

Best Practices for Grant Development: Starting With the Idea¹

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Grant writing has become an expectation for Extension faculty at the state and county level. While grant development may feel like a task to dread, with some support, grant writing can bring resources to your programs and help you test new solutions in your communities. However, aside from a few workshops provided by the university, new faculty may feel like they have few resources to help them sharpen their practices at applying for and securing grant funding. This EDIS series supports Extension professionals, especially at the county level, in building good grant development habits. This publication will focus on overcoming the obstacles to starting a proposal idea and identifying funders. Other parts in the series will cover constructing the actual proposal and narrative for a specific funding opportunity and assembling a team and budget.

Top 10 Tips

10. Get started now! Grant writing and idea development is an ongoing process, so doing a little bit at a time will help create a habit and prepare you for opportunities that pop up quickly. Starting now will also help break down a large task into smaller, manageable pieces.
9. Start building budgets and teams early. Similar to Tip 10, once you build one or more of these, revising them to fit new opportunities becomes easier.

8. Get to know funders. Refer to Harder et al. (2019) and take a look at recent funding opportunities and awards to see what each organization prioritizes.
7. Figure out your “so what.” Articulating the importance of your work is key to attracting a funder.
6. Figure out your unique value proposition. What sets you apart from everyone else? It may not be your actual solution but rather the demonstrated buy-in by your community, the experience of your team, or something else altogether.
5. Apply and get feedback. Similar to manuscript submissions, learning to move beyond rejection and using the constructive criticism to improve your work is key.
4. Ask colleagues or other teams for their successful proposals to use as models. There are often formulas and “hidden knowledge” for what funders want in a proposal structure, and you may learn from seeing what others have done.
3. Have multiple ideas to pitch to funders if the time arises. Building on Tip 10, once you have an idea, you can generate others. Then when you get in front of a program officer to discuss concepts, you can get their high-level feedback on a few that you have ready in case one does not fit their interests.

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2. Know your community and their needs. Center them in the funding process, or at least partner with them as advisors. Again, this can set your proposal apart if you have strong community support for the idea and especially if you have members of the community on your team.

And the #1 Tip:

1. Continuously share and hone your messages. In addition to seeking formal feedback from applying, participating in workshops or sharing drafts with community members, mentors, and writing partners will help you identify and address holes in your ideas or writing.

While all parts of the EDIS series will discuss these tips, this publication will cover Tips 10, 8, 7, 6, and 3 in more depth. The publication on proposal writing delves into Tips 5, 4, and 1, and the budget and team publication examines Tips 9 and 2.

Before You Begin: Understand Your Confidence Level

Consider—What is keeping you from applying? As a new faculty member, or as someone hoping to apply to a different funding program or with a different topic, you may feel lower levels of confidence in your idea. You may also believe that failure, especially on the first attempt, may not feel good. However, if you frame the proposal as a chance to get feedback on the idea, assuming the granting organization will provide feedback, you may feel more confident in submitting a proposal. Proposing an idea can also serve as an introduction of you and your programs to a new funder.

Perhaps you also feel like you do not fully understand the process of applying, either to the grant organization or through the internal institution requirements. My advice in any case is to go ahead and try. Even if you do not submit because you miss an internal deadline, or the application ultimately does not fit the formatting and does not get reviewed, you will have still created a draft that will be more easily adapted to other opportunities, and you will have learned about the processes, hopefully avoiding similar mistakes in the future. Grant proposals, even unfunded, are usually counted in your Report of Accomplishment. Finally, the process may create new partnerships with state specialists and other faculty that can support your work in other ways going forward.

Also, finding potential funders is usually not the biggest barrier; see Harder et al. (2019) for great ideas and resources within and outside of UF and IFAS especially for county faculty. The publications on building proposals and budgets will cover these resources in more depth.

Consider when selecting a funder—Are you looking for program support or for research or program development funding? The former often can be funded with smaller grants from non-profits or local organizations while the latter is usually best suited to government agency grants. Understanding the cycles of when programs release opportunities for funding, such as quarterly, annually, or less frequently, can also help you plan your applications.

You can learn about funders and application priorities by volunteering to be on grant review panels or committees. Some of these, especially nationally, can be paid opportunities or at least reimbursed expenses. Serving on panels is one way to develop relationships with the program officers, so you may feel more comfortable pitching them initial ideas when you have them.

Idea Development

Understanding your community is key to developing a strong idea and proposal. What does the community you are working with say is a priority? Having the community-driven idea will lend credence to the feasibility of adoption should you prove successful. Extension is expert at collecting this information, of course, through advisory boards and needs assessments. Some national data tools can also give ideas at state and county levels, including the American Community Survey, the Social Vulnerability Index, and PLACES data from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. For more information on engaging your community in planning programs for maximum impact, see Vines and Forde-Stiegler (2018).

Turning to the narrative, that is, the bulk of the space to explain your plan, having an idea is often the easy part. Grant writing is primarily about really editing, honing, and selling your message to the funder. See the section on fitting in with other funder opportunities in Harder et al. (2019). As mentioned, you can often reach out to program officers to discuss whether your idea in general fits their priorities. They may ask for a brief, generally one-page, concept description to review ahead of a conversation with you.

One of the most important tasks in building your narrative is working on clearly and concisely providing your message.

Ask yourself the following questions, and then answer in the proposal:

- What is the problem you want to solve that fits the funder's priorities?
- How are you going to address the problem in a unique way?
- What are your strengths in addressing the problem?
- How do you know this is a problem in your community and that your approach will (probably) work?
- What are the limits of your approach and potential pitfalls? How will you address those pitfalls?

For anything programmatic, include an evaluation plan. This will help demonstrate that you have expertise and recognize the value of evaluation (Israel et al., 2020). Including the plan, even if it is just one sentence long, when not required may push funders to help everyone do stronger evidence-based and evidence-generating projects. Bonus: if you engage your community, they can help you plan the evaluation and the outcomes that they would be most interested in. Find more on evaluation in many EDIS publications on the topic, such as the Program Evaluation topic (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/topics/program-development-and-evaluation>) and the Savvy Survey series (https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/collections/series_savvy_survey).

Knowing Your Funders

Identifying appropriate funders requires some information gathering. Starting with understanding the specific funding opportunities and awards made over the past several years is a good first step to determine donor priorities. Find the donors' objectives and specifically the types of benefits to communities they want to see, such as infrastructure or programs or particular outcomes, and even which specific communities they want to see benefit. Make sure you have results or preliminary results, if the funding mechanism requires them, demonstrating your accomplishments' fit with the funder priorities. At the same time, know your weaknesses and potential obstacles; acknowledging and planning to overcome these show that you have really examined your own ideas in depth. Finally, consider whether a funder wants public-private partnerships to address the complex problems facing Florida, the United States, and beyond and whether you have experience with such partnerships that you can demonstrate to the funder. If not, a solid plan for a team and collaboration can still be attractive to the right funder. See in this series the publication on building a team for more information.

Building for the Future

One emerging model for funding is trust-based philanthropy (McGrath & Wong, 2020; Tedesco & Salehi, 2021). This approach aims to give power back to the communities to decide what to do with the money. Funding comes with fewer (or different) strings and fewer "priorities" driven from the funder. The model includes a stronger sharing of resources to build the communities themselves. Are there organizations who work in your communities who might be practicing this philosophy? If so, how can you support these communities' programming efforts funded by this model? Or, could you broker relationships with communities and local funding organizations such that they begin to practice this way because they know you, your community, and your work? Again, reporting partnership development can be an accomplishment on your annual Report of Accomplishment if agreed upon with your director(s). The National Network for Collaboration offers a collaboration framework (Bergstrom et al., 1995) that can help document partnership development stages (Downey & Peterson, 2020).

Summary

Preparing and submitting proposals to fund innovative programs for your communities can be intimidating. Breaking down the steps and working on things with a mindset of revising and refining ideas can help you build strong concepts to take to funders. Incorporating development in the long-term can lead to a suite of partnerships and proposals to support your work.

Resources for Grant Searching and Funder Identification

- Harder et al. (2019)
- Pivot, Funding Database (UF Subscription): <https://pivot.proquest.com>
- UF Research Funding listings: <https://ufresearch.infoready4.com>
 - Note for Limited Submissions, you must apply to UF internally first as the sponsor limits the submissions from each institution.
- UF Research email list: <https://my.research.ufl.edu/ProgramDevelopment/FundingOpportunities/OpportunitiesManager.aspx>
 - Log in and set up a subscription.
- Candid. Philanthropy News Digest: <https://philanthropynewsdigest.org/>

- [Youth.gov](https://youth.gov)
- Grant Gopher Grant Finder: <https://grantgopher.com/#/>
- State and National Government agencies

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