

How to Write an Outreach Grant Proposal

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Plenty of advice is available for scientists seeking research grants. But what if you are looking for money to create an after-school science program or a training session for nurses who work with an increasingly elderly population?

Writing a grant for community or "outreach" activities is different from writing a research grant. In a scientific grant proposal, it is understood that researchers are exploring new realms and cannot know exactly what they will encounter. That's the definition of basic science, and delving into the unknown is what makes it exciting.

In contrast, an outreach grant proposal represents a road map for a project in which the applicants know where they are going and how to get there, and anticipates bumps in the road.

Foundations and agencies that support outreach programs want to see their money make a difference. While the full significance of a physicist's new findings in nonlinear dynamics may not be recognized for years, an outreach program is expected to show results -- here and now. That could mean higher test scores for students or increased fitness among the elderly. Whatever the target, you must provide evidence that your approach can succeed.

Don't assume that outreach grants are limited to human activities. For example, the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration provides money for coral-reef conservation projects as well as efforts to remove marine debris such as derelict boats and abandoned crab pots. So faculty members from many disciplines have the opportunity to seek grants for community activities.

If you are seeking money for such activities, it helps to know a little grant lingo when you search in databases or in directories. Under "award type" or "type of support," select "service delivery," "program development," "demonstration program" or "outreach."

In writing grant proposals, scientists are familiar with a format that includes the project's significance with respect to existing knowledge, its objectives, perhaps some preliminary data, and a research-design and methods section. A proposal for an outreach project is similar but uses different terminology for the sections. It includes five basic components: a description of the problem you want to deal with, what you hope to achieve by tackling the problem, how you will approach the problem, who will be in charge of which activities, and how you will measure your success.

Showing the Problem

Establishing the need for the work you propose is an essential first step. While a scientific-research project usually doesn't have to identify practical applications for the work, an outreach proposal must show the existence of a problem that needs to be remedied. A strong "statement of need," as it is sometimes called in the application, lists specific problems and supports those claims with documentation. It is akin to the significance section of a research proposal. The U.S. Department of Education's Web site provides several examples of successful proposals that include detailed need statements.

For example, a proposal for a new physical-education program for a school district documented the old and scarce equipment. There aren't enough soccer balls, so teams had to wait their turn to play. But idle time is not good for those students, because many are obese and do not meet basic fitness standards for children their age. The school district sought money for new sports equipment for activities that would appeal to more students, such as tennis, strength training, and aerobics.

In a proposal for a community technology center, the applicant showed the need for the facility by reporting the high poverty level of the surrounding area, along with the low standardized test scores in the schools. That was supported by national statistics showing less computer ownership among lower-income families.

Goals and Objectives

The terms "goals" and "objectives" may seem interchangeable, but there is an important distinction between them in a grant proposal, particularly in a results-oriented outreach grant.

A goal is the situation you want to achieve in the long run. World peace is an example of a lofty goal. But no one will give you money to pursue world peace. Instead, you must identify some concrete results you can achieve during the grant period that will take the world a few steps closer to that ideal.

First, you need to set a more realistic goal, such as reducing violent behavior in a particular school roiled by student fighting. Then think of measurable ways to document a decline in violent behavior. Those are your objectives. They might include reducing the number of referrals to juvenile authorities, times the school nurse has to treat fight-related wounds, and detentions issued as a result of fights.

The use of measurable outcomes is increasingly important as federal agencies face pressure to show they are putting taxpayer dollars to good use. But be realistic about what you promise to achieve in the project. Reviewers won't be fooled by exaggerated claims. They will accept that you can decrease the number of black eyes at the school; they won't believe that the students will be singing "Kumbaya" at the end of the grant.

The Road Map

The next component common to outreach grants is a work plan. That is a detailed description of the activities that will lead you to your goals and objectives. It is similar to the methods section of a scientific-research proposal but more detailed with regard to what you will do and when. In a scientific proposal, you need not explain each standard laboratory technique in detail. But an outreach grant often involves describing unique and innovative activities.

The agency will also want to know why your proposed activities are worth the risk of investment. Use evidence to make a strong case. Perhaps the scholarly literature supports your belief that your approach will succeed. Or perhaps others have used similar methods with good results. Mention those, and describe how you are modifying the approach to fit the unique needs of your situation.

A realistic timetable for completing the proposed work during the grant period is another must for this type of project. Prepare a calendar that shows when you will perform the proposed activities. Focus on major accomplishments, or milestones, as they are sometimes called in the application. If it's a multiyear grant, it is acceptable to be less specific about activities that will occur late in the grant period. In fact, your proposal will be stronger if you can show that you will learn as you go

along and adjust program activities accordingly. That is called "formative evaluation" in education-related grants.

Organization and Management

Who will do the recruiting and training? Who will reserve the space? Those questions need to be answered in a section usually called the management plan. Here again, you will need to provide more detail about the project leadership than you would in a scientific proposal.

Work in a laboratory follows standard procedures, with the investigator, postdocs, graduate students, and undergraduates playing well-defined roles. In contrast, each outreach project has its own team with its own plan of action. If you are not clear about who is responsible for what, some tasks may never get done.

If you are writing your plan of activities using the passive voice, it's a signal that you are failing to assign responsibility for some tasks. For example, if you say, "Workshop facilitators will be trained in the first month of the project," it is unclear who will do the training. Reviewers will notice that and ding you for it.

You may be asked to provide charts as a way to expand on the information in your management plan. There are a couple of ways to document the organization and management of your project. One way is to create a bar-chart-style timeline. On the vertical axis, list the tasks that need to be performed. On the horizontal axis, list each month of the grant period, and indicate the months in which each task will be done. You can also include on the horizontal axis a column that shows who will be responsible for each task.

Another way to illustrate management of your project is with an organizational chart, showing who reports to whom. Accompany the chart with descriptions of the job responsibilities of each position. Your application instructions will indicate which of those charts, if any, is sought.

In addition, the agency will want evidence that key personnel have the qualifications for their roles in the project. That may involve summaries of their backgrounds or résumés included in an appendix. Avoid attaching long CV's and instead focus on citing the work experience of participants that is most relevant to the project.

For example, if a biology professor will be presenting an after-school program to elementary school children to get them interested in science, don't provide an exhaustive list of that person's publications about the role of nitrogen in the growth of sea lettuce. Briefly establish the professor's scholarly credentials, and then emphasize his or her relevant activities, such as involvement in a highly successful summer science camp or some other work with school-age children.

Evaluation: The Measure of Success

Outreach grants are about results. Careers of individual program officers as well as future support for a given program can depend on how well current grantees perform. Most likely you will be asked to include an evaluation plan in your proposal so you can document whether you have been successful.

Evaluation conducted at the end of a project is called "summative evaluation" in education-related grants. Demonstrate your success by showing your achievement of the measurable objectives listed at the beginning of the proposal. One way to document performance is by quantifying things you can quantify, such as services and participants. In our example about the violent school, we could set a target of serving 25 students through biweekly workshops of 90 minutes each. If we want to reduce

referrals to juvenile authorities, we need to know how often they occurred before the outreach project. Then we need to remember to tally them again after the project. You need to be thinking about evaluation while you are planning your project activities, not after.

If that is unfamiliar territory for you, consider hiring someone else to design and conduct the evaluation. Experts in evaluation can be found in schools of education as well as in social-science departments. They will often prepare an evaluation plan for your proposal at no charge, provided you write them into the budget to perform the work if the project wins a grant. It's best to involve that person in the project planning so that valid measurements can be developed alongside program activities. If you try to retrofit the measures, you may have a harder time illustrating success.

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