

Grants and Foundations Review™

What is most important in getting a grant funded?

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Ask 10 people that work for non profit agencies and they'll probably say write a good grant. If you ask 10 funders they will probably say the same thing. In fact, I was at an applicant workshop with the federal agency staff and individuals from organizations seeking funding. This agency had a history of funding four year colleges over community colleges. There were many questions from community colleges about this and why more community colleges weren't funded. At one point, a man that worked for this federal agency screamed to the audience "Write better grants!"

Is this enough, writing better grants? Is this really the most important thing in getting funded? In my experience the answer is no.

If the conventional wisdom is that writing a good grant is the most important factor in whether a grant is funded or not, isn't this really true? There are many, many well written grants that do not get funded. Frequently the grants that were not funded are written better than the ones that were funded. And many times, grants that are funded are poorly written.

How do I know this? I have sat on review panels, I have reviewed funded proposals that were requested through the Freedom of Information Act, and compared them to the unfunded grants that were submitted by agencies seeking help in resubmitting. One issue of course goes back to the fact that a very small percentage of grants get funded at all, on average about 5% of proposals submitted in response to a call for proposal or request for proposal. So there are more well written grants than there are awarded grants. What else influences funding?

Well there are many other factors often more important than the quality of the writing of the grant. These vary in importance depending on the funder. Here is a list of factors that influence the likelihood of success, from the most to least important. Factors that are most important:

- **Has the agency that is applying been funded before by the funder that they are applying to?** In the majority of cases having been previously funded by the funder is a huge advantage, like in politics the incumbents have a huge advantage. Name recognition, trust, and relationships with the funder and people on the review panels often outweighs the quality of the grant proposal.
- **Has the agency been funded by any other funders?** There is also a huge advantage for agencies that have received grants from other funders. The applicant then has more credibility than agencies that have not received grants have.
- **What kind of relationship does the agency have with the funder and the individuals who will be reviewing grants?** Often the reviewers are not the staff of the funder. This issue is related to having been funded previously. Agencies that have been funded before often have much stronger relationships with the funder and reviewers than agencies that have not. The exception might be when there has been a problem with past performance or when a funder is specifically looking to fund organizations they haven't funded before. However, many times this is exactly what funders say, that they want to fund agencies that haven't been funded before, but if you look at who they actually award grants to, the majority of organizations have often been funded by them before.
- **What is the "organizational stature" of the agency applying for the grant?** What is the level of esteem or regard that people hold the organization, do they have a world class reputation, are they Harvard or the Red Cross, or an unknown mom and pop agency?

In my experience, the following factors are much less important:

- **What are the agency outcomes?** Are they known for producing great results? Do they measure and report on their results widely?
- **What type of agency is applying for funding?** Often there will be a list of agencies that are eligible for funding, however, not all types of organizations have an equal chance at being funded because they prefer some types over others. If you look at the history of who they fund you will see what the preference is. One federal agency lists 5 types of organizations that are eligible for funding, yet over 90% of grants go to one of the organizational types. I wrote a grant that was submitted by a non profit organization which was not funded. One of the reviewers comments said “this proposal was submitted by a for profit agency.” This comment was not even true, but even had it been true it still shouldn’t have been a negative factor in scoring the grant since for profit agencies were eligible to apply.
- **Is there a champion among the reviewers? Is there a detractor or critic among the reviewers? Did the reviewer presenting your proposal annoy the other reviewers?** Often an impassioned individual can convince the other reviewers negatively or positively. I heard a story I never forgot from a review panel member who was in a group that had to wait an hour for a reviewer to show up before they could start. Everyone was annoyed and criticized excessively harshly all the proposals this reviewer presented and none were funded. Sometimes the opposite can occur. These are things that obviously, you as an agency submitting a grant have no control over.
- **Is there a strong partnership and who is partnering?** You can often boost your credibility by partnering and having strong letters from partners.
- **Is the grant well written, does it follow directions, is the program well designed, does the budget seem reasonable?** These things do matter, although they can be overridden by other factors.

So what can an applicant do to increase their chances of being funded?

Well you obviously have control over what you submit. You can also impact the relationships that you have with funders and the community by meeting with people, building relationships, and partnerships, measuring and communicating your great results, and finding champions, people who support your work and are engaged with your agency. These are things that will help you in the long run in many ways in addition to increasing your chances of getting a grant.

Also recognize that with the success rate being so low – you are often better off – focusing less on grant writing and more on other things that are more likely to be successful and support your organization. With the amount of grant dollars decreasing and the amount of organizations applying for them, writing a good grant is not enough.

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