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Grant Writing

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Harold F. Shay

This is a session concerned with preparing requests for Federal grants and other types of Federal assistance. We will try to make some suggestions about ways to learn about available Federal grant resources and how to prepare applications for grant assistance.

As you may know, my own experience is in the management of the rehabilitation training grant program which is only one of the many different discretionary grant programs authorized under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and available from the Rehabilitation Services Administration. Much of what I will be suggesting is impressionistic, therefore, and based on my own experience with the program with which I am most familiar. I am not an expert in other areas of Rehabilitation Services Administration discretionary grant programming nor am I fully familiar with programs administered elsewhere in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. I strongly suspect nonetheless that most of my impressions concerning application preparation would be shared by Federal reviewers in other offices since the responsibilities for application review are relatively standard.

Basically, in approaching the world of Federal grant support, it seems most important for potential applicants to: (1) develop the confidence that they really can sort through the variety of Federal programs available and identify those programs most appropriate to their own needs; (2) learn the language regularly used in Federal grants and contract management; and (3) follow the instructions provided by each Federal office to potential applicants

for grant assistance.

The *first* step for potential applicants is learning how to get access to information concerning the availability of program funds and the appropriateness of the funds for meeting different established needs. In this regard, both written materials and personal contacts are available.

A basic and essential published resource, of course, is the *Catalogue of Federal Domestic Assistance* which provides in outline form a comprehensive description of each Federal grant program. For each discretionary grant program the Catalogue identifies the administering Federal agency, the authorizing legislation, the program objectives, the types of assistance available, the uses to which grant funds are put, the eligibility requirements for applicants for grant funds, a general description of the application review and grant award process, the names of other available information describing the program such as the regulations and guidelines and, what frequently seems the most important, the name of a contact person at the Federal agency responsible for the grant program.

Since the Catalogue can only be expected to provide general descriptive information, it often may be necessary for potential applicants to follow through on this lead and get in touch directly with the designated Federal contact person for more specific information. With experience one learns that some Federal representatives are more helpful than others, and some are more knowledgeable. An applicant should nonetheless feel perfectly free to

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contact Central Office or Regional Office Federal agency personnel as much as necessary to ensure that his questions have been answered sufficiently to enable him to determine whether he wishes to take the risks involved in submitting an application. Developing a working relationship with the Federal contact person can assist tremendously in reducing confusion about technical aspects of each program.

While the *Catalogue of Federal Domestic Assistance* provides general background information about grant programs, for the past few years the *Federal Register* has been used to announce very specific information about the competition for Federal grant funds. Under this procedure a Notice is published announcing the competition for grant funds under a specific program and ensuring that each potential applicant throughout the country has an equal opportunity to participate in the competition. Grant decisions are made within an open and structured system of competition and the *Federal Register* Notice is used to describe the terms under which the competition is to be conducted. The *Federal Register* Notice should therefore be read very carefully because in so doing the applicant will learn whether the program is appropriate to his needs and whether it is worth his time to apply.

Any Notice covering a Rehabilitation Services Administration program, for example, will start with a description of the purpose of the program. The *Federal Register* Notice will also identify eligible applicants and indicate the total amount of funding which is available. To be helpful, a Notice should indicate the amount of funds which has actually been appropriated and how much of this amount is earmarked for continuation grant costs. In this way, the amount of funding clearly available for competitive applications will be known.

Each Notice is also expected to identify program priorities. In some Federal grant programs, applications are reviewed *only* if they fall under one of the established priorities listed in the *Federal Register*. In other cases, applications not falling under established priorities will be reviewed and funded only after decisions have been made about applica-

tions submitted under designated priority areas. In general, however, it is best for an applicant to submit an application which does in fact respond to one of the specific priorities defined in the *Federal Register* Notice.

The *Federal Register* Notice also indicates the extent of grantee participation in the costs of the project which is generally expected. The application submittal procedure is, of course, also described. In the rehabilitation training grant program, some applications are submitted directly to Central Office in Washington and the others are submitted to one of the Regional Offices, according to instructions in the *Federal Register*. An application which is sent to the wrong office will generally end up where it should be but an applicant makes so much better an impression if he manages to send it to the right place himself.

In the case of grant applications submitted under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Notice will also indicate whether the State vocational rehabilitation agency is to receive a copy of the application and whether State vocational rehabilitation agency approval is necessary.

Especially important is the fact that Notices list the evaluative criteria against which all applications are reviewed. Applications are reviewed according to a common set of criteria and these criteria are shared with all potential applicants before any applications are written. Obviously, an applicant should be conscious of these criteria when he is preparing his proposal and should write his proposal accordingly.

Finally, Notices indicate the deadline date after which applications will not be accepted. Every effort is made to ensure the fairness of the competition and to maintain an equal opportunity for all applicants to receive grant funds. A very important way to protect the fairness of the competition is to ensure that the deadline dates are carefully observed. There really do not seem to be very many valid reasons for extending a deadline date for any applicant and in the rehabilitation grant program, late applications are simply returned and are not reviewed.

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During all phases of the information getting stage, Federal agencies officials can be contacted and it is usually a good idea to do so. You should be sure, however, that you are discussing the program in which you are interested with someone who really has some direct responsibility for its administration. You will sometime find yourself talking with someone who is in the Federal agency administering the program but is really no better informed about it than you are.

The *second* aspect of securing grant funds is learning some of the language you will be using. Two very basic terms—and ones which Federal officials themselves often confuse are “contract” and “grant”.

A contract is “the procurement of a service to perform a specific activity where the Federal agency has identified a need, has determined the type of program needed to meet this need, has determined the expected outcomes for the project, has selected an acceptable cost range, and knows the length of time required to complete the program”. In the case of a contract, the funding agency has specified exactly what it wants, has usually announced its specifications in the *Commerce Business Daily*, and can be expected to a strong management control after the contract has been awarded.

A grant, on the other hand, is simply “a formal gift of money where all the requirements and specifications related to a contract, are not fully determined by the Federal agency”. The idea for a grant is proposed by the applicant developing the proposal and the grantee has management control over the use of the funds, the methods to be used, and the timetable to be followed. Although some Federal officials try to blur the differences between “contract” and “grant”, the distinctions are quite clear and if you are awarded a grant, you should recognize your freedom to administer the grant in the manner approved by the Federal agency without the direct management control evidenced in a contract.

Other terms which you will need to master include “authorization” and “appropriation”, “budget period” and “project period” and “regulations” and “guidelines”.

Both securing the information and learning

the language have been directed towards making a decision as to whether to invest the resources necessary to apply for a grant. All applications involve a certain amount of risk-taking but by following the instructions of the grant agency and showing some sensitivity to the people who will be reading the application, you can reduce some of the risks. The *third* step, therefore, is preparing the application. Obviously one of the variables involved in how favorably an application is reviewed by the granting agency is how well it is written. Reviewers attempt to get beyond the quality of writing and into more substantive aspects of the proposal itself but it is probably accurate to say that a well written proposal does better than one which is rambling and incoherent. Good application writing seems basically to involve simple and direct sentences organized around a series of independent ideas and using language with which reviewers can be expected to be familiar.

Good application writing emphasizes specifics and gets directly to the point. Well written applications do not rely on lengthy attachments to explain the proposal and refrain from incorporating charts and graphs unless they are simple and easily interpreted. Good application writing takes into consideration the attention span of the reviewers who have probably been asked to review a number of applications within a prescribed period of time. Conciseness and ease of comprehension are therefore essential qualities.

In writing an application, it is a good idea to follow very closely the format for narratives suggested by the granting agency. There is nothing so very special about the agency’s suggested format but following it ensures that all those elements against which the application will be evaluated will be covered in the proposal.

The format for presenting an application varies somewhat from agency to agency and program to program. Certain general areas seem to be required in most proposals, however.

There is always, for example, a Statement of Needs. In completing this part of the proposal, the applicant will wish to keep the state-

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ment narrow, specific, and consonant with the overall purpose of the grant program under which the funds are being requested. The applicant should avoid speaking of needs so general that the proposed program could not be reasonably expected to have any impact. Explain the needs carefully, however, and do not assume that the reader is as aware of the needs and their significance as you are. Document the needs and provide some evidence when possible. It is also good to relate the needs to the expertise and demonstrated achievements of the applicant agency. Make sure that the proposed project plan to meet these needs is achievable within a reasonable amount of time and utilizing reasonable resources.

Background Information about the applicant agency should clearly indicate to the reader who the agency is, its goals, how long it has been in business and some of its significant accomplishments. Letters of support are helpful especially when the letters sound sincere and indicate some familiarity with the scope of the proposed program. Clippings from newspapers about the agency always seem to be enjoyed by readers and help to establish the credibility of the applicant organization.

Project objectives should distinguish the means from the ends. Establishing a unit at an agency to provide some desired service is simply the means for doing that which is stated to be necessary. It is the provision of the service itself which is important and on which the proposal focus should be directed. You will also want to be sure to link the project objectives directly to the objectives of the funding program. In the rehabilitation training grant program, for example, there is a category of "long-term training" as well as a category of "experimental and innovative training" and the objectives of these two categories are quite different. The objectives submitted in applications for grant support do not always indicate an understanding of the differences of these programs objectives and some applications are

rejected simply because the different categories and their distinct objectives were not understood.

The most important part of most proposals is the Methodology to be followed in implementing the program. The methodology should be described fully and clearly. Sometimes it is necessary to indicate why one methodology was selected rather than those other methodologies which might have been selected but were not. To the extent appropriate, the methodology should reflect a year by year plan for the accomplishment of project objectives.

All Federal funding programs are conscious of Evaluation as a basic aspect of project activity and special attention should be paid to the development of effective evaluative components within proposals. Although there are no rules in this area, it is preferable to provide for an objective evaluation rather than a subjective one which has no external components.

Finally, the preparation of the Budget should reflect what the applicant really believes is necessary to achieve project objectives but should also demonstrate some recognition of the total budgetary level of funding which is actually available. The budget presentation should also include firm plans for the eventual absorption of project costs at the end of Federal support, which such absorptions is appropriate. It is always disappointing to read an application which makes vague promises in this area since such promises generally indicate that the applicant has given very little thought to project continuation after the Federal grant support has terminated. Federal agencies like to believe that their grant support will have a meaningful and permanent impact and that the project activity is not totally dependent on special Federal support. Ensuring the continuation of the project indicates to the Federal office that its grant is a good investment.

These then are some aspects of application preparation which you will wish to consider. There is no guarantee of Federal funding but by following these suggestions at least some of the risks might be reduced.