

# Journal

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## Editors' Note

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the 2019 edition of the *Journal of the Grant Professionals Association*. As the research publication of the GPA, the *Journal* provides a forum for scholarly examination of the profession and discussions of best practices. The *Journal* is devoted to the improvement of the grants professional and our growing and changing profession.

Like previous editions, this year's *Journal* mirrors the diversity of work in our profession. The three articles in this edition reflect this diversity and opportunity for learning. We thank the authors for their time and dedication to preparing scholarly manuscripts that bring new research and insights to our professional community.

As with recent editions, the 2019 *Journal* also includes four GPA *Strategy Papers* published in 2019. *Strategy Papers* stimulate discussion and innovative thinking about a single topic that furthers the knowledge, skills, and understanding of grant professionals. *Strategy Papers* are shorter than full-length *Journal* articles and offer practical solutions to current and emerging issues within the profession.

For the 2020 *Journal* and *Strategy Papers*, we invite you to contribute your experience to these publications, as either an author or as a peer reviewer. We seek articles that address new ideas in our field, contribute research-based information, provide a case study or best practices, or examine any of the GPCI competencies and skills. We seek peer reviewers to evaluate manuscripts submitted to these publications. Please contact us at [journal@grantprofessionals.org](mailto:journal@grantprofessionals.org) if you are interested.

We would like to thank the authors, editorial board, and peer review managers for contributing extensive time and effort to this year's *Journal*. We also deeply appreciate the time and effort of the anonymous peer reviewers for both publications.

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

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

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

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

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## GPA Mission

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

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

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# Validated Competencies and Skills

## *Grant Professionals Certification Institute (GPCI)*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Table of Contents

## Journal of the Grant Professionals Association Volume 17, Number 1

<b>Funding Undergraduate Research Programs: Exploring Administrators' Grant Development Process</b> Terry Vaughan III .....	1
<b>Replicable Strategies for Advancing Proposal Development Capacity in Teaching-focused Institutions</b> Ben Cipra, GPC and Alli Cipra, PhD.....	11
<b>Streamlining Operations to Reduce Applicant, Recipient, and Staff Burden at the Health Resources and Services Administration</b> Thais Macaluso, MBA.....	25

## GPA Strategy Papers, Volume 6

<i>Issue 1 (March 19, 2019)</i>	
<b>How Can I Be a Better Mentor in the Grants Profession? Best Practices for Mentors</b> Mollie Bond, EdD.....	43
<i>Issue 2 (July 2, 2019)</i>	
<b>Designing Performance Metrics for Grant Professionals: Recommendations from the Field</b> Amanda Ellinger Neese, MRA and Julie A. Boll, MEd .....	50
<i>Issue 3 (July 30, 2019)</i>	
<b>Leveraging the Role of the Grant Professional in an Organization for Maximum Success</b> Andrea V. Ferreira, MPH .....	58
<i>Issue 4 (August 13, 2019)</i>	
<b>Improving Nonprofit Sustainability with Focused and Engaged Strategic Planning</b> S. Kimberly Jones, MAS, GPC .....	65



# Funding Undergraduate Research Programs: Exploring Administrators' Grant Development Process

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

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

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

## **Abstract**

Many administrators of undergraduate research programs (URPs) must apply for grants to create, enrich, or expand undergraduate research opportunities for their institution. To better understand this grant development process, the author analyzes administrators' responses to a qualitative survey about writing grant proposals for URPs. Based on the responses, the author explores how administrators identify grant opportunities, write proposal narratives, and manage post-award activities. The author then highlights best practices for writing grants for URPs and compares the practices to the Grant Professionals Certificate Institute competencies and skills.

## **Introduction**

Writing grants for undergraduate research programs (URPs) is a process that involves rhetoric—not in the sense of deception, but persuasion (Halpern & Blackburn, 2005). With a keen awareness of audience and purpose, administrators must make a compelling case to convince

grant reviewers of the need to fund a URP. At each step in this process, administrators (i.e., directors, coordinators, or program managers) must use rhetoric. Whether identifying funding opportunities, writing proposal narratives, or managing post-award activities, administrators are in the best position to determine how to articulate the fit between a grant and an institution's undergraduate research initiatives.

Without overlooking the role of pre- and post-award specialists who may work at an institution (Campbell & Carter, 2004), there are multiple "rhetorical moves" administrators can use to build their case when competing for a grant. Rhetorical moves include actions such as outlining a compelling need for a program, aligning proposal narratives with funders' expectations, and ensuring the efficacy and fidelity of a program. Analyzing rhetorical moves within a grant development process is a similar analytical approach used by Halleck and Connor (2006) to study rhetoric in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) conference proposals. While the rhetorical process of writing grants for undergraduate research programs can go unnoticed, the following findings from this study help to highlight some of the best practices in the field.

## **The Role of Grants for Undergraduate Research Programs (URPs)**

Undergraduate research programs (URPs) are experiential learning opportunities. During these programs, students partake in research by assisting faculty or staff members with ongoing research or by completing an independent study project. Given the benefits of experiential learning in the form of increased retention and graduation rates, the Association of American College and Universities (AAC&U) and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) list undergraduate research as a high-impact practice that supports students' academic success, especially for historically underrepresented students (Kuh, 2008). Because of the opportunity for greater academic success, many institutions of higher education embrace research as a fundamental learning experience by offering URPs to students.

The type of URP an institution offers often reflects the need to serve specific student populations. Given the academic benefits of undergraduate research for historically underrepresented students, many colleges and universities have programs specifically for first-generation, low-income, and racially/ethnically underrepresented students. A well-known, externally funded, grant-based undergraduate research program is the Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program (U.S. Department of Education, 2019), which provides first-generation and low-income students the opportunity to complete a research project with a faculty mentor. Other types of URPs, whether funded externally by an outside funder or internally by an institution, may focus on targeting

students at different points in their studies, such as programs designed for first-year students. There can be many types of URPs depending on an institution's mission and student population.

A URP provides participating undergraduate students a formal learning opportunity with academic and financial benefits. One academic benefit is the opportunity to learn from a faculty, staff, or graduate student mentor during the duration of a project. For example, in the Big Ten Academic Alliance Summer Research Opportunities Program, students participate in weekly workshops with program staff while receiving mentorship from a faculty member (Big Ten Academic Alliance, 2019). Financial benefits may include stipends, food, housing, and funds for transportation. Through the combination of academic and financial services, URPs are designed to ensure that students have a productive research experience.

To offer these academic and financial benefits, however, requires substantial funds to hire staff, purchase supplies, and provide stipends to students and mentors. If a program is taking place during the summer, funds may also be necessary to pay for student housing, food, social events, and conferences. Beyond a single program, Crowe and Sienerth (2006) estimated that the average annual budget for a centralized undergraduate research center is \$215,960 for public institutions and \$130,510 for private institutions, in addition to startup costs. Even among institutions looking for "low-cost strategies" and research activities such as forums and symposiums, administrators must still strive to secure internal and external funding (Snow, DeCosmo, & Shokair, 2010). While actual costs of URPs will depend on the type of programs an institution establishes, administrators face pressure to secure funds for various types of research activities to create URPs.

Given the need to secure grant funding for URPs, whether that funding is for an entire URP or a specific research activity, many administrators encounter a variety of challenges. These include identifying funding resources, writing proposal narratives, and managing post-award activities to create reports that demonstrate impact. To ease this pressure to identify and secure funding, a better understanding is needed of how administrators use rhetoric during their proposal writing process. Through such exploration, key practices will emerge that inform current and future proposal writing practices for funding URPs.

## **Methodology**

To explore administrators' proposal writing processes, the author sent a research recruitment email to 171 administrators of URPs that included a link to a qualitative research survey. The email list used to contact administrators was based on the institutional membership list from the Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR). Of the 171 recruitment emails sent, five administrators participated in the study (i.e., a 3% response

rate) by completing the qualitative survey. The relatively low response rate may be the result of multiple factors, such as busy work schedules and/or lack of incentives (e.g., the survey did not include a gift card for completion).

The purpose of a qualitative survey is to explore the “diversity of some topic of interest within a given population” (Jansen, 2010, p. 2). With this method, the author sought to learn how administrators of URPs use various rhetorical moves to create a compelling grant application. In documenting these perspectives, the author was mindful of how administrators’ institutional context could affect their grant development process.

The questions for the survey were influenced by the author’s experience as an administrator for a URP and aimed to explore how administrators use rhetoric within their proposal writing process (i.e., rhetorical moves). The survey asked administrators to answer the following open-ended questions regarding proposal writing for URPs:

- *Describe your experience with identifying funding opportunities. In particular, how does your process differ, if at all, when seeking internal grants versus external grants?*
- *Describe your process for writing a narrative in a proposal. For example, depending on the grant you are applying to, what aspects of your undergraduate research program(s) do you emphasize to create a convincing narrative?*
- *Describe your process for managing post-award activities. Specifically, what steps do you take to ensure that you can write an informative post-award report that details how a grant has helped your program(s) meet the expectations stated in a proposal?*

Based on administrators’ responses to the survey questions, a greater understanding of the proposal writing process within the context of managing URPs emerged. To protect the identity of the administrators within the guidelines of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the author named these individuals the following pseudonyms in the findings: “Steven,” “Jane,” “Marcus,” “Ashley,” and “Rose.”

## Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how most administrators approach proposal writing to secure funding for undergraduate research programs. Based on the findings, the author determined that most administrators use a mix of rhetorical moves to create compelling and persuasive grant applications for URPs. Such moves include using online databases and campus partners to identify grant opportunities, writing rich descriptions to create compelling narratives, and engaging in accounting and student learning outcomes assessment to produce

meaningful final reports. Through these rhetorical moves, administrators expressed different levels of concern and success throughout the proposal writing process.

### *Identifying Funding Resources*

Identifying funding resources for a URP is a type of pre-writing activity that involves being mindful of the audience and purpose of a grant. The alignment between a URP and grant in part determines both the proposal narrative and post-award activities. Thus, identifying appropriate funding resources with a clear understanding of audience and purpose is crucial for submitting a competitive grant application. However, this effort looks different across institutions, each of which have unique campus environments.

Subsequently, a key consideration when identifying funding resources is assessing the level of institutional support available at an institution. While some institutions have a grant office that offers pre-award specialists to help identify grants, other institutions do not have such specialists to support the development of grant proposals. For example, in terms of institutional support for finding external grants, “Jane” stated:

I have not sought external funding, mainly because my position (Coordinator of Undergraduate Research) is not a separate job. I am doing it on top of my full-time faculty position. Also, there is no institutional support for grant writing or even grant identification. (survey response, March 2, 2019)

What “Jane” highlighted is that a lack of institutional support undermines her efforts to find grants. And as “Jane” pointed out, the situation is worse if an administrator is also overwhelmed with additional responsibilities such as managing more than one URP or serving more than one institutional role.

Nonetheless, identifying, with or without institutional support, funding resources often begins by using online grant databases. Through such databases, grant professionals can find a range of external funding opportunities to research further, though such online searches may not always be productive. While access to online databases makes it easier, identifying grants that relate directly to specific needs is challenging. Sharing his experience searching for appropriate funding opportunities, “Steven” stated:

We use Pivot and GrantForward for funding opportunities. Many times, we find that the opportunities listed are often expired or do not apply to our area regardless of refined searches. We often

go to Grants.gov and other internet searches, but it makes it rather difficult in locating funding for various disciplines, such as music or dance, or even economics and other social science disciplines. (survey response, February 27, 2019)

While there is an increasing number of online databases to search for grants, as “Steven” shared, matching these funding resources with specific needs requires additional time and effort when considering which opportunities align with campus needs and are still open for submission.

Beyond searching online databases, another approach for identifying funding is building relationships with campus partners. These partners can be from departments or other units that have a similar goal of identifying grants to fund institutional initiatives. Such partnerships can be especially beneficial for administrators who do not have direct support from an institutional grant office. For example, “Marcus” stated:

My strategy for funding UROP [undergraduate research opportunities program] has been two-fold: 1) partnering with the [institution’s donor office] to identify potential donors; and 2) partnering with a variety of units across campus on submission of external proposals (e.g., National Science Foundation, U.S. Department of Agriculture, etc.). Both avenues have been quite fruitful to date. (survey response, March 2, 2019)

As “Marcus” statement advocates, collaborating with campus partners can help with identifying funding resources by creating a network of people knowledgeable about grant opportunities. Campus partnerships may also help to create long-term relationships for identifying funding resources with or without the support from an institutional grant office. While identifying opportunities without institutional support is more challenging, using online databases and working with campus partners can help to alleviate this challenge.

### *Writing Proposal Narratives*

Creating rich descriptions in narratives by highlighting existing undergraduate research initiatives at an institution or by working from a list of program needs to support students, staff, and faculty is a powerful approach for writing narratives. Writing a proposal narrative in this manner helps administrators craft narratives that align institution’s undergraduate research goals with funders’ expectations. For example, “Steven” “[highlights] existing programs on campus for undergraduates” to write a compelling narrative (survey response, February 27, 2019). By highlighting existing programs, administrators are in a better position to communicate how a funder can contribute to current undergraduate

research success at an institution. Making this same point, “Ashley” stated that writing about students’ participation in training workshops and research presentations is beneficial to create compelling narratives (survey response, March 5, 2019).

Another way to add rich descriptions in proposal narratives is to write from a list of institutional, office, or program needs. By writing from such lists, proposal writers can make funders aware of particular undergraduate research activities not currently available at their institution that will serve students, staff, and faculty. In describing the benefits of writing from a list, “Marcus” stated:

We have a large enough program that there are needs for direct funding to students, funding for staff, funding for new programs...I have a list of needs for the office, and then I approach each funding opportunity as trying to align needs with agency priorities. (survey response, March 2, 2019)

With a list of needs, administrators can write in a manner that goes beyond the strengths of their institution toward detailing specific areas for improvement that funders can support. When balanced with writing from a position of strength, writing with a list of needs can further enrich a proposal narrative.

### *Managing Post-Award Activities*

After receiving a grant, administrators can make additional rhetorical and persuasive moves to support the success of a current award while also preparing for future grant opportunities. As such, proposal writing within undergraduate research is a circular process where previous success can lead to future grant opportunities. Some of the post-award rhetorical moves mentioned in the survey responses include managing a grant budget (i.e., accounting) and aligning specific funder outcomes and goals with program assessment. Through these moves, administrators can share more details about the success of a grant in a final report.

To properly manage a grant budget, an institutional office typically monitors the essential accounting functions of an award, such as expense reporting. This management usually is in the form of documenting approved transactions. For instance, “Steven”’s home campus “has a separate fiscal award entity. They manage the expenses and accounting of the project” (survey response, February 27, 2019). Within this arrangement, managing post-award activities is, in part, a matter of accounting to ensure that administrators use funds appropriately and within the guidelines of the proposal narrative.

In addition to accounting, another rhetorical move is for administrators to review all of the requirements and expected outcomes of the award to determine the best metrics to indicate if a program is

meeting expectations—essentially student learning outcomes assessment or program evaluation. This assessment process consists of “making a list of the outcomes and goals of the grant and continually [tracking] them throughout the projects” (“Ashley,” survey response, March 5, 2019). With a rigorous assessment process in place, administrators are in a better position to document and explain how grant funds are meeting expectations set within a proposal narrative.

A range of assessment and evaluation methods also may be used to track and communicate student learning outcomes, such as using rubrics to assess student assignments (e.g., research posters) or conducting exit interviews with program participants (Banta & Palomba, 2015). “Rose” advocated the use of a “pre- and post-program survey for student participants” and will include faculty and staff responses in such surveys to capture a more holistic view of the program’s effectiveness (survey response, March 6, 2019).

Thus, both diligent accounting and rigorous program assessment are rhetorical moves that may affect the success of current and future grant programs. Even for those grants that may not ask for a detailed final report, being mindful of accounting and program assessment may prove beneficial for securing future funding given the added ability to demonstrate a higher sense of accountability.

## Conclusion

By viewing grant proposal writing as a rhetorical process, administrators of URPs have a host of rhetorical moves to consider when identifying funding opportunities, writing proposal narratives, and managing post-award activities, all of which align with Grants Professionals Certification Institute (GPCI) Table of Validated Competencies and Skills (Grant Professionals Certification Institute, 2019). Recommendations for best practices that follow GPCI Competency 01 (*Knowledge of how to research, identify, and match funding resources to meet specific needs*) include 1) exploring deeply the alignment between funder expectations and the needs of a URP at one’s home campus; and 2) applying in collaboration with campus partners to relevant internal and external funding opportunities. Recommendations for best practices that follow GPCI Competency 05 (*Knowledge of post-award management practices sufficient to inform effective grant design and development*) include working from a list of pre-established needs and also highlighting current, successful student engagement activities. Lastly, recommendations for best practices that follow GPCI Competency 09 (*Ability to write a convincing case for funding*) include conveying ideas clearly and persuasively, performing diligent financial oversight, and reconciliation and rigorous program assessment.

With these GPCI practices in mind, the success of securing funds for URPs depends, in part, on administrators’ ability to effectively

incorporate rhetorical moves into their grant development process. Future research about grant development within the context of undergraduate research programs should explore using a case study model to analyze how administrators can best incorporate rhetorical moves when applying to grants. In the meantime, the findings from this study can help administrators, especially early career professionals, with securing funds to support or grow undergraduate research at higher education institutions. Highlighting the importance of understanding grant development as an early career professional, “Marcus” shared that after becoming an administrator of a URP, there was a “[rapid realization] that it would be close to impossible to grow the program without additional funding” (“Marcus,” survey response, March 2, 2019). With an aim of helping administrators like “Marcus” with securing funds for undergraduate research, the findings from this study help to empower administrators with identifying and submitting compelling grant applications.

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# Replicable Strategies for Advancing Proposal Development Capacity in Teaching-focused Institutions

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*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*

## **Abstract**

A common grievance heard from higher-education grant professionals is that faculty do not prepare a sufficient number of grant proposals to meet institutional goals. Likewise, faculty who are concerned about their teaching and publication goals often do not prioritize grant proposal writing. Furthermore, the structure of faculty duties in most universities does not provide free time or adequate support for them to research and craft grant proposals. This scenario is especially problematic at community, liberal arts, and teaching colleges where the faculty may not be required to produce successful grant proposals for tenure status. Grant professionals must address this and many other challenges when looking to increase grant submissions from faculty. Federal grant projects may span several years and require a substantial amount of effort while affording applicants only a few weeks to complete a proposal. Time pressure is especially problematic for teaching faculty, who have substantially more classes than ever, but are asked to develop

proposals. Ultimately, if university administrators expect revenue streams from faculty grants, grant professionals must have an action plan to support and motivate faculty. By analyzing the experience of one teaching-focused university, this article presents such strategies for the grant professional, particularly those at teaching and community colleges where previous literature has not addressed their unique needs and challenges.

## Introduction

Contrary to current understanding about grants in higher education, the pressure to obtain grant funding is not exclusively felt at research institutions. Many faculty are not employed at the “highest levels of research activity” academic institutions which require faculty proposal writing for job security and tenure. While previous articles have examined proposal writing primarily in the “very high” (R1) and “high” (R2) research setting, in fact, research institutions constitute only a minority of national colleges and universities. Of the nation’s 4,660 colleges and universities, only 130 are R1 and only 134 are R2 institutions. Even when expanded to include “moderate research” institutions (R3), the total number is a mere 423 nationwide (Indiana University, 2018). Therefore, a majority of faculty are employed at low-research or teaching academic institutions. While research institutions often have larger overall enrollment per college, 42% of all undergraduate students are enrolled in community colleges (Ma & Baum, 2016). Additionally, most grant professionals work within administration at teaching-focused institutions, two-year (community) colleges and universities, four-year teaching and/or non-tenure track colleges and universities, and small liberal arts colleges and universities.

These non-research focused (non-R) institutions, by and large, do not contain a central grants office nor employ a dedicated proposal development specialist. As Klein (2011) found, creating a large grant support office supporting nearly 1,100 faculty is nearly impossible in a smaller (non-R) institution. While an Office of Sponsored Programs may be present, more likely, a grants office may consist of one grant administrator utilizing the “Swiss-army knife” approach to grant management. This professional may juggle multiple project tasks that include, but are not limited to, monitoring funding announcements, emailing grant announcements to faculty, facilitating collaboration, running meetings, reading RFPs, developing workplans, guiding the proposal development process, writing budgets, contacting program officers, editing draft proposals, and filing online applications. While faculty at these institutions may feel they receive inadequate support in proposal writing, likewise, the grant professional is receiving inadequate

support to increase the overall proposal submission rates. To counteract this reality, several strategies can be implemented to incentivize and support faculty in their grant pursuits. In general, the strategies were developed, analyzed, and endorsed by a grant consultant and faculty at a low-research, teaching-focused regional university in the Midwest, Governors State University. This university has been slowly increasing faculty research expectations since 2014. Even so, a faculty writing retreat was not implemented until 2016, and a grants consultant was not contracted until 2018.

An *Inside Higher Ed* comment thread (Flaherty, 2014) underscored a fundamental reason the non-R professor struggles to prioritize and develop grant proposals: time constraints. Faculty at an R1 typically teach three classes annually, while community college faculty often teach 10–12 courses and teaching-focused (non-R) faculty commonly teach a 4–4 load (four classes per semester). By and large, teaching is only one of the retention requirements; faculty are generally required to commit significant time and effort to university service and research as well. Indeed, nearly all the faculty interviewed at the current institution cited time constraints as the foremost reason they do not pursue (more) external grant opportunities. As Professor S explained in the comment thread, “the teaching load makes it difficult to have the time to put towards preparing and submitting a grant. After that, there isn’t much support...”

Many professors enter into academia because they enjoy the mission of academic institutions: a balance of teaching, scholarly writing, and service. At non-R institutions, this three-pronged approach is balanced much differently than in a research environment. Consider a 2014 study out of Boise State University illustrating a new reality encountered by most professors: besieged by teaching and a mounting number of administrative tasks, faculty must do their scholarly work and grant proposal writing on their own time (Flaherty, 2014). The study’s faculty workload findings (see Figure 1) show that faculty spend the vast

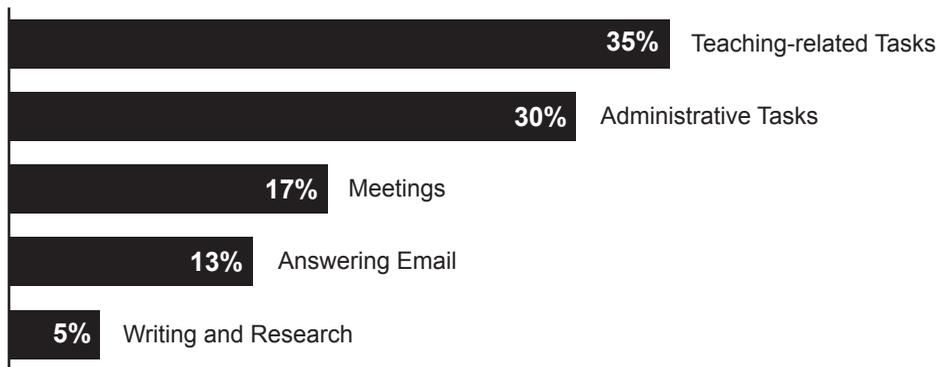


Figure 1: Faculty workload during an average week

majority of their time—a total of 65%—on teaching-related tasks and administrative tasks. An additional 30% of time is spent in meetings or responding to emails. Primary research and manuscript writing combine for only 5%.

While the general public and higher education as a whole emphasize the importance of quality teaching, academic institutions still value external funding and grant dollars won, even if no available time exists for faculty to pursue such funding. The biggest culprits in the erosion of faculty time for scholarly writing appears to be increased administrative responsibilities, such as “committees for hiring, promotion, curriculum, and budget planning; departmental, school or college, and university administration; student activities; and service to disciplinary associations and community service organizations” (Flaherty, 2014, p. 6). With limited time, faculty are likely to remove items not directly required for tenure. In many cases, this includes grant funding.

## Strategies

Given a choice between grant dollar productivity and teaching excellence, faculty are more likely to embrace teaching excellence. Faculty at non-R institutions are predisposed to increase status with recognition in teaching and service. As such, they may be more likely to deprioritize the pursuit of external funding. This exacerbates the difficulty of the grant professional's job to increase submissions and funding. Without new incentives aimed specifically at teaching faculty, grant activity is not likely to increase. The following sections provide strategies for several incentives, as based on experiences at a teaching-focused regional university in the Midwest. While many of these recommendations can be implemented by the grant professional, others require changes at the university administration level. Even the suggested administration-level changes, however, require input, effort and planning from the grant professional.

### *Faculty Proposal Writing Retreat*

The Faculty Proposal Writing Retreat is designed to facilitate dedicated faculty time towards a solo or collaborative proposal writing project. The retreat's purpose is to provide faculty with meaningful and uninterrupted time to brainstorm, collaborate and write in order to finish a proposal writing project (e.g., letter of intent, narrative, budget or full grant proposal). For those grant projects requiring more time to completion than the retreat allows, two practices are particularly helpful. The first is having faculty come to the retreat with some grant materials (i.e., selected funding announcement, abstract, general ideas, outline). With this model, the retreat becomes the editor and closer for the grant project. The second, and admittedly more common, approach is to have faculty work

on the grant during the retreat and create a detailed time-limited plan to completion, preferably using SMART goals, to complete the grant project after the retreat.

Logistically, the Faculty Proposal Writing Retreat should be a minimum of four days and should be held during a period outside of the academic semester. A common timeframe is the week following final exams or the week preceding the start of the semester. For both of these weeks, faculty are generally on contract and on campus but have fewer administrative tasks. Below is a four-day schedule template which provides ample time for discussion, goal-setting and a daily presentation (Table 1).

Table 1. Suggested Daily Schedule

Monday		Tuesday		Wednesday		Thursday	
9:00 am	Welcome & Goal-setting	9:00 am	Check-in & Goal-setting	9:00 am	Check-in & Goal-setting	9:00 am	Check-in & Goal-setting
9:45 am	Open work time	9:45 am	Open work time	9:45 am	Open work time	9:45 am	Open work time
12:00 pm	Lunch	12:00 pm	Lunch	12:00 pm	Lunch	12:00 pm	Lunch
1:00 pm	Presentation	1:00 pm	Presentation	1:00 pm	Presentation	1:00 pm	Presentation
2:00 pm	Open work time	2:00 pm	Open work time	2:00 pm	Open work time	2:00 pm	Open work time
4:30 pm	Check-out	4:30 pm	Check-out	4:30 pm	Check-out	4:30 pm	Closing

The expectation of punctual attendance, adherence to the schedule, and the commitment of multiple days should be clearly stated and reiterated in order to maintain the legitimacy of the workshop. Once the retreat begins, participants should be allowed ample time to come and go as they please. However, being on time for the start of the workshop is crucial to success, and tardiness may be an indication that a participant is not committed.

Two separate workspaces are also recommended. One room can be used as a “discussion room” for collaboration and conversing and one room as a “quiet room” for working without verbal disruptions. During the *Goal-setting* phase, participants are asked to describe their progress from the prior day and what they aim to accomplish (specific, small and detailed goals/tasks) during the current day. Writing blocks for

the majority of the workshop day are necessary; this is included in the *Open work time*. However, explaining that these blocks are specifically meant as independent or group writing sessions and not breaks from the workshop is a helpful prompt. These writing blocks are the foundation of a productive workshop. Participants may go to either workspace and come and go as needed. Depending on program budget, lunch can be provided (recommended) or brown-bagged. During *Check-out* participants reflect on the progress made during the day. During the *Closing* participants will reflect on progress made during the week, whether their goals were met, and the status of the project before completing an evaluation of the retreat.

Incorporating a short, daily *Presentation* covering an aspect of proposal writing is recommended. For instance, faculty are often unaware of how to search for grants, various types of funding, institutional support available, and the general procedures involved in the writing and submission process. Helpful presentations for writing workshops tend to focus on these issues as well as goal setting, accountability, and other helpful tips. An advanced instructional option is to include a peer mentor or a consultant available for individual meetings to assist with the proposal-writing projects. Personnel from the university writing lab may volunteer to serve as peer mentors. Alternatively, if an institution's budget allows, contract consultants who specialize in proposal development are a knowledgeable source of support who can provide more detailed and grant-specific knowledge. Many resources, such as the GPA Consultant Directory, provide listings of grant consultants.

### *Faculty Recognition: Reception, Award, and Annual Report*

Authoring grant proposals is hard work that should be recognized (Hooper, 2016; Klein, 2011; Shambach & Guevarra, 2003; Sridhar, 2009). Conventional approaches, however, have not been discussed in great detail. A Grant Proposal Writing Faculty Achievement Award to be presented at a Faculty Reception is an inexpensive and easily implemented approach. In the absence of a Faculty Awards Ceremony, it is highly suggested that the grant professional work with university administration to create an annual reception to honor faculty who submit grant proposals. Such an event would be a moderate expenditure option. Honoring faculty who wrote their first proposal, faculty who received their first grant award, faculty who submitted three or more proposals, and faculty who received two or more grant awards are just a few categories.

Another straightforward approach is to counteract the reality that nearly all faculty who write grant proposals do not receive financial reimbursement for their efforts. If any monetary resources are available, consider this option. As many institutions have monetary awards for teaching and service, a stipend for grants excellence is well within reach and has a high potential return if the monetary incentive succeeds

in propelling faculty towards more grant submissions. Whatever the institution budget, remember that recognition is a vital resource that forms a mutually beneficial relationship that adds to overall grant-development sustainability: "It's important to remember that a little sentiment goes a long way. We need to keep those first-timers and veterans writing applications" (Shambach & Guevarra, 2003, p.6). Faculty who are recognized for their efforts feel valued and may feel more loyalty toward the institution. In turn, they are more likely to continue proposal writing efforts to gain future recognition.

In absence of or in addition to an awards ceremony, an annual grants report recognizing faculty may serve as an incentive and relay to faculty that the institution is invested in the process. This report is likely to be more incentivizing if all submissions are reported, rather than just funded grants. Whether posted on a website or printed and circulated, this report becomes the foundation for a grant-proposal writing campaign. Opening with an inviting letter allows for a personal touch, emphasizes the marketing message, and is the grant personnel's rare opportunity to discuss the importance of grant projects and to provide the faculty with information about upcoming events and how faculty can help. Emphasizing that grants are about more than the money is key. Grants can help connect students to the institution, create collaborative opportunities for peers, and subsidize enhanced professional development opportunities. The annual report should include a fiscal year summary that chronicles all new proposals awarded, total number of proposals submitted, and the following metrics: total dollar value of proposals submitted, total number of awards, total dollar value of awards, and success rate. The report should conclude with highlights on sponsored activities that were awarded and prominently record and list the following fiscal year highlights.

### *Faculty Tenure: Submission Requirement*

A common-sense approach to increase proposal submissions is to require them. This, of course, requires the cooperation of administration. If the goal is to have more faculty-produced grants, requiring proposal submissions as part of the retention or tenure process will certainly help. It is important to remember, however, that research is the secondary or tertiary focus at teaching institutions. At such institutions, it would be reasonable to require one grant submission (internal or external) for tenure review. A more productive but still attainable model might require one grant submission per year, of which at least one must be an external submission prior to the tenure review portfolio.

### *Institutional Buy-In: External Support*

Klein (2011) holds that in academic institutions with a central grants support center, arrangements for facilitating successful grant proposals

can “limit accessibility and can lead to unacceptable response times. Quality of assistance is also a potential issue” (p. 63). She asserts that this is the case because many grants support centers: 1) are only available to certain departments; 2) use fee-for-service; and 3) refer faculty to outside contractors whom faculty must pay. The authors disagree with these claims, at least in small to medium-sized teaching-focused institutions. In such environments, the authors assert that:

1. A university without the resources to hire such a position full-time is likely to have the resources to hire a fee-for-service consultant. Such a position is only paid by hours worked or by project (two separate pay schedule options) and does not cost the university benefits, which often prohibits the creation of new positions in higher education.
2. Fee-for-service grant consultants can be quite accessible and advantageous at institutions without the long-term financial resources for full-time internal grant staff. As outside experienced contractors, they are dedicated, efficient, and more easily accessed than permanent staff facing a host of other job-related tasks. The consultants are able to provide expert support to faculty in complicated and lengthy submissions. If the institution covers contractor fees rather than individual investigators, faculty are much more likely to use them. Either way, utilizing persons with knowledge in academic proposal writing is a key to success in securing funds in a competitive submission environment (Hooper, 2016).
3. It is especially helpful to have outside contractors under the purview of a specific department. Grant contractors working with a specific department become more knowledgeable in that area and a better resource than an “all-areas” consultant. They are also better versed to find grants suitable for the department and/or specific faculty, as their search is more focused. Such contractors can often be “loaned out” to other departments if not currently working on projects in their “home” department.

### **Working Dynamics: What We Already Know**

Working productively alongside faculty is unquestionably the central strategy of the university grant professional. A book on these relationship dynamics might be called, *Grant Professionals are From Mars, Faculty are From Venus*. Although the faculty and grant professional share a common goal, each approaches the proposal submission process from a distinct perspective. For faculty, the goal is to acquire funding to promote their own research or career goals. For the grant professional, the goal is to increase quality and competitive proposal submissions from the university. University grant professionals and faculty working together

each analyze the amount of give and take in the working relationship. This interdependent relationship necessitates the mastery of subtle and not-so-subtle nuances. The university grant professional must be assertive without being arrogant and knowledgeable without being condescending. Moreover, while the faculty should relay their expertise and seek assistance, this relationship is a partnership, not a hierarchical structure.

Credibility and reliability by the university grant professional are best practices that lead to a trustful, productive working relationship with faculty (Campbell & Carter, 2004; Sridhar, 2009; Klein, 2011; Hooper 2016). *Credibility* is a valuable resource; when faculty experience that working with a grant professional improves their proposals, they become “enthusiastic supporters” (Klein, 2011, p. 62). Similarly, *reliability* is a crucial factor that influences unspoken views of the capacity of the grant professional to be beneficial to the faculty, since faculty “rely upon us to wade through and translate lengthy and complicated proposal guidelines, manage collection of all the required vitae, current and pending forms” (Campbell & Carter, 2004, p. 53). Finally, development of tangible grant-focused activities that benefit faculty help to strengthen the relationship, such as faculty brainstorming sessions (Campbell & Carter, 2004); presenting workshops on proposal writing to faculty (Campbell & Carter, 2004; Sridhar, 2009); collaborative faculty proposal writing (Campbell & Carter, 2004; Sridhar, 2009; Klein 2011); developing quick reference sheets and templates for faculty (Campbell & Carter, 2004; Hooper, 2016); and requiring faculty to evaluate all services rendered by the grant professional (Klein, 2011; Hooper, 2016).

The authors likewise endorse these aforementioned concepts; however, they hold opposing views on sentimentalized notions to achieve these ends. For instance, the authors do not agree with Sridhar (2009, p. 12) that in order to work successfully with faculty, “grant professionals must be passionate about the faculty’s work.” Rather, the objective of the grant professional here is to enable the faculty to fulfill their own passion. Although mutual respect is important to the relationship, a passion for the research project is not a prerequisite to developing a successful grant proposal. Nor do the authors hold with Campbell and Carter (2004, p. 49) that upon the grant professional taking a genuine investment in their work, “investigators [faculty] who have become accustomed to a place of renown are willing to accept the following kinds of assistance we [grant professionals] offer.” Suggesting faculty occupy a “place of renown” and are naturally unwilling to accept assistance due to their lofty status is exaggerated and out of touch with the attitudes of most faculty, particularly teaching faculty. Faculty are ready and willing to accept the kinds of proposal development assistance offered in absence of adulation.

## **Grant Professional Practices**

The authors, and faculty interviewed, found the following grant professional practices to be helpful in addressing the goal to maximize institutional resources. These practices are presented in chronological order in the proposal development process:

### *Forge Faculty Partnerships*

Creation of faculty partnerships is a strategy endorsed in order to promote faculty learning from one another and pooling expertise and resources. “Multidisciplinary projects are increasingly in vogue with funders” but there must be an organized way to establish and coordinate collaborations (Klein, 2011, p. 59). Because proposal collaborations between faculty can take significant time and effort, starting early is necessary. “Creative thinking is the hallmark of a successful university grant professional...[only] it is difficult for faculty to collaborate across disciplinary lines” (Sridhar, 2009, p. 11). If the grant professional is knowledgeable about faculty expertise, they may be able to jumpstart interdisciplinary research between faculty. Quality and frequency of collaboration will trend up as the grant professional attends research-sharing meetings, talks, and lectures. Institutions must also be proactive in creating spaces for interdisciplinary research. A promising first step is to host events wherein faculty discuss their expertise and current or prospective projects. While some of these events may be specifically geared for faculty, most should accommodate one-on-one or group meetings with the grant professional to give a short presentation. In this way, faculty have formed collaborations and may bring a more complete project to the grant professional when seeking funding. These partnerships share information, time, and resources, thus are more likely to reach the goal of submitting a quality proposal for funding. Such collaborations are good for the institution, grant professional, and faculty.

### *Research External Funding Opportunities*

While Hooper (2016) argues that faculty should be trained on using federal listservs to search for funding, the grant professional, by preference, is better suited to probe grant opportunities for the faculty. The faculty are the content experts, while the grant professional is the expert in knowing their government and foundation funders (Eligan, 2017). As Professor C explains, “there is no time available to me to search for federal funding. I highly prefer that someone else explore funding opportunities for me and then distribute that information to me via email” (Flaherty, 2014). To search for external funding from foundations, grant professionals should take advantage of sources such as the Foundation Directory Online, GrantStation, and similar online databases. Whatever funding database is being searched, remember that few things

annoy faculty more than when grant professionals “send us funding announcements that have nothing to do with my research.” In other words, know what the faculty want and give them what they want. A mutually beneficial way of ensuring faculty are provided with appropriate funding opportunities is to meet with them one-on-one. Allow faculty to explain their research and potential projects in detail to ensure a better grasp of the research agenda and identification of fewer but more specific funding opportunities.

### *Decipher the Funding Announcement*

The first task for the grant professional on any grant proposal development project, before even one word is written, is to dissect the Notice of Funding Announcement (NOFA), Request for Proposal (RFP), etc., and *become an expert on it!* The importance of reviewing the eligibility criteria cannot be overstated. Are the faculty and institution eligible to apply? Case in point—the author working as a consultant was brought in by a university (IHE) to assist on a state agency grant proposal. The parties to the proposal were the IHE and a school district (LEA). The consultant was asked to review and summarize key assurances and attachments that the applicant was required to submit. The IHE wanted to serve as the lead applicant, but LEAs were the only eligible applicants, according to the RFP. Though the parties attempted to adjust to be eligible to submit an application, the LEA could not finish the proposal, and it was abandoned.

Another important step in the development of a grant proposal is the workplan, a document similar to an outline that guides the writing of the grant application (Eligan, 2017). If the destination is a grant award, the project workplan is the map. The workplan has five main functions. The plan should *organize* information into a simplified document (80-page RFP = 12-page workplan); *assign* sections to be written and deadlines (person responsible, due dates); *outline* materials for submission to the funder (required materials, contacts, regulations); *establish* the framework (formatting requirements, page limits, scoring rubric); and finally *guide* the writing of the project narrative (workplan guides writing, always). The grant professional’s goal in thoroughly reviewing the RFP and developing a workplan is to simplify the writing job of faculty and reduce undue stress that can be caused by completing these additional and often foreign duties.

### *Guide, Manage, and Monitor Proposal Development*

Faculty are the content matter experts, while grant professionals are the experts in workplan, organization, and management of the grant. The grant professional will not be writing the project methodology (design), in all probability. Therefore, assume responsibility of all proposal-related tasks that do not involve content-matter expertise: developing timelines,

setting firm deadlines, researching facts and evidence to support the need, proposal editing, and feedback on key proposal requirements (needs assessment, methods, goals, logic model, objectives, staffing capacity, evaluation plan, budget, sustainability plan, supplemental documents, etc.). Time is tight when preparing proposals, especially for federal grants, and promptness is essential to the grants staff's credibility as project managers. The challenge of meeting deadlines rests on distributing to the faculty "a timeline with internal deadlines that need to be met in order for the proposal to go out on time.... we put out the call for forms, vitae, letters of support and commitments from the very beginning" (Campbell & Carter, 2004, p. 51-52). In all likelihood, the grant professional will need to take ownership of the proposal development process, particularly deadlines, to ensure prompt submission.

## Conclusion

Most higher-education institutions have limited resources to invest in faculty for the purposes of proposal writing, yet they still expect or at least encourage faculty to secure external funding. When the expectations and resources do not align, little progress is made. The grant professional can mitigate this dissonance by employing strategies such as the concept of a faculty retreat and recognition mechanisms (reception, award, and annual report). Further, the institution must be a stakeholder in some shape or form, whether requiring faculty to submit one grant each year via submission or (preferably) via a fiscal buy-in for external support. Last, the grant professional must deploy and make available their expertise and resources to create a collaborative and trusting environment. In closing, trust between institutions, grant professionals, and faculty must exist in order for collaborations to flourish.

"Collaboration is a powerful vehicle to promote faculty learning and professional development and an effective way to maximize the impact of institutional investments in faculty" (Baldwin & Chang, 2007, p. 26). The primary purpose of collaboration is to accomplish goals difficult to achieve independently. Ultimately, faculty achieving their goals with the support of grant professionals often become "repeat customers" who recommend the process to colleagues (Klein, 2011).

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# Streamlining Operations to Reduce Applicant, Recipient, and Staff Burden at the Health Resources and Services Administration

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

### Abstract

Over the last 15 years, the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) streamlined internal operations and implemented initiatives to reduce applicant, recipient, and staff burden throughout the grant cycle. These initiatives included opportunities to redesign the application submission process, improve progress reporting, and increase the time for application submission while reducing the number of funding announcements. Looking back, bold initiatives supported by technology brought substantial gains to the Agency, applicants, and recipients. To identify cost-saving strategies, HRSA evaluated ways to reduce costs of the review process by implementing technology to facilitate the evaluation of applications in virtual meetings. Likewise, focusing on quality improvement brought a new light to the review process by having reviewers evaluate their HRSA review experience using an online platform to provide feedback for quality improvement of the review process. The commitment to reduce burden continues through collaborations with the public, HRSA staff, and other federal agencies to learn from experiences and to move forward with innovative ideas to enhance the lives of the people HRSA serves.

## Introduction

This article explores initiatives implemented at the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) to reduce burden and streamline operations during the application submission and review process for grant programs. Initially, the paper describes moving from paper applications to electronic submissions followed by the redesign of the non-competing continuation process. Later, the paper discusses the transition from face-to-face application reviews to web-assisted teleconferences. In addition, the article discusses a quality improvement initiative implemented for the review process that provides for reviewer feedback on their experience after participating in HRSA's reviews. The path followed by HRSA resembles a multi-pronged approach with many checkpoints and turns to meet the agency's mission, requirements, and stakeholder expectations.

In the current grant environment, grant reform is a common theme within the framework of modernizing the information technology (IT) infrastructure, working with data, ensuring transparency and accountability, and maintaining a qualified workforce for the future. This is the message of the 2018 President's Management Agenda (PMA), which includes 14 priority goals to develop strategies and achieve desired outcomes. One of the goals in the PMA, the Cross Agency Priority Goal 8 (CAP #8) focuses on Results-Oriented Accountability for Grants. In this goal, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and Department of Education must collaborate to standardize grant reporting, reduce grantee burden, and promote evaluation of grant programs. This is not an easy task considering the diversity of grants programs, systems, and requirements managed by government agencies (GAO.gov, 2003; GAO.gov, 2005). Earlier, in April 2017, following a push for reform, the HHS had introduced the ReImagine initiative, which included six strategies aimed at increasing efficiency in government operations (Azar, 2018).

Initiatives to reform the grants process or the government are not new (GPO.gov, 2002; WhiteHouse.gov, 2003; FederalRegister.gov, 2013; Kamarck, 2013). Some initiatives, like those described in OMB Memorandum M-17-22, Comprehensive Plan for Reforming the Federal Government and Reducing the Federal Civilian Workforce (April 2017), focused on a "lean, accountable, and more efficient government" by implementing workforce reductions, cost savings, and improved employee performance. For other initiatives, government performance was the cornerstone of reform efforts. As an example, in 1993 Congress signed into law the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), which became key for the performance shift in which agencies developed performance measures as part of their strategic planning. In 2010, Congress re-authorized GPRA including amendments demonstrating the enduring mantra of government reform (GPO.gov, 2011). For example, the GPRA Modernization Act

of 2010 placed greater emphasis on setting priorities, increased collaboration among agencies, and rigorous analysis to improve outcomes (WhiteHouse.gov, 2018). The expectation for the GPRMA Modernization Act (GPRAMA) of 2010 is to expand the use of performance information and increase accountability, results, and cost-effectiveness.

In September 2018, OMB released Memorandum M-18-24, *Strategies to Reduce Grant Recipient Reporting Burden*. This supported and came in response to the Digital Accountability and Transparency Act (DATA Act) of 2014 (P.L. 113-101) to provide guidance to Federal agencies on how to apply data standards, reduce burden, and simplify reporting for grantees. With this memo, OMB brought together the DATA Act and the PMA requirements to have agencies review and align data standards with grant-related reform initiatives, update or design grant systems using government-wide data standards, and use shared services and systems to reduce burden.

The commitment to reduce burden is ongoing at HRSA, taking advantage of new opportunities and challenges while gaining efficiencies in operations. HRSA considers its stakeholders key players in bringing grants operations to the next level in which recipients devote more time and effort to providing public health services and less on redundant administrative activities.

### **Applications: From Paper Copies to Electronic Submission**

Many years ago, applicants sent hard copies of applications by “snail mail” to apply for grants. For some organizations, sending applications by email was progress compared to submitting paper copies. At that time, some government agencies did not have grants management systems to receive the information. Even if they did, applicants needed to work with several disparate systems that did not talk to each other. Actually, this array of systems still appears to be the rule today rather than the exception when interacting with the government, which explains why alleviating administrative burden became a central point in grants management (GAO.gov, 2016; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016; WhiteHouse.gov, 2018; WhiteHouse.gov, 2017).

As GAO and other reports attest, over the last decade grant reform initiatives partially achieved their objectives (GAO.gov, 2004; GAO.gov, 2005; GAO.gov, 2013; WhiteHouse.gov, 2012). For example, grant-streamlining initiatives recommended having a web portal or central location to apply for funding—what later became Grants.gov was an initiative that showed progress. Other initiatives, such as standardizing performance reporting, have been more elusive (GAO.gov, 2005).

Since the approval of the Federal Financial Assistance Management Improvement Act of 1999 (P.L. 106-107) (GPO.gov, 1999), Congress has remained committed to reducing applicant and grantee burden, standardizing government operations, and making agencies more

efficient in providing services to the American people. Because of P.L. 106-107, the government deployed Grants.gov in 2003 as a centralized web portal for applicants to find and apply for funding across the government (GAO.gov, 2004). Although multiple hiccups occurred during implementation, Grants.gov was quite an achievement among the different e-government initiatives designed to meet P.L. 106-107 requirements (GAO.gov, 2009). In retrospect, although it took more than a decade to implement, having a single point of entry today to apply for grant funding seems common sense.

Before HRSA adopted Grants.gov, the Agency received hard copies of applications by mail. Staff manually reviewed each application to ensure it met eligibility, responsiveness, page limitation, and other requirements—a time-consuming, tedious, and repetitive task. The journey to streamline operations and reduce burden at HRSA started in the 1990s when the agency realized the inefficiencies caused by bureaus and offices maintaining separate systems to interact with recipients. In 1997, the Grants Electronic Management System (GEMS) was one of the systems HRSA used to manage the grants process. However, because of other systems managed by bureaus and offices at that time, in 2003 HRSA moved from using GEMS to developing the Electronic Handbooks (EHBs). The EHBs became the central portal agency-wide that supported operations from beginning to end of the grants cycle. For instance, the EHBs served as the main system to receive applications, process awards, and monitor grants for Agency programs.

To publish funding announcements, HRSA transitioned from “hard copy booklets” to the Agency website and listservs as the preferred communication tool to advertise competitions. By January 2010, HRSA completed the interface between EHBs and Grants.gov to have Grants.gov as the main portal for publishing funding announcements and receiving grant applications. As a result, applicants applying for funding to most of the Agency’s programs worked with and used government-wide forms in a single system instead of several different systems. In addition, funding announcements allowed applicants a minimum of 30 days to submit applications. Later, the application window for submission increased to 60 days. Today, HRSA provides applicants up to 90 days to apply for funding, when feasible.

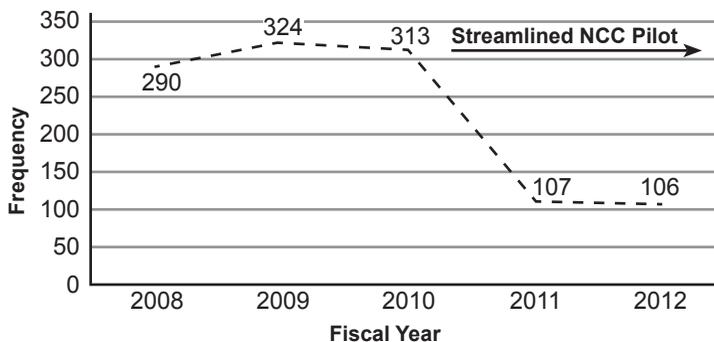
For HRSA staff, the enhancement of the electronic grant system streamlined the receipt, handling, and preliminary review of applications. For example, the development of the interface between Grants.gov and EHBs facilitated the receipt of applications, creation of pdf files, and identification of applications over the page limit. In addition, the agency had immediate access to applications after submission and the automated process made it easier to archive and preserve information. In recent years, enhancements to the EHBs increased the user-friendly experience, strengthened the help desk capability, and provided online trainings for users.

## Streamlining the Submission of Noncompeting Continuation Applications (NCCs)

According to the 2007 HHS Grants Policy Statement, NCCs are a request for funding the subsequent budget period within an approved competitive segment. A non-competing continuation application does not compete with other applications for support (HHS.gov, 2007). Until eight years ago, HRSA issued funding announcements for NCCs following a similar process as regular competitions, per the Office of Federal Assistance Management (OFAM) (OFAM Annual Report, 2008). This process included developing a funding announcement, publishing the announcement in Grants.gov, and receiving NCC applications from recipients.

In fiscal year (FY) 2010, HRSA implemented a pilot program to streamline the NCC process and reduce recipient and staff burden by eliminating the development and publishing of NCC funding announcements and the submission of full applications. With the streamlined process, HRSA changed the NCC process by moving from funding announcements to short instructions and from applications to “progress reports.” As a result, recipients did not submit a full application for an NCC. The Agency already had the original funded application; what HRSA needed was a “report on the progress” of the ongoing project. To meet this requirement, grantees submitted a shorter document in the EHBS system that focused on accomplishments and challenges while implementing the program.

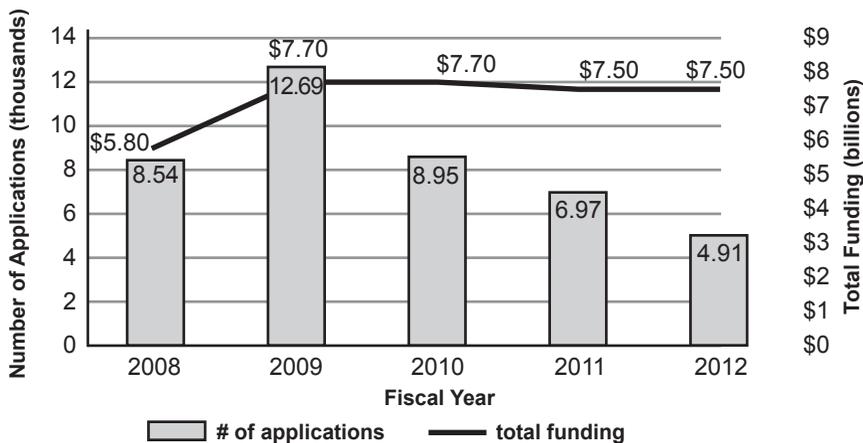
According to the OFAM Annual Reports and the EHBS system, the streamlined NCC process had a great impact on the application submission process (OFAM Annual Reports, 2008–2012). For example, the number of funding announcements published in Grants.gov decreased 63% from approximately 290 in FY 2008 to 106 in FY 2012 (see Figure 1). The number of applications subsequently submitted through Grants.gov decreased 42% from approximately 8,543 applications in FY 2008 to



Source: OFAM Annual Reports FY 2008–2012  
Noncompeting Continuation (NCC)

Figure 1: Number of HRSA funding announcements published in Grants.gov by fiscal year

4,914 in FY 2012 (see Figure 2). For NCCs, data from the EHBs indicate that the number of NCC progress reports submitted by recipients was approximately 3,000 per fiscal year. In contrast, according to the Tracking Accountability in Government Grants System (TAGGS), the amount of funding released by the agency over time increased 29% from approximately \$5.8 billion in FY 2008 to \$7.5 billion in FY 2012 (Figure 2). As grant funding increases at HRSA (\$9.7 billion in FY 2018), the number of NCCs relative to the total number of funding requests (applications through Grants.gov plus NCCs through EHB) remains relatively constant (38% in FY 2018) (OFAM Annual Report, 2018).



Source: OFAM Annual Reports, HRSA EHBs System and the Tracking Accountability in Government Grants System (TAGGS). In FY 2009, HRSA received additional funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. Paper applications included during the FY 2008-2009 transition to Grants.gov.

Figure 2: Number of HRSA-submitted applications through Grants.gov and released funding by fiscal year

Because of the successful implementation of the streamlined NCC pilot, HRSA no longer issues funding announcements for NCCs in Grants.gov and recipients submit progress reports directly through the EHBs.

### Streamlining the Objective Review Process

Funding agencies use a variety of review types when evaluating applications (Obrecht *et al.*, 2007). Over the years, HRSA used the following review types: Face-to-Face (FTF), Field, Collaborative, and web-assisted Teleconference (TC).

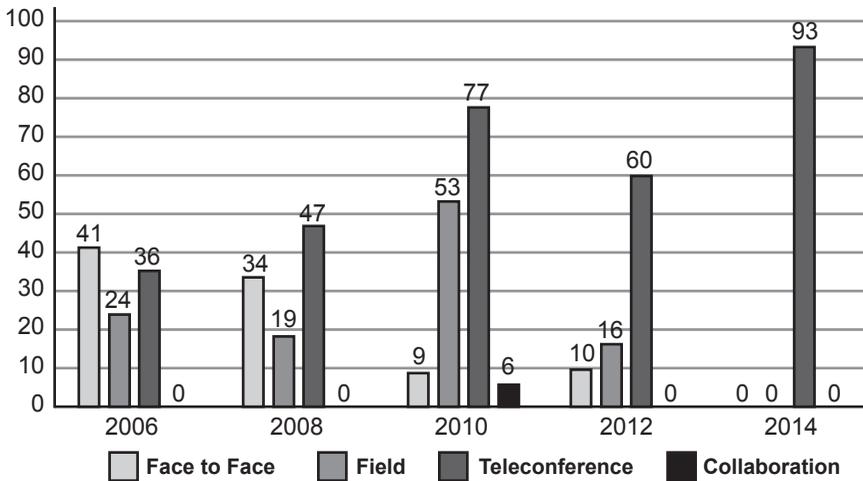
- In FTF review meetings, reviewers travel to a central location to evaluate the merit of applications. To prepare for an objective review or Objective Review Committee (ORC), HRSA staff recruit and analyze

potential reviewer information to identify conflicts of interest, qualifications, and expertise in health care services. After passing initial screening and receiving training, reviewers follow standardized review criteria published in the funding announcement to assess applications and provide strengths and weaknesses and preliminary scores for each application. During objective review, reviewers discuss each application, provide a final score, and reach consensus on strengths and weaknesses. HRSA staff ensure the review process is consistent and follows internal policy so that each application receives an unbiased and thorough evaluation. At HRSA, on average, face-to-face review meetings lasted from two to three days depending on the number of applications. However, some programs required longer reviews to evaluate applications.

- For Field reviews, field readers independently evaluate and rate applications using standardized criteria and protocols without discussing the information in a panel. Fogelholm *et al.* (2012) and Obrecht *et al.* (2007) described field reviews as “remote evaluations” and “at home reviews,” respectively, and found this type of review to be a valuable alternative to face-to-face reviews. Specifically, field reviews have lower costs, requiring less reviewer time and infrastructure without sacrificing reliability.
- In Collaborative reviews, which ended circa 2012, reviewers travel directly to the agency to read applications before objective review and later discuss the information in a panel. This collaborative panel informs the development of grant reviews and evaluations.
- For TC, reviewers participate in a virtual ORC rather than in person. Gallo *et al.* (2013) performed a retrospective analysis of review data comparing the effect of TC and FTF on review outcomes. The results of the study indicate that the review type did not affect the outcome.

Initially, efficiencies gained in the development of funding announcements and application submission and receipt did not translate to other steps in the grant cycle, such as evaluating the merit of applications. Even though HRSA had an automated grants system, staff still provided hard copy applications to peer reviewers to evaluate the information. However, HRSA’s review process changed gradually over the years, as TCs became the preferred method to evaluate applications (Figure 3). Data are only provided through FY 2014 because 99% of ORCs were TCs beginning in FY 2015.

According to the FY 2008 OFAM Annual Report, there were 34 FTFs, 19 Field reviews, and 47 TCs that year. Records from FY 2006 showed an estimated 41 FTFs with an estimated average cost of \$148,022; 24 Field reviews with an estimated average cost of \$40,041; and 36 TCs with an estimated average cost of \$21,320.

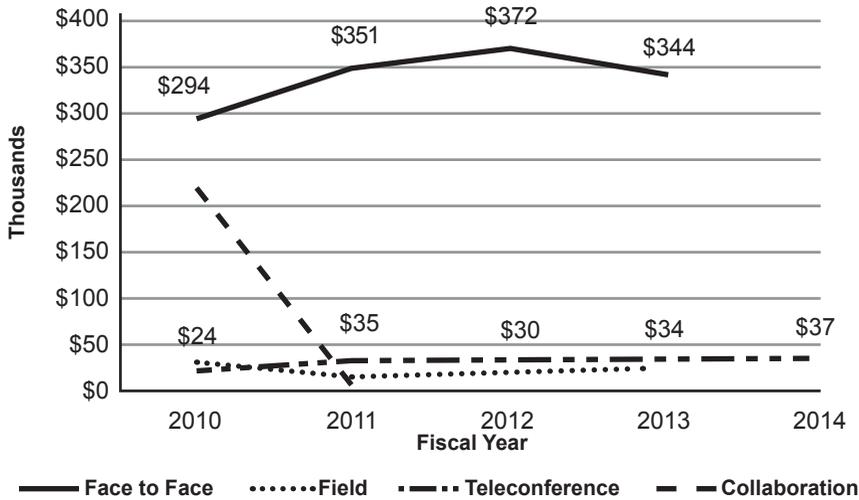


Source: FY 2006 estimated data from internal document; FY 2008 OFAM Annual Report; FY 2010–2014 DIR Master Data

Figure 3: Number of objective reviews by type

Initially, when the Division of Independent Review (DIR), the group responsible for implementation of objective reviews at HRSA, started using web-assisted TC, it sent hard copies of applications to reviewers. In FY 2010, DIR completed a fit-gap analysis and piloted the Application Review Module (ARM) of the shared service of Grant Solutions/Grants Administration Tracking and Evaluation System (GATES) operated by the Administration of Children and Families (ACF) to complete the merit review of applications. The ARM is a web-based system for recording reviewers' evaluations and scores of applications submitted in response to HRSA funding announcements. After a successful pilot implementation, in FY 2011 DIR started using the ARM system to convene review panels and evaluate the merit of applications for competitions. Several years later, the ARM system integrated with the EHBs to export and upload applications for evaluation and migrate review results, including the ranking of applications and reviewers' comments.

From FY 2010 through FY 2014, average costs of FTF were approximately ten times higher than for TC (Figure 4). To illustrate, in FY 2013, while the average cost of FTF was approximately \$344,153, for TC the average cost was \$34,006. Comparing the cost per application for FTF and TC in FY 2013, the data shows an approximate 2.5-fold cost reduction from \$3,081 for FTF to \$1,284 for TC (Table 1). In FY 2018, the average cost per application was \$1,320 for TC, which is similar for FY 2013 (OFAM Annual Report, 2018). Several factors may have contributed to the cost savings experienced by HRSA. For example, moving from FTF to TC reduced travel, lodging, and per diem costs for reviewers. At HRSA, the transition from FTF reviews in a pen and paper environment to web-assisted teleconference contributed to streamlining the review process.



Source: FY2010–2014 DIR Master Data

Figure 4: Average cost of reviews from FY 2010-2014

In addition, as reported by other authors, web-assisted teleconferences offered cost-saving opportunities, flexibility for reviewers and staff, and a viable alternative to evaluate applications (Vo & Trocki, 2015; Vo et al., 2016; Gallo, 2013).

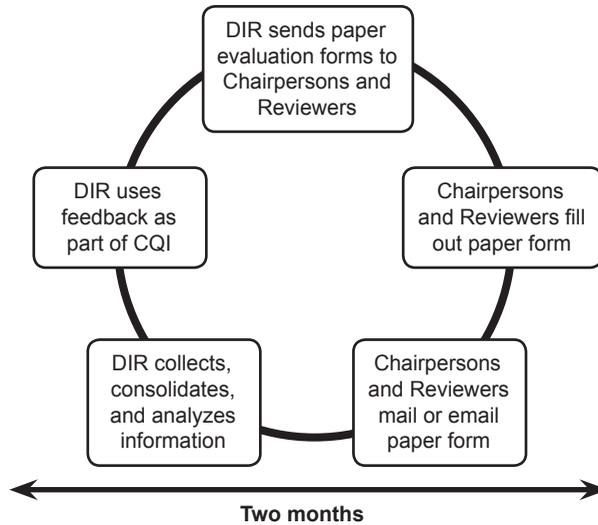
Table 1. FY 2013 Number of Objective Reviews and Average Costs

Type of Review	# ORC	# of Applications	Average Cost per ORC	Average Cost per Application
Face to Face	3	335	\$344,153	\$3,081
Field	5	169	\$26,511	\$784
Teleconference	68	1,800	\$34,006	\$1,284
Total/Average	76	2,304	\$45,755	\$1,509

Source: FY 2013 DIR Master Data

### Evaluating the Objective Review Process

Before 2016, DIR used a manual paper-based process to receive feedback from reviewers and chairpersons on their participation in objective reviews (Figure 5). In this process after objective reviews ended, chairpersons and reviewers received a paper form to evaluate their experience in the review process. They filled out forms and submitted responses by email or mail to DIR, which collected the paper forms for review and analysis. Later, DIR used the results to strengthen the review



*Figure 5: Paper-based reviewer and chairperson evaluation workflow*

process as part of its continuous quality improvement (CQI) efforts. The overall evaluation process took about two months.

DIR staff experienced challenges with the manual paper-based implementation and evaluation of the review process. For instance, tracking, analyzing, and reporting on a high volume of hard-copy documents was cumbersome, time-consuming, and prone to errors. In addition, the receipt and analysis of forms experienced delays due to reviewers missing deadlines and papers getting lost in the process. Likewise, the analysis of the information presented challenges because of data entry errors and limited capability for qualitative and quantitative data analysis.

In an effort to streamline the evaluation process, DIR identified as a priority the replacement of the manual (paper-based) evaluation process for an online web-based user-friendly version with data analysis capabilities. In 2014, DIR started the process to identify and acquire an online platform that could expedite the review evaluation process. As part of the planning phase, DIR identified goals and objectives of the project including requirements and functionality of the platform needed as well as stakeholders, a timeline, and resources to complete the project.

In the next phase, DIR assessed commercially available products that could meet the needs to evaluate the review process. Specifically, DIR's requirements included having a user-friendly online platform, online data collection and analysis, real-time access to information, limited data entry by staff, faster data analysis, and customized reports.

After completing the screening, selection, and contract process to acquire the online platform, DIR drafted new surveys for reviewers and

chairpersons to complete. These surveys asked participants to analyze the online platform's usefulness for completing grant reviews. Then, to meet Paper Reduction Act requirements, DIR sought approval from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) of the survey forms. After OMB approval, DIR performed a small pilot evaluating the online surveys and DIR started using the online platform in 2016 to evaluate the performance of the objective review process.

DIR realized immediate benefits of having an online, streamlined review process. Completing the manual process took approximately two months, whereas completing the online form took a week to ten days (Figure 6). The savings in time, resources, and analysis capabilities were enormous. Most important, DIR achieved a higher response rate, faster feedback, and better organized data collection and analysis. For the first time, DIR had access to real-time information and the ability to create reports without handling paper forms or entering data manually. Today, DIR continues using the online platform to evaluate the implementation of ORCs regularly. This evaluation has become an integral part of DIR's continuous quality improvement process to identify efficiencies and improve results.

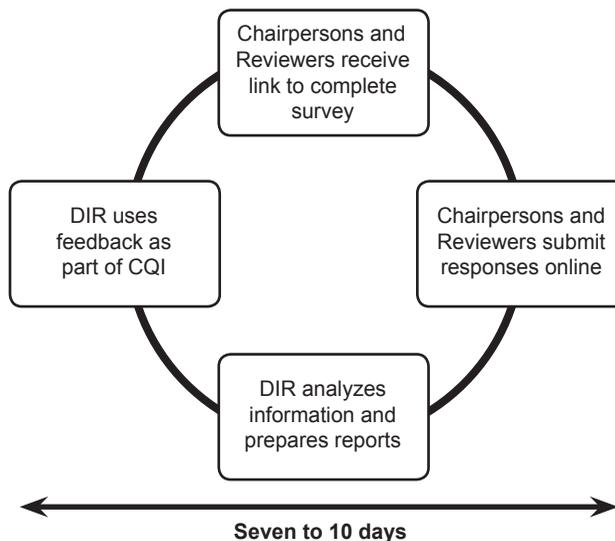


Figure 6: Online reviewer and chairperson evaluation workflow

### Strategies to Cultivate Relationships

For HRSA's initiatives to succeed, input from recipient organizations was important. Their comments and interactions led OFAM and HRSA on a path for continued quality improvement. According to OFAM annual reports for 2012 and 2013, OFAM conducted two annual Grantee

Customer Satisfaction Surveys. The purpose of the surveys was to assess the overall performance of the grants management function including pre-award, award, post-award, and closeout activities. Each online survey reached more than 2,800 recipients targeting grants administrators, business officials, project directors, and principal investigators. The survey response rate was approximately 50%.

After analyzing the information, OFAM identified three main areas for improvement:

- Simpler processes
- More reasonable timeframes
- Increased clarity of funding announcements

The response from the recipient community was loud and clear: Burden reduction to recipients mattered. That is why for OFAM, “simpler processes” meant greater commitment to streamlining operations; “more reasonable timeframes” resulted, giving more time for applicants to write and submit applications. “Increased clarity of funding announcements” led to greater collaboration with Program Offices at HRSA to deliver instructions that were easier to read and understand without sacrificing attention to requirements.

In FY 2014, the Office of Planning, Analysis and Evaluation (OPAE) assumed responsibility to implement the grantee satisfaction survey HRSA-wide. The focus of the survey expanded to cover other areas in addition to grants management (OFAM Annual Report, 2014). Today, OPAE continues implementing the grantee satisfaction survey annually. This activity helps the Agency identify strategies to strengthen relationships with stakeholders while gaining efficiencies in operations.

In 2017, OPAE implemented the most recent survey reaching 4,859 recipients and having a 40% response rate. Results from the 2017 survey indicated significant improvements in the ease and time allotted for the grant application process. Further, responses suggested that HRSA recipients appreciated the efforts to improve the EHB. HRSA will continue its efforts to simplify the language in funding announcements to reduce confusion and complexity.

### **Additional Activities to Reduce Burden and Streamline Operations**

In a renewed effort to reduce public and stakeholder burden, HRSA in 2018 issued a “Request for Information (RFI): Administrative Streamlining and Burden Reduction.” The RFI described the HRSA programs participating in the effort and identified areas in which the agency sought public comments to gain new operational efficiencies (HRSA.gov, 2018). At this writing, the agency is reviewing the comments received in July 2018.

HRSA remains an active participant of the ReImagine HHS, President's Management Agenda CAP #8, and OMB Memorandum M-18-24, which focus on improving customer service for stakeholders and streamlining agency operations. In addition, as part of the DATA Act of 2014, HRSA participates in ongoing discussions to establish grants management data standards and facilitate the integration of risk-based strategies to guide data-driven decisions and reduce recipient burden.

## **Conclusions**

During the last 15 years, HRSA implemented dramatic changes and transitioned away from manual, paper-copy operations to reduce burden to applicants, grantees, and staff. Today, a fully automated system interacts with Grants.gov to post funding announcements, receive applications, issue awards, monitor recipients, and close out grants. Applicants have more time to work on their applications, generally interact with one system, and have access to online trainings and a help desk to address issues. Likewise, staff benefit from having an online system with real-time access to electronic applications, automated validation including page count, and archiving capability.

In addition, replacing the lengthy application process with the submission of progress reports for ongoing projects became standard operating procedure, thus saving time.

HRSA streamlined the objective review process by moving from hard copy, face-to-face reviews to electronic applications evaluated in web-assisted teleconferences. In fact, the agency saved time and resources when moving from FTF to TC while also reducing the cost of reviews tenfold. By using an electronic system, HRSA standardized and streamlined the review process, simplified the organization, evaluation and management of applications and reviewers, decreased reviewers' burden (no travel, which leads to more time for reviewing), and reduced costs and paperwork.

Another dramatic improvement was the implementation of an online reviewer and chairperson evaluation process to replace the paper format for submitting comments to the agency. DIR obtained better responses and fewer errors when collecting and analyzing the information. In addition, the time to complete the overall process decreased substantially from months to days allowing for faster data analysis and use of evaluation results. Reviewer and Chairperson feedback provided a wealth of information and lessons learned for future initiatives.

In conclusion, during the last 15 years, HRSA has used emerging technologies and implemented strategies to streamline operations, reduce public burden, and gain efficiencies. The agency remains committed to working with stakeholders supporting new HHS initiatives and ensuring the right balance between providing services and reducing burden. The future landscape for grants management brings innovative ideas for open

data, data standardization, and systems integration. However, technology alone can only go so far. Further improvements in operations will address how funding agencies interact with stakeholders and use their human resources and technological systems to serve the public. The stakes are high and there is no time to waste. This new era in grants management brings opportunities and challenges for all.

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## **Biographical Information**

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## *GPA Strategy Papers Volume 6, Issue 1*

# How Can I Be a Better Mentor in the Grants Profession? Best Practices for Mentors

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### **Abstract**

Mentoring is a relationship that can bring grant professionals to a greater level of success. In 2017, the Grant Professionals Association (GPA) developed a mentoring program specifically for grant professionals called Mentor Match to “raise the level of professionalism” of grant professionals (GPCI Competencies and Skills number 7).

Through the GPA’s Mentor Match program, a mentor can benefit from learning new skills from a mentee, give back to the grants profession, and help another person form positive lifelong work skills and habits. Grant professionals can grow in their career and life by being a mentor.

This strategy paper presents some best practices mentors can apply when engaging in a mentoring relationship. By realizing the importance of mentoring and applying these best practices, a mentor can enhance the mentorship. Some best practices include setting expectations, asking questions, and ensuring regular engagement with a mentee.

### **Introduction**

Mentorship benefits those that choose to engage in an intentional relationship which grows a person professionally (as a mentor or a mentee), particularly in the grants profession. For example, a grants professional might be working from home. Or a grants professional may be working in an office but as an office of “one” which does not allow for coworkers who understand the grants profession. In any of these situations, a mentoring relationship can be a source of collegial support or advice. Mentorship is one way for a grants professional to overcome isolation.

Mentorship may also benefit a grants professional serving as a mentor in other ways. For example, a grants professional may want to learn how to build a relationship with a potential funder. Or perhaps a grants professional needs help navigating office politics with a principal investigator. A mentor can enhance the future of the grants profession by helping the mentee with a goal based on his or her challenge. In addition, a mentor may find some practices and habits growing stale without the option to learn from another or “give back” to the profession. Yet, it may be cumbersome to find a mentee without the aid of a national program that has a readily accessible community of grant professionals.

The Grant Professionals Association created the Mentor Match program<sup>1</sup> congruent with its mission to “build and support a community of grant professionals committed to serving the greater public good” (Grant Professionals Association, 2018). The GPA’s Mentor Match program recruited its first 10 mentors in July 2017 before opening the program to mentees. In September 2017, the first mentor-mentee pair began meeting. By January 2019, approximately 50 people signed up to be mentors and approximately 150 people enrolled as mentees. The need for such a program specific to the grants profession is clear: 200 people enrolled within 18 months of the program launch.

This strategy paper presents best practices for mentors while in a mentoring relationship through a mentoring program, such as the GPA’s Mentor Match program.

First, what is mentorship? The GPA’s Mentor Match program defines mentoring as “the relationship between a grants professional who has a passion to guide, inspire and motivate others and a lesser experienced person in the profession who is seeking to accomplish a goal” (GPA Mentor Match Program, 2018). This definition is unique to the people enrolled within the GPA’s Mentor Match program. Other mentorship definitions vary.

Essentially, a mentor helps a mentee move into the next phase of the mentee’s professional development journey. A mentor may guide and direct a mentee, sometimes in general situations and other times with a specific challenge, depending on the mentee’s needs. Mentoring in this manner allows the mentee to gain experience so that the next time a similar situation arises, the transformed mentee will tackle the issue smoothly on his or her own. For example, if a mentee sought support from a mentor during a hiring procedure (Bond, 2017), the next time the mentee needs to hire, the lessons learned while in the mentoring relationship may help make the hiring process easier.

## Best Practices

Best practices, based on existing literature on mentorship and feedback from mentors and mentees involved in the GPA’s Mentor Match program,

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<sup>1</sup> The author serves as the chair of the GPA’s Mentor Match Committee.

can help improve mentoring relationships and outcomes. *Best practices* are repeatable practices that align with proven and theoretically-based research (Brondyk & Searby, 2013). Understanding these best practices will help unlock what will benefit mentors and mentees.

*Set clear goals and expectations.* After the pair is formed, the first meeting should include a discussion about goals and expectations (Sanfey, Hollands, & Gantt, 2013). One mentee within the GPA's Mentor Match program said, "I would have benefitted more if I had first worked out what exactly I wanted to learn from my mentor before engaging [with my mentor]. I think I can get the *knowledge* online or in a book but the *experience* is something that will take time to learn [without a mentor]" (A. Johnson, personal communication, December 27, 2018).

*Ask questions and listen.* During subsequent meetings, ask and expect mentees to arrive with a list of topics and timelines for goals (Sanfey *et al.*, 2013). Mentees need to be self-starters for their goals and commit to the relationship (Raabe & Beehr, 2003). Mentors should consider themselves a source of support and a listening ear (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006), not the person directing the meetings.

Mentors are not people who accomplish the mentee's goal or do the work for the mentee. In such scenarios, an unhealthy dependency can emerge. Instead, a mentor should consider contemplative questions that help the mentee draw out solutions or provide resources and tools that will help the mentee accomplish the goal he or she desires to reach. Mentees' willingness to learn allows them to have shared meaning with their mentors and become active participants in gathering knowledge (Raabe & Beehr, 2003; Swap, Leonard, Shields, & Abrams, 2001).

By asking thoughtful questions, a mentor can guide a mentee toward a new revelation. Asking questions like, "How does this experience change your day-to-day work?" gives a mentee space to reflect on what he or she gleaned and how to apply what he or she observed. As a result, the active learning phase blooms into metacognition and self-monitoring (Swap *et al.*, 2001). In addition, a mentor could conduct experiential learning activities such as role-playing and observation, which gives space for trial-and-error moments and plenty of activity to be a basis of a great discussion.

*Learn from the relationship.* Mentorship can benefit a mentor while the mentor is helping the mentee. Mentors may learn new trends, ideas, or procedures from mentees that advance their careers or reenergize them in their current careers (Ragins, 1997). A mentor through the GPA's Mentor Match program said,

Working with my mentees has caused me to revisit issues that, as an 'experienced' grants professional, I've not thought about for a while. After being in the

‘business’ for nearly 20 years, I’m very comfortable with how I do things. I have my routines that I’ve developed after years of trial and error.

Working with people who are looking to improve their professional skills and outcomes has made me reexamine my routines to see if they need to be tweaked. We are working in an industry that is constantly changing so we need to continue to challenge our skills and approaches in order to keep up—and mentoring those who are undertaking these challenges with us helps to keep our skills sharp too. (M. Whitacre, personal communication, June 28, 2018)

A mentee in the GPA Mentor Match program also noticed this benefit for mentors. “Mentors should be careful that they don’t discount the wisdom and experience mentees can bring to the relationship as well. It should be a learning and growing process for both parties” (A. Johnson, personal communication, December 31, 2018). If a mentor is open to learning from a mentee, the mentor gains knowledge in new trends.

*Help the mentee stay focused.* Sometimes a mentee wants to tackle many aspects of his or her goal at once. A mentor may wish to suggest the mentee to consider giving up a commitment if a mentee is not accomplishing work toward the mentee’s goal. A mentee may need to say “no” to events, activities, studies, and projects (outside of their employment arrangement) that do not advance the stated goal of that mentee (Sanfey *et al.*, 2013).

*Support the mentee in networking.* Networking is another key element of mentoring (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006). For a grants professional, networking may mean meeting a new potential funder through a mentor. Or a mentor may connect a mentee more deeply with others in the grants profession which could lead to future job opportunities or clients. Networking can be an avenue for mentees to expand their career opportunities or to increase the likelihood of reaching a career goal (Hopkins & Grigoriu, 2005).

*Ensure regular interaction.* The time spent on mentoring can be a factor in relationship success. Within one study, mentees desired more regularity in the pairs’ meetings and communications (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006; Dymock, 1999). Meeting frequently heightens the perception of being similar and therefore the connection grows within the relationship (Holt, Markova, Dhaenens, Marler, & Heilmann, 2016; Ragins, 1997; Young, Cady, & Foxon, 2006).

The Mentor Match program through the GPA recognizes the time limitations of many mentors and therefore requests that mentors meet

with their mentee for at least one hour per month during the year-long program. However, the mentor and mentee may decide to meet more frequently.

## Conclusion

Mentoring is important to the grants professional as a mentor or a mentee because it heightens the grant professionals industry. As one person improves his or her grants professionalism, the reputation of the grants profession may rise in the minds of those that person interacts with, whether as a mentee or a mentor. If the relationship transforms the person involved in the mentoring relationship through applying best practices, mentorship can bring greater self-awareness and success.

The Grant Professionals Association (GPA) recognizes the value of raising “the level of professionalism” (GPCI Competencies and Skills number 7). Creating the Mentor Match program for GPA members will help individuals overcome issues like isolation and roadblocks possibly due to singular thinking.

Mentors should consider the goals of their mentees and what level of support the mentees desire in that area of potential growth. To properly help their mentees, mentors must know what their mentees expect. In the beginning stages of the relationship, mentors should ask mentees about their goals.

Mentors can apply a number of best practices and processes to enhance the mentee’s development. The strength of the relationship between a mentor and a mentee may be a catalyst toward the mentee’s reaching personal goals and enhancing the grants profession through the mentee’s individual development.

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## *GPA Strategy Papers Volume 6, Issue 2*

# Designing Performance Metrics for Grant Professionals: Recommendations from the Field

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### **Abstract**

In the November 2018 issue of the *Journal of the Grant Professionals Association*, the authors examined the topic of performance evaluation for grant professionals. This research, 'Measuring Up: A Review of Current Grant Professional Performance Metrics,' identified the most commonly used performance metrics among grant professionals practicing in nearly every area of the field. This strategy paper is a follow-up to the research. It seeks to provide an overview of the most frequently used metrics for grant professional performance evaluation. It also aims to provide examples of targeted performance metrics grant professionals can use to better capture the value they bring to their employers and clients. Additionally, this paper will discuss the limits of performance metrics in measuring the contributions of a grants professional.

### **Introduction**

Grant professionals have been calling for the establishment of standardized performance metrics for the field almost since grant writing became recognized as a profession (Faruqi, 2004; Tiernan, 2012; Tilzey, 2016). Yet, in spite of these urgings, there has been little progress in developing or vetting common sets of key performance metrics to assist grant professionals in measuring and reporting on the value that they bring to their institutions (Calabrese & Mason, 2014).

In the spring of 2018, authors Amanda Neese and Julie Boll embarked on a research study to identify the performance metrics grant professionals are using and why. The goal of their research was to propose a set of expanded metrics that all grant professionals, regardless of their field of practice, could use to comprehensively track and measure their performance. The results of this study were published in the Grant Professionals Association *Journal* in November 2018 and affirmed anecdotal evidence that:

- Grant professionals are responsible for a host of work functions that stretch far beyond proposal development.
- Many of these functions—relationship building skills, knowledge and expertise in the field, and the ability to manage multiple projects with competing deadlines—are difficult to measure. This is in part because they are more qualitative, and thus more subjective, in nature.

This strategy paper will build on the most commonly used performance metrics previously reported by grant professionals in the 2018 Neese-Boll survey. It will also take a deeper dive into the specific metrics grant professionals can use to demonstrate the scope of their work and the value they bring to their employers and clients. The suggestions provided within this paper are meant to start a conversation around the idea of developing standard performance metrics for grant professional evaluation while also discussing the limitations of the metrics presented.

The authors propose three steps to strengthening grant professional performance evaluation: 1) Begin by incorporating the most frequently used performance metrics into any evaluation tool already in use; 2) Add the suggested metrics that best reflect the role(s) and function(s) of the grant professional being evaluated, either within an organization or in service to clients; and 3) Develop a mechanism for tracking and reporting the metrics selected consistently.

### **A Place to Begin: The Most Frequently Used Performance Metrics for Grant Professional Evaluation**

When designing a performance evaluation tool for grant professionals, it is helpful to understand how most grant professionals measure and track performance. Independent of their areas of practice, respondents to the 2018 Neese-Boll study identified the following performance metrics with the highest frequency, meaning that at least 50% of respondents (n >/= 108) reported that they were currently using one or more of the following metrics to evaluate their performance.

1. Dollar amount of funds awarded (90%);
2. Number of proposals submitted (84%);
3. Number of proposals funded (82%);
4. Dollar amount of proposals submitted (pending but not yet awarded/

- denied) (58%); and
5. Rate of proposals funded vs. proposals submitted ('Win Rate') (53%).

While these metrics offer a place to begin designing grant professional performance evaluations, they do not capture the full scope of work for most grant professionals. Additionally, focusing solely on a dollars in/dollars out model for performance evaluation can be damaging to an institution's grant seeking operations. It can create risk aversion in grant professionals (Poderis, 2011) who may then seek to return to funders and projects with which they have had previous success instead of stretching to pursue new opportunities. And, creating systems that require grant professionals to 'stretch' their goals and increase their efforts without the addition of resources can lead to burnout and job dissatisfaction (Poderis, 2011).

An additional challenge of using performance metrics that are largely numbers-focused relates to benchmarking. In order to evaluate performance using these types of metrics, grant professionals must have existing benchmarks against which they can compare their current and future performance. These benchmarks vary from institution to institution and even within institutions and between grant professionals. As a result, institutions and grant professionals who choose to use these types of metrics should take care to benchmark grant professional performance only against his/her past performance in these categories—not against other grant professionals' performance at the same or similar institutions (Poderis, 2011).

This is not to say that quantitative, numbers-focused performance metrics should be abandoned, only that they should be developed thoughtfully. Grant professionals should give consideration to the institution or client's past successes and grant portfolio, as well as the grant professional's own past performance.

### **Adding Performance Metrics That Reflect Value**

Success or failure of a grant professional cannot be measured by numbers alone (Poderis, 2011). As one respondent to the 2018 Neese-Boll survey observed,

When judging a grant writer's performance, it seems that the bottom line (i.e., the total dollar amount of grants funded in a fiscal year) is the only metric that really matters to most [employers]. Meeting or exceeding the organization's annual grants funded goal is paramount. Doing things that contribute to the long-term sustainability of the organization's funding is also important. This might include 1) researching new sources of grants and sponsorships; 2) building relationships with program staff, board members,

community partners, and other stakeholders; and  
 3) contributing to the nonprofit's special events, marketing communications, and donor database. However, little credit is usually given for the often-substantial amount of time that a grant writer spends doing these things.

### **Expanding The Grant Professional's Performance Evaluation Tool**

The performance metrics provided in Table 1, while extensive and varied, are not designed to be comprehensive in nature, or applicable to every grant professional. Rather, this list is presented to encourage grant professionals to consider how they might expand their own performance evaluation tools to better capture the full scope of their contributions to their institutions and clients.

The authors recommend developing a personal performance evaluation worksheet that includes just 2–3 new metrics (chosen from the list above or from another source) that help demonstrate the complete scope of the grant professional's work and contributions. The goal is not to exhaust grant professionals with endless tracking and analysis, but to provide solid metrics that can be used for personal satisfaction, to identify areas for change, and/or promote the grant professional's contributions to his/her employers or clients.

After foundational performance metrics are incorporated into a grant performance tool, the authors encourage the grant professional to identify other metrics that reflect the broader contributions and represent the full scope of responsibilities to employers and/or clients.

These metrics are described in Table 1.

*Table 1. Targeted Performance Metrics by Work Function*

<b>Category of Performance</b>	<b>Specific Performance Metrics</b>
Grant Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Dollar amount of proposals funded/funds secured from new funders, through new competitions, and/or for new initiatives</li> <li>● Error rate (number of times supervisor needs to intervene due to grant professional's mistakes)</li> <li>● Positive feedback from funders on well-crafted proposals (written feedback/formal scores)</li> <li>● Dollar amount of proposals under development (not yet submitted)</li> <li>● Number of faculty/staff meetings held re: new grant projects (excludes specific grant project meetings)</li> </ul>

Grant Management & Reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Number of active grants in portfolio</li> <li>● Hours spent assisting staff with current grant programs (reporting, management, implementation, etc.)</li> <li>● Percentage of grant objectives/outcomes achieved by project close-out, compared to original objectives/outcomes</li> <li>● Client/Stakeholder or PI ratings related to satisfaction with grant administration functions</li> <li>● Number of grant reports completed per quarter; percent of grant reports submitted on time</li> <li>● Percentage of grant dollars spent according to original timeline ("Burn Rate" or Expenditure Rate)</li> </ul>
Institutional Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Number or percent of grant proposals linked directly to an item (or sub-item) in institution or client's strategic plan</li> <li>● Number of new cross-sector relationships formed as a result of grants received that benefit clients, community, and organization</li> <li>● Number of grant awards tied to external collaborations</li> <li>● Number of collaborations formed, as evidenced by MOUs/ MOAs/Letters of Support</li> <li>● Annual increase in grant conversion rate (measured by number of grant prospects resulting in funded projects or dollar amount of funds secured from new grant prospects)</li> </ul>
Organization Capacity Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Number of consultations with staff as part of the proposal development process (not trainings)</li> <li>● Number of hours spent on work or committees not explicitly grant-related</li> <li>● Number of internal policies or Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) developed annually</li> <li>● Support provided to programs in 1) launching new grant-funded programs, 2) complying with funder requirements for new and repeat grants, 3) assisting with non-grant program development (measured by quantifying hours spent on these activities or volume of related actions/meetings). 4) Number of hours spent maintaining grants data, tracking, reporting, etc.</li> </ul>
Funder Research/ Prospecting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Number of site visits</li> <li>● Number of grants/funders identified for departmental consideration</li> <li>● Number of grants researched but did not apply to</li> <li>● Lead conversion rate (number of "high match" leads pursued)</li> <li>● Number of requests received for support related to funding research</li> </ul>

Additionally, survey respondents recommended that metrics reflecting ‘soft skills’ should be considered for inclusion in the grant professional’s performance evaluation. These skills might include the grant professional’s ability to effectively manage grants, build/sustain relationships that encourage stakeholder engagement, and develop partnerships with funders over time.

Specific performance metrics related to these skill sets are presented in Table 2.

*Table 2. Targeted Performance Metrics by Skills*

<b>Category of Performance</b>	<b>Specific Performance Metrics</b>
Relationship Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Number of stakeholder contacts related to grant-seeking activities</li> <li>● Number/percent of stakeholders engaged in grant activities</li> <li>● Number/percent of new stakeholders engaged in grant activities, compared to previous year</li> <li>● Number of proposals submitted to new funders</li> <li>● Number of hours spent building relationships with future collaborators and organizations that can assist with support letters, match requirements, etc.</li> </ul>
Funder Stewardship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Grant retention rate (year to year support)</li> <li>● Dollar amount of funds secured by grant professional/ with support from the grant professional</li> <li>● Progress (percentage) to fundraising goal or revenue awarded compared to goal</li> <li>● Response rate of targeted donor communications</li> <li>● Number of contacts with new and existing funders</li> </ul>
Mentoring & Training Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Improved confidence of project team in project planning and grant production as a result of mentoring activities (measured via survey)</li> <li>● Number of internal trainings held and/or workshops conducted</li> <li>● Number of hours spent assisting staff with proposal development and grants management</li> <li>● Number of consultations with staff as part of the proposal-development process (not “trainings”)</li> <li>● Public outreach (explaining the field) and mentorship (helping train new grant professionals)</li> </ul>

## Conclusion

While metrics cannot reflect the entirety of the grant professional's work, if they are properly selected with input from the grant professional and contextualized alongside other responsibilities, they can provide insight that helps the grant professional know what to aim for. When tracked and measured consistently over time, such metrics can identify strengths as well as opportunities for additional growth.

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## Biographical Information

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**Julie Boll, MEd, GPC** is the founder of Julie Boll Consulting, which provides grant writing and strategic planning support to nonprofits. Over the course of her career, Julie has secured more than \$9.4M in competitive grants from foundation, state and federal funders. From 2011 to 2017, she secured more than \$6.2M in competitive grants for Quincy University including the university's first NSF grant in over 25 years and a \$2.25M US Dept of Education grant. Julie is a GPA Approved Trainer. She can be reached at [julie@juliebollconsulting.com](mailto:julie@juliebollconsulting.com).

## *GPA Strategy Papers Volume 6, Issue 3*

# **Leveraging the Role of the Grant Professional in an Organization for Maximum Success**

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### **Abstract**

Grant professionals have an array of responsibilities and roles, regardless of the size of the organization or department where they work. The Grant Professionals Association (GPA) GrantZone, a private, online community forum for members of GPA, reveals that GPA members also face a wide range of organizational conundrums ranging from lack of job clarity to being pigeon-holed as “just the grants person.” Grant professionals on a development team, regardless of team size, may also deal with clashing priorities, ethical issues, internal politics, and board-related problems. These challenges can impact the success of a grant professional and interfere with effectiveness. This paper provides some initial guidance for emerging grant professionals to maximize their success by assessing their organization’s grant operations and the expected and actual roles they have within this structure. This includes considering and leveraging their unique talents, personal inclinations, and work style to demonstrate the value they add to their organization.

### **Introduction**

Formal and informal roles for the grants professional (GP) can be as diverse as the organizations in which they work. A GP may work as the unique professional fundraiser in a small nonprofit having some responsibility for grants. A GP might work within a larger organization or development department as a full time grant writer. Often, GPs work in organizations where they might be engaged in filling multiple roles.

During the period of February to June 2018, in GPA’s GrantZone, there were several online discussion threads related to roles and responsibilities of the grant professional. Many comments focused on

grant-related responsibilities that were overlaid with challenges common to many nonprofit organizations. Some of these challenges impacted the work and efficiency of the GP. They included ambiguous reporting structures, clashing priorities, and/or interpersonal issues. In this small online community, a gleaning of the many titles of the authors in these threads and the duties they described implied a wide range of roles and functions for the grant professional.

A compilation of these roles and functions was included in an informal analysis of titles from colleagues in the author's professional network and conference attendee lists from other development professional events. The analysis resulted in more than 40 descriptive titles and functions for GPs. It also yielded some possible overarching, but not mutually exclusive, roles for a grant professional in a nonprofit organization, regardless of industry. The author loosely clustered these roles and functions (ranging from "scam-sniffer" and "responsible for organization survival" to grant writer and executive director) into four general GP categories: 1) technical grant specialist, 2) development professional, 3) organization-wide leadership, and 4) relationship manager. These overarching roles may provide some insight for GP career development.

Organizational behavior management and human resource management literature is replete with case studies, analyses, and theories about the employer-employee relationship and career management best-practices. Some twenty-first century employment practices in Western culture seem to facilitate individual career success and may be applied to the advantage of the GP (Lawler, 2011). While influenced by organization structure, individual career success may rely largely on employee engagement as well as employee skills. These skills not only consist of strong technical expertise, but also demonstrate additional, more broadly applied "soft" skills and attributes needed for the contemporary workforce. These more generic skills include the ability to work well on a team, possessing interpersonal competencies, being highly ethical, having excellent written and verbal communication skills, demonstrating the ability to think analytically and critically, and showing at least the capability for leadership (Bowditch, Buono, & Stewart, 2008).

In an analysis on career paths, Baruch (2003) also posits that career pipelines in this century are less "linear" and more multidirectional. This is a result of nonprofit and for-profit entities alike having to adapt in recent decades to both reflect individual strengths of their employees and to be increasingly accountable to society to ensure ethical and equitable human resources management. Further, as today's work environment has evolved to become more diverse and individualized (Lawler, 2011), it is expected that organizations overtly (and legally) address diversity in the workforce across all parameters, beyond race and gender. Thus, strictly linear, traditional, one-size-fits-all position descriptions or titles in an organization may no longer accurately capture the needed technical and soft skills for the grant professional and successful fundraising.

So, where lies the onus for the role definition and function of the grant professional in a nonprofit organization or a development department? It may fall on both the organization/department and the GP, but the GP may bear more responsibility. Due to their training and skills, GPs are uniquely positioned in the fundraising efforts of the organization. The GP is equipped to compile and analyze diverse information, create order out of potential chaos, and produce compelling language to define the “universe” of success. Why not apply these skills to one’s own career track?

### **Understand and Leverage the Setting**

As part of a process for advancing their career, the GP may find it helpful to deliberately reflect on the external (organization) and internal (personal) context of their work. The process for reflection can include a simple inventory of the organization’s grant operations and structure, goals, metrics, policies, and very importantly, the GPs own skills, talents, personal strengths, and inclinations. For the personal assessment, a GP may choose a more formal route such as *StrengthsFinder 2.0* (Rath, 2007), *Myers-Briggs* (MBTI Basics, 2019), or other commercially available tools. However, beginning with an informal assessment is the suggested strategy here. The task before the GP is to discover how to leverage this information to add value to their role, both in the development department and the organization.

Questions to ask about the organization’s grant operations might include: What is the scope and size of the organization and the stated expectations and/or metrics for success? How do these impact productivity? Job satisfaction? The 2018 *GPA Salary Survey* (Grant Professionals Association, 2018) indicates that among the approximately 360 respondents of their Spring survey, there was an average of 5.5 individuals working in the grants department of the organization. Forty-two percent of respondents, however, reported working in organizations with more than 250 employees. That means the rest of respondents (nearly 59%) work in much smaller organizations and on much smaller grant teams. Many are “flying solo.” But beyond staff size, how much does the development department raise annually for the organization? What proportion of this revenue is from grants? What metrics are used to evaluate the success of the GP? Do metrics include: the number of proposals, number of awards (and the associated “win rate”), number of renewable grants, number of new funders? There may be additional development measures around “moves.” How do these metrics impact productivity?

### **Understand and Leverage Personal Skills and Inclination**

Yet, beyond the organization structure, metrics, policies/practices, and even the physical location of the GP in the organization, GPs may consider what part of their role falls into the general broad categories

identified earlier: grant specialist, development professional, leadership, and relationship manager. Considering these overarching roles and including in the “mix” personal experiences and disposition, it is not unreasonable to conclude that an additional key to the GP’s effectiveness in their role is a thorough knowledge of oneself. For example, does the GP consider themselves to have weak, moderate, or strong skills associated with this/these function(s)? Is more training needed or simply more practice? Would the GP consider themselves as having more introverted or extroverted tendencies? How does that impact the way work is carried out? Many in the grants profession admit they are more inclined to be introverted. However, depending on the role, demonstrating the value the GP adds to the department or organization, may sometimes require learning some extrovert behaviors.

Two examples may illustrate how engaging in new behaviors could help leverage the GP’s role and skills to add value: creating a budget and clarifying priorities.

*Creating a budget* is an activity common to GPs as part of the grant proposal process. It may be (or feel) more efficient and perhaps more pleasant to sit at the computer to create a budget drawing from inferences about a program, the funder, and other relevant experience. However, consciously leveraging the value the GP brings to the organization may also include recognizing that budget preparation may not only be about producing a well-designed spreadsheet in support of a grant application. It could be an opportunity to demonstrate understanding to others about what goes into a budget. How to do this? One option is to consider convening and running a budget-building meeting with the program managers and finance staff. This not only showcases the GP’s expertise, but builds understanding, consensus, and some accountability into the proposed budget to be submitted with a proposal.

*Clarifying priorities* is another example where the GP may be presented with an opportunity to add value to the organization. At the least, this opportunity helps to identify which funders and grants to pursue. A GP’s introverted side may incline them to compile a document listing all funded programs in the prior year and send an email to department leadership. While this is needed research, the added value of the GP role may include proposing, offering structure for, and perhaps running a meeting to discuss this list, elicit immediate feedback from management, and ensure follow-up tasks are completed. These front-and-center roles may feel uncomfortable at first, but eventually can build and inspire self-confidence and strengthen the credibility of the GP in the organization or on the fundraising team as a valuable resource.

## **The Grant Professional’s Response to Organization Challenges**

Addressing challenges in the department or organization is another way for the GP to distinguish the value of their role in their department

or organization. Simultaneously, an approach a GP takes to address a challenge can also be part of conscious career decision-making. GrantZone discussion threads captured several themes about GP “conundrums” as individual GPs described specific challenges they faced and sought advice from their GPA peers. A few distinct categories of challenges emerged: 1) an organization’s *good structure*, but *poor understanding* about its fundraising priorities across the organization; 2) an organization’s *poor structure* but *good understanding* of its priorities; 3) internal politics and ethical issues; and 4) organizational issues including how to manage “up” and manage “across.” Most of these situations complicated and compromised the efficiency and effectiveness of the GP. These are not unfamiliar challenges in nonprofit organizations and GPs can learn to leverage these to grow professionally and personally.

Consulting with others both within and outside the organization, such as through GrantZone or a mentor, is one way to explore potential responses to an organizational challenge. Similar to the examples provided earlier, the GP might explore how applying a skill set outside of an existing role, and perhaps out of one’s “comfort zone” might distinguish them as a professional that adds value to the organization. Table 1 provides some potential strategies for addressing each of the four types of challenges described by GPs in GrantZone and could lead to career growth.

*Table 1. Potential Strategies to Address GP Challenges in an Organization*

<b>Challenge</b>	<b>Potential Strategy for the Grant Professional</b>
1. Good structure, poor understanding of priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitate strategic planning process</li> <li>• Demonstrate expertise in program development, evaluation, budget building, and storytelling by “cross-training” others in the department</li> </ul>
2. Poor structure, good understanding of priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review and discuss the grant professional position description and amend if needed</li> <li>• Participate in creation of an integrated fundraising strategy for the department/organization</li> </ul>
3. Internal politics, ethical issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clearly articulate the facts and strategize with superiors, HR</li> <li>• Seek out a mentor or mentor others</li> </ul>
4. Managing up and/or across	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build connections—for oneself, for team members, for others in the organization</li> <li>• Employ widely one of the GP’s strongest skills: communication</li> </ul>

## Conclusion

The Grant Professional (GP) may face many challenges when employed in a nonprofit organization and/or a development department. These challenges may include ambiguity of role, organizational operations, relationships, and even conflict within oneself. An informal analysis of robust GrantZone discussion threads during the first half of 2018 identified several roles of GPA members and specific types of challenges. This paper encourages an intentional way for GPs to reflect on organizational characteristics as well as personal attributes that may impact the GP role. Organizational factors include structure, size, and metrics, while personal attributes include technical and soft skills, personal strengths, inclinations, and preferences. It also offers some guidance to help less experienced GPs maximize their value to their organization. Leveraging both organizational and self-knowledge may lead the GP to discover ways to demonstrate the value they add to their organizations in their specific role. This strategy also has the potential to help the grant professional advance in their personal and professional growth.

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## *GPA Strategy Papers Volume 6, Issue 4*

# **Improving Nonprofit Sustainability with Focused and Engaged Strategic Planning**

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### **Abstract**

Staying operational, relevant, and competitive is a constant challenge for nonprofits due to the myriad of factors that challenge the continuation of programs. The current funding environment dictates efficient and innovative approaches to secure funding and support, so it is essential that adequate time be invested in programmatic and organizational development efforts that build capacity to achieve these outcomes. A focused strategic plan, developed by engaged stakeholders, aligns the critical elements of operations with improvement efforts to ensure program growth. Focusing on five proven critical elements to each plan—vision, data analysis, priority development, SMART goals, and implementation management—and incorporating new, inclusive ideas and efficient tools will ensure infrastructure for continuous evolution and create the pathway to long-term nonprofit sustainability.

### **Why Invest in a Strategic Plan?**

Sustainability is an ongoing challenge for most nonprofits and their fundraising staff. A recent report on the financial health of nonprofit organizations found that approximately 7% of nonprofits are technically insolvent, while another 30% struggle with enough cash reserves to continue operations for a sufficient amount of time. More than 50% of organizations have less than a month's worth of reserves on hand (Guidestar, 2018). Why is ongoing development and sustainability so hard to achieve in this sector?

A key indicator is strategy. With a growing number of funding opportunities limited to programmatic operations, organizations are constantly stretched thin trying to meet the requirements of funders,

deliver programming, and support operational costs. They stay in a difficult cycle of chasing funds to meet immediate needs (Latham, 2016). The value of the programming and its impact inevitably get lost, which decreases capacity to develop a long-term direction for the organization. This often results in stagnant programs that do not continue to evolve to meet the needs of the target population or attract funding, ultimately inhibiting sustainability.

Investment in demographic and generative planning efforts constructs an ongoing pathway for continuous improvement and operational development. Strategic plans provide the means to this capacity building through a process of envisioning a future state, analyzing the current environment, prioritizing needs, and setting goals that achieve success (University of Kansas, 2019). These efforts result in more focused programming and staffing, as well as more efficient operational infrastructure that demonstrates agency and programmatic value.

## **Essential Elements of the Strategic Plan**

A nonprofit organization that wants to continue growth and stay competitive for opportunities needs solid strategies to prepare them for a constantly changing environment (Richardson, 2004). The strategic planning process essentially builds the foundation to create, monitor, and measure organizational success where the result is increased capacity (Mittenthal, 2018). A strategic plan establishes a road map with clear sight lines of the future programmatic and operational state, providing a better understanding of the organization and the sector/constituency served. Ongoing quality improvement and operational goal monitoring are also developed. In essence, strategic planning provides the focus and direction to move from plan to action.

## **Where to Start?**

Start with key stakeholders. Your strategic planning efforts should not just include your leadership team and board of directors. Include members of the program and fundraising staff, volunteers, and especially your constituency. Any additional community members relevant to the work being done by the program or agencies that are working closely with the organization or its programming should also have representation. Involving this group of stakeholders in strategic planning can be an effective engagement tool, especially with millennials (Morrison, 2013), that provides an additional lens with which to view the current organizational and community environment.

Next, set a reasonable timeline for completion. Spreading the process out over a three to six-month timeline will allow enough time to complete the most critical portions of the plan without overwhelming volunteer

participants in the process. You will need to survey your work team to see what will work best for them. Whether you decide to break the work out over time into multiple one- or two-hour meetings, or schedule larger blocks of time for a workshop, get the schedule set and calendars reserved.

Finally, consider other planning efforts relevant to the focus, constituency, and activities of the organization. For example, a nonprofit focused on historical preservation, should consider reviewing or investigating recent plans done by the local tourism bureau, community development agencies, or planning commissions. Aligning the nonprofit's efforts with work already being done both inside and outside the organization will only serve to strengthen the new plan. It will also enlighten the planning team to forces of change that might be at work in the community that could potentially impact future work.

The strategic planning process is ready to start once the initial planning steps are completed. It is important to understand there is no one way or perfect way to develop a strategic plan (Martin, 2014). Although many methods and methodologies have been developed and touted over time and through different industries and sectors, most seasoned planners agree every plan should have five key elements (Figure 1). These include a vision, data, priorities, SMART goals and objectives, and a management and implementation plan. Stick to these critical elements and the rest will fall into place.



*Figure 1: Primary elements of the strategic plan*

### *Vision*

The vision is the first critical element of the strategic plan and requires adequate attention during the planning process (Nagy & Fawcett, 2018). It clearly defines the future state to be achieved, and should represent the investment of the key stakeholders. It is not what is to be done or the focus of efforts, or to be confused with organizational mission, values or immediate goals. It should represent beliefs by key stakeholders of what the long-term purpose of the organization or program is designed to address in an easy-to-communicate format.

Developing a vision provides key stakeholders an opportunity and space to “daydream” for the future state they hope to achieve for their community or world. It is also an opportunity to set the organization

apart from others. Exercises that involve imagining that broader, longer-term future are great ways to help a robust team on a track for envisioning what is possible. There are many tools and exercises that inspire, and get people thinking about what could be possible (Washington Nonprofits, 2016). For example, there are a variety of exercises that ask participants to imagine receiving an award for the organization's accomplishments. They are then asked to write down what was heard by the presenters and felt by the group. By investing time in a solid vision statement that sets the organization on a journey to achieve something larger, a path to sustainability is also created as it inspires action and provides a tool to test all future goals and objectives for alignment (AchieveIt, 2014).

### *Data*

Data is the next critical element of your strategic plan. Its collection and review provide the stepping stones of the strategic plan pathway (Kenny, 2018). Therefore, it is important to get it right. Unfortunately, this does not always happen because many organizations limit the scope of the data utilized. Data for strategic planning should not only include information that is relevant to your organization and area of focus, such as the number of people served, satisfaction or learning scores, etc., but also include broader data that informs on current evidence-based practice, the current capacity of the organization, the current community environment, and needs of the target population.

If the organization does not have up-to-date, community-informed data, information, and input, it will likely risk duplicating efforts and living in the bubble with stagnating programming. Developing a plan around broad, recent information that defines the current environment helps deliver a robust report to key stakeholders that informs ongoing program development and operations. For example, a coalition looking only at data on the employment rates and housing status of the clients they serve will be limiting their possible impact because they are not considering what the actual employment and housing availability are in the community. They may need to focus more efforts on developing opportunities for clients to be successful, but they will not learn that if they do not look at the community data.

Data from census, health and human services, education, etc. is a good place to start as it informs on the community current state such as the demographics of the community, socio-economic status, and community resources. This portion of the plan should also include other reports and data like a local community needs assessment from a related agency partner or a recent survey of the constituency served. A summary of the most relevant information that stands out the most in a brief one-to-two-page brief for the planning team to review will help them focus on what is important.

Also consider qualitative data as part of this portion of the planning process, including researching and reviewing the latest information on evidence-based models and promising practices. This will educate your team on the most effective and efficient methods of programming to consider whether current resources are optimally utilized. Focus groups and surveys—both internal and external—are also effective tools that provide insight on experiences, needs, and barriers. It provides an opportunity to also engage key stakeholders for important feedback that strengthens your ongoing planning.

It is important to thoroughly analyze data once it is collected. This is critical to the next portion of the strategic planning process which is determining priorities. Carefully consider what information might have stood out from other data, new information that was not previously known, and the feedback provided by key stakeholders. Highlight these areas to take into the next phase of the process.

### *Priorities*

Once the planning team has completed its review of the data collected, it is time to identify what themes have been revealed. Again, this should not be limited to just the organization and its constituents. Themes present in the community or sector relevant to the organization and those it serves should also be taken into consideration, as should other relevant efforts or forces of change in the community (NACCHO, 2013).

For example, qualitative data collection may reveal that access to substance use disorder treatment is the primary barrier for most of an organization's constituents. Further community information gathered reveals, however, there are five new treatment providers opening in the next six months. Possible partnerships with these agencies versus starting a program would be key topics to consider as part of the process. This is a good time to stop and revisit the vision that was established and decide what themes are most important to the organization and future state they are trying to reach. This will make identifying what is most important easier.

The planning team can then consider what resources the organization currently has, as well as what resources will be necessary to address the priorities. At this stage in the process, identifying the types of relationships, policies, conditions, and decisions affecting the issues, organization, or program is key. A strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis tool (Figure 2) is helpful to organize key points from the discussion. After careful consideration, planning teams may add additional priorities relevant to building organizational capacity. For example, additional facilities or technology determined necessary to meet operational goals will need to be included as part of the new plan.



Figure 2: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats tool

It is common to see multiple themes revealed in the data analysis portion. This presents an opportunity to identify similar resource needs for different issues. When the same resource is necessary for multiple problems, this makes it easier for planning teams to prioritize accordingly. A strategy map or a project charter can be helpful tools to implement help at this stage of the strategic planning process. They also organize key points into a single, easy-to-read summary that will keep the team on track.

### SMART Goals and Objectives

Once the planning team has identified the top priorities for the organization, they can begin laying out the goals and objectives that will be necessary to address the priorities and make strides toward their vision. Formulate goal statements around addressing the strategic priorities that were identified and clearly align them with the vision statement. Incorporating the data previously collected provides the necessary information to baseline current state and from there develop goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time-bound (SMART). Utilizing the SMART methodology can be a valuable tool in this part of the process (Figure 3).

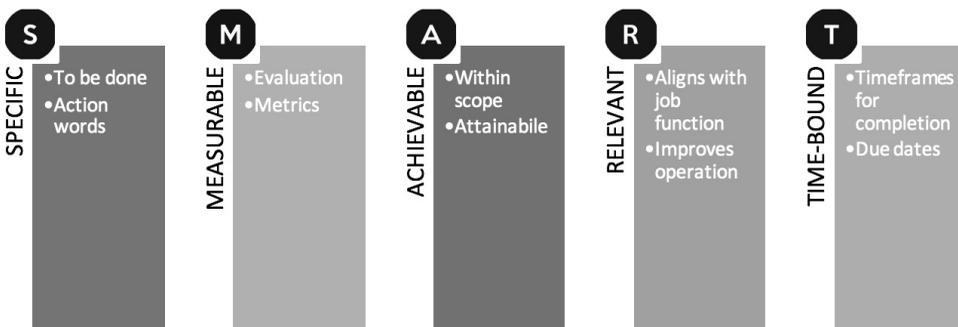


Figure 3: SMART Goals tool

It is important to consider a couple of critical factors in this segment of the planning process. First, are your primary goals relevant to and aligned with the vision of the planning team? While it is not intended for the goals to achieve the desired future state, they should be activities or objectives necessary to reach it. For example, a nonprofit envisioning a future where all children in the community are completing high school reviews data indicating poverty and other social factors that are barriers to successfully completing high school. The goals and objectives needed to reach this vision should be aligned with addressing those social and environmental issues. Setting goals around efforts that demonstrate improvement in some of the social factors, therefore, would be critical, first steps in this strategic plan.

Other critical elements to consider in this portion of the process are whether or not objectives are achievable and how long it will take to do so (Jackson, 2019). Ask important questions, such as “How will we know we are being successful?” “How will we know we are focused on the right target or objective?” When the team is on the same page about what it will take to accomplish the goals, clear stepping stones are marked to get to the future state.

The timeline of the strategic plan should also be considered. Business and industry traditionally use a three- to five-year plan. However, with rapidly developing technology, a younger workforce that changes jobs frequently and a fast-changing marketplace, there is indication that the business sector is shortening its plans to one to two years (Vanderbloemen, 2016). Nonprofits may benefit from this model as well, given the volatility of funding opportunities, particularly grants, which continue to provide shorter funding terms and constantly changing funding tracks.

### *Management and Implementation*

The final step in the strategic planning process is the implementation. A common story among many nonprofits is that after developing a strategic plan, they do not utilize it. Everything goes back to the previous day-to-day activities. It is critical to utilize tools that facilitate buy-in from key personnel and constituency, as well as to complete the necessary activities that accomplish the goals and objectives.

First, make sure the plan is visible to everyone within the organization. Making use of stories and examples that excite the group about the vision is a great first start. If they are excited about the future state that could be possible and the vision is evident in many areas of the organization, buy-in and ongoing support will be much easier. Here, a communication plan that outlines a calendar of venues, messages, and target audiences will result in ongoing visibility. Incorporating the vision statement on the organization’s internal and external communication tools is one way to keep it visible on an ongoing basis.

Clearly communicating and monitoring objectives and activities must also be an important priority for leadership prior to implementing the strategic plan. Without instruction, it may be difficult for staff to understand their role in helping to achieve a long-term vision or yearly goals (Green, 2011). However, this is most often overlooked by leadership and where most plans fail. Develop rolling action item lists (RAILS) that break down the specific activities necessary for each goal and objective out into smaller steps and include a deliverable, due date, and necessary resources. This enables staff to focus on their part. It will also keep objectives on track which ultimately result in accomplished goals.

For example, a nonprofit agency choosing increased funding as part of their strategic plan, need not overwhelm grant and fundraising staff by only presenting the large dollar amount selected as the goal. Clarifying the objectives and activities like research of available funding or development of proposals will make the larger goal seem more achievable. Adding ongoing progress reports for team members will also encourage attention to deadlines and create a culture of accountability. Regular high-level reports, in such venues as monthly board or management meetings are also helpful. Providing updates to staff and community through venues like newsletters will also foster accountability.

Finally, update the plan on a regular basis. Ongoing strategic planning develops capacity for continued programmatic evolution. Utilize each plan as infrastructure to help build the next plan that ultimately reaches the desired future state. It will also help the organization identify areas of strength and weakness, as well as where changes in strategy might be necessary. Consider the use of plan-do-check-adjust (PDCA) tools to identify opportunities for improvement and growth. All of these efforts establish a culture of ongoing quality improvement.

## **Conclusion**

Nonprofit agencies can reduce the challenges of achieving ongoing sustainability. Investing time in ongoing strategic planning will drive organizational focus and establish a road map to long-term success. By engaging key stakeholders in envisioning a shared future and increasing their understanding of current needs and environment, clear goals and objectives are developed that position the organization to move forward. It also provides staff and other supporters the opportunity to more effectively contribute to the organization's growth and success. In the long-term, this develops overall capacity to adapt to changing environments and attract long-term support.

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