

## CHAPTER 1

# The Process Approach

## HOW AND WHY

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- What is the difference between a proposal and a grant?
- What is a systematic approach to proposal writing?
- How can I find appropriate Requests for Proposals for my organization?
- What section headings do I use in my proposal?
- Why should my organization spend time and effort on proposal writing?
- What is the actual proposal-writing process?
- What is proactive versus reactive proposal writing and why is proactive a better approach?

Individuals frequently use the term *grant writing* without realizing that a grant is the funding instrument issued by the agency, corporation, or foundation providing the money for the program. Individuals, colleges, and organizations submit a proposal to solicit funding for a project or program they have developed. Throughout this book, therefore, I will use the term *proposal* to refer to the document you prepare and submit.

Successful proposal writing can begin in a number of ways but always follows a **systematic process**. As will be seen in the chapter on developing the idea, a grant proposal can develop from *review of needs of the institution or population to be served*. It can also begin with *information about a successful program targeting a similar college or group*. You might also review published Requests for Proposals (RFPs) or recently awarded grants and find one that fits your students. Regardless of how you identify the source of funds and whether it is a federal, state, local, or a corporate source or a foundation, the

#### **Proposal Ideas Can Develop from Different Approaches**

Proposal ideas can develop from studying institutional needs, successful programs, Requests for Proposals, and/or recently awarded grants.

**What Is an RFP?**

An RFP is a document issued by a government agency, a corporate entity, or a charitable foundation inviting applications for funding. The RFP provides the rules, regulations, and framework to be followed in preparing a proposal.

**What Is Scaffolding?**

Scaffolding uses instructional techniques designed to build student knowledge, skills, and understanding through small steps that build upon one another.

**A Grant Is Never Finished**

You can revise a proposal forever, always finding little changes here and there. At some point you have to stop and begin the submission process. If the submission is late, you lose your opportunity!

**Remember the Reader**

Peer reviewers frequently have to read and score 10 or more proposals in a short period of time. Make it readable, interesting, and attention getting through picture words and active verbs.

process approach presented in this book will help you prepare and submit a complete, well-written, coherent, consistent, and supported proposal on time and within budget constraints.

This book uses a scaffolding approach to take you through the process with examples and practice so that writing a grant proposal becomes second nature for you. Once you have mastered the process, you will find that it can be used for other projects.

In the past, before grants were submitted electronically, one of my deans told me that *a proposal is never finished*; you can always find sections and sentences to edit for clarity, style, conciseness, and impact. However at some point you have to begin copying, collating, checking, and packaging for mailing. The same is true today; at some point before the deadline date and time the proposal has to be submitted for review. If you miss the deadline, you miss the opportunity to compete. If you are within an institution there are review steps leading up to final submission by your Office of Research and Sponsored Programs (ORSP) (a.k.a. grants office), and often your final proposal must be ready a week or more ahead of the actual deadline for review. Many times the final review process will reveal inconsistencies or errors you did not catch, and so it is equally important that you be available to consult on or complete any changes that need to be made before submission.

It is also critically important that the proposal be clear, readable, and understandable by those who review your submission. You will see that by using the exact headings provided in the RFP you will make your task and that of the readers easier. In addition the prose cannot be stilted. As with good writing in general the reader must be drawn in by your narrative. One way to do this is to use a suggestion I was given by a member of a writing team I worked with: use the active voice through **picture words and action verbs**. In Appendix A you will see tables that contain examples of these.

The process of grant writing can be broken down into steps. When these steps are followed in sequence a complete and competitive grant proposal is the result. The approach taken here is to map out the proposal

using charts, tables, and diagrams and then to write the narrative that explains and supports what you are going to do.

A proposal is designed to market you and your program to individuals or government agencies that have money to support projects of interest. Your proposal document must convince readers/funders that:

- The group you are intending to serve is within their preferred population group;
- The individuals you are serving have sufficient need to warrant funding;
- Your program objectives are specific, measureable, attainable, realistic, and time oriented (SMART);
- The logic model for your proposal shows a clear and effective process;
- Your program activities will lead to the achievement of the program objectives;
- Your program design addresses the needs of the group/population you are going to serve;
- The design/activities of your program have merit given your presentation of relevant supporting research;
- You and your organization are well qualified and are, in fact, the best group to carry out the program because of past experience, location, purpose, or mission;
- The expertise of the project directors and staff assures program success;
- The environment in which the program will occur allocates sufficient space and support; and
- The proposed evaluation will demonstrate that your objectives have been met.

A critical question you might ask is “Why learn to write and submit grant proposals?” There are several reasons:

First, tax levy funding for student scholarships, community projects, after-school activities, enrichment programs for students, parent workshops, urban renewal, health initiatives, curriculum development, professional development, research, and innovative approaches has never been easy to get; recently, funds allocated for these critical activities has become virtually nonexistent. Local, state, and federal governments and private and corporate funders have always funded these types of programs, but many individuals have not tapped these resources. Now with tax funding shrinking as greater constraints are put on the available dollars, more and more individuals are turning to non-tax sources—such as grants—to support programs.

As more individuals turn to these resources it will become more difficult to win funds. Proposals will have to become more carefully thought out, structured, supported, and crafted to sell the funders on the value of your program and your ability to carry out your plan and achieve success. Some funding programs provide

#### **What Is Tax Levy Funding?**

**Many organizations that seek grant funding obtain their basic operating expenses through federal, state, or local taxes.**

**While the funding received may be sufficient for business as usual, it often does not allow for innovative approaches. Grant funds will permit an organization to try something new. If it produces expected outcomes, they can adopt it as usual practice.**

continuing grant seekers additional points for prior experience (U.S. Department of Education TRIO programs are the most well-known example) so that new first-time proposers must achieve an almost perfect submission to receive funding.

Further, there are many funding streams available, and although there is some commonality among funders regarding how and what to submit for funding, each opportunity demands adherence to a unique set of guidelines for how, what, when, and where to submit. This book will give you the information you need to understand and respond to RFPs.

Second, a majority of community-based organizations and schools depend on allocations and donations from constituencies to carry out programs and to provide needed services. In troubling economic times the support often decreases, forcing cuts in programs, reduction in services to constituencies, or cutbacks in personnel.

Third, grant writing and preparation is a challenging and creative process entailing working with others to:

- Identify needs (program purpose and goals);
- Decide what you can and want to accomplish (program objectives);
- Develop a logic model that shows the relationships among inputs/resources, activities, outputs, outcomes (short term and long term), and impact;
- Determine what can be done to address the needs and achieve the objectives (program design);
- Design an approach to implement the activities you select (program design and program management);
- Organize an approach to assess whether you have accomplished the objectives (program evaluation); and
- Explain how you will let others know about your program (program dissemination).

Fourth, it is critical that you use the selection criteria provided in the RFP to structure your proposal and that you respond to each element completely in order to maximize the points you will receive. Grants are awarded using the scores that are provided by a panel of readers. Definitely for federal grants, and in some state grants, there are usually three readers who independently score your proposal using the point values for each element of the selection criteria. The readers' total scores are averaged, and all proposals are ranked in score order. Funding begins with the highest scoring proposal and continues

**What Are Selection Criteria?**

Each RFP provides a set of questions that must be answered in detail in your proposal. These "selection criteria" are associated with point values and are used by reviewers to "score" your work. The better you respond to the selection criteria, the more points you receive and the more likely it is that you will receive funding.

down the ranked list until funding is exhausted. The higher your score, the more likely you will be in the funding band.

You can find funding in several ways:

- Review available RFPs, using the Forecast of Funding Opportunities or an online search program (such as Grants.gov, Pivot, or the Foundation Center search program—see suggestions in Chapter 5) to determine the funding opportunities that are/will be available;
- Subscribe to newsletters and e-mail alerts that provide information on newly announced RFPs;
- Develop an organizational database to identify areas for funding along with needs, goals, objectives, and assessments;
- Maintain an electronic database of past proposals (funded and unfunded) with reviewer ratings if available; or, best,
- Employ a combination of all of the above.

Fifth, an aspect of the process that is ongoing and crucial, and takes place outside of grant preparation, involves knowing your organization. It is widely agreed that self-knowledge is the key to advancing new programs. This aspect relates to the idea phase and is comprised of continuing identification of *organizational needs, best practices, innovative programs, and future directions*. At least two or three times per year a group of individuals from across your organization should meet to review and add to lists of needs, practices, programs, and directions. These individuals should agree to look at current literature pertinent to your organization and review research relevant to these areas for your organization based on previous discussions. It is critical, as well, that meetings such as these take place in relation to a specific RFP, as well as within the preparation phase, but with a smaller, more focused group.

Sixth, many organizations have ongoing improvement projects in which teams of your colleagues meet to design more effective approaches to managing various aspects of the ongoing work. In addition, there are well-documented national challenges that can be cited to support the grant work of your organization, including readiness to learn, mathematical literacy, supporting English language learners, high school graduation, college readiness, college persistence, college graduation, and career readiness. There is also a national effort to increase preparation in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), and many funders are asking that this be a focus of proposals.

Seventh, a grant proposal is a working document. You never finish it; you merely stop writing in time to meet the funding deadline. Programs can be funded by multiple sources—as long as each funder's resources are used to underwrite clearly different aspects of a project. One well-written proposal can be the foundation for grants in response to a number of different RFPs.

At the beginning of each chapter that addresses a section of the grant proposal, the selection criteria guiding your writing of that section will be presented. These selection criteria can be found in the application packet for the grant that is part of the RFP. My approach has always been to excerpt the selection criteria from the RFP and use them as the template for the table of contents and for the grant narrative.

Eighth, and finally, you and your organization can practice proactive or reactive grant writing. A proactive approach is one in which your organization consistently and systematically considers local needs, challenges, and opportunities and how they might be met through external funding. Perhaps there is already a group that meets regularly to plan for future needs and innovations, but I think this is unlikely. Many institutions are siloed, that is, opportunities for cross-conversations focused on the future are limited by the daily pressing issues. In contrast, a reactive approach responds to individual RFPs as they are released and then scrambles to find a relevant program initiative to include. As a grant writer for the past 35 years at my college I can attest to the efficacy of a proactive mind-set but have been able to participate in such efforts only a handful of times.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

The process approach to proposal writing focuses on a set of systematic, organized, and thoughtful methods to conceptualize, design, write, edit, and finalize a competitive set of documents to submit to a funder. This chapter reviews ways in which an institution or organization can find ideas for proposals. In addition, a series of questions is posed so that the user can determine whether his or her idea, the target population, research-based activities, organizational strengths and the location of the project meet the requirements of the funding agency. Finally, seven reasons why institutions and organizations should seek external funding are presented. These can be used to motivate others in your institution to support your efforts to seek funding. They include dwindling tax levy funds for needed support initiatives for underrepresented urban and rural students; lessening of individual donations to support extracurricular programming; the challenge of creating a proposal and receiving funding; the selection criteria to provide a way of viewing the capabilities of your institution and creating innovative approaches to meeting needs; the in-depth knowledge of an institution/organization needed to write a proposal; support for ongoing improvement and development efforts; the use of a proposal as a working document; and creation of an institutional mind-set for attending and responding to funding opportunities.