A GUIDE FOR WRITING FUNDABLE RESEARCH PROPOSALS

Introduction

This Guide for writing a fundable proposal has been created to help empower staff and students to be successful in securing funds for research projects that provide worthwhile social service. A major theme that runs throughout the guide is a concern for the development of meaningful cooperative relationships with funding agencies, with community organizations and with the people we are serving as a basis for the development of strong fundable initiatives. The guide is built on the assumption that it is through collaboration and participation at all levels that long term change can be effected.

As you are going through this guide, you will probably see things that aren't clear, need fixing, or should be further clarified. Please send them along and we will do our best to improve the guide based on your ideas. Your suggestions on how to improve this guide will be most appreciated.

Enjoy using this guide and I hope it brings you good luck as you seek funding to support your research.

SECTIONS OF A PROPOSAL

I. **Project Title**
   a) Always check to see if the agency you have in mind has any specifications for the Title Page (often they have a required format).
   b) If your proposal is built on collaborating with other groups/organizations it is usually a good idea to include their names on the Title/Cover Page.
   c) Your cover should look professional and neat. However, do not waste time using fancy report covers, expensive binding, or other procedures that may send the wrong message to the potential funding agency. You are trying to impress the potential funding agency with how you really need funding, not the message that you do things rather expensively.
   d) The title should be clear and unambiguous.
   e) Think of your title as a mini-abstract. A good title should paint a quick picture for the reader of the key idea(s) of your project.

f) The words you use in your title should clearly reflect the focus of your proposal. The most important words should come first, then the less important words. Try to remove words from your title that really are not necessary for understanding.

g) Always try and use only a single sentence for your title. If the sentence is getting too long try removing some words. When all else fails try using a two part title with the parts separated by a colon (use only as a last resort). Do not attempt to use the title as an abstract of your entire proposal.

II. Project Executive Summary/Abstract

a) Think of the Executive Summary as the Project Overview (the busy executive probably only has enough time to read your abstract - not the entire proposal).

b) Be specific and concise. Do not go into detail on aspects of your proposal that are further clarified at a later point in your proposal.

c) The Project Overview should paint a picture of your proposal in the mind of the reader. It should establish the framework so that the rest of the proposal has a frame of reference.

d) Use the abstract to begin to show your knowledge of the organization from which you are requesting funds. Key concerns of the funding organization can be briefly identified in relation to your proposed project.

e) If you will be collaborating with other researchers/organizations make sure some of their interests are also highlighted in this section. This can assist in strengthening the collaboration by recognizing them at the very beginning of your proposal.

f) The best time to prepare the Executive Summary is after you have completed the entire proposal (and you understand all aspects of your proposal very well). Let the summary be your last piece of writing and then insert it at the beginning of your proposal.

g) Try to keep in mind that someone will be reviewing your proposal and you would like to have this person be very positive about what you have written. The Executive Summary will probably form a strong impression in the mind of the reviewer. Work on your Executive Summary so that you can avoid giving this person the opportunity to say things like:

- ✔ *Not an original idea*
- ✔ *Rationale is weak*
- ✔ *Writing is vague*
- ✔ *Uncertain outcomes*
- ✔ *Does not have relevant experience*
- ✔ *Problem is not important*
- ✔ *Proposal is unfocused*
- ✔ *Project is too large.*

III. Background Information/Statement of the Problem

a) It may be easier to think of this section as a review of Relevant Literature. Cite previous projects and studies that are similar to what you are proposing. Show the funding agency that you know what you are proposing because you are familiar with what has preceded you.

b) Try to be careful in your use of language. It can very helpful to have a friend, outside of your area of focus/expertise, read your proposal to make sure that the language is readable and minimizes the use of jargons, abbreviations, colloquial expressions, redundant phrases or confusing language.

c) Position your project in relation to other efforts and show how your project:

    i. will extend the work that has been previously done,

    ii. will avoid the mistakes and/or errors that have been previously made,

    iii. will serve to develop stronger collaboration between existing initiatives, or

    iv. is unique since it does not follow the same path as previously followed.

d) Use the statement of the problem to show that your proposed project is definitely needed and should be funded.

e) It is essential to include a well documented statement of the need/problem that is the basis for your project. What are the pressing problems that you want to address? How do you know these problems are important? What other sources/programs similarly support these needs as major needs.

f) Check to see that the potential funding agency is committed to the same needs/problems that your proposal addresses. Clearly indicate

how the problems that will be addressed in your project will help the potential funding agency in fulfilling their own goals and objectives. As you write, keep the funding agency in your mind as a "cooperating partner" committed to the same concerns that you are.

g) Is there a special reason why you and/or your organization are uniquely suited to conduct the project? (Geographic location, language expertise, prior involvements in this area, close relationship to the project clientele, etc.) .

h) When you get to the Methods Section of your proposal it will be important to refer back to the needs you've identified in this section (and show how your methods will respond to these needs).

i) It can really help gain funding support for your project if you have already taken some small steps to begin your project. An excellent small step that can occur prior to requesting funding is a need assessment that you conduct (survey, interviews, focus groups, etc.). Write up your need assessment as a short Report, cite the Report in your proposal, and include a copy with the proposal if possible.

j) This is an excellent section to have the reader begin to understand that an ongoing approach to the problem is essential (assuming that you are proposing a project that is ongoing in nature) and that short term responses may have negligible effect. This can begin to establish a rationale for why your project needs external funding as it seeks to provide a long term response.

IV. Goals and Objectives

a) Try and differentiate between your goals and your objectives and include both.

b) Goals are the large statements of what you hope to accomplish but usually aren't very measurable. They create the setting for what you are proposing.

c) Objectives are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, operational and tell specific things you will be accomplishing in your project.

d) Your objectives will form the basis for the activites of your project and will also serve as the basis for the evaluation of your project.

e) Try to insure that there is considerable overlap between the goals and objectives for your proposal and the goals and objectives of the

funding organization. If there is not a strong overlap of goals and objectives then it might be best to identify a different funding organization.

f) Present measurable objectives for your project. If you are dealing with "things" it is easier for them to be measured than if you are dealing with abstract ideas. Your proposal is easier for a prospective funding organization to understand (and the outcomes are much more clear) if you describe your objectives in measurable ways.

V. **Target population/Clientele**

a) Include specific information on the population or clientele that your project is focused on.

b) Exactly who are the clientele? Who is included/excluded in the clientele group? In what ways have you already had contact with the clientele group?

c) Can you show that you have the support of the clientele group to move ahead with the project?

d) In what ways (if any) have members of the clientele group been involved in the preparation of the proposal?

e) What other agencies are involved with this clientele group (and have these other agencies been included in your proposed project)? Your proposal should clearly indicate how assisting your clientele is in the best interests of the funding organization.

VI. **Methods**

a) There should be a very clear link between the methods you describe in this section and the objectives you have previously defined. Be explicit in your writing and state exactly how the methods you have chosen will fulfill your project's objectives and help deal with the needs/problems on which your proposal is focused.

b) The prospective funding agency will be looking at your methods to see what it is that you are proposing that will be new, unique or innovative. Make sure you clearly present the innovative aspects of your idea.

c) Are the specific methods you are proposing for your project very important to your unique clientele? Make sure you clarify this for the funding organization.

d) Do not forget to include the collaborative relationships your project will be developing with other cooperating groups. A good way to show collaboration is in the methods that you will be using. How will the methods for your project encourage groups to join together in dealing with the issues/concerns your project addresses?

e) Your Methods section should clearly indicate how the methods that will be used will allow the outcomes of your project to have value for others beyond your project. This can also tie into your Dissemination Plan.

VII. Staff/Administration

a) Use this section to describe the roles of the different people associated with your project and the importance of each.

b) Make sure to clarify how each of the roles are essential to the success of the project and each role clearly relates to operationalizing the methods you have described.

c) To start, make sure you include name, title, experience, and qualifications. Include other information if you feel it's important to the success of your project.

d) The descriptions of your personnel should let the funding agency know that you have excellent people who are committed to the project. The validity for what you are proposing is directly related to the people who will work with the project.

e) Working together as a part of a team is something that funding agencies often like to see. Try making your project a team effort.

VIII. Available Resources

a) Collaborative efforts (an important project resource) are usually considered very favorably. Many funding agencies like to see cooperative ventures as the basis for local action. In other words, the funding agency's funds are being brought together with other existing organizations that are already committed and involved in dealing with the needs that the project is responding to.

b) Sometimes local resources go unnoticed and are difficult to see. Look carefully around you because there are certain to be resources that you have available that you may not be noticing (time that volunteers donate to your project, materials that local merchants may provide,

local experts who can provide help/advise when needed, a student who is willing to do some word processing, etc.). Such in-kind resources can show a potential funding agency that you are strongly rooted in your community.

c) It is very impressive to a prospective funding agency if local resources have already been contacted and plans to include them in the project have already been made. Letters from local resources supporting the project (included in the Appendix) are an excellent addition to the proposal.

IX. Personnel

a) Refer back to your Staff/Administration section and identify those people who will actually be paid from the grant. These are the ones to be identified in this section.

b) Include short descriptions of each of the people who will be involved in your project and supported by the funding. The descriptions should clarify in the mind of the potential funding agency that these people are ideally suited to conduct the project.

c) Instead of having all full-time staff on the project, consider having a number of part-time.

X. Facilities

a) Though you may not be requesting funds for the purchase or rental of facilities, it can be helpful to provide a brief description of the facilities that will be used for the project.

b) Consider describing existing facilities that will be used for the project as in-kind contributions to the project. Even if you have free access to classrooms at a local school, meeting or a project room in a local office building, it can be helpful to indicate how much additional money the prospective funding agency would have to provide if these facilities were not donated.

XI. Equipment/Supplies/Communication

a) Be careful in listing the equipment that will be needed for your project. Funding sources are usually much more willing to provide

funds for the support of personnel than they are to support the purchase of equipment (that may or may not directly benefit the funded project).

b) It will help if you've really done some research on the actual cost of the equipment you specify. This is much better than guessing at the cost and then to be challenged on your estimates by the potential funding agency.

c) It is easy to overlook many of the office supplies or consumables that will be needed for your project.

d) How will you be sharing information about your project with others? Will your project include a Newsletter? How about a website? The more open you are and willing to help others learn from your experiences the more likely a funding agency will be interested in assisting.

e) Consider including in your proposal additional funds for hosting some form of workshop or symposium where you can bring together other professionals who are interested in conducting a similar type of project in their area. This would be a good way to publicly recognize your funding organization. Invite someone from the funding organization to attend the workshop so they can hear what others think about the investment they have made.

XII.   Budget

a) Make your budget **realistic**. Carefully think through exactly what you will need from the funding agency to carry out the project and establish your budget around this amount. (Do not forget, funding agencies receive lots of requests for funding. They can easily tell when someone has inflated a budget in order to procure funds for other purposes. Don't get caught in this situation.)

b) Have someone else in your organization review your budget to see how realistic you are.

c) Do you really need a large amount of funding at the beginning of the project or will your project be "phased up" over a period of time?

Sometimes it's not very realistic to expect a new project to be able to be up and operating (and spending large amounts of money) during the first 6 months or year of operation.

d) A good strategy to use with a potential funding agency is to ask for a small amount of funding for the first phase of the project. Specify in your proposal what you expect to achieve during this "minimal funding phase" and when you will be returning to the funding agency to ask for funds for the next phase. This can suggest to the funding agency that they can terminate the relationship easily if your project is not successful (and then it is essential for you to make sure the first phase is successful).

e) Check with the agency to see if they have suggested/required budget categories that they want you to use.

f) If the potential funding agency doesn't have any suggested/required budget categories, organize your budget around a set of meaningful categories that work for the project you are proposing. Categories that you may want to consider for itemizing your budget are:
- Personnel (salary and benefits)
- Consultants (salary)
- Instruction
- Equipment
- Supplies
- Communication (telephone/postage/internet)
- Materials preparation
- Travel
- Rental of facilities
- Evaluation
- Other expenses
- Indirect costs (costs that your organization requires that you include)

A suggested budget format for a three year funding proposal:

ITEM	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
PERSONNEL(list)			
Sub-Total			
FACILITIES (list)			
Sub-Total			
EQUIPMENT (list)			
Sub-Total			
SUPPLIES (list)			
Sub-Total			
COMMUNICATION (list)			
Telephone			
Postage			
Sub-Total			
TRAVEL (list)			
Sub-Total			
SUM TOTAL			

XIII. Evaluation Plan

a) It's important to describe in your proposal exactly how you will decide whether or not your project has been successful, achieved its objectives, etc. The Evaluation Plan will tell the prospective funding agency how you will be going about showing them at the end of the project that their investment in you was a good one.

b) If you plan to use a survey or questionnaire to help in evaluating the success of your project you may want to include in the Appendices a draft of what you are considering for the questionnaire/survey.

c) Your evaluation plan does not have to be elaborate but it is important to indicate to the prospective funding agency that you have not forgotten this important step.

d) Try to include both a concern for formative evaluation/process evaluation (ways to gain feedback on the project while it is being conducted) and summative evaluation/product evaluation (ways to show that the project fulfilled that which was originally proposed). Another way of conceptualizing this is that formative evaluation/process evaluation is concerned with the activities of the project. On the other hand, summative evaluation/product evaluation is concerned with the stated objectives of the project.

e) It is easy to create a summative evaluation/product evaluation plan if you have done a good job of clearly stating your project objectives or expected outcomes.

f) Make direct reference to your objectives in your evaluation plan. This creates a strong sense of integration/consistency within your proposal. The reader of your proposal will now be hearing the same message repeated in different sections of your proposal.

g) Try creating two separate evaluation plans - one for formative evaluation and the other for summative evaluation.

h) A good evaluation plan should include some sense of concern for what goes on following the conclusion of the funding period. How will the initiatives that have been started under the project be sustained? Have new things occurred that will be continued in the future? How

will other cooperating agencies assist in continuing the project after the conclusion of the funding period? These and other areas should be included in a viable evaluation plan.

XIV.   References

a) Include your references list just before the appendices. References provide the information necessary for a reader to locate and retrieve any source you cite in the body of the proposal. Each source you cite in the proposal must appear in your reference list; likewise, each entry in the reference list must be cited in your text.

b) Your references should begin on a new page separate from the text of the proposal.

XV.   Appendices

a) Appendices should be devoted to those aspects of your project that are of secondary interest to the reader. Begin by assuming that the reader will only have a short time to read your proposal and it will only be the main body of your proposal (not the Appendices). Then, assume that you have gotten the attention of the reader who would now like some additional information. This is the purpose of the Appendices. Here are some possible sections to include in the Appendices:

i.   **Dissemination Plan** - An important aspect of your proposal will be the plan for disseminating information of/from the project to other audiences. Most funding agencies are interested in seeing how their financial support of your project will extend to other audiences. This may include newsletters, workshops, radio broadcasts, presentations, printed handouts, slide shows, training programs, etc.

ii. **Time Line** - A clear indication of the time frame for the project and the times when each aspect of the project will be implemented. Try creating the time line as a graphic representation (not too many words). If done well, it will help demonstrate the feasibility of the project in a very visible way.

iii. **Letters of Support** - Funding agencies would like to know that others feel strongly enough about your project that they are willing to write a letter in support of the project. Talk through with the potential letter writers the sort of focus that you think will be important for their letter. (Try and draw on the reputation of the letter writing group.) Do not get pushed into writing the letters for the agencies - they will all sound alike and will probably defeat your purpose of using them. The letters must be substantive. If not, do not use them. Have the letters addressed directly to the funding agency. (Do not use a general "To Whom It May Concern" letter. It makes it appear that you are applying to many different potential funding agencies and are using the same letter for each. This may really be the case, so make sure you personalize each letter to the specific potential funding agency.)

iv. **Cooperating Agency Descriptions** - If you have referenced in your proposal different cooperating agencies that you will be working with, it is a good idea to provide a more detailed description of each of these agencies in the Appendices. Rather than include large descriptions of each cooperating agency, a single page that gives the name/address of the agency, names of key personnel, and brief descriptions of the major services provided is sufficient. Try and prepare each of these single page descriptions so they follow a similar outline/presentation of information.

v. **Evaluation Instrument** - Include a draft copy of the actual evaluation instrument you plan to use (survey, questionnaire, interview guide, etc.). This will let your prospective funding agency know that you are serious about making evaluation an integral part of your project and funding agencies like to hear this. Indicate DRAFT at the top of the instrument and then make it look as real as possible. If you will be using an interview procedure or a focus group discussion, include a draft copy of the specific questions that will actually be used for the interview/discussion.