Getting Money: Grant Writing for Student Activities Programmers

Doing more with less. It is an easy cliché with which to begin because it's one many who work in student activities programming know all too well. It is a cliché often associated with the corporate sector and it is increasingly being associated with higher education. Students want more. The senior student affairs officer wants more. You hear over and over again how programming and retention are tied. And, there's only so much money to go around. Where is a student activities person to turn? Grants!
read on for a brief overview of the nuts and bolts of obtaining grants to assist with student activities programming on your campus. From how to get started with grant writing to where to find them, here are the basics of grant seeking and grant writing. All it takes is some investigating and a little initiative and you’ll be surprised what is available for people just like you.

Of course, I’m not talking about major grants—those that bring your institution hundreds of thousands of dollars and can make an assistant professor associate professor in a matter of days. I’m talking about programming grants—the kinds that supplement your current budget with funds that can assist you with further programming. An added benefit of pursuing such grants is that they allow you to network with other organizations, often leading you to additional off-campus resources.

So, where do you get started?

WHAT’S IN A GOOD PROPOSAL?

A good grant proposal has several characteristics. First, it has to start with a good idea. The process of writing a proposal is much like writing a good English paper. Think through your idea before sitting down to write. Decide on your audience: Ask yourself who is your audience? Will others like what you’re proposing? You might really be into the dances of native people in Botswana; will your students enjoy it? Will the granting agency think this is a good idea?

Second, your proposal must demonstrate a need. Can you show you’re adding something unique or necessary to the community? You may be adding to your own college or university community, but if this is a grant from an off-campus source, what is the impact of your proposed program on the community at large, which the sponsoring agency supports?

Third, your proposal must demonstrate/contain a thorough plan for implementing your program, including all that it will entail. Is this something you can really implement? Is it part of an existing program? Is it something altogether new? Do you require the support of other offices at your institution? If so, is there a direct cost—are you billed for the services of other offices on your campus? Are the direct costs worth it—and your office may be willing to take on some additional work, but will the Facilities Department, whose support you need, want to take on that work as well? Do you (or your staff) have the time to implement the program? Have you thought through all the steps involved?

Once you’ve thought through these early questions, you’re ready to move on to logistics.

WHAT LOGISTICAL CHARACTERISTICS DO YOU NEED TO CONSIDER?

Some key logistical points you should consider when writing your grant are:

- **Your message should be consistent with agency guidelines.**
  - Give the agency awarding the grant what they ask for—don’t give them more and don’t give them less. This is one of those times when you should follow every direction they give you. It’s also not a bad idea to contact the sponsoring agency and ask clarifying questions throughout the process. This demonstrates your interest and you may get some pointers that others don’t.

- **Make sure you are writing in an area in which you have expertise.**

  I once worked on a grant with a colleague for what was called a grassroots programming grant. The sponsoring agency was looking for new ideas that explored musical history within our region of the country. My colleague and I decided to write a grant that would support a series on Old-Time music. This is where the expertise part comes in. I knew absolutely nothing about Old-Time music. In fact, when I compared it to the blues in front of my colleague, I ended up getting a 20-minute lecture on the true roots of music in America, complete with pictures. He ended the conversation by making me promise to correct all others in the future who might make the same mistake.

  In this situation, I knew how to implement a program and I was willing to write the grant, but I knew nothing about the subject at hand. My colleague, on the other hand, knew everything there was to know about Old-Time music but had no interest in drawing
up the necessary paperwork and following through on the grant-writing process. We were a match made in heaven. And we got the grant.

- **Your grant should be easy to read.**
  Often the granting agency will provide a form for you to follow. Strictly adhere to that format. If a form is not provided, make sure you insert headings and write your grant using a strong outline form. (That part of the grant will be covered in more detail shortly.) You want your reader to be able to find information easily. The granting agency may buy your rationale in your opening paragraph, then just want to skip ahead to see how much you want. Make this easy for the reader to do.

- **Know the granting agency’s mission.**
  The agency to which you are applying for grant monies will tell you what they want to fund. They may not spell it out directly, but it will certainly be implied somewhere in their documents. Make sure you’re speaking to their needs as well as your own. I once applied for a grant with an area tourism board. I hoped we could improve the seating in our major auditorium space on campus. I tried every way imaginable to demonstrate that new seats in our college’s auditorium would benefit tourism in the area. Who was I kidding? I did not get the grant.

- **Make sure you are consistent with your institution’s guidelines.**
  Your institution most likely has guidelines pertaining to writing a grant. Some institutions’ guidelines may be quite formal and some may be more informal. If you’ve never written a grant, talk with your supervisor about the process. Visit with your development office, or office of sponsored programs, and gain an understanding of what is required at your institution when submitting a proposal. If you are unsuccessful in finding out much from any of these offices, check with the business office of your institution. One of the things you should look out for at this step is the financial aspect of this process. You’ll be bringing money into the institution and there are always guidelines on how to properly do that. Those guidelines normally exist so the college or university is able to comply with all relevant tax laws.
Why Are Proposals Rejected?

There are a number of reasons why a grant may be rejected. Here are some of the most common that you may want to try to prevent.

○ The nature of the problem
  This is similar to my application for the tourism grant. The nature of my problem was not consistent with their mission or guidelines.

○ The approach to the problem
  In a case such as this, your methodology may be weak. You may not have done your homework. Did you think through all the stages?

○ The perceived competency of the proposed project’s director
  When I was in my master’s program, I applied for my first grant. I worked for weeks on that grant with my fingers crossed. However, I didn’t get it. I discussed this with my graduate assistantship supervisor and she suggested I call the Provost’s Office (the granting agency) for clarification on why my grant was rejected. It was rejected because only I was involved in the process—there was no involvement on the part of a full-time staff member whose job it would be to carry out the process if my graduate school days came to an abrupt halt or if my schoolwork became too demanding. This was a good, but hard, lesson to learn.

○ Conditions of the environment
  For whatever reason, the place where you want to implement a project doesn’t work. We once had a grant for a film festival in a venue that was really too small to be a good host site. In this case, we were actually successful in getting the grant several years in a row, but I knew that a better venue would have benefited the festival tremendously.

What’s in a Standard Grant Application?

If the sponsoring agency does not provide a format for your proposal, you should be prepared to offer a format for the reader to make moving through your document easy and pleasurable. This is where the skills you learned in English 101 come in handy. You should always begin with a title. Your title should describe what you’re going to do, but not be too long—this is not a dissertation. Your title should pull your reader into your program; the reader should see the title and become excited about turning to the next page.

Next, consider your introductory statement. State the nature of your project or problem. The exact topic should be embedded into the first paragraph. If you can find a catchy statistic, use it. It never hurts to strengthen your thoughts with quantitative data. Follow this immediately with the justification or rationale, which can be a separate section, or which can be expressed throughout your text.

Take a moment to consider previous research in this area. Why is what you want to do important? Consider a brief review of related literature if you think it will increase your chance of securing the grant.

Your next section is where you’ll be glad you’ve thought through the implementation stages ahead of time. Provide the granting agency with your objectives and procedures. What are you going to do and how are you going to do it?

Your granting agency will most likely require an evaluation. Be familiar with what they require in this regard as you’re putting together your program so you can make sure your program procedures take into account how the evaluation will take place. I once collaborated with an academic department on a programming grant that bridged in-class and out-of-class activities. In this case, I was able to convince the professor from the academic department to attend the programs funded by the grant and complete all of the program evaluations for that grant while I completed the budget evaluation area explaining how we spent the money.

What Do You Do If You Get (Or Don’t Get) The Money?

This may be the easiest part of the grant-writing process. If you DON’T get the money, ask why. This is a good learning opportunity for you. It is unlikely you’ll get every grant for which you apply, so you should take rejections as learning experiences. I am convinced my graduate assistantship supervisor knew I was not going to get the grant I wrote while in graduate school, but she knew it would be good experience for me.

Next, write a thank-you note. Make sure the granting agency knows you appreciate their time and what they are doing. Expressing your appreciation to them may pay off for you in the future.

If you DO get the money, be absolutely certain to write a thank-you note! Then, strictly follow the plan you outlined in your proposal. You will also want to begin promotion of your program and make sure your college or university also knows about your suc-
cess in receiving the grant. You should inform your college or university's public relations office about this so they can provide an appropriate press release. You should also notify your institution's grants office and business office to make sure you are meeting all of your institution's procedural requirements for handling money.

WHERE CAN YOU GET THE MONEY?

You may be interested in grant writing but have no idea where to begin. Below is a list of a few places you may want to explore when getting started in this area.

- Professional organizations
- Local arts councils
- State arts councils
- Web searches conducted by topics and organizations
- Your chamber of commerce
- Your city tourism board
- Your institution's grants-writing office
- Your institution's finance office
- Your institution's librarian
- Your mail (read some of that mail you recycle—you might be surprised to find grant information there!)

HAPPY GRANT WRITING

The first grant I wrote took me weeks to complete and I was unsuccessful. The second grant I wrote took me an hour and I was successful. It was one of those cases in which the application was easy and I knew what we could do and how we could do it. Within two months, I had an additional $3,000 in my programming budget. Some grants will be incredibly complex and should be attempted only by a pro, while others are perfect for programmers and their advisors. The most important thing is to not be afraid to try. You'll probably surprise yourself.

Good luck and happy grant writing!

About the Author

Dawn Watkins is dean of students at Washington and Lee University (VA). A former student activities director, she has successfully applied for a number of grants that helped fund programs such as a French film festival, African-American arts festival and an ethnic minority campus ministry program, among others. She holds a bachelor's degree in English and a master's degree in counseling and student personnel services, both from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, and a doctorate in adult and higher education administration from the University of North Carolina-Greensboro.