

## **Grants and Foundations Review™**

### **Sustainability: More than a fiction writing contest**

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by Cassandra O'Neill, MA

What does sustainability mean? If you are writing a grant, there is usually a sustainability section, where you are asked to describe how the new program you are requesting funds for will be continued after the grant ends. The reality is that new programs started with grant funds are almost never continued when the grant ends. This is because funders only want to fund new programs. However, what most grant proposals include in the sustainability section, is a list of the foundations the organization plans to submit grants to in order to continue the proposed program. What if sustainability was more than a fiction writing contest, what if funding was directed to activities that would result in lasting change and not require more money after the grant ended? Why are funders only interested in funding new programs that there is no way to continue?

Many decades ago, foundations funded new programs and the federal government picked up the funding after the grant ended. At that time, it made sense for foundations to limit funding to new programs. However, it has not been true for quite awhile. The federal government is not picking up funding for programs that were initially funded by foundation grants. And the federal government itself is now using discretionary funding to fund new programs – AS IF -- there was funding available to continue new programs somewhere out there. The reality is that there is not.

Is it possible to create lasting change with grants? What can organizations do differently? Here is one example of a new program that did not continue after the grant ended, and what could have been done differently. A university applied for and received a grant to increase Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) achievement of girls in elementary and middle school. The main activity of the grant was to deliver STEM programming during summer day camps. Although the university partnered with an organization that served girls in this age group, this organization did not operate day camp programs. As a result, a large majority of the funding went to develop a new day camp, recruit students, and operate the camp. When the grant ended, so did the program.

What else was possible? What if the university partnered with one or more of the many youth serving organizations in the community that operated summer day camps? The grant money could have been spent to develop curricula and training materials, and to provide training to a cadre of professionals that would both operate STEM programming, and continue training as new staff were hired. If they had done that, the program would have continued after the grant. And the sustainability section would not have been a fictional description of how more grant money was going to be received to continue the program. It would have been a description of how the program would be able to continue after the grant, because no additional funding was needed.

What can funders do to increase the impact of their funding? Here is one idea. I was at an applicant workshop last year for a federal program that awarded funds through grants. These grants required the grantees to start a new program which would cost on average \$1 million over three years, and that would require that same amount to continue. The organizations that were applying for these grants had no capacity at all to fund raise, they did not have fund raising staff, or any history of successful fundraising. During the sustainability discussion of the workshop, the federal staff suggested that applicants write the names of specific foundations they were going to apply for funds to continue the program, in the sustainability section. The foundations that were suggested by the federal staff did not fund continuation of existing programs, did not fund in the topic area the grant was addressing, and did not fund in the

geographic areas of the people in the room. I raised my hand and said the following: There is almost no chance that any of the applicants will be able to get any grants to continue the program. The reason for this is that foundations only fund new programs. I added that their suggestion to go to community foundations for continuation funding was not realistic. Many people in the audience came from rural communities that had very little community foundation funding, and no where near the \$330,000 a year it would take to continue the program. After my comments, the woman from the federal government asked me if I had any suggestions. Here is my suggestion, a truly radical idea – CHANGE THE Request For Proposal.

Instead of asking people to start programs that can not be continued no matter how many grants they apply for – let them use the grants to make changes in the way their organizations operate that will have lasting impact. Make the sustainability section a description of something achievable rather than a fiction writing contest. Give higher scores to organizations that have plans to make changes to their existing practices that will have a lasting impact. Here is a specific example. The goal of the specific grants that were being discussed at this applicant workshop was to increase the number of successful college graduates in a particular field.

There are many policies and practices of colleges and universities that actually set the students up for failure, which leads to a high drop out rate in this field. Examples include poor advising, no assistance for people preparing for the field, long waiting lists which result in students being out of school for a long period of time before they start coursework, and admissions selection processes that are not based on the student's likelihood of success. Addressing any of these will make positive lasting change for all students which will result in more graduates -- rather than providing support to the small number of students who happen to be enrolled during the grant period.

What if true sustainability is not the continuation of a grant funded program after the grant ends. What if sustainability is a way of thinking and being, a way of directing your organizational and human resources in the most powerful way. What if sustainability is a way of finding small changes that create powerful differences in results.

Is the current way of funding grants creating the results that funders or grantees want? Often it is not. Is there some better way of using money to create impact? Recent research shows that collaboration is the key to high impact. There is currently very little collaboration among funders. They are each separately directing money at problems by funding new programs. The federal government, county and local governments, and foundations are all giving out money without any idea what anyone else is funding. There is no ability to plan effectively or to direct resources in a thoughtful manner. It seems somewhat like what it would be like to play darts blindfolded.

The dynamics which are created by asking applicants to compete repeatedly for small pools of funds through RFPs – creates barriers to collaboration. Instead of giving out money in a way that is very expensive and inflexible, why don't we figure out how to have more impact with the money that is currently awarded through grants and contracts? What if we put all of the talent that is currently going into writing unfunded proposals into designing a better way to achieve the results that both funders and grantees want?

I am often asked what I think should be done instead. While I have some ideas, the more important thing is to look at the criteria used to design a process to award money. Here are two I think are very important – 1.) make the process valuable for all that apply – whether they are awarded a grant or not, and 2.) make it inexpensive to apply. Right now applying for a grant is very very expensive. Proposals require an enormous amount of hours from writers, program and budget staff, and other stakeholders. If the grant isn't funded, there is no benefit for all that work. Why? Because all the thought went into how to spend a lot of new money, and nothing that was thought of can be done without a lot of new money.

But isn't it worth doing applications because it will help the organization do a proposal next time? Not usually. Why? Because there is not enough commonality among funders to be able to use what is written for any other proposal – it all has to be re-written because there are different questions, formats, and requirements. Even the same funder often changes the rfps every year, so that it requires just as much time to modify an earlier proposal as it does to start from scratch. And add to this the fact that the majority of grants are not funded. The current system is very expensive for applicants, and there is value added only to the very small percentage of applicants that are funded.

What can we do to make sustainability a reality rather than a fiction writing contest?

- Design programs that don't need to continue because they promote lasting change,
- Establish partnerships that promote continuation,
- Write RFP's so that they reflect reality,
- Increase coordination among funders,
- Make the application process valuable and easy, and
- Figure out a way of allocating money in which everyone can win.

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