process or recover, shutdown becomes a survival response. This pattern is now being recognized in research on autistic burnout and chronic overload in neurodivergent professionals (Raymaker et al., 2020). Sensory and environmental stressors can also be intense. Noise, lighting, visual clutter, and nonstop meetings or pings can make an already demanding job feel unmanageable. Even digital systems like cluttered grant portals or inflexible reporting tools can turn routine tasks into barriers. Without accommodations, what looks like a simple upload or a routine report can become a major obstacle (Tailored Round Tables 2024).

In addition to all those obstacles, many neurodivergent professionals also feel pressured to mask. This can look like holding back questions, avoiding requesting accommodations, suppressing natural forms of expression like stimming (small, repetitive movements or sounds that help regulate focus and emotion). Masking may help someone pass as "professional" in the short term, but it is cognitively and emotionally taxing. Over time, it erodes energy, clarity, and self-trust, and is strongly associated with anxiety, depression, and burnout (Raymaker et al., 2020, Corbett et al. 2021).

Inclusive Practices That Work

Building a more inclusive environment for neurodivergent grant professionals takes more than one-off accommodations. It requires

[3] Yes, we know it is due. Yes, we know it is important. No, that does not make opening the document any easier.

rethinking how tasks are structured, how communication flows, and how success is defined. These changes help everyone, not just neurodivergent team members, by making work more clear, efficient, and sustainable (Tailored Round Tables, 2024; Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2023).

Structured workflows and visual tools can help reduce cognitive load. Breaking tasks into smaller steps and using checklists or visual calendars can support follow-through and reduce decision fatigue and time blindness, the difficulty accurately perceiving time

Flexible pacing and asynchronous options allow people to plan deep focus time around how their energy flows. While funder deadlines are often fixed, internal review timelines and meeting structures can frequently be designed with more flexibility. The option to work from home, even part of the time, can support concentration, reduce sensory overload, and give individuals more control over their environment. Quiet work blocks and modular deadlines, when paired with clear expectations, help professionals with executive functioning differences stay grounded and productive (Brooks et al., 2024; Tailored Round Tables, 2024).

Clear, layered, multimodal communication is another important strategy. Verbal instructions should be paired with written summaries, and meeting notes should be stored in shared folders for easy reference. Expectations can also be restated visually to support comprehension across different processing styles. These practices reduce the risk of miscommunication and improve access for team members who think in nonlinear, associative, or visual ways. Research has shown that neurodivergent professionals often benefit from multiple modes of input and clarity around task expectations (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Tailored Round Tables, 2024; Lindsay et al., 2021). These same practices also increase team efficiency and reduce avoidable rework which benefits all grant professionals.

Supportive, strengths-based supervision is essential for creating sustainable environments for neurodivergent professionals. Inclusive supervisors recognize that productivity doesn't look the same for everyone, and they actively engage in dialogue about how team members work best. This includes making space to adjust timelines, shift communication modes, and tailor feedback loops. This approach not only reduces the pressure to mask, it also helps foster psychological safety and long-term engagement. Research has shown that when professionals are supported in working "in their own way," rather than forced to conform to rigid expectations, they are better able to sustain focus, preserve energy, and avoid burnout (Raymaker et al., 2020; Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2023; Tailored Round Tables, 2024).

Technology can play a powerful role in reducing cognitive load and supporting diverse working styles. Voice-to-text apps, grammar checkers, screen readers, and structured note-taking tools can help minimize fatigue and free up mental energy for higher-level thinking. Online services such as Focusmate, which allows users to virtually body double

(share goals and work together silently), can help staff members stay focused. These tools are most effective when integrated into the team's standard workflows, available to everyone, and not treated as individual accommodations. Normalizing accessibility tools benefits everyone by promoting clarity, reducing friction, and allowing people to focus on their strengths. Research on neuroinclusive design emphasizes the importance of embedding these supports into daily systems to reduce stigma and improve long-term outcomes (Tailored Round Tables, 2024; Brooks et al., 2024; Lindsay et al., 2021).

These changes can include reducing digital notification overload, offering camera-optional meetings, and creating quiet workspaces with adjustable lighting or visual simplicity. Even small shifts can significantly reduce stress and improve focus. Research consistently shows that when sensory needs are proactively addressed, neurodivergent professionals experience less fatigue and are better able to sustain performance over time (Brooks et al., 2024; Tailored Round Tables, 2024; Raymaker et al., 2020).

Lived Experience is Expertise

In many contexts, especially federal grantmaking or when demonstrating return on investment for corporate and foundation partners, grant professional standards tend to emphasize technical precision, measurable outcomes, peer reviewed research, and/or an objective tone. These norms can sideline lived experience and nonlinear ways of thinking, which are often part of neurodivergent communication styles.

Scholarship in disability studies and neurodiversity research has long argued that experiential knowledge is not merely anecdotal, but also epistemologically distinct and valid. It provides access to insights that are unavailable through abstract reasoning alone. This position is echoed in recent work advocating for neurodivergent storying as a mode of producing meaning on its own terms (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2023). Neurodivergent grant professionals may be especially adept at translating between what funders want to hear and what communities need to say. Their lived experience can make them uniquely equipped to recognize when systems are failing and how to make them work better.

Lived experience also reveals the gap between organizational policy and daily reality. While many workplaces now claim commitments to inclusion, the structures don't always follow through. Accommodations may be vague or inconsistently applied. Disclosure might still feel risky or unsafe. Real change happens when leadership is actively engaged, coworkers understand that lived knowledge is valid, and feedback loops include the people closest to the friction points (Lindsay et al., 2021).

Integrating practice-based insight isn't about storytelling for its own sake. It means rethinking whose expertise counts, how feedback is solicited, and what kinds of leadership are legitimized in professional

settings. That might look like inviting neurodivergent staff to co-design workflows, lead access trainings, or reframe internal policy. It also means learning to read discomfort, burnout, or resistance not as personal failure, but as system-level feedback (Raymaker et al., 2020). This kind of inclusion goes beyond optics. It requires accountability, ongoing reflection, and a willingness to challenge long-standing norms.

Signs of Progress: Where the Field Is Getting It Right

In many ways, grant professionals may be uniquely equipped to lead this shift in the wider professional culture. The work already demands that they solve complex problems, navigate across sectors and fields, and stay responsive to changing conditions. Grant professionals translate between community needs and institutional structures every day, often while advocating for equity, access, and systemic change. That orientation naturally aligns with the goals of neuroinclusion.

Peer-Led Communities, Professional Networks, and Inclusive Programming

Online forums and peer networks have become essential connection points for neurodivergent grant professionals. These spaces often allow for asynchronous participation, low-pressure dialogue, and varied forms of engagement. One example is the Brainy Bunch forum on the GPA platform, which creates space for members to ask questions, share strategies, and reflect without judgment. Professional associations are starting to talk about neurodiversity more directly. In-person meetups and neurodivergent-focused sessions at GrantSummit have also helped build community and visibility. Conferences like GrantSummit include sessions on burnout, executive functioning, and accessibility, which are topics that resonate deeply with neurodivergent professionals.

Gender, Masking, and Structural Erasure

Gender plays a major role in how neurodivergence is recognized, experienced, and supported at work. The grants profession is overwhelmingly female with more than 70% of U.S. grantwriters identifying as women (Zippia, 2023). However, many neurodivergent women go undiagnosed well into adulthood. Research shows that women with autism or ADHD are often identified years later than men, with many receiving diagnoses only after prolonged burnout or misdiagnosis (Lai & Baron-Cohen, 2015).

This diagnostic gap reflects long-standing gender bias in how conditions like autism and ADHD have been studied and understood. Early diagnostic tools were developed around male behavioral patterns, leading to the under recognition of traits that are more internalized or

masked, especially in those socialized to suppress distress or blend in. As a result, many neurodivergent women enter the workforce without language for their experiences, often blaming themselves for what is a structural mismatch (Raymaker et al., 2020).

At work, masking shows up in ways that go far beyond "faking it." It might look like suppressing natural communication styles, mimicking small talk, hiding sensory sensitivities, or overworking to stay ahead of executive dysfunction. Women are especially likely to mask due to both socialization and pressure to meet expectations around emotional labor and professionalism. While masking may create the appearance of composure, it is cognitively and emotionally exhausting. Research links long-term masking to anxiety, depression, burnout, and even suicidality (Raymaker et al., 2020; Cassidy et al., 2018).

The structure of grant work can compound these pressures. Grant professionals are expected to be responsive, precise, and emotionally attuned (able to translate human need into fundable language, navigate complex relationships, and intuit unspoken priorities). These expectations often overlap with gendered norms around empathy and emotional labor, and can both align with and strain neurodivergent realities. Neurodivergent women may feel pressure to meet these standards while managing information overload, sensory stress, or inconsistent energy.

Intersectionality adds even more weight. Neurodivergent women of color, LGBTQ+ professionals, and multilingual staff often experience additional layers of bias and invisibility. Their needs may be misread through cultural stereotypes, dismissed as noncompliance, or ignored in environments that lack diagnostic awareness. In these situations, many choose to stay silent or step away entirely (Tailored Round Tables, 2023; Praslova, 2023).

Despite growing attention to neurodiversity in the workplace, there is virtually no published research on the experiences of neurodivergent professionals in the grants field. Yet within peer-led communities and informal networks, many individuals are beginning to name their experiences, support each other, and imagine new ways of working. The grant profession's focus on systems thinking, mission alignment, and narrative strategy may resonate with the strengths neurodivergent professionals often bring such as nonlinear reasoning, deep focus, pattern recognition, and a strong sense of justice. When supported, these strengths can contribute meaningfully to the sector.

Recognizing that potential means going beyond flexibility. It requires rethinking how professionalism is defined, how communication is judged, and how leadership is recognized. Inclusion must account for the full complexity of neurodivergent women's experiences, including how gender, race, language, and culture shape access and expression.

The Role of Funders in Inclusion

While internal policies and workplace culture shape daily experiences, external forces, particularly funders, define much of the landscape that grant professionals must navigate. Through their platforms, priorities, and expectations, funders influence not only what gets funded, but also how grant work is structured and who can meaningfully participate.

Despite growing commitments to equity, few funders have explicitly considered how their practices impact neurodivergent professionals who are navigating proposal development, budgeting, and reporting. One major barrier is the design of application systems and digital portals, some of which lack accessibility features like keyboard navigation or save-and-return functions. Others rely on rigid formats that penalize nonlinear thinking or creative framing. For professionals who process information visually or need more time to shift between tasks, these systems introduce unnecessary friction and fatigue (Tailored Round Tables, 2023). Vague instructions or limited examples of how to properly complete tasks often generate confusion and undermine trust. For professionals who rely on structure and consistency to manage executive functioning, this lack of clarity can create stress and slow progress.

Tight timelines and compliance-heavy reporting can further exclude those who work with cognitive or emotional intensity. Short turnarounds often leave little room for scaffolding, processing, or quality control. When reporting is burdensome but not meaningful, it can lead to burnout or disengagement, especially for professionals already navigating masking.

Funders may also overlook the emotional labor embedded in grantwriting. Applications often require professionals to translate real human pain into concise, fundable narratives. For neurodivergent professionals who feel that weight deeply or struggle with the emotional disconnect, this task can be especially draining.

To truly support inclusion, funders must look beyond intention and examine the impact of their systems. Accessibility isn't just about offering accommodations—it's about designing processes that work for a wider range of minds from the start. This work includes investing in universal design, plain-language materials, and application platforms that are tested and shaped with input from neurodivergent professionals (Tailored Round Tables, 2024). Research on workplace accessibility emphasizes that clear, structured, and consistent communication—such as written instructions and simplified language—can significantly reduce cognitive load and improve outcomes for autistic professionals (Lindsay et al., 2021). It also means offering longer lead times, clearer guidance and more flexible reporting formats (Tailored Round Tables, 2024).

Conclusion and Future Possibilities

Neurodivergent grant professionals offer strengths that are deeply aligned with the needs of the field such as strategic insight, nonlinear thinking, strong pattern recognition, and a deep connection to mission-driven work. However, these abilities are often sidelined by rigid systems, inaccessible platforms, and narrow expectations around professionalism.

Burnout, masking, and attrition are not personal failures. They are signs that the current structures within the grants profession do not reflect how many people actually think, process information, and engage with their work. Moving toward a more sustainable model means rethinking how workplaces operate, how success is defined, and how leadership is recognized across different ways of working.

This kind of change cannot be limited to internal policy. Funders, reviewers, and institutions shape the broader conditions that define what grant work looks like. Inclusion cannot depend solely on the efforts of individual practitioners. It requires accountability for the systems that either support or exclude participation. That includes reexamining timelines, communication practices, application processes, and reporting structures.

A more inclusive profession will require input from neurodivergent professionals at every level. It means applying universal design principles to tools and workflows, adapting evaluation frameworks to reflect the full range of labor involved in this work, and creating feedback systems that value lived experience. It also means acknowledging the gaps in existing research. There is still very little data on how neurodivergent professionals, especially women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people of color, experience the field.

The grants profession is built on the belief that better systems are possible. By treating neurodiversity as a source of strength rather than a box to check, the profession can lead by example and build the inclusive futures it already works to fund.

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Biographical Information

Hannah Carswell, MA is a grant professional based in Atlanta, GA. She began her career in direct service, grounding her work in the importance of listening to those closest to the work. As Director of Grants at Raksha, she supports the organization's mission through grant writing and management.

Hannah holds a BA in Interdisciplinary Studies from Berry College and an MA in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies from Georgia State University, where she also earned a Certificate in Nonprofit Management. She also completed a Certificate in Indonesian Language and Culture through the Darmasiswa Scholarship Program at Politeknik Negeri Bali. She recently earned the Grant Professional Certification (GPC). Receiving a diagnosis of ADHD as an adult has shaped her interest in how professional systems can be redesigned to better reflect the needs of neurodivergent people. Hannah can be reached at hcarswell@gmail.com.

University Partnerships: Opportunities for Grant Professionals to Strengthen Community

Sarah Gunning, PhD
Towson University, Towson, MD

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

Abstract

This article encourages grant professionals to consider contacting their local universities to build connections with grantwriting students and faculty. Grant professionals could provide insight into the profession, share expertise in guest lectures, and/or share local histories of the community. Many university programs teach nonprofit grantwriting via "service-learning," where a course partners with a local nonprofit organization and students learn how to write successful grant proposals. Researchers in the fields of technical and professional writing have written extensively on these practices and are developing grant professionals who may not be aware of possible mentoring support from local professional organizations.

Service-learning is challenging: student writers navigate a steep learning curve as they learn the profession, as did most novice grant professionals (Gunning, 2025). Grant professionals might consider leveraging their expertise in these four areas that research has suggested are difficult for new grant professionals:

1. Relationships take time to build trust,

2. Collaborative writing is complex,

3. Interviewing and research skills are being honed, and

4. Critical listening skills require reflection and synthesis (Gunning, 2025).

The article provides a list of selected nonprofit studies programs within universities where grant professionals might identify a local program to work with and mentor, which may lead to successfully hiring new grant professionals in their organization.

Applied theory: Introduction to service-learning coursework

Service-learning coursework is the practice of giving university students an opportunity to partner with (usually local) organizations to develop meaningful projects that are used within the community. Increasingly, university writing courses are introducing students to this practice via nonprofit partnerships. For example, students may learn how to write grant proposals to assist a nearby nonprofit organization and submit them to funding agencies.

Like new grant professionals, students face a steep learning curve during their process of learning the histories behind the nonprofit organization and community, writing collaboratively, developing strong research questions, and practicing strong listening skills when working in a (likely novice) professional capacity. Grant professionals can help foster these skills in students by partnering with university courses, perhaps by giving guest lectures on the histories of local communities, highlighting strategies that they use within the grantwriting process, and sharing advice they have learned during their careers.

What universities say about nonprofit grantwriting via service-learning

Over the past 25 years, service-learning has been increasingly promoted as a way for university students to gain real-world writing experience, particularly with nonprofit partners (Brizee, 2014, 2020; Cargile Cook, 2014; Falk 2011; Matthews & Zimmerman, 1999; McEachern, 2001; Stuckey, 2019; Stuckey & Grant, 2022; Towey & Bernstein 2019; many others). Universities and nonprofit organizations have gained a wealth of information as they identify strategies for working together, helping ensure students gain communication skills essential for collaborative, organizational writing. Service-learning with local nonprofit organizations does help students learn the process of applying for grants and writing proposals (Cuyler, 2017, p.19), but ‘learning by doing’ and ‘trial by fire’

are commonplace experiences for many beginning grant professionals (Gunning, 2025).

Running a successful service-learning course in ten to fifteen weeks requires much dedication and planning. Professionals in the grant writing field have learned a lot through trial-and-error and research-based attempts at creating a positive experience for both community partners and classrooms. Over the past ten years, recommendations in community engagement have focused on social justice and community building (Grant, Walker, & Robertson, 2024; Mason, McDougle, & Jones 2019; Moore, 2018; Stuckey, 2019; Stuckey & Grant, 2022) more so than learning about the genre components of a proposal.

As noted in the scholarship, collaborative partnerships between colleges and surrounding communities can be difficult to establish and maintain (Cushman 1996; Brizee, 2014, p.34). Worse, at times, university partnerships can cause more harm than good when working within disenfranchised communities (Stuckey & Grant, 2022; Moore, 2018). Students may be new to the community surrounding their university (Andrews & Etheridge, 2022; Griffith, Hart, & Goodling, 2006). For example, in one university study, the majority of students had a very limited knowledge of the organizations in the community that were course partners in need of funding. The instructor provided instructions to identify a nonprofit organization in the community that may be of a topical interest to individual students, then contact the organization to determine if there might be a need that a grant could be used to address. Other studies have noted that instructors ask students to find their own organizations to work with (Andrews & Etheridge, 2022). This practice is common, and although not recommended, it still often occurs. At times, instructors believed it was valuable to put the responsibility on the student to gain a better understanding of what organizations exist in the community (Griffith et al., 2006, p. 228). However, social issues and histories are complex and require much background knowledge for students to understand why the nonprofit organization exists in the first place. Andrews and Etheridge (2022) noted that students worked with a local food bank, youth service agencies, homeless shelters, health-service organizations, and others, and likewise, Matthews and Zimmerman (1999) listed five community partners for a single class. Matthews and Zimmerman suggested that professors create a long-term partnership with one or two organizations rather than short-term relationships with many organizations (p. 200).

Research has corroborated that nonprofit proposal writers don't often have other writers in their organization to ask for advice (Davidson, 2009; Gunning, 2025; Hager, Rooney & Pollak, 2002; Healey, Bartolini, Maehara, & Williams, 2010). Davidson (2009) conducted interviews with nonprofit proposal writers in the southwest United States and found most work as "lone writers," employed as the only proposal writer within their organization, and had little training. Hager et al. (2002) conducted

a survey with 1,540 nonprofit organizations on how fundraising is carried out in the U.S. and found only 25% of nonprofit organizations had one full-time grant professional, indicating most of those worked as lone writers. Not much has changed over the past twenty years: writers report having to learn on their own, with few procedures documented for training (Gunning, 2025; 2014). Typically, limited resources exist to help new proposal writers quickly and confidently develop those skills (Stepankiw, 2023 p.176; Gunning, 2025). Since nonprofit proposal writers must often essentially build their own network, relationship building is essential. This is where members of professional organizations for grant professionals can be especially valuable, especially in terms of addressing challenges faced during service-learning projects.

The four main challenges in grant writing coursework

A literature review of service-learning studies have shown that there are four major challenges in university partnerships with communities:

1. *Community knowledge* is essential, and relationships take time to build trust.
2. *Collaborative writing* is complex, and students are learning how to do this as they go.
3. Students are learning *research methods,* such as interviewing skills, to help them write strong arguments.
4. *Critical listening skills* are often challenging for students; professors must ensure community partners are heard.

The following sections will discuss these four topics and note suggestions on how grant professionals might partner with universities to help new grant professionals navigate these challenges.

1. Community knowledge: Relationships take time to build trust

Community partnerships take time and energy to develop, with many service-learning projects developed and executed within a 15-week long semester. Most literature on service-learning and professional writing recommends instructors spend as much time as possible planning. This includes researching the organizations and visiting the agencies to build and develop multi-semester relationships, not “one-and-done” projects (Matthews & Zimmerman, 1999; McEachern, 2001, p. 220; Brizee, 2014; Bourelle, 2012; Stuckey & Grant, 2022; many others). However, the literature is unclear how many research practitioners have long-term course relationships with community partners. Ellen Cushman (2002) warns us to commit: distrust can easily form between universities and surrounding communities, as a short-term partnership might leave an organization in the lurch. Nonprofit organizations often work to fill

in gaps of underfunded social services, and may work with vulnerable populations, where it is essential to be mindful of a university "barging in" and asking to partner (Moore, 2018, p. 191).

Researchers have since suggested building a sustainable, participatory relationship: a "long term collaborative project that allows partners equal say in the direction of the project, and control over the deliverables" (Brizee, 2014, p. 25). Falk (2011) noted a similar strategy. Her students spent a minimum of eight hours volunteering or shadowing at the nonprofit, helping them gain an understanding of the organization's mission. As the relationship begins, research suggests professors familiarize themselves and their classes with theories of civic discourse and engagement theories, then develop a careful overview of project stakeholders to identify needs (Brizee, 2014, p. 36). Deep knowledge of what the organization does, its history and mission, and the complexity of the socioeconomic histories a community has experienced can help foster trust between a group of students and a nonprofit.

How can grant professionals help?

As noted earlier, university students may not be from the area where their university is located and often have a steep learning curve with amassing background, contextual information. For example, students who attend a university 50+ miles away from their home are likely not going to know about the social and economic histories behind the university and local neighborhoods within a grantwriting course. These histories may be shared by their professors but grant professionals whose organizations work within these very communities would have even more knowledge about the region.

Grant professionals might consider visiting grantwriting classrooms early in the semester to provide insight into a neighborhood or community's histories. Professors would choose readings that will help provide a starting point for learning, but grant professionals could give examples of individuals' stories that they have written about or programs they have helped develop. This supports the GPA's Core Competency #4: *Knowledge of how to craft, construct, and submit an effective grant application,* as contextual and historical knowledge helps justify a program's need within an argument. While building service-learning opportunities requires dedication and stamina, the relationship-building that the course models may be the most valuable strategy that students glean from the course.

2. Collaborative writing is complex, and students are learning as they go

Research has noted that students often have difficulty communicating effectively with community partners (Bourelle, T. 2012; Cook, K. 2014; Graves, R. 2001; Kastman Breuch, 2001; Spilka, R. 2009; Matthews, C. & Zimmerman, B.B. 1999). Establishing a productive dynamic within groups

can be challenging (Bourelle, 2012, p. 193). Not only must students co-create a deliverable with new community partners, but they must also co-write with their peers. In one study, only one student out of seven mentioned "learning to collaborate" as an important skill in a service-learning-based certificate in nonprofit writing (Andrews & Etheridge, 2022, p. 19).

Collaborative writing is a complex process of dividing tasks, developing accountability, creating a cohesive voice, and accurately representing viewpoints. This is difficult to do when authors *already* know each other and have a strong working relationship. Students don't usually have this luxury: they may not know others in the classroom, which can make it difficult to establish trust in a short, three-month timeframe. There is a cycle of transition, struggle, and accommodation when operating in an unfamiliar context, with new, perhaps dual sets of rules for the classroom and client (Wolfe, 2010). Additionally, in service-learning, students must learn by becoming part of the organization until the communication processes become second nature (Bourelle, 2012).

The service-learning project may be the first time students have had to collaborate within a course, as it is common for most university majors to take only two writing courses during their university education: one during freshman year, and another during junior year. Professors must serve as guides for how students interact and provide feedback on one another's collaboratively written work. As noted in England, Estes & Brewer, 2018 and Burnett, Cooper, & Welhausen, 2013, collaboration is not 1)having group members write their sections separately and put them together at the end; 2) having group members only present the segment they wrote in a project, or 3) having one group member do all the work. The authors note, "true collaboration results in outputs better than what could have been achieved by a single person" (England et al., 2018, p. 161). Professors might include excellent readings about collaborative writing such as *Team Writing: A Guide to Working in Groups* (Wolfe, 2010) but must keep in mind that students are learning not only the new collaborative writing strategies, but also figuring out how to apply collaborative techniques to a new form of writing as well (a grant proposal), within the context of a new organization and community. That is a tall order for one semester.

How can grant professionals help?

Grant professionals might consider visiting a grantwriting class early in the semester to discuss their own collaborative writing procedures with partner organizations. Talking about their own experiences would give students a better idea how to apply collaborative strategies that they are reading about, and students would have concrete examples of how collaborative writing works in the grants profession. Reflecting on these collaborations would help students process which strategies worked well

and where they might use more practice. These discussions and exercises would contribute to GPA's Core Competency #7, *Knowledge of practices and services that raise the level of professionalism of grant developers.*

3. Research methods: students are learning interviewing strategies as they go

Grant professionals have often noted, "It's not so much the *writing* that is difficult, it's that the *information seeking* processes can be difficult" (Gunning, Joynes, McMullen, & Trybus, 2024; Gunning 2025; 2013). During service-learning, students learn about an organization, identify a communication problem, list information needed, assess rhetorical strategies, and finally produce their solution, creatively working within the community partners' budgetary, technological, and cultural/political constraints. All these activities require critical research skills: systematic data collection, analysis, and decision-making based on findings (Cook, 2014, p. 34). However, instructors may assume students already know how to interact with, ask questions of, and listen to clients, when it may be a student's first time working as a writer for an organization (Kastman Breuch, 2001).

Research shows professors should integrate interviewing skills early into technical writing courses (Cook, 2014, Spilka, 2009; Gunning, 2025; many others). However, many grantwriting students may lack the research skills needed to access information from partners (Kastman Breuch, 2001, Cook, 2014, Spilka, 2009; Gunning, 2017). I conducted a survey with 580 members of professional organizations for grant professionals and found that research methods, particularly interviewing skills, were one of the three most requested skills nonprofit proposal writers wished they had learned in the classroom, in addition to project management and personnel skills (Gunning, 2025). Focusing on strong interview skills would allow students to practice their qualitative data collection skills: drafting and revising strong questions and learning how to work backwards from their information goal.

How can grant professionals help?

Grant professionals are a highly educated group: 65% hold a graduate degree, where they likely encountered a research methods class as part of their graduate curriculum (Gunning, 2025; Healey et al., 2010). Likewise, grant professionals must naturally strengthen their research skills as they work with others. Asking good questions takes practice, and consultants have reported that they have honed these skills during their professional experience. One way that experienced grant professionals can help students is to offer advice on developing strong information-seeking questions to ask the finance office, executive director, or program managers within an organization. Grant professionals might visit a class meeting and help students develop or strengthen questions

that they plan to ask the community partners or stakeholders. Students can brainstorm ideas that will help move their proposals forward, and the grant professional mentors can help the class refine their questions to maximize everyone's time. For example, a student who has not had coursework in research methods may ask vague questions, such as, "how does this project work?" whereas an experienced grant professional could help them frame their question in a way that would get more concrete answers, such as "what three outcomes do you expect from this new initiative? How and who will measure results?" This addresses GPA's Core Competency #3: *Knowledge of strategies for effective program and project design and development.*

4. Critical listening skills: Ensuring your community partner is heard

As noted in the previous section, developing good questions is not enough to conduct a strong interview; critical listening skills are essential, and something that service-learning students need to practice. Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch (2001) found that students often misinterpret or don't hear client requests, particularly in three major areas:

1. *Overruled requests,* where students hear the client but ignore their comments. This may be due to the students not realizing the importance of a request. For example, the client might indicate that they want a particular writing style used for a document, but the product demonstrates the students' preferences.
2. *Unheard requests:* students do not fully hear the client, missing opportunities to completely address a client's need. A client might request ten changes to a revised document; students may only identify and include seven.
3. *Seeking affirmation*: students seek unwarranted praise from the client, even when not meeting the client's needs. Students might ask if they are doing a good job along the way, and the client may feel inclined to say "yes" due to the "favor" nature of service learning. Seeking affirmation can be problematic if it blocks necessary critical feedback (Gunning, 2017) and worse, can be irreparably harmful to marginalized communities. Moore (2018) warns against "barging in with our document design skills"—we learn how to listen first. This is likely improved by working with fewer partners more deeply (Stuckey & Grant, 2022).

Last, but most importantly, "there is a difference between doing "local" work from the outside in, versus deeply understanding, listening, and attuning to a local community's needs—starting from those with the needs themselves" (Stuckey & Grant 2022, p. 18). Work that represents those unlike us requires mindfulness, critical reflection, and care (Moore, 2018, p. 191). As instructors, we need to build critical listening into service-learning courses, making it a clear learning objective (Kastman

Bruech, 2001; Gunning, 2017). In the context of underserved nonprofit organizations, "Most often, you will want to defer to your partner's vision, honoring the lived experiences from those within the community" (Stuckey & Grant 2022, p. 22).

How can grant professionals help?

Grant professionals who are already familiar with the partnering organizations can help provide feedback on the "levels of listening" students demonstrate in their speaking and writing. Are students accurately representing an organization's words? Grant professionals could serve as the mediator between the nonprofit organization and the students in early class meetings. As students take notes about the organization's histories, the grant professional could help students practice the language used in grant applications towards a more accurate representation of the organization and explain why the revised wording works more effectively. Gunning (2017) also had luck with recording Zoom meetings with the client, where classes could go back and evaluate the communication clarity between the students and clients. Reviewing the recordings as a class, students can hear information they may have missed or misheard and update their knowledge from the meeting. Grant professionals can help the new writers with follow-up questions that show that the listener has heard the speaker correctly and effectively, which will help build trust within the partnership.

Ultimately, there are many ways that grant professionals might partner with existing or new grantwriting courses that work with local nonprofit organizations, and many professors would love to partner with professional organization members.

Next Steps

Grant professionals might consider reaching out to existing programs within universities that teach grantwriting courses and seeing if they would be interested in partnering, either via guest lecturing with an existing course or proposing to teach their own grant writing course.

Guest Lecturing: Partnering with existing courses

Service-learning professors may simply not be aware of professional organization chapters in their regions or have limited time to research or find professionals in their area. Grant professionals could volunteer a few evenings a semester with the course to offer insight into the profession and assist with struggles that students have experienced when working with an organization for the first time. Hearing from professionals who do this work full-time and have built a career out of skills used in class is always interesting to students, whether graduate or undergraduate. Students would benefit greatly from hearing a professional's strategies

for learning about the community's history, for engaging in collaborative writing, how to conduct strong research, and how to actively listen to partners. Having a grant professional share their experiences and community knowledge might be the most effective way to help these new grant professionals learn the skills involved in proposal writing, which might lead to hiring a strong novice grant professional at the end of the semester. This is also another way grant professionals can bring mentoring into the profession.

Proposing Teaching a Course

In 2023, Stepankiw performed a content analysis of course catalogues from 112 "Research One" universities (such as state universities or flagship universities). Twenty did not have proposal-writing coursework at the undergraduate or graduate level, indicating 82% of R1 universities (research-intensive universities, such as state flagship schools) include proposal-writing coursework (Stepankiw, 2023, p. 176). However, few courses are dedicated to nonprofit communication or proposal writing compared to academic proposal writing (Stepankiw, 2023 p.175), although nonprofit leaders state there is demand for this training (Falk, 2011). Only 6% of proposal-writing courses focus on nonprofit grantwriting (Stepankiw, 2023, p. 175). Reach out to local English, Family Studies, or Arts departments for grantwriting course options with existing coursework. Most graduate coursework in proposal writing are housed in departments of Public Administration, Nonprofit Studies, Arts & Theatre, and Social Work. Most undergraduate courses were housed in English, Arts and Theatre, and Nonprofit Studies departments.

If no grantwriting courses exist at a local university, grant professionals, particularly those with advanced degrees, might also consider proposing to teach a course on nonprofit grantwriting. ENGL 401 *Grantwriting,* a service-learning course, is one of the most popular classes in my home department of English, as is the graduate level version in the MS Professional Writing program. The Grantwriting In Valued Environments (GIVE) program at Towson University arose from a similar special topics course. GIVE is led by Drs. Zosha Stuckey and Carrie Grant, cited within this article, and their students have collectively raised more than $1,000,000 in grant funding for surrounding Baltimore communities (Bacigalupa, 2024). English and Writing departments would likely be very receptive to a grant professional proposing a special topics course on nonprofit grantwriting, as students are often looking for professional writing experience before graduating. Universities often encourage those with advanced degrees and relevant professional experience to apply for teaching an adjunct course. The students are enriched, and grant professionals can earn a bit of extra money while connecting with and developing future grant professionals.

Starting points for partnerships: Nonprofit Studies programs noted across the U.S.

Where do we start? Weinstein (n.d.) has identified a "selected list of university centers and organizations that focus on nonprofit data collection and reporting, provide resources for managing and funding nonprofits, and host conferences for those involved or interested in nonprofit organizations." Many of these centers are attached to advanced degree programs in nonprofit management and continuing education training. Of course, there are universities that offer coursework in grantwriting that may not be listed below (see Figure 1).

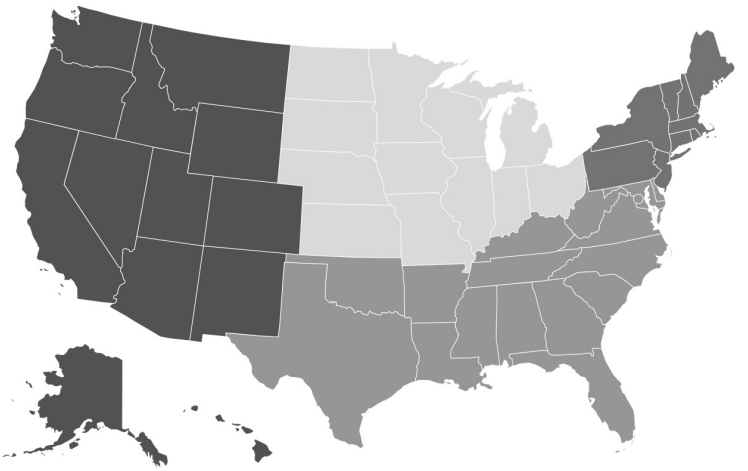

Figure 1: Regions of the U.S.: West, Midwest, South, Northeast

Northeast

- Massachusetts
  - Grand Valley State University: Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy
  - University of Michigan: Nonprofit and Public Management certificate
- New Jersey
  - Seton Hall University: Center for Public Service
- New York
  - University of Albany, SUNY: Center for Women in Government and Civil Society
  - City University of New York: Center on Philosophy and Civil Society
  - The New School for Public Engagement: Milano School of International Studies, Management, and Urban Policy
  - New York University: National Center on Philanthropy and the Law

- Pennsylvania
  - LaSalle University: The Nonprofit Center
  - University of Pennsylvania: Center for High Impact Philanthropy
  - University of Pennsylvania: Netter Center for Community Partnerships

Midwest

- Illinois
  - DePaul University: Public Services graduate program
  - North Park University: Axelson Center for Nonprofit Management
  - Northern Illinois University: Center for Nonprofit and NGO Studies
  - Northwestern University: Center for Nonprofit Management
- Indiana
  - Indiana University, Indianapolis: Lilly Family School of Philanthropy
- Minnesota
  - University of Minnesota: Nonprofit Management graduate certificate
- Missouri
  - University of Missouri, Kansas City: Midwest Center for Nonprofit Leadership
  - University of Missouri, St. Louis: Nonprofit Management and Leadership program
- Ohio
  - Case Western Reserve: Mandel Center for Nonprofit Organizations
  - Cleveland State University: Center for Nonprofit Policy and Practice
  - Columbus State University: Nonprofit and Civic Engagement Center
- Wisconsin
  - University of Wisconsin-Madison: Center for Community and Nonprofit Studies
  - University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee: Helen Bader Institute for Nonprofit Management.

West

- Arizona
  - Arizona State University: Nonprofit Management certificate
  - Arizona State University: Lodestar Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Innovation

- California
  - University of California, Berkeley: Center for Social Sector Leadership
  - University of San Diego: Institute for Nonprofit Education and Research
  - University of Southern California: Center on Philanthropy and Public Policy
- Colorado
  - Regis University: Institute of the Common Good
- Oregon
  - Portland State University: Institute for Nonprofit Management
- Washington
  - Seattle University: MS Nonprofit Leadership

South

- Washington, DC
  - The Catholic University of America: MS in Management—Nonprofit Management Track
  - Georgetown University: Center for Public and Nonprofit Leadership
- Delaware
  - University of Delaware: Center for Community Research and Service
- Georgia
  - Georgia State University: Nonprofit Studies program
- Maryland
  - Johns Hopkins University: Center for Civil Society Studies
  - Towson University: MS Professional Writing—Writing in the Nonprofit Sector track
  - University of Maryland: Nonprofit Management and Leadership certificate
  - University of Maryland: Do Good Institute
  - University of Maryland, Baltimore County: MS and Certificate program in Community Leadership
- North Carolina
  - Duke University: Center for the Study of Philosophy and Volunteerism

- Texas
  - University of St. Thomas: Center for Nonprofit Management
  - Texas A&M University: Center for Nonprofits & Philanthropy
  - University of Texas at Austin: RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service

- Virginia
  - George Mason University: Center on Nonprofits, Philanthropy, and Social Enterprise
  - University of Richmond: MS Nonprofit Study
  - Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University: Institute for Policy and Governance

Conclusion

Many programs provide the potential for partnering with nonprofit grantwriting coursework across the United States. Students would greatly appreciate grant professionals' insight into the profession, learning about community knowledge, collaborative writing skills, research method strategies, and listening skills within an existing grantwriting course or by proposing one.

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Biographical Information

Sarah Gunning, PhD is an Associate Professor of Technical Communication and Information Design at Towson University outside Baltimore, where she also serves as Director of the MS Professional Writing and graduate certificate in Communicating Complex

Information. Prior to academia, she worked as a grant-writer for several nonprofit organizations across the United States. Her research investigates knowledge management and information sharing strategies of nonprofit grantwriters. She can be reached at sgunning@towson.edu.

Integrating Artificial Intelligence into Grant Authorship

Kevin Leary, MA
St. Petersburg College, St. Petersburg, FL

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

GPCI Competency 06: Knowledge of nationally recognized standards of ethical practice by grant developers

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

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

Abstract

The purpose of this publication is to discuss the implications of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in grantsmanship as it pertains to the future of the profession and evolution of the necessary professional skills in an increasingly technological and information-rich field. It will provide preliminary insights into adoption trends of AI in grantsmanship through a literature review and quasi-experimental survey of grants professionals and those who actively work on grant proposals based on a diffusion of innovation (DOI) paradigm (Rogers 1983; Lund et al., 2020; Lund, 2025).

Preceding the literature review and survey is a section to assess the role of AI in authorship of grant proposals and the distinctions that necessitate the oversight of grant professionals during the grantwriting process to craft proposals. This is an important preface to establish why AI cannot yet autonomously submit grant applications. Authorship and by proxy copyright have become pervasive topics within the AI discourse, with new precedents emerging to address the impact of this

novel technology. Grant professionals should be aware of these precedents because, like most professions, AI can and is impacting grantsmanship with the potential for disruption and even job displacement. The emphasis placed on authorship is meant to 1) highlight the current legal precedent and funder guidelines, and 2) home in on current areas where AI is insufficient to submit grant proposals both technically and ethically. Areas where AI needs oversight or may presently lack autonomous capabilities present opportunities for grant professionals to focus their own professional development in order to establish a more symbiotic relationship with AI integration into grantsmanship.

AI competencies are not just vital for grants professionals, they are vital for professionals across all career fields. Microsoft and LinkedIn's *2024 Work Trend Index Annual Report* (2024) found that 71% of leaders are more likely to hire a less-experienced candidate with AI skills than a more experienced one without those skills, and 66% of leaders would not hire someone without AI skills. The *Shaping the Future of Learning* report (World Economic Forum, 2024) contends that AI is one of the top emerging skills required for jobs and those who fail to possess AI literacy are the most susceptible to job displacement. Demand for AI skills is at a premium and its impact on the labor market continues to unfold in real time.

What is Artificial Intelligence?

According to IBM, "Artificial intelligence, or AI, is technology that enables computers and machines to simulate human intelligence and problem-solving capabilities" (IBM, n.d.). It is the emulation of human cognition used to support, enhance, or replace actual human cognition in a variety of domains and tasks.

How do Large Language Models work?

In the context of grantwriting, the type of AI being most commonly leveraged is large language models (LLMs). This tool comes from natural language processing (NLP), an area of AI that allows computers to 'understand' and produce human-like text (Huston, 2022). LLMs produce patterns of words based on statistical associations from their training data or source material and the prompts that they are given by the user (Nature Pubishing Group, 2023). This often means that the outputs are dependent on what input they have been given, also known as "priming,"

which means the responses can appear bland and generic, or contain simple errors. Responses from LLMs are made in a humanistic fashion via collaborative communications that can be conducive to grant writing (Najafali et al., 2023).

What does it mean to be an author?

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines an author as 1) the writer of a literary work (such as a book) or 2) one that originates or creates something; the source (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). As a verb, to author is to write something (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Based on those parameters, one could reasonably think that generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Bard, and others would be considered authors. They would, however, be wrong.

Can AI be an author?

The discourse on AI authorship is still evolving, but according to notable academic journals *Nature* and *Science*, AI chatbots cannot be listed as authors in their published papers (Lee, 2023). Per the *Nature* guidelines, "Large Language Models (LLMs), such as ChatGPT, do not currently satisfy our authorship criteria. Notably an attribution of authorship carries with its accountability for the work, which cannot be effectively applied to LLMs. Use of an LLM should be properly documented in the Methods section (and if a Methods section is not available, in a suitable alternative part) of the manuscript" (Kritz, 2023, para. 6). From a legal perspective, since an AI chatbot is not considered a human being, the text it generates cannot be copyrighted work, which prevents it from obtaining authorship status (Lee, 2023). This is especially important in grant applications, where verifying sources and ensuring originality is critical. Depending upon the LLM used to help create the proposal and data privacy and retention settings, requests for clarification from funders could also be difficult to answer as the LLM may not be able to "recall" the outputs in question from a previous point in time.

While AI cannot be copyrighted without human involvement, copyright laws are evolving to account for infringement from previous authors and creators whose work is being used as training data to enable AI-generated outputs. Initially, AI was not overly susceptible to infringement violations, as the outputs need to be "substantially similar" to work outside of non-protectable elements like facts, tropes, or style (Rasenberger, 2022). In 2023, the *New York Times* was the first major company to file a lawsuit against an AI company as they sued Microsoft and OpenAI for copyright infringement after previous lawsuits like Author's Guild vs. Google examined what constitutes fair use and harm to the original works in the market (Rasenberger, 2022). This notion of infringement is a crucial pitfall in grant authorship. Infringement

is equivalent to plagiarism, which is grounds for disqualification in a competitive solicitation environment and can harm an organization's reputation. Usage of AI in the grantwriting process will necessitate comprehensive fact-checking and adequate sourcing of information to be done effectively.

One of the premier organizations that many journals follow for policy guidance is the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE). It has four criteria for authorship, of which GenAI can only satisfy two (Moffatt & Hall, 2024), as shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Considering Authorship Criteria for AI

Criteria	AI Functionality
Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work;	Yes
Drafting the work or reviewing it critically for important intellectual content;	Yes
Final approval of the version to be published;	No
Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved	No

This view on authorship criteria reinforces AI's current lack of accountability for its work and adds the ability to offer approval of the content it produces as areas exclusive to human cognition. Moreover, while the first criterion of substantial contributions to the conception or design of work can be met, the argument can and has been made that AI-generated outputs are not truly creative and are solely the basis of statistical algorithmic outputs to make successful predictions from queries and prompts (Rasenberger, 2022). Another important aspect of publication is that AI cannot legally or morally disclose any conflict of interest, which is a standard inclusion for research practice and highly relevant for grant applications (Moffat & Hall, 2024). That level of institutional knowledge and confirmation presently lies in the human domain.

It has been asserted by some international courts that, because AI is not human, it does not have the capacity to have rights. Without human rights, it is not sufficient for its "work" to be copyrighted and protected on the grounds of originality alone (Lee, 2023). This key component of copyright serves as the crux of the legal aspect of why AI is not seen as an author or co-author, while from an academic perspective, the exclusion of authorship relies on accountability and academic integrity.

Accountability is a concern in AI authorship because any unethical behavior, such as plagiarism or inaccuracy from biases or hallucination, cannot adequately be addressed through punitive measures (Moffatt & Hall, 2024). Grant funding cannot exactly be pulled from ChatGPT or another LLM, especially when it is being used by millions of people daily for an array of tasks. What is deemed unethical by grant professionals—fabrication—is a design feature of LLM's generative process that is known as a "hallucination." Although arguments against using the specific term have arisen, it is synonymous with an error or invention of fact (Huston, 2024). Dan Weld, the Chief Scientist of Semantic Scholar and member of the Allen Institute of Artificial Intelligence, described the problem language models often find when generating text summaries. "There's a problem with what people charitably call hallucination," Weld notes, "but is really the language model just completely making stuff up or lying" (Huston, 2024, p. 2).

According to Stanford's AI Index (as cited in Dahl et al., 2024), ChatGPT fabricates unverifiable information in approximately 19.5% of its responses). This problem is impactful to grantsmanship because grant applications require well-researched, evidence-based frameworks for their intervention approaches and LLMs are more susceptible to hallucinations in technical disciplines. In a medical study, Dr. John Halamka of the Mayo Clinic noted, "Models mostly know what they know, but they sometimes don't know what they don't know" (Halamka et al., 2024, para. 1). The LLMs tended to perform better with clearly identifiable facts as opposed to more nuanced medical scenarios (Halamka et al., 2024, para. 1). Similar inaccuracies were observed using ChatGPT 4 and other public models to interpret technical legal documents. They showed that LLMs hallucinated at least 58% of the time, struggled to predict their own mistakes, and often uncritically accepted incorrect legal assumptions by the users (Dahl et al., 2024). This preliminary research shows that the more technical the subject matter, the more difficult it is for LLMs to produce reliable content. This analysis may be more impactful for research-focused grant applications, but should still serve as a caution to grant writers who use AI of the importance to verify their content and substantiate facts. That being said, models are improving accuracy and continually becoming more proficient at providing correct responses or caveating when their responses have levels of uncertainty. Many models now are more transparent about identifying their source material and even giving glimpses of how they formulated their response.

Any level of inaccuracy in AI outputs makes it crucial that grant professionals be integrally involved with and oversee any usage of AI in grantsmanship. Editing and revision have always been necessary skills of the trade, but fact-checking and discernment of fabrication will likely become an increasingly vital skill for grant professionals as AI becomes more integrated in the profession by those who choose to leverage the

technology. The legal precedent, funder policies, and current limitation of LLM functionality should 1) help to assuage concerns grant professionals have over job security being impacted as their roles are necessary to grantsmanship and 2) indicate the areas where human oversight is valuable and should be prioritized on the grounds of accountability, mediation of conflicts of interests, and ethical integrity for a grant professional's organization.

Federal Agencies Weigh in on AI Authorship for Grants

Federal agencies such as the National Science Foundation (NSF) and National Institute of Health (NIH) have issued statements on the use of generative AI in proposals which do not prohibit its use, but do impress upon applicants the importance of integrity and accountability. The European Research Council (ERC) Scientific Council, for instance, noted that the use of AI in drafting a research proposal, "does not relieve the author from taking full and sole authorship responsibilities with regard to acknowledgements, plagiarism and the practice of good scientific and professional conduct" (Moller-Nielsen, 2023, para. 3). One study (Lund & Naheem, 2024) found that over half of the top 300 journals, including the *Lancet, Journal of Business & Economic Statistics,* and *American Sociological Review,* have some type of policy regarding the AI use and of those journals with guidelines, 97% allowed some form of AI use in manuscript preparation. However, 99% of them forbade AI from being granted authorship (Lund & Naheem, 2024).

The clearest stance from funders, however, has been that AI will not be used in the merit review process to protect the confidentiality and proprietary content they receive from applicants. In effect, this decision would prevent the applications from being repurposed, or used to train, the LLMs when other users are seeking information from the tools—such as proposal ideas. If reviewers are allowed to have AI tools assist them with the review process, the inputted proposal information would be available to be "authored" into future responses by the LLM. According to one NIH institute, "NIH set this rule because of confidentiality concerns—inputting substantial, detailed information into a generative AI tool forfeits control of where that data may be sent, saved, viewed, or used in the future" (National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, n.d.). Many funder review processes, including NIH, require reviewers to certify and sign an agreement that dictates they will not share applications, proposals, or meeting materials with anyone who has not been officially designated to participate in the peer review process—which includes sharing that information with AI platforms (Lauer, 2023). Inputting material that is considered the intellectual property of another party constitutes a breach of confidentiality as their data have now been collected by the LLM in some capacity, although there are some privacy settings to curtail that data consumption process. This is an important

point for grantwriters to consider if they intend to initiate a peer review of their own proposals using AI, because that content would then be available to train the LLM and has the potential to be repurposed by other AI users unless they have an agreement or privacy setting that prevents this usage.

While grant proposals are being protected in the review process, publishers of academic journals are not as secure in making sure the unique ideas they authored are not being repurposed by generative AI models. In May 2024, academic researchers found out that Informa, the parent company of academic publisher Taylor & Francis, signed a $10 million data-access agreement with Microsoft which would grant them nonexclusive rights to Taylor & Francis's nearly 3,000 academic journals (Palmer, 2024). This not only presents a challenge for authors who no longer have autonomy over whether their work is being leveraged in generative AI platforms, but could also create a potential atmosphere where their ideas are being used without proper reference and citation to their publications. Without transparency on the training sets of data being used in the LLM, there are limited insights on the intellectual property of the source information (Moffat & Hall, 2024). This provides another complication to the AI authorship debate when the province of ideas is not properly evaluated and the work is not in fact original to the AI. Returning back to the original definition of author, who is in fact the source?

How can one ethically apply AI in grantwriting?

To properly apply AI to grantsmanship, AI should be used to enhance the processes being conducted by a human, not replace the human perspective outright to autonomously generate proposals. Aside from accountability and fact-checking, AI can struggle to capture nuanced and specialized knowledge that is critical for grant and academic writing, which can be compared to how foreign-language learners misinterpret idiomatic expressions (Bell, 2023). The human element is critical to maintain a professional style of writing in alignment with an organizational mission or project and AI tools should only be leveraged to draft outlines or preliminary ideas before the grantwriter or subject matter expert modifies the text to be more coherent and cogent. Another important consideration to make is that it is not just the province of ideas that matters, but also the destination. Proposals are considered "trade secrets" by the applicants so they should not be shared outside of the institution that applied or by the funding entities and their review committee. Again, this is part of the reason funders are emphatic about AI not being used in the review process, so that the ideas of their applicants are not being given away to LLMs and being repurposed by others without permission. Some institutions may have data privacy agreements with larger providers like Microsoft where it is possible to

use an AI tool like Co-Pilot that is already integrated with their content management system where they can safely input their materials into the AI platform without concern of their data being given to others. Proper data privacy needs to be considered, especially if there is proprietary information or personally identifiable information.

While these ethical and procedural considerations highlight the importance of responsible AI use in grantsmanship, it is equally important to understand the broader landscape of how AI is currently being applied in academic writing and research support. The use of artificial intelligence in academic writing can generally be divided into two broad categories, 1) those that assist in the writing process; and 2) those used to evaluate and assess the quality and validity of written work (Golan et al., 2023). Other applications of AI in the writing process include text summarization, generation of outlines, creation of research protocols, simplification of jargon-laden paragraphs, improvements to the clarity and conciseness of drafts, and language translation, as well as drafting informed consents, emails, letters of support, reports and other written documents (Golan et al., 2023; Seckel et al., 2024). In a *Nature* survey of 1,600 researchers, 25% of respondents indicated they use AI to help them write manuscripts and more than 15% indicated they use AI technology to help them write the actual grant proposals (Parrilla, 2023). Respondents from another AI perceptions survey of academics in the UK suggested that LLMs could outsource up to 80% of their work (Watermeyer et al., 2024). One respondent even claimed they were able to more than triple the number of research funding applications they submitted compared to the year prior from using AI to increase their productivity (Watermeyer et al., 2024).

In one accounting of personal usage, "I also asked ChatGPT to write a paragraph explaining how our proposed research fitted the funder's call. Again, the chatbot did a great job. I read through everything, changing a few parts where the use of ChatGPT was too obvious. It cut the workload from three days to three hours" (Parrilla, 2023, para.10). In an environment with constant deadlines there are significant time-savings that AI can provide. Research from *Science* has suggested that Generative AI improved the efficiency of office workers by 40% and the quality of work by 18% (Noy & Zhang, 2023.; Godwin et al., 2024). More and more evidence is pointing to AI as a capacity enabler and it is no longer just anecdotal. According to the AI Index from Stanford University (2024) and a consortium of industry partners such as the National Science Foundation, Google, OpenAI, Accenture, GitHub, LinkedIn and others, several studies conducted in 2023 assessed AI's impact on labor and suggested that it enables workers to complete tasks more quickly and to improve the quality of their output. These studies also suggest that AI has the potential help to bridge the skill gap between low- and high-skilled workers (Stanford, 2024).

That should not suggest that AI adoption should be done without due diligence and proper training, as there are potential risks with this technology adoption. One commonly cited risk is the potential for skill erosion and loss of critical thinking skills. A 2025 study from Microsoft and Carnegie Mellon found a strong negative correlation among knowledge workers (n = 319) with reliance on AI and critical thinking engagement (ρ=-0.69, p < 0.001) which highlights the risk of overreliance on AI for professionals (Lee et al., 2025). Despite the increased efficiency and confidence in generated outputs that AI users have, concern was raised during the research study that the overreliance on AI can negatively impact independent problem-solving from users (Lee et al., 2025). A quantity-versus-quality risk may also present itself with AI implementation in grantwriting, where time savings may lead to a burden of submitting more applications rather than focusing on improving the quality of overall proposals. It is important to both acknowledge the risks associated with AI adoption in grantsmanship and take efforts to mitigate the potential negative impact on the trade.

Eight Steps to use AI to help author grant proposals

Below are some suggestions for people who are interested in using AI to help author grant proposals. Additional guidelines on how to apply AI in grant -writing are included in "Ten Simple Rules to Leverage Large Language Models for Getting Grants" (Seckel et al., 2024) as well as "Leveraging AI to Enhance Grant Writing" (Leary, 2024).

1. First, *Check* if AI is allowable from the funder in the grantwriting process and if there are any use restrictions or disclosure requirements. Check relevant institution policies and restrictions (if any) that may provide information on acceptable uses of AI in the grant writing process. If there are no policies in place, the Grant Professionals Association's GPA Code of Ethics (https://grantprofessionals.org/page/ethics) can be a point of reference.
2. *Data in.* Check sources to confirm authenticity of AI outputs and to avoid hallucinations. Certain tools, like perplexity.ai or elicit are designed to provide the source material automatically and are more suited for grant and academic writing. Any sensitive data required for an application should be done offline under human guidance.
3. *Data out.* Be careful about inputting any sensitive or confidential information into an LLM tool. People should only put in information that is publicly available, like an organizational factbook or information available in marketing materials, and should avoid any sensitive financial or personally identifiable information associated with clients or beneficiaries—like name, date of birth, or health information.

4. Use AI for *outlining proposals,* not for substantive writing. AI can be used to outline a draft of a proposal on the front end, or to review for continuity and funder alignment on the back end when it comes to writing the proposal itself
5. *Cite* where AI was used in the grant application and provide an AI use statement as part of the application submission. The AI use statement is a brief description of how AI was used in the proposal development process, especially in relation to the creation or enhancement of content. Ideally this statement will also describe and certify how AI was not used in the writing process. When writing the grant application as a team, it is important to check if any collaborators have used AI for their contributions to the grant application to ensure accuracy of this statement. The inclusion of an AI disclosure statement for manuscript authorship is being adopted in many academic journals such as *JAMA Network,* Elsevier, Springer Nature, ACS, PLOS, AGU, *Sage, Taylor & Francis, PNAS* and is a suggestion for inclusion by NSF in their proposals (Berezin, 2023).

   If it is not required to cite AI-generated content, the American Psychological Association (Ellis, 2023) still recommends citing AI as an "algorithm's output," which means crediting the author of the algorithm (i.e., the company that built the AI). The full citation would include: AI model name (ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity, etc.); date accessed; other information in the reference list. If the content is material to a proposal, it is recommended to include the prompt or chat history in the appendix for added context.
6. Outside of the writing process, AI has the potential to *expedite the research process* for grant applications. It is important to utilize an evidence-based approach in the program methodology or intended intervention, and AI can help source vast amounts of information and provide the most recent and relevant information with an effective, tailored prompt. While models are improving their accuracy, grantwriters who opt to use AI will need to be vigilant with fact-checking through discernment of fabrication and confirmation of source material.
7. Use AI to *save time in areas where it excels*—consuming large amounts of data and performing redundant tasks. AI can help source peer-reviewed articles and point people to relevant and reliable sources of information with the usage of effective prompts and the right LLM platform, which is useful for establishing an evidence-based approach to a grant project. It can also help summarize previously-awarded grants by a funder or within a specific program in a coherent summary that may be arduous to do by hand. It can also help with clerical tasks like generating citations or summarizing large documents into digestible information packets.

8. *Confirm the AI-generated content.* Information can sometimes be inaccurate or incomplete without sources. If sources are provided, users should verify that the content generated is contained within the source and not a hallucination. This is especially important for the evidence-basis for a grant proposal. It is also important to check the AI-generated content with team members responsible for executing the grant proposal, because AI lacks the human perspective of an organization to see how their mission is rendered on a daily basis. The LLM will not have a firsthand understanding of the organizational resources on hand or the challenges inherent to a given organization.

Even when an AI model has successfully generated the majority of text in peer-reviewed publications, they still require close editing and careful consideration of factors such as ethics, copyright, and accuracy (Biswas, 2023).

The key to proper application of AI to grantsmanship is to use the technology to support the grantwriting process and not to autonomously write the grant without oversight, which presents ethical concerns for accountability, authenticity, and accuracy. Irresponsibly outsourcing too much of the grant development process to AI has the potential to diminish the profession. Grantwriters should also consider that the writing skills to properly engineer prompts to get useful outputs is an evolving skill in the profession. In the future, it is likely that more and more of the grantwriting will shift into the LLM in a back-and-forth symbiotic relationship. Having the skills to adequately navigate this new approach to grantwriting will help to ensure job security and is a challenge many professions are facing. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, AI skills are valued more than overall experience by the majority of business leaders, and failure to possess AI literacy has the potential risk of job displacement. In the words of internationally recognized neurosurgeon Antonio Di Ieva, "Machines will not replace physicians, but physicians using AI will soon replace those not using it" (Di Ieva, 2019). It is plausible to suggest that, similarly, grant professionals who effectively adopt AI in the proposal development process and capitalize on time savings to improve grant applications will gain a competitive edge over those who do not.

While some people see the use of GenAI in writing grant proposals as cheating or cutting corners, others feel that it may point out the redundancy of the process and that maybe the application process should be reconsidered—"what is the point of asking scientists to write documents that can be easily created with AI? What value are we adding?" (Parrilla, 2023, para. 12). The climate of AI in grantwriting and other professions is evolving and under debate, which makes it imperative to be aware of the trends and ethics as it pertains to AI in grantwriting and publication practice.

Are Grant Professionals Receptive to Adopting AI?

The author conducted a preliminary research survey to get a sense of AI adoption patterns amongst grant professionals in January 2025. The survey is based on a diffusion of innovation (DOI) paradigm, which is a notable change theory that explains how, over time, a novel product or idea gains momentum and diffuses through a specific population or social system (Rogers, 1983). Diffusion becomes possible when the idea, behavior, or product is perceived as new or innovative (Rogers, 1983). DOI can be viewed as an uncertainty reduction process where users seek information about characteristics and attributes of an innovation (Xu et al., 2024). Encompassed in this theory of change is that adoption of innovations does not happen with the same patterns among all people and instead falls along a spectrum of receptivity (i.e. Innovator, Early Adopter, Early Majority, Late Majority, Late Adopter, Laggards) which coincides with the time in which they adopt the innovation (Xu et al., 2024). Innovators lead the pack in adoption and are the very first to adopt a new idea or technology. Moving along the adoption continuum, later users may be slower or less prone to adopt a behavior, idea, or product immediately as they wait to learn more about it.

Key factors attributed to influencing the adoption of innovation include:

- *Relative Advantage.* The extent to which an innovation is perceived superior to the idea it replaces and advantageous when it provides economic benefits, social status, and gratification (Xu et al., 2024; Yuen et al., 2018)
- *Compatibility.* The extent to which an innovation aligns with potential adopters' existing values, past experiences, and needs (Xu et al., 2024)
- *Complexity/Ease of Use.* The extent to which an innovation is perceived as being easy or difficult to use (Rogers, 2003)
- *Observability.* The extent to which the innovation's results are visible to others (Rogers, 2003). Duan et al. (2010) argue that visible innovations can encourage individuals to discuss them with friends and neighbors, leading to positive attitudes toward their use
- *Trialability.* The degree to which an innovation can be experimented with on a limited basis and tested prior to adoption (Duan et al., 2010).

A new dimension has been proposed (Xu et al., 2024) as related to AI DOI, *the threat of AI,* concerning its ability to exercise agency and replicate human behavior. This dimension primarily manifests in the concern of AI replacing human workers and is evidenced by large responses from Americans (81%) indicating they are worried about AI adoption in the

workplace leading to layoffs (Rainie et al., 2022). Fear can also manifest as concerns of privacy and security of data (Lund et al., 2020). The perceived threat of AI can lead to a negativity bias (Xu et al., 2024) and discourage adoption of AI in ways that can benefit the user and help them add skills valued in the workforce.

Data Collection

The survey was conducted via Qualtrics through the use of email, meeting chats, and QR codes. The data were collected using a convenience sampling from members of the Florida College system via the Florida Council for Resource Development, Florida AI Consortium (FALCON), Tampa Bay Regional Consortium and Community College S-STEM Network. There were 35 total complete responses to the survey; 94% of respondents (n=33) qualified to participate based on their self-identification as grantwriting professionals or someonw who writes grants as part of their profession.

The survey asked the following questions to emulate early research into the adoption of AI by research and academic libraries (Lund et al., 2020; Lund, 2025). The questions were designed to ascertain an individual's receptivity to innovation (new ideas or trends) and their own knowledge of AI and their adoption of AI in grantsmanship.

1. *In general, I am…*
   (6) The very first person to adopt a new idea or way of thinking.
   (5) One of the first to adopt a new idea or way of thinking.
   (4) Not one of the first, ahead of the majority.
   (3) About middle of the pack.
   (2) Very late to adopt a new idea or way of thinking.
   (1) I almost never adopt a new idea or way of thinking.
2. *In general, I am…*
   (6) The very first person to use a new technology.
   (5) One of the first to use a new technology.
   (4) Not one of the first, but ahead of the majority.
   (3) About middle of the pack.
   (2) Very late to adopt a new technology.
   (1) I almost never use a new technology.
3. *Rate your knowledge of innovation as a concept*
   (6) extremely knowledgeable;
   (5) very knowledgeable;
   (4) fairly knowledgeable;
   (3) somewhat knowledgeable;
   (2) not very knowledgeable;
   (1) extremely little knowledge; and
   (0) no knowledge of this technology.

4. *Rate your knowledge of trends in innovation*
   (6) extremely knowledgeable;
   (5) very knowledgeable;
   (4) fairly knowledgeable;
   (3) somewhat knowledgeable;
   (2) not very knowledgeable;
   (1) extremely little knowledge; and
   (0) no knowledge of trends.
5. *Rate your level of optimism about the future of innovation for improving grantwriting*
   (6) extremely optimistic;
   (5) very optimistic;
   (4) fairly optimistic;
   (3) somewhat optimistic;
   (2) not very optimistic;
   (1) extremely little optimism; and
   (0) no optimism

In a DOI framework, "A score of 5.00 or above indicates that individual is an "innovator," 4.00–4.99 points as "early adopter," 3.00–3.99 points as "early majority," 2.00–2.99 points as "late majority" and 1.99 and below as "laggard" (Lund, 2025, p. 10). It should be noted that respondents often overestimate their knowledge and interest in innovations (Lund, 2025).

The initial findings of the survey show that, while grant professionals appear to be prone to adopting new ideas and new technologies, there is some variance with standard deviations of greater than 1 for both categories (Table 2). This suggests that some professionals are more prone to adoption than others. While there does appear to be some general level of adoption and trial happening among the respondents, although not always, there is room to increase grant professionals' knowledge of AI both as a concept and in terms of AI trends which have proven to be dynamic and fast-evolving. Optimism regarding AI was scored at a 4.09 (out of possible 6) and it featured the highest standard deviation among the questions at 1.28. This is not surprising given the potential impact on the profession with the threat of job loss or the necessity to learn a new technical skillset being potential explainable factors.

The survey also asked a question regarding how professionals are currently using AI, if at all, and any considerations they were making when implementing AI in the grantwriting process. Several respondents indicated they were not using AI directly in grantwriting, which could explain the greater than 1 standard deviations featured in the survey data. Other responses suggested minor trials of AI as the professionals were just starting to "play with" or use AI capabilities "a little bit" and even expressed timidness to experiment with the technology. This

Table 2. Grant Professionals AI Adoption Trends

Survey Topic	Average Response	Standard Deviation
Adopt New Idea	4.36	1.02
Adopt New Technology	4.09	1.01
Optimism about AI	4.09	1.28
Knowledge of AI as Concept	3.75	.86
Knowledge of AI Trends	4.09	1.28

feedback could reflect the need to have a better understanding of how the technology works and trends on where the best opportunities are to leverage AI as a less receptive adopter.

Below is a sampling of AI applications from survey respondents. Sample text and summarization were two of the most common themes. Standard "yes" or "no" responses are not included in this summary. Responses are very much in alignment with previous research on AI adoption among academics (Golan et al., 2023; Seckel et al., 2024).

How have you used AI in the grantwriting or management process (if at all)?

- We have "played" with it just to write a standard description based on Census data for our service area.
- Providing sample objectives; developing grant calendars
- Only a little bit. I've used AI to help me find news sources for needs assessments but haven't figured out yet how to use it for journal articles, which I need for grant proposal literature reviews. I've used AI more in administrative tasks related to my role in grant writing, like with help refining an email.
- Project summaries, research, rewriting sections, updating data, letters of commitment
- I've used AI to suggest different ways to organize information in narratives, to summarize important details from RFAs so that I can send it to potential project directors, and to write the first draft of emails. I also regularly ask AI to identify gaps in proposals before submission.
- We currently use AI to assist with polishing certain sections of a proposal. We also use AI to transcribe meetings and create meeting notes and action lists. Additionally, AI helps craft sensitive emails to grant staff as well as program officers. Lastly, AI is used for ideation and as a starting place for current trends.

- I use it to improve sentences or spark ideas about a response. I've used it to create wording about technology that is unfamiliar to me. I have used it to create different versions of letter of support.
- Not yet, though I am interested in doing so.
- Some but I still value targeted human thoughtful responses
- To get over writer's block or generate a starting draft.
- Have used it to shorten text, draft responses based on existing text, do prospect research, locate useful research and studies, draft support letters and summaries
- Yes, specifically for research and editing.
- Editing, generating ideas, condensing verbiage, tone of voice, and structure.
- Yes, I have used it to summarize a bullet list of project components into a paragraph format, and edit grammar and spelling.
- To find citations and studies
- Clarify regulations and review my writing
- Assist in wording concepts and clarity
- Somewhat but timid

Below are the considerations respondents are making when adopting AI into the grantwriting process. Many of the respondents indicated that there are limited guidelines from their institutions on how AI can be applied at their organization. A common theme among the responses was the clear emphasis on verifying the accuracy of the information being generated by LLMs and personal accountability for substantive human writing in proposal development with AI support—not outsourcing. The concern of plagiarism was a common theme among respondents as was the usage of AI as a peer reviewer in lieu of a de facto co-author, thereby alleviating concerns of plagiarized content. Standard "yes" or "no" responses are not included in the summary.

What considerations do you make when utilizing AI in the grant writing process and are there any guidelines at your institution or department that you must adhere to when using AI?

- The only guidelines to-date are that we must use the MS Office product, Co-Pilot.
- Providing attribution; not trusting AI over own judgment.

- Confidentiality, accuracy, relevance. The institution/department do not have AI policies.
- I never share anything in AI that could be copied and used by another, for instance, uploading a full proposal for review. I'd like the feedback on the grammar, etc., but then the contents of the proposal, the project idea itself, would be out there in the world. I'd like to use AI to record meetings and help create post-meeting action items, but my college doesn't currently allow that. I plan to use it to interpret solicitations or RFPs, but I keep forgetting to do that once the time comes.
- Use perplexity.ai as it provides source documentation
- I consider what kind of information I am giving AI and make sure it isn't sensitive/confidential. At this time, my institution does not have specific AI guidelines for employees, but there are technology and internet guidelines that must be adhered to when using AI. There are guidelines for AI in the classroom.
- We always consider data security, bias, errors/hallucinations, and transparency with our end users when using AI. I'm co-chair of our institution's AI Governance Council. We recently updated our procedures to include verbiage on AI, specifically relating to the above considerations. Our institution uses Copilot and encourages faculty and staff to use our licensed product, rather than open source options like ChatGPT.
- Our institution does not have a policy in relation to grant writing, but GPA does. I am very concerned about plagiarism or the appearance of plagiarism. I don't just copy and paste text, other than versions of letter of support because the original wording came from me. I worry that new grants writers will be all AI focused and the "art" of grant writing will become devalued because almost anyone will be able to do it. I have heard of grant writers using AI to summarize the RFP for key points, write the proposal, score it, and even create a budget. Some see that as efficient. I see it as unethical.
- No guidelines internally, however professional and personal responsibilities, I do not use responses that are majority AI generated.
- We have not moved to using AI yet for grant writing. We are starting to experiment with it for interaction with our consortium members.
- I feel more comfortable using it to edit and summarize than to draft. I like using Perplexity for research since it gives links to sources.

- I do my best to be as clear as possible with my prompts and will try to refine search results/answers at least a few times to make sure the AI is responding effectively.
- The institution has set up an AI Committee and is offering trainings. Formal guidelines are in the works.
- Guidelines are under development.
- There are not official guidelines, but I never allow AI to come up with ideas out of whole cloth. AI should be used to edit and refine, not to be the inception of new projects.
- I recognize the transformative potential of AI in grant writing, particularly in streamlining research, drafting proposals, and ensuring compliance with funding requirements. However, I approach AI utilization with a balanced strategy that prioritizes accuracy, ethical considerations, and adherence to industry best practices.
- Use of Grant Professionals (GPA) Association AI Tools Code of Ethics

The data collected in this survey should be taken as preliminary. The validity of the responses would be improved by collecting a larger, randomized sample. That being said, it does shed some light on adoption patterns of a limited sample of grant professionals and suggests there is a need for grant professionals to become more knowledgeable about AI concepts and trends.

Conclusion

It will be interesting to see how the view on AI authorship evolves in the future and how that fits into the grantwriting profession. If something as amorphous as a corporation can be viewed as a person, how long will it take for that distinction to be extended to large language models that can create compelling narratives indiscernible from human-generated text? The present applications of AI in grantwriting to assist in literature reviews, generate text, and revise passages would constitute author or co-author status if done identically by a human. While I am an adopter of AI, I do think it must be done responsibly and in a way that enhances the skillset of grant professionals. As it was suggested in the medical field and by proxy the grants profession (Godwin et al., 2024), machines may not replace grantwriters, but grantwriters who use AI may replace or gain a competitive advantage over those who do not.

Publication AI Use Statement

This paper utilized AI to help locate research publications focused on Artificial Intelligence in grant and academic writing through Semantic Scholar as well as to create APA citations through Perplexity.ai. Citations were checked for accuracy. Co-Pilot was used as a final peer review with the expectation that author institution has a privacy agreement and that the publication was on the verge of being shared via GPA Journal. AI was not used to generate any of the text herein. The tools that were used included Perplexity.ai, Semantic Scholar and Co-Pilot.

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Biographical Information

Kevin Leary is a grantwriter at St. Petersburg College in Florida. He is a seasoned technical writer focused on grants and proposals and holds an MA in communications from Johns Hopkins University and a certificate in proposal writing from Rollins College. He is particularly interested in the impact of generative AI on academic writing. Kevin can be reached at leary.kevin@spcollege.edu.

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The Continuing Case for Employing DEI Initiatives

David Gray, MPA
Greenville Technical College, Greenville, SC

Abstract

Promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) remains a critical driver of industry competitiveness, innovation, and long-term organizational success. Research consistently shows that DEI fosters stronger market positioning, enhances customer and employee engagement, and contributes to financial growth for grant-supported organizations. However, in environments where DEI initiatives face resistance or outright opposition, grant professionals and organizational leaders must find innovative ways to integrate inclusive practices while aligning with broader institutional goals. This paper outlines practical strategies for grant professionals to frame DEI regarding business performance, regulatory compliance, and workforce development. It also provides insights on crafting persuasive grant narratives emphasizing DEI's measurable impact without triggering resistance. Successfully advocating for DEI in challenging climates requires a combination of strategic messaging, data-driven justification, and the ability to connect DEI principles with an organization's core mission and values.

Introduction

Despite growing political and cultural opposition in some sectors, the case for continuing—and even expanding—DEI initiatives remain strong. Organizations prioritizing DEI consistently outperform their competitors in market share, innovation, employee satisfaction, and financial growth. Yet, in an era where DEI efforts are scrutinized, defunded, or rebranded, grantwriting and program development professionals must navigate these challenges with agility.

Grant professionals can adopt the following strategies for effectively communicating DEI's benefits to key stakeholders—clients, supervisors, and boards—and crafting responses to DEI-related questions in grant applications. The goal is to integrate inclusive practices that align with organizational priorities and demonstrate that DEI initiatives are integral to workforce and community development efforts.

Strategy #1: Reframing the Conversation

- *Focus on Business Outcomes.* Highlight how diverse perspectives drive innovation, improve problem-solving, and enhance market competitiveness. Frame DEI as a strategy for achieving better business results rather than a moral or political imperative. Organizations seeking funding should highlight how diverse teams enhance problem-solving, drive creativity, and improve customer engagement.

- *Use Neutral Language.* When direct DEI terminology triggers resistance, consider using alternative phrasing such as:
  - "Inclusive leadership" instead of "equity"
  - "Workplace excellence" instead of "diversity"
  - Collaboration and innovation" instead of "inclusion."

  These adjustments allow organizations to maintain their DEI commitments while aligning with existing corporate language.

- *Expand Definitions of Diversity.* DEI is not just about race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. It also includes factors like:
  - Neurodiversity (e.g., ADHD, autism spectrum disorder)
  - Physical disabilities
  - Linguistic diversity (e.g., English as a Second Language)
  - Socioeconomic backgrounds
  - Lived experiences, such as military service or recovery from substance use disorder.

  This broader framing reduces resistance while keeping inclusion efforts intact.

Strategy #2: Embedding DEI in Broader Organizational Initiatives

- *Workforce Development and Talent Retention.* Implement mentorship programs and leadership development initiatives that naturally support DEI goals without being labeled as such.

  Leverage grant funding to provide upskilling opportunities for underrepresented groups, reinforcing the business case for an inclusive talent pipeline.

- *Customer-Centric Approaches.* Advocate for market research on diverse customer bases, framing it as a competitive advantage. Instead of directly referencing DEI, focus on how accessible product design and multilingual services improve the customer experience.
- *Build Inclusive Policies Without the Label.* Focus on fairness and meritocracy in hiring, promotions, and performance evaluations. For example, implement blind hiring practices or standardized evaluation criteria. Research suggests that blind recruitment effectively reduces bias in hiring (Vivek, 2022), while standardized evaluation criteria help mitigate performance-reward bias (Castilla, 2008), leading to better talent acquisition and retention.

Strategy #3: Leverage Data and Metrics to Build the Case

Data is a powerful tool for demonstrating DEI's impact. For instance, research indicates that people with disabilities have roughly $1.2 trillion in disposable income (Girkar, 2024), and LGBTQ+ individuals hold an estimated $3.7 trillion in global purchasing power (Wolny, 2019). Companies with gender-diverse leadership teams are 25% more likely to outperform their competitors financially (Dixon-Fyle, Dolan, Hunt, & Prince, 2020). By presenting DEI as a revenue-driving strategy, grant professionals can gain buy-in from skeptical stakeholders.

Strategy #4: Cultivate Grassroots Efforts

- *Employee Resource Groups.* Encourage informal networks that foster peer support and collaboration.
- *Peer-Led Training.* Promote workshops on cultural competence, emotional intelligence, and teamwork as part of professional development.
- *Focus on Community Engagement.* Partner with external organizations that support diverse communities. Frame this decision as a corporate social responsibility rather than DEI.

Strategy #5: Engage Leadership and Gain Internal Buy-In

For DEI efforts to thrive, leadership support is crucial. Grant professionals should:

- Identify executive allies who understand the value of diverse perspectives.
- Frame DEI initiatives as part of broader organizational success metrics like employee engagement, productivity, and financial performance.

- Use success stories from industry leaders to illustrate DEI's business impact.
- Share how diverse teams and/or inclusive practices have positively impacted the organization, using examples that resonate with stakeholders.

Strategy #6: Stay Compliant While Innovating

Navigating legal and regulatory challenges requires adaptability. Organizations should:

- Stay informed about local and federal compliance requirements.
- Integrate inclusive practices under legal workforce protections and corporate social responsibility rather than DEI branding.
- Monitor the evolving legal and cultural landscape. Be ready to pivot strategies while maintaining a commitment to fostering an inclusive workplace.

This approach allows organizations to sustain DEI efforts within restrictive environments.

Strategy #7: Promote Psychological Safety

Encourage an environment where employees feel valued and heard. Research indicates that inclusive leadership enhances employees' sense of meaningful work by creating psychological safety and encouraging learning from errors (Shafaei & Nejati, 2023). Psychological safety also positively impacts team learning behaviors and productivity (Patil, Raheja, & Mittal, 2023).

Strategy #8: The Business Case for Sustaining DEI Efforts

Despite rising ideological opposition, leading companies continue investing in diversity, equity, and inclusion due to clear, evidence-based advantages across financial performance, innovation, workforce engagement, and brand integrity.

Three Corporate Case Studies

1. *Apple Inc.* Reaffirmed its DEI commitment by rejecting shareholder proposals to dismantle its DEI programs (U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, 2025).

2. *Costco Wholesale Corporation.* Defends its DEI policies as essential to workforce engagement and customer satisfaction (Tabassum & Kerber, 2025).
3. *Ancestry & MITRE Corporation.* Both organizations use data analytics to guide DEI implementation (Ancestry.com, n.d.; Knight, 2024). Ancestry tracks demographic data and fosters inclusivity via Employee Resource Groups, while MITRE integrates DEI metrics into its innovation and performance systems to ensure alignment with strategic goals.

Commonly Known Benefits of Sustaining DEI

1. *Financial Performance.* Companies in the top quartile for gender and ethnic diversity on executive teams are 33–39% more likely to outperform industry peers financially (Dixon-Fyle, Dolan, Hunt, & Prince, 2020). Diversity positively correlates with profitability and value creation (Kang et al., 2016).
2. *Innovation and Decision-Making.* Diverse teams generate 19% more innovation revenue (Lorenzo et al., 2018), and inclusive teams make faster and more effective decisions (Rock & Grant, 2016). Gender and racial diversity also improve creativity and solution quality (Page, 2007).
3. *Talent Attraction and Retention.* Organizations that demonstrate DEI commitment are more attractive to Millennials and Gen Z talent, with inclusive cultures boosting retention by 3–5 times (Deloitte University Press, 2017; Shore et al., 2011).
4. *Employee Engagement and Productivity.* Psychological safety in diverse workplaces promotes three and a half times greater innovation potential and stronger performance outcomes (Bersin, 2015; Edmondson, 1999). Inclusive cultures lead to two and one thirds higher cash flow rates per employee (Dixon-Fyle, Dolan, Hunt, & Prince, 2020).
5. *Risk Management and Brand Equity.* Companies with diverse boards are more likely to be rated highly for ethics, less prone to fraud, and better able to respond to reputational challenges (Credit Suisse Research Institute, 2016; Post & Byron, 2015).

The DEI commitments of Apple, Costco, Ancestry, and MITRE reflect a broader strategic trend: organizations that sustain DEI realize measurable advantages in innovation, financial performance, workforce engagement, and public trust. Academic literature affirms these outcomes, underscoring that supporting DEI is not just an ethical choice, but also an economically sound and competitively essential one.

Conclusion

While the political and cultural landscape surrounding DEI is shifting, its business value remains undeniable. Grant professionals and program designers must navigate this environment with strategic messaging, data-driven justification, and alignment with organizational priorities. By embedding DEI principles into the broader workforce, and market-driven and innovation strategies, organizations can sustain inclusive practices while driving measurable success. Despite resistance, the most forward-thinking institutions continue integrating DEI, not as a political statement, but as a competitive advantage.

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Biographical Information

David Gray holds a master's degree in public administration from a joint program between Clemson University and the University of South Carolina. He has 32 years of experience researching, writing, and administering federal and state grants. For 20 years, he also served as a funding officer specializing in comprehensive local and regional planning, affordable housing, and public services. David has successfully mobilized over $90 million in public and private grant investments throughout his career, supporting initiatives that foster economic development, workforce advancement, and inclusive community growth. His contact information: David.Gray@gvltec.edu.

GPA Strategy Papers Volume 12, Issue 2

Enhancing Grant Development for Inclusive Community Programs

Lara Zawacki, MPA
VersAbility Resources/Grant Crafters, Hampton Roads, VA

Abstract

This strategy paper explores best practices in grant development for inclusive community programs. Through a review of literature, case studies, and practical examples, it outlines key strategies for successful grant proposals, effective program implementation, and sustainable funding models, thus providing a brief framework for grant professionals to create impactful programs that meet diverse community needs.

Introduction

Grant development plays a crucial role in funding programs that enhance community inclusion. This paper examines the intersection of grantwriting, program design, and collaboration to foster sustainable and effective initiatives. By integrating scholarly research and case studies, we highlight strategies that improve grant success rates and program efficacy.

Background and Context

The demand for inclusive community programs has increased, driven by policy changes and societal recognition of diverse community needs. Research underscores the importance of structured grant development to secure funding for such initiatives. Historical funding trends, legislative policies, and successful models inform the current landscape of grant-seeking efforts.

Methodology

This study draws upon qualitative data, including a case study of a successful grant-funded project, lecture attendance, and a literature review. The methodology emphasizes best practices in proposal writing, stakeholder engagement, and funding diversification.

Case Study: The Unused Childcare Center

A nonprofit organization launched a capital campaign to build a state-of-the-art childcare center, believing it would better serve families in the community. The campaign successfully raised millions in grant funding, secured land, and constructed a brand-new facility. However, a critical misstep occurred: the parents who used the current childcare center were not involved in the decision-making process.

Despite the new center's modern amenities, parents and caregivers continued using the existing facility, citing familiarity, accessibility, and trust in the original location. The result was a brand-new, but underutilized, childcare center—highlighting the importance of community engagement in grant planning. This case underscores the necessity of involving stakeholders in decision-making to ensure that funded projects meet actual community needs.

To encourage greater usage of the new site, the nonprofit implemented several responsive strategies rooted in participatory planning. First, they conducted a series of parent surveys and focus groups to understand hesitations. The feedback identified key barriers: lack of transportation, concerns about unfamiliar staff, and a desire for more communication and consistency during the transition.

In response, the organization co-developed a transition plan with community input that included:

- *Dual Enrollment Options.* Families could gradually transition by maintaining access to both centers during a trial period.
- *Staff Reassignment.* Familiar and trusted caregivers were moved to the new center to reduce anxiety and build continuity.
- *Cultural Orientation Events.* Open houses, parent-led tours, and family gatherings were hosted to build trust and create a sense of shared ownership.
- *Transportation Solutions.* The nonprofit provided bus vouchers and partnered with a local rideshare provider for discounted access.
- *Visual and Verbal Wayfinding.* Multilingual signage and welcome materials helped new families feel seen and included.

These practical and inclusive actions, combined with continuous feedback loops, gradually increased enrollment and improved trust between the organization and the families it serves.

Key Findings and Analysis

Key findings indicate that successful grants share common elements: clear objectives, strong community partnerships, and data-driven impact

metrics. The case study illustrates how adaptive programming, cross-sector collaboration, and robust evaluation frameworks contribute to sustainable funding and program effectiveness.

Implications for Grant Professionals

Grant professionals can enhance their proposals by integrating evidence-based practices, leveraging cross-sector partnerships, and aligning funding requests with donor priorities. The role of adaptive programming in grant success is emphasized, providing actionable insights for professionals in the field. The case study above reinforces the need for thorough stakeholder engagement in capital campaigns to avoid costly oversights.

Additionally, research from Miller et al. (2023), in their article "Building the Foundation for Equitable and Inclusive Research: Seed Grant Programs to Facilitate Development of Diverse CBPR Community–Academic Research Partnerships," highlights the importance of combining funding with capacity-building mentorship. Their findings emphasize that grant programs incorporating community input and collaboration yield stronger outcomes, reinforcing the need for direct engagement with stakeholders throughout the grant development process.

Further, Coombe et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review on community granting programs, emphasizing that programs with strong community engagement and culturally tailored interventions had significantly better outcomes. Their findings reinforce the importance of stakeholder collaboration in grant-funded projects. Similarly, Fink (2023) explored the role of seed grants in advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education, demonstrating that community transformation is more sustainable when grant strategies prioritize communal goals and inclusive practices.

Strategies for Effective Program Design

Healthy Places by Design and Denver Urban Gardens (DUG) illustrate how strong program design leads to lasting impact. By following structured planning steps and incorporating cultural competence, grant professionals can align projects with funder priorities and community needs, ensuring sustainability and success.

Healthy Places by Design (https://healthyplacesbydesign.org/), a consulting firm that aims to advance community-led action and proven, place-based strategies to ensure health and wellbeing for all, emphasizes the role of community-driven solutions in project development. Their approach demonstrates how strategic partnerships and stakeholder involvement lead to impactful, lasting change in communities. They illustrate this through initiatives like their work in Durham, NC, where

they facilitated a multi-sector coalition to address health disparities by engaging residents in neighborhood-level planning. This led to co-designed interventions such as walkability audits, food access strategies, and community-led beautification—all of which reflected local values and priorities. Their framework ensures that funded projects emerge from, and remain accountable to, the people they serve.

Similarly, Denver Urban Gardens exemplifies effective program design through its "Growing Healthy Communities" program, which transforms vacant lots into vibrant spaces for gardening, education, and cultural exchange. By involving residents from the start in planning, planting, and maintaining gardens, DUG creates a sense of ownership that sustains program participation beyond the funding period. Their emphasis on co-creation, intergenerational learning, and cultural relevance makes their work a powerful model of place-based, community-rooted development.

Conclusion

Effective grant development is essential for sustaining inclusive community programs. This paper highlights key strategies, challenges, and best practices to inform grant professionals in their pursuit of funding impactful initiatives. Future research should explore innovative funding models and policy shifts that influence grant accessibility.

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Biographical Information

Lara Zawacki, MPA, brings a multidisciplinary perspective to grantwriting and program development, drawing from her background in occupational therapy, adaptive

swimming instruction, and long-standing advocacy for people with disabilities. She focuses on designing inclusive, community-centered initiatives that are both impactful and sustainable. She can be reached at askgrantcrafters@gmail.com.

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Case Study: Leveraging Emerging Trends to Align Grant Funding with Mission-Driven Youth Empowerment at the Global Co Lab Network

Susan McClellan, MLS
Global Co Lab Network, Arlington, VA

Abstract

Navigating today's increasingly intricate funding environment is essential for the long-term viability of nonprofit organizations. This case study explores how the Global Co Lab Network—a nonprofit focused on youth engagement and aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—adopts creative research methods to explore public grant opportunities. It delves into patterns in the funding landscape, the motivations of grantmakers, and the growing role of digital tools in identifying funding prospects. By emphasizing the importance of mission alignment and understanding the goals of funders, this paper illustrates how organizations can strategically position themselves for sustainable growth. The case demonstrates how informed and intentional grant-seeking efforts can amplify youth-driven initiatives and support broader social impact.

Introduction

Starting in 2015 with the Teens Dream video contest, a project inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, our organization has offered young people a chance to share their visions for achieving the U.N.'s Sustainable Development Goals. What began as casual living room gatherings quickly evolved into structured salons, and later into virtual SDG Hubs addressing issues such as climate action, plastic waste reduction, and youth empowerment. The Global Co Lab Network (Co Lab), an Arlington-based nonprofit, empowers teens worldwide to become changemakers by connecting them through digital platforms to act on

the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through its annual SDG video challenge and weekly virtual gatherings known as SDG Hubs, Co Lab provides a safe, inclusive space for teens to learn, lead, and collaborate on global issues like climate change, mental health, gender equality, and more. Led by youth alongside mentors and partners, these hubs foster leadership skills, cross-cultural understanding, and real-world impact.

Recognizing that teens often lack opportunities to engage meaningfully in global challenges, Co Lab fills the gap by offering accessible, teen-driven programming that inspires confidence, creativity, and global citizenship. In collaboration with partners like the Smithsonian Conservation Commons, we have supported a variety of teen-led efforts—ranging from multimedia education projects and virtual reality storytelling to youth-authored publications and policy advocacy at the U.N.

Drawing on my own experience as a volunteer focused on fundraising, I have seen firsthand how strategic grant-seeking can significantly expand a small nonprofit's reach. This strategy paper outlines how our team is sharpening its public funding strategy by using research, funder mapping, and targeted alignment with our mission of empowering youth to create global change. For mission-driven groups working in youth development, education, and international impact, public grants remain a crucial source of support. But in a funding landscape that is constantly shifting, it takes more than just hard work to identify relevant grant opportunities and secure funds to maintain and/or expand programs. It requires thoughtful research and an ability to match the right opportunities with the organization's goals. From my perspective as a fundraising volunteer with the Co Lab, this evolving approach to grant-seeking has already begun to have positive outcomes.

As a community-based nonprofit, aligning our work with the right public funding sources is both vital and often complex. Headquartered in Arlington, VA, the Co Lab reflects emerging priorities in public sector grantmaking: digital innovation, youth empowerment, and alignment with international development goals. Even with a modest annual budget of $80,000, the organization manages to make a wide-reaching impact by equipping teens to take meaningful action toward achieving the SDGs.

As funders increasingly seek projects that promote equity, digital inclusion, and youth-led problem-solving, the Co Lab offers a forward-thinking approach that aligns with current and future grantmaking trends. Unlike many programs that are short-lived, competitive, or inaccessible to diverse communities, our model is designed to be inclusive, continuous, and driven by youth voices. The Co Lab presents a scalable path for supporting meaningful teen engagement, combining global digital outreach with hands-on, local action, and can provide a model for other youth-focused organizations looking to sustain or expand their programming.

Key Developments in Public Grantmaking: Insights from the Co Lab's Experience Leveraging AI for Smarter Grant Discovery

Operating out of Arlington, VA, Co Lab connects with youth globally through an annual video challenge and sustains engagement year-round via weekly online SDG Hubs. These youth-led, mentor-supported spaces give teens a consistent platform to learn, collaborate, and act. As public funders increasingly value digital accessibility, youth-led innovation, and initiatives with sustainable impact, our model is naturally aligned with these current, key priorities.

To strengthen our fundraising efforts, we have begun integrating AI-powered tools such as Instrumentl and GrantForward. These platforms help us more efficiently identify funding sources that resonate with our mission. They even allow us to tailor our approach based on insights from funders' communications, including press releases and blog posts.

Using Funder Mapping as a Strategic Tool

We are adopting a more strategic method for identifying potential funding partners. Platforms like LinkedIn have proven valuable for researching funders' interests and priorities, allowing us to make more intentional connections. This approach has led to opportunities beyond our usual focus, including identifying environmentally focused corporations through targeted outreach. For nonprofits navigating a crowded grant space, this kind of research can create a meaningful difference in both funding success and mission alignment.

Aligning Grant Strategy with Mission and Capacity

Today's grant professionals must go beyond simply tracking available funding to critically evaluating which opportunities align with their organization's mission and ability to deliver sustaining impact. The Global Co Lab Network prioritizes sustainability by focusing our efforts for maximum impact. We categorize grants based on how well they match our programs, values, and capacity. This allows us to channel our energy into opportunities that support our broader vision: empowering youth to take meaningful action on the United Nations SDGs through global collaboration. We assess each opportunity in terms of relevance, feasibility, and alignment with existing initiatives like our virtual SDG Hubs and youth advocacy work. This kind of deliberate strategy ensures our limited resources are used effectively, and that our growth remains both mission-centered and sustainable. This intentional, impact-focused mindset can be a key asset in a fast-changing funding environment.

Decoding Funder Trends in 2025: Insights for Grant Professionals from the Global Co Lab Network

As we move through 2025, people working in a variety of grant-related fields must operate within a funding landscape marked by volatility and increasing political influence. Government agencies, philanthropic institutions, and private funders are constantly redefining their focus, often in response to external pressures. For organizations such as the Global Co Lab Network, which is rooted in youth empowerment and sustainable development, remaining dedicated to their core priorities is critical not only for growth, but also for preserving long-term program integrity.

Navigating Political Shifts and Minimizing Risk

Federal transitions have caused many public grantmakers to pivot toward less politically charged, impact-driven areas like STEM education, workforce development, and digital connectivity. These domains offer tangible outcomes and are supported across the political spectrum.

How the Global Co Lab is Responding

The Global Co Lab Network has refined its messaging to emphasize how our teen-led, virtual SDG Hubs foster digital competencies, civic participation, and forward-thinking leadership. This strategic alignment allows us to remain true to our mission while also reflecting funder priorities that are viewed as politically neutral. By showcasing our teen-led SDG Hubs and engaging with global forums like the U.N. High-Level Political Forum, we highlight our dedication to amplifying youth voices and driving equity-focused action. Our proposals underscore civic empowerment, intercultural collaboration, and advocacy as integral parts of our impact to resonate with funders who prioritize transformative, value-driven initiatives. We deliver high-impact programs through a digital model that is both cost-effective and widely accessible.

Strategic Grant Development Starts with Funder Insight

In today's climate, understanding funder intent is just as crucial as knowing their identity. At the Global Co Lab Network, we integrate funder intelligence throughout our development strategy. We examine funders' mission statements, language preferences, and digital presence using tools like LinkedIn.

Rather than presenting static project details, we craft narrative-driven proposals that reflect funders' own language and values. The Global Co Lab does not just engage youth, we mobilize them for global change. Through a combination of clear mission focus and funder-tailored outreach, we aim to remain adaptable without compromising our values.

Next-Gen Grant Tools: Tracking, Adapting, and Scaling in a Changing Environment

The modern funding landscape demands more than persuasive writing. Grant professionals today must be part researcher and part strategist. They must quickly spot trends early, interpret funder goals accurately, and deliver compelling, real-time messaging. The Global Co Lab Network offers a leading example of how integrating funder intelligence into every stage of the grants process can shift the work from reactive applications to forward-thinking organizational growth.

Keeping Mission at the Center of the Strategy

Maintianing alignment between programming and potential grant funder priorities is also a changing process, which is why the Global Co Lab emphasizes authentic, value-based communication over simply reshaping our mission to fit trends. We position our youth-led SDG Hubs in the context of funder concerns like digital equity, climate resilience, and inclusive leadership while always keeping our vision intact.

Core strategic practices include:

- *Agile Implementation.* Our digital model delivers strong outcomes with minimal overhead. This is ideal for funders looking for high-return, low-cost programs.
- *Trend Awareness.* We track policy shifts and philanthropic themes to ensure we position our work within broader systemic narratives.
- *Funder-Led Framing.* Today's donors want to see that an applicant understands their vision, mission, and goals. We create proposals focused on shared values, not just outcomes.
- *Engaging Formats.* With funders increasingly open to visual and multimedia content, we use videos, infographics, and dynamic storytelling to enhance engagement. The Co Lab produces documentaries to inspire the next generation of change-makers! See *Youth Voices on the UN Goals*—a 20-minute educational docudrama created by teens for teens—at this link: https://www.globalcolab.net/youth-voices-on-the-un-goals/
- *Digital Listening.* By monitoring funders' digital content and social media, we gain early insights into shifting goals and language, allowing us to stay ahead of the curve.

Grantwriting in 2025 is no longer just about meeting deadlines. It has transitioned to creating mutually beneficial partnerships. Organizations like the Global Co Lab Network have moved from chasing grants to cultivating alliances. Today's funders are seeking changemakers who understand systems, not just services.

By combining new grant technologies with mission-led strategy, one can:

- Expand options for funding sources beyond traditional government options.
- React quickly to funder realignment.
- Position youth-led innovation to be a scalable solution to global problems.

In a landscape where funders are searching for vision, creativity, and innovation, success lies in responsiveness, integrity, and personal storytelling that demonstrates real impact.

Conclusion

The Global Co Lab Network's evolving approach to grant research and identification expands our funding pipeline and deepens alignment with mission-driven funders. By adopting data-informed strategies, leveraging AI tools, and applying funder analysis, we have become more intentional and effective in our grant-seeking efforts. Our youth-led model continues to stand out as a compelling differentiator for funders seeking scalable, long-term impact. By adapting thoughtfully and staying true to our values, the Co Lab has evolved from simply pursuing funding to intentionally building strategic alliances. This shift has allowed us to be seen not just as recipients, but also as reliable partners committed to driving meaningful, long-term changes.

Grant professionals across sectors can draw valuable insights from the Global Co Lab Network's forward-thinking approach to grant research and funder engagement. The Co Lab's strategy centers on adaptable, data-driven practices that others can tailor to strengthen their own grant-seeking efforts. By incorporating data analysis into the grant research process, organizations can more effectively identify funders whose priorities align with their mission and values. The Co Lab's integration of AI technologies to streamline research, forecast funding opportunities, and customize proposals has led to greater efficiency and precision. Grant professionals can adopt similar tools to reduce manual work, uncover prospects, and better target their applications. A key takeaway is the Co Lab's ability to remain agile in response to shifting funding landscapes while remaining firmly rooted in its mission.

Resource List

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Biographical Information

Susan McClellan, MLS is the Volunteer Fundraising Co-Director for Global Co Lab in Arlington, VA, and the full-time Membership Coordinator for the Comparative and International Education Society. She has more than 28 years of experience as a librarian, including leadership positions as director of several small libraries. Throughout her career, Susan has developed strong expertise in grantwriting, fundraising, and community engagement, having successfully written and secured numerous local, state, and federal grants to support library programming, operations, and capital improvements. She holds a Master's Degree in Library Science from the University of Pittsburgh. Susan can be reached at susanmmcclellan7@gmail.com.

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Grants Are Part of Sustainability

Ellen Gugel, MBA, GPC
Grants and More, Westborough, MA

Abstract

Grantmakers often ask how an organization will sustain a program after the grant period ends (i.e., an organization's sustainability plan). This paper aims to debunk a common notion that many funders harbor—that organizations must wean themselves off grants. Drawing from surveys of nonprofit executives and grant professionals and from academic research, along with a hypothetical case study, the author makes a case that grants play a critical role in sustainability for most community-based nonprofits, organizationally and programmatically, and that grants belong in their fundraising plans and income streams. Grant professionals can use these concepts to help answer the sustainability question on applications.

Introduction

This strategy paper aims to show that grant funding will always be needed to sustain community-based programs and organizations: cultural, environmental, human services, youth development, and educational organizations that make up the fabric of a thriving community. With this knowledge, the author encourages grant professionals to educate funders about the enduring and necessary role of grant funding in an organization's revenue. This suggests grantmakers should recognize that sustainability includes continued grant funding for programs and operations for community-based organizations.
The author's research focused primarily on finding an answer to two questions: "What percentage of community-based nonprofits receive foundation funding?" and "For those organizations that do receive grant funding, what percentage of their income comes from foundations?"

This strategy paper focuses on community-based nonprofit public charities with annual budgets under $10 million. This excludes higher education, hospitals, private schools, government entities including K–12 public schools, and houses of worship. The research is oriented towards

private foundation grantmakers. Findings are applicable to established organizations.

Giving USA 2025: *The Annual Report on Philanthropy for the Year 2024*

At a high level among all types and sizes of nonprofits, we know that foundation funding is growing as a percentage of overall charitable giving as individual giving has declined over the past generation. A ten-year look back (Table 1) shows that, in 2015, giving by individuals accounted for 71% of all philanthropic giving and foundations contributed 15%. By 2024, individual giving had fallen to 66% and had been falling steadily in the ten-year period, while giving by foundations grew to 19% (Giving USA, 2015–2025).

Table 1: Giving USA Review of Charitable Giving Sources

	Individuals	Foundations	Bequests	Corporations
2024	66%	19%	8%	7%
2023	67%	19%	8%	7%
2022	64%	21%	9%	6%
2021	67%	19%	9%	4%
2020	69%	19%	9%	4%
2019	68%	17%	10%	5%
2018	68%	18%	9%	5%
2017	70%	16%	9%	5%
2016	72%	15%	8%	5%
2015	71%	16%	9%	5%

These data suggest that, collectively, nonprofit organizations of all sizes and types have become more reliant on, and successful at, securing grant funding over the past ten years.

The 2025 *State of Grantseeking*™ Report (GrantStation)

A more targeted data source is the 2025 *State of Grantseeking™* Report (GrantStation, 2025) with 1,258 respondents. In 2024, 81% of grant seekers reported acquiring funding from private foundations, and 36% reported that private foundations were their largest source of funding. Eighty-two percent of respondents represented organizations under $10M annual budgets. The median annual budget of respondent organizations was $854,000. Nearly half of respondent organizations were Human Services, Arts and Culture, or Education.

The survey on which this report is based is geared toward organizations that seek grants and might not typically attract respondents whose organizations do not rely on or seek grants. However, it does provide a data point that may be considered the high end of the range of nonprofits that rely on grant funding for some portion of their revenue.

Nonprofit Finance Fund's 2025 National State of the Nonprofit Sector Survey

The Nonprofit Finance Fund (NFF) National State of the Nonprofit Sector Survey is conducted every three years and is more general. The 2025 survey (2,206 respondents) found that "progress is mixed when it comes to supportive funder practices" (The Nonprofit Finance Fund, 2025, p.16). In the report, NNF makes several recommendations for private funders to improve their practices, including "Give multi-year, flexible funding…Flexible funding (unrestricted funds, general operating support, etc.) and multi-year funding allow organizations to spend less time fundraising and more time delivering services to communities" (The Nonprofit Finance Fund, 2025, p.22). This suggests that nonprofits will be in a stronger position if they can rely on grant funding. However, only 40% of respondents said foundation funders have been less restrictive since 2022, with 21% reporting more restrictions. Still, 81% of nonprofits reported receiving grant funding in 2024. About half of respondents represented human services, arts and culture, and education organizations. 62% of respondents have budgets under $2M.

How Can a Grant Professional Use These Data?

Next described is a real example from my work as a grants professional.

- Organization: A basic needs organization with an annual cash budget of $700,000 serving a densely populated region north of Boston assisting 60,000 clients annually. Clients are primarily immigrants and children of immigrants. The organization is 20 years old.
- Prompt from Request For Proposal: *"What steps are being made to ensure the sustainability of your project or organization beyond this grant period?"*
- Answer provided to the funder: "Grant funding is about 20% of organizational revenue. This is consistent with other small- and medium-sized organizations like ours, according to the Nonprofit Finance Fund. For our organization, grant funding is growing in size, though not as a percentage of income. Other income sources—individual and corporate donations, events, earned income, and agency fees—are also growing year over year."

The answer does not rely entirely on these data, but helps provide more context and justification that our organization will continue to seek grants.

Conclusion

These resources may help grant professionals answer the sustainability question in a richer way that may also educate funders. These sources provide evidence that grant funding will always be a part of revenue for community-based nonprofits.

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Biographical information

Ellen Gugel, MBA, GPC is a grant professional with twenty years' success fundraising for nonprofits. She has developed over 900 proposals and had success with 120 different funders, helping dozens of organizations win grants from private foundations, corporations, and government. She can be reached at Grants & More: emgugel@verizon.net.