How to prepare a successful grant proposal

By Richard L. Pullen, Jr., EdD, RN, and Sheryl S. Mueller, MSEd, MSN, RN

Identifying sources of funding is a common need in clinical practice to enhance the quality of care in the community and in academia to promote student success in nursing school. Grant-writing is one major source of securing funding for innovative projects. Preparing a grant proposal is a highly organized process of clearly articulating and communicating ideas that bring the project to life to individuals from the granting agency who will be evaluating the proposal.

Getting started

An effective grant proposal must demonstrate that an organization has carefully planned for a successful project. Therefore, it's often beneficial for individuals to attend a grant-writing workshop or class as a first

Preparing a grant proposal is a highly organized process of clearly articulating and communicating ideas that bring the project to life to individuals from the granting agency who will be evaluating the proposal.

step, especially if individuals who plan to participate in the grant writing experience have never written a grant proposal. The next step in proposal planning is to schedule brainstorming sessions with all those who'll be directly or indirectly involved in the grant writing process. At these sessions, participants will identify the statement(s) of need and develop a clear, concise description of the proposed project. The goals for the project, a timetable for the project, and ways to evaluate the effectiveness of the project will also be determined during the initial proposal planning sessions.

It's crucial that industry partners from the community be involved in the grant proposal planning process. These partners are often the direct beneficiaries of project outcomes and may provide leveraged funds for

the grant project. Letters of commitment to support the grant project can be more easily obtained from industry partners and community organizations that are initially a part of the planning process. Sources of grant funding should also be explored early in the grant planning process. These sources are numerous and include, but aren't limited to, the federal government, various accrediting bodies, state and local agencies, and professional organizations.

A request for proposal, or RFP, is the primary source of information about each specific grant and provides an outline of criteria for the development of the grant proposal. It should be consulted early and often during the planning process in order to meet the requirements of the granting agency for the proposal.

Generally, each grant proposal will include the following sections:
• cover letter and summary
• introduction (presentation of the organization or applicant)
• statement of need and project objectives/outcomes
• project methods and design
• project evaluation
• project budget narrative
• proposal appendix.

Cover letter and summary

A one-page cover letter should be written on the applicant's letterhead to accompany the grant proposal. The cover letter should be signed by the highest official in the organization seeking the grant. Following the cover letter, a proposal summary or abstract should be inserted. The abstract or summary is developed after the proposal has been written and is usually no longer than three or four paragraphs. The summary should include a description of the applicant, a definition of the problem to be solved, a statement of objectives to be achieved, an outline of activities and procedures to be used to accomplish those objectives, a description of the evaluation design, the plans for the project at the end of the grant, and a statement of what the cost will be for the grant-funding agency. It should also identify other funding sources participating in the grant, if any.

Introduction

Be prepared to provide information to the grant-funding agency or source about the organization submitting the grant proposal. Most proposals require a statement of the purpose and a description of the organization's past and present operations. The introduction of the proposal should include a brief history of the

organization, a description of the qualifications of its professional staff and board of directors, and a discussion about whether other funds are being sought or are available for the grant project. A succinct resume of each principal grant author will also be required.

Statement of need and project objectives/outcomes

The problem statement (or needs assessment) is a key element of any proposal and provides a clear, concise, and well-supported picture of the problem(s) to be addressed. The best way to supply the information necessary to support the problem statement is to conduct both a formal and informal needs assessment in the service area, as well as to review the professional literature on the problem(s) to be addressed. Areas to document in the problem statement include, but aren't limited to, the purpose of the proposal, the project beneficiaries, the social and economic costs, and the nature of the problem(s). The statement of the problem(s) must also stress what identified needs gaps will be included in the grant project.

The project objectives or outcome statements are specific activities in the proposal, which are designed to address the problem(s) identified. Well-written objectives or outcome statements are well stated in clear, measurable terms. If the grant proposal is funded, the stated project objectives or outcomes statements will probably be used to evaluate not only the project's progress, but also overall project effectiveness.

Project methods and design

After the objectives or outcome statements have been identified in the proposal, it's important to walk the potential grantor through each step of the project. The project methods and design section is the blueprint to solve the stated problem(s) identified in the proposed grant. A specific plan of action, which delineates a sequence of justifiable activities including the proposed staffing and timetable for each task, should be written for each objective. The innovative features of the project should also be highlighted in the project methods and design section. Sometimes it's helpful to develop a diagram or model to complement the narrative. This section, in particular, should be carefully reviewed to ensure that the activities being proposed are realistic in terms of the proposed resources and designated time lines.

Project evaluation

Evaluation of a grant project includes two forms of evaluation: (1) product evaluation and (2) process evaluation. Product evaluation addresses the extent to which the project achieved its desired objectives. Process evaluation addresses how the project was conducted in terms of consistency with the stated plan of action and the effectiveness of the various activities within the plan. Common measures, or outputs, at each stage of the project must be clearly written for process evaluation. Federal grants often require a detailed process evaluation component that's reportable on a quarterly and annual basis.

Project budget narrative

The project budget should be presented as clearly and in as much detail as possible to justify the proposed expenses. The budget section should begin with a budget summary; like the proposal summary, it's written after the entire budget has been prepared. Thereafter, each section of the budget should be in an outline form, and line items should be listed under major headings and subdivisions. A well-prepared budget will justify all the proposed expenses and be consistent with the grant proposal narrative. The budget should specifically include the cost of salaries for personnel, anticipated expenses for equipment purchases, and a discussion of indirect costs and/or matching funds that may be required.

Proposal appendix

Lengthy documents, which are referred to in the narrative, are best added to the proposal in the appendix section. Examples to include in the appendix are letters of commitment, a list of previous funders, key staff biographies, annual reports, statistical data, maps, and diagrams and/or models.

Important points to remember

It's highly likely that several drafts of the proposal will be developed before the final product is submitted to the granting agency. Successful proposals are professional looking, have theoretical and methodological soundness, are written using positive terminology, don't overuse educational terms, are culturally sensitive, and present a justifiable budget that matches the project objectives and outcome statements. Successful proposals also clearly document how the project will be shared (disseminated) with others. Developing drafts of the proposal is labor-intensive work and requires a commitment by the grant writing team to meet deadlines in a timely manner. NM

At Amarillo College in Amarillo, Tex., Richard L. Pullen, Jr. and Sheryl S. Mueller are professors of nursing in the Division of Nursing.