

**STRATEGY PAPERS
COMMITTEE**

**Joshua Einhorn, Ed.D.
Editor**

**Sean Kirby and Joan
L. Whitman, Ph.D.
GPA Publications
Committee Co-Chairs**

GPA Strategy Papers offer practical solutions to current and emerging issues facing grant professionals. *The GPA Strategy Papers Committee* accepts concept proposals on a quarterly basis and uses a double-blind peer review process. Members and nonmembers may submit concept proposals and have electronic access to approved papers.

Articles in this publication represent the opinions and views of the author(s) only.

www.grantprofessionals.org

An Anthropological Approach to a Grant Professional's Toolkit

*Erica M. Dziedzic, Ph.D.
Grant Professional and Anthropologist
East Lansing, MI*

GPC Competencies:

- 02. Organizational Development For Grant Seeking
- 03. Strategies for Effective Program Design and Development

Abstract

Grant professionals strive to capture the mission and voice of an organization in order to write successful grant proposals. Anthropologists are trained to embed themselves in communities using a skill set that helps them to understand cultural practices. This paper discusses three anthropological strategies that are useful when gathering organizational information, grant-seeking, and crafting grant proposal narratives: open-ended questioning, participant observation, and mixed methods data collection that involves collecting qualitative and quantitative data. The focus of these strategies is to tease apart how non-profit professionals talk about their work versus how they accomplish their work – akin to observing an organization's mission in practice. Collecting information in this way provides the grant professional with knowledge pertaining to how a non-profit is organized and program development, which in turn informs more effective grant seeking and proposal writing. Strategies are also considered for information gathering in a COVID-19 social-distancing world.

Introduction

As an anthropologist – specifically, an archaeologist - the author used grant funding to go on dirt-filled adventures exploring humanity's ancient past. Transitioning from archaeological project-based proposals to writing grant proposals as an employee for non-profit organizations requires a great shift in how information is gathered and how proposals are prepared. At the heart of this professional challenge is the question: how do grant professionals capture the mission and voice of an organization in order to write compelling grant proposals? To address this issue, the author put on her anthropologist hat.

This strategy paper describes an anthropological approach to grant writing using components from the ethnographic method, which is common to social science fields. The following techniques are adapted for collecting information, grant seeking, and proposal writing for non-profit organizations: open-ended questioning, participant observation, and mixed methods data collection that involves collecting qualitative and quantitative data. Practical examples from the author's experience describe each methodological component. Finally, as an ongoing learning experience, the author discusses limitations of this approach and adaptations for a post-COVID-19 world.

The Anthropologist as Grant Professional

There are many ways in which anthropology informs grant writing. Anthropology is the study of human cultures throughout space and time via language, behavior, material culture and human biology. A simple definition of culture is the shared understandings among a group of people or a community that influences how we think and guides our behavior (Muckle & Tubelle de González, 2016). The anthropological perspective is holistic and interconnected. Anthropologists consider how various cultural systems (e.g., social, economic, ideological) and components (e.g., communication, food, housing) guide human behavior and beliefs (Muckle & Tubelle de González, 2016). Anthropology is interdisciplinary by nature. Anthropologists incorporate various theoretical standpoints from other social science disciplines and rely on multiple methods of analysis, both quantitative and qualitative, in order to understand and describe why people do what they do or believe what they believe relative to a specific time and place. Both of these characteristics - interconnectedness and interdisciplinarity – exemplify the work of grant professionals as they search for appropriate grant opportunities and craft proposal narratives that: a) reflect the capacity of the people doing the work; and b) present multi-faceted solutions to complex human-centered problems. *But what does an anthropological approach to grant writing look like?*

Using practical techniques from the ethnographic method to collect organizational information and to inform proposal writing is effective. This method, common among social scientists, employs observation, analysis of documents, and interviews to understand the worldview of a community or group of people and how their worldview informs their actions (Muckle & Tubelle de González, 2016; Weller, 2000). The immersive techniques of ethnography allow for a rich, “thick description” of social actions - in-depth observations using the human senses and a process of careful questioning between the anthropologist and informants with the ultimate goal of eliciting the meaning of actions within a cultural context (Geertz, 1973). Ethnography entails, but is not limited to: taking detailed notes during informal and formal conversations with informants (not just *what* is said, but *how* it is said); observing the environment and its surrounding colors, smells, and sounds; and noting who the actors are, their roles in the community, and what they do. Ethnography is particularly suited for business settings because data come from direct observations as they happen and, therefore, can offer critical information in addition to surveys and focus groups (Ladner, 2014).

The Method

Anthropology contributes to the grant writing profession in many ways. The scope of this paper discusses anthropology's value mainly in relation to collecting organizational information, grant-seeking, and proposal narrative writing. Grant professionals strive to preserve the voices of the staff members and the community they serve in grant proposals. Intentionally using an anthropological lens while collecting organizational information distinguishes between what people say and what people do and situates how programs are developed in the context of an organization's culture. This differentiation is characterized as observing *ideal* vs. *real* behavior, meaning what people say about their actions and beliefs vs. how people actually behave (Muckle & Tubelle de González, 2016). In order to capture a rich and full understanding of an organization, observation of staff at work and analysis of internal documents illustrates how staff talk about their work (i.e., ideal behavior) and how staff accomplish their work (i.e., their actions or real behavior). The following are examples of these ethnographic techniques at work.

Open-ended questions. Anthropologists who are new to a community and in an exploratory stage usually begin by gathering descriptions with unstructured interviews or collecting narrative histories (Spradley, 1979; Weller, 2000). In the setting of a non-profit organization, this looks like engaging in one-on-one conversations with program directors and volunteers and asking open-ended questions that allow for fluid conversations about program goals and client services. For example, the author spoke to volunteers and staff who provided advocacy services to clients and were engaged in program development. These meetings initially took place in-person and transitioned to Zoom meetings or phone calls once COVID-19 social distancing policies became the norm. The author started conversations by asking these individuals to describe their biggest goals for the program and for clients, and the conversations evolved from there. Staff and volunteers readily shared their advocacy experiences and their perceptions of what clients gained upon leaving the programs. During these conversations, the author asked probing questions for more information or for clarity, but the author mostly listened while staff or volunteers described programs and their experiences. Social scientists call this the *emic* point of view or capturing the perspective of organization members in their own words (Spradley, 1979; Weller, 2000; Ladner, 2014). By intentionally seeking the *emic* point of view, one learns the language of the organization, which informs grant seeking and the crafting of proposal narratives. For instance, this information gathering exercise allowed the author to identify the theme of empowerment and what it meant to organization members to empower clients, a through-line from the mission of the organization to how individuals spoke about and meaningfully acted on their work. Knowing this underlying theme guided the author through the process of vetting grant opportunities and proposal writing.

Participant observation. Anthropologists frequently use this method, which involves immersing oneself in the daily lives of community members and observing regular activities while maintaining a distance in order to carefully consider and reflect on what is happening (Muckle & Tubelle de González, 2016). Within a non-profit environment, one can observe participants by taking careful notes during meetings and listening to how staff describe their work, their program goals, and what they believe their clients need. When possible, sitting in the background at an organization's offices and observing how staff interact with clients is incredibly informative and provides glimpses of *real* behavior. Listening and observing how supporters and volunteers talk about the work of the organization provides another valuable perspective; this can be done in-person or virtually. As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, the author used a non-profit organization's social media channels to observe how supporters talked about its work and mission. The author also attended fundraising events via Zoom, which were excellent opportunities to witness how supporters talked about an organization's work in real time. Collecting these various perspectives of an organization's work and impact in a community and observing staff-client interactions can add rich, differentiating details to a proposal narrative.

Mixed methods data collection, qualitative (documentation). Pre- and post-surveys, when accessible, are crucial documents that report on clients' progress and experiences with services, whether they are completed by clients or staff members. These valuable pieces of information often illustrate the clients' perspectives of services - a glimpse of clients' voices - which is critical in understanding the impact of the organization's work and the *real* behavior of staff members. Documentation written by the Executive Director (ED) and program directors are great examples of learning the language of an organization and how the ED and staff visualize the work of the organization (*ideal* behavior). Conducting a comparison of client surveys and internal staff documents is an excellent source of *real* vs. *ideal* behavior that adds a critical layer of understanding regarding the culture of the organization, which is very useful during information gathering and grant-seeking stages. It can also help clarify client needs.

Mixed methods data collection, quantitative data. Tallying the results of fundraising events, such as the number of donors, their geographic locations, and the amount of dollars raised, is a great way to quantitatively assess community support. Additionally, tracking the number of clients served and the amount and type of grant support an organization has won enables them to quantitatively demonstrate their impact. Quantitative and qualitative data are key sets of information for both anthropologists and

grant professionals. The numbers and the narrative both tell the story of an organization and, when taken together, are critical bodies of information for vetting of funding opportunities and proposal writing.

Employing an anthropological approach to grant writing teases out the difference between real versus ideal behavior of program staff and volunteers, which enhances the grant professional's knowledge of program design and development. Moreover, this approach increases knowledge of organizational development as it pertains to grant seeking because it reveals the kinds of grants the organization has the capacity to manage, as opposed to what the grant professional has in mind. For instance, applying for multiple foundation grants with smaller funding awards may be more suitable than applying for state or federal grants with large funding awards. Certain foundation grants that offer smaller grant awards and/or have less stringent application and reporting processes often allow a degree of freedom for incorporating the language and values of the organization into the proposal. This type of funder may be a better fit for some non-profit organizations, compared to funders that offer larger awards with complex application and reporting processes.

Limitations

There are limitations to this anthropological approach to grant writing. The activities described in this paper were carried out for a nonprofit organization with a staff size of less than ten individuals. This idea has not been tested with organizations with larger staff sizes. Access to confidential documents, such as client surveys and internal documents written by management staff, are extremely helpful in gaining perspective of different voices (e.g., staff, supporters, and clients), but may not always be available for use, especially if the grant professional is not an employee of the organization. Observation and event attendance may not always be permissible; for instance, due to HIPPA compliance and rules and regulations. Furthermore, the author conducted some of this work pre-COVID-19 social distancing mandates when it was easier to move in group settings. However, witnessing the incredible work of nonprofit organizations at any level is helpful for gaining a deeper picture of their mission and organizational culture. Strategies to accommodate current COVID-19 safety precautions and for those grant writing consultants whose clients are long distance could include watching recorded events organized by the nonprofit or requesting to attend virtual staff meetings and events. Finally, this approach is time-consuming work that may not always be realistic, especially for freelance consultants who have commitments to multiple clients.

Conclusion

An anthropological approach to grant writing enables the grant professional to capture the mission and voice of a non-profit organization using three strategies: open-ended questioning, participant observation, and collecting qualitative and quantitative data. This approach incorporates various perspectives of an organization's mission and distinguishes between how non-profit professionals talk about their work versus what they are doing or accomplishing, providing an in-depth understanding of an organization's culture. These strategies are useful when gathering organizational information, grant seeking, and crafting proposal narratives. Knowledge gained from language, actions (e.g., services, support), documentation, beliefs, and staff-client interactions all tell the story of an organization - capturing the voices and visions of those who are creating social change. This information can strengthen any grant proposal and set the organization apart from other non-profits within their region that may be offering similar services.

References

- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. HarperCollins Publishers.
- Ladner, S. (2014). *Practical Ethnography: a guide to doing ethnography in the private sector*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Muckle, R.J. & Tubelle de González, L. (2016). *Through the lens of anthropology*. University of Toronto Press.
- Spradley, J.P. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Weller, S. C. (2000). Structured interviewing and questionnaire construction. In *Handbook of methods in cultural anthropology*. Bernard, H.R. (ed.) Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

AUTHOR BIOSKETCH:

Erica M. Dziedzic, Ph.D., is a grant professional and anthropologist living in East Lansing, Michigan. Erica started her career as an archaeologist and has worked on field projects across the United States and in Peru, Bolivia, and Senegal. She transitioned to grant writing in order to apply the research skills she learned in academia to public sector work. Erica holds a B.A. in Anthropology from the University of Michigan and both her M.A. and Ph.D. in Anthropology from Michigan State University. She is a member of the Grant Professionals Association and the American Anthropological Association. Erica can be reached at ericadziedzic23@gmail.com.