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# A Twelve-Step Program for Stronger Grant Proposals

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**T**hat does it! The library board has just told you — again — that, although you have a great idea, there's no money. It's time to find funds somewhere else. You know there are foundations, corporations, and government agencies that have given money to libraries — why shouldn't they give to yours? You sit down at your terminal and start to write a proposal.

Whoa, there! Let's put on the brakes. Believe it or not, writing a grant proposal is one of the last steps in seeking outside funding. You have lots of preliminary work to do before you ever set fingers to keyboard. Using the following twelve steps, nearly all of which precede any writing, will make your grant proposal stronger and more likely to be funded.

## Purpose

In preparing to write a grant proposal, you must ask yourself many questions, the answers to which may seem obvious; however, they are not obvious to a potential funder. First of all, why do you want or need additional funds? After all, libraries are funded by their governing agencies, whether those are city or county governments or an academic board of trustees. Why isn't that funding sufficient? Can't you realign your priorities and thus accomplish what you have in mind?

Very few outside funders will provide money for ongoing operating expenses. Most are interested in 1) supporting a finite project which is beyond the scope of the library's budget or, 2) in providing seed money to start a new program which can become self-sufficient later. Make sure your need for additional dollars cannot be

classified as an operating expense.

Once you have determined precisely the purpose for which you want outside funding, you must answer two additional questions: 1) How does this project relate to your library's mission, and 2) how does it relate to the library's strategic plan. It is tempting to seek money for a project for which you know a specific foundation has provided money in the past, regardless of its relevancy to the library. As an example, last year ABC Corporation gave a substantial amount of money to the public library in a nearby region for a children's summer reading program; you think your community college library should start a similar program and tap in to some of that money. Do not succumb to this temptation! At best you will end up with a short-term, irrelevant program that cannot be supported beyond the grant-funded period; at worst you will have spent hours preparing a grant proposal for an irrelevant project that was not funded. You must be able to show how the proposed activity or project relates to the library's mission and how it fits into the strategic plan for carrying out that mission.

## The Project

The second question to be answered is what you plan to accomplish with the funds. Both foundations and corporations want to be assured that the funds they provide will have tangible, beneficial results. They want to feel that their contribution will make a difference in the services that the library provides to its patrons. Corporations, in particular, are eager to have the public think highly of them because, in contrast to foundations, their main business is not philanthropy,

but, rather, providing a service or product that they hope the public will buy. Thus, they want their image enhanced by your project. They want their name coupled with a successful and worthwhile venture. You must be able to describe clearly and in the greatest possible detail the exact results you hope to achieve.

## Justification

Closely allied with this explanation should be a justification of the necessity or desirability for the project. Why is it important that this project be carried out? What specific benefits will result from its completion? If the project is not funded, what services will deteriorate or what segment of the population will not be served?

## Qualifications

The potential funder also will want to know why your library is the best (or at least, an excellent) place in which to carry out this project. What special resources does your library have that makes it the ideal site for this program? Do you have available local expertise? Does your library have special resources that this project will complement? Does your library serve a unique population?

## Time Frame

The majority of foundations, corporations, and government agencies have maximum grant periods; the remainder have no such restrictions. In either case, the funder will want to know the projected length of your project. You should determine the total length of the project and develop a timeline, specifying target dates for completion of each step. If a totally new project is proposed, the time required for specific

parts of the operation may be unknown. In this case, a timed test-run of procedures can be very helpful. Such a test will allow the schedule to be projected as accurately as possible, and provide information about the level of staffing, type and quantity of supplies, and equipment needed for the project.

### Costs

Perhaps the most important piece of information for the potential funder is the cost of the project. The funder will want to know how much money is being requested, when it is needed, and precisely how the funds will be used. You must complete a detailed budget outlining each category of expenditure (salaries, fringe benefits, equipment, supplies, travel, indirect costs, etc.). Remember that each line item should be adequately explained within the narrative of the proposal. If your proposal is for a multi-year project, prepare a separate budget for each year. The funding agency will also want to know what the library will contribute to the project. Some funders, in fact, require that the library contribute a certain percentage of the total project costs (often called cost sharing). Your contribution indicates the level of your commitment to, and support of, the project. Can you contribute a staff position to work on the project? Can you purchase a piece of equipment, or provide travel expenses? In the detailed budget specify exactly what you will contribute and its value.

### Staffing

Describe the duties and qualifications of those who will direct and work on the project, and include a job description for each position. If you intend to contribute your own staff, include a statement of their qualifications for the project. If the project budget includes funds for hiring staff, include a statement of required and desirable qualifications for each individual to be hired. The funder wants to know that competent individuals with appropriate qualifications will be handling the operation.

### Evaluation

The funding agency will want to know how you plan to evaluate the project. What measures will you use to determine whether the project is meeting its stated objectives? When will these measures be applied? What corrective steps will be

taken if the project is not meeting its objectives?

### Publicity

Closely allied with evaluation of the project is publicity. Determine how the project and its results will be publicized. This step is particularly important if yours is a ground-breaking project that may be used later by other libraries. Predetermining how to publicize your project will help insure appropriate records and statistics as the project proceeds.

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### The Funder

Now that you have a clear picture of your proposed project, it is time to find someone to fund it. Though wealthy individuals may be a possibility, most library projects are funded by government agencies, foundations, or corporations. Bibliographic tools exist for determining which funding agency is appropriate for your project.

Funds available to libraries from the federal government are described in detail in the annual *Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance*, published by the Office of Management and Budget and the General Services Administration. This catalog is a "government-wide compendium of federal programs, projects, services, and activities which provide assistance or benefits to the American public." Each entry lists the type of assistance, any restrictions, eligibility requirements, and the application and award process.

Foundations making grants of \$200,000 or more are listed in the *Foundation Directory*, which has an index by type of project. Corporations which provide funding are described in the *Corporate 500: Directory of Corporate Philanthropy*, published by the Public Management Institute, and the Foundation Center's *National Directory of Corporate Giving*. Several reference works have a narrower focus; examples are the *Directory of Grants in Humanities*, published by Oryx Press, and *Grants for Libraries and Information Sciences*, issued by the Foundation Center.

With these tools, you can identify those entities which are most likely to provide funding for your library, by answering a few questions. Which agencies have given funds to libraries in the past? Which agencies provide funds for the type of support you seek (e.g., equipment, seed money, endowment)? Some agencies restrict their giving to institutions in their home state; make sure you choose ones that either give nationally or give in your state.

And now ... you are ready to begin writing. Armed with the details of your project and information about the potential funder's interests and orientation, you should be able to write a winning proposal in no time. But before you mail it, you need to follow the two remaining steps. To perform these steps you should assume the role of reviewer for the funding agency.

### Editing For Clarity

One or two days after writing the proposal, edit it thoroughly, asking the following questions. Is it clearly written? Do the sentences and paragraphs flow logically throughout the document? Have you included an appropriate amount of detail and expressed it lucidly? Too often, convoluted sentences discourage reviewers and keep them from discovering the merits of a proposal. Can it be easily understood by a non-librarian? The majority of individuals reviewing the proposal will have only a superficial knowledge of libraries. Make sure your document is free of library jargon and that processes are clearly and simply explained.

In editing the document, a lay person can be very helpful. If that individual does not understand your proposal or its terms, it is likely that the agency's reviewers also will be perplexed.

### Editing For Completeness

If the funding agency has an application form or suggested outline, have you followed it precisely? Have you supplied all the information requested? Is your budget complete and detailed? Are all the budgeted items described in the narrative? Have you re-checked the math? Finally, would you fund this project?

When you can answer affirmatively all the questions in steps eleven and twelve, you have a solid, well-developed proposal. Mail it!