Capacity Building through Grant Writing in Arkansas Communities

A Fact Sheet for Cooperative Extension Agents and Community Members

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Summary and Overview

Fund development is a key component for communities to act on shared priorities. Without money to support shared goals, it is hard for communities to maintain the shared momentum for action. Grant writing provides an opportunity for community-centric and nonprofit organizations to leverage and bring in funding for their community.

Community development empowers members to mobilize and act collectively, creating a more vital and resilient community (Robinson & Green, 2011). Extension practitioners play a key role in fostering this capacity by building skills, networks, confidence, and leadership. Effective development happens when communities engage intentionally to act on their strengths and aspirations.

Start with Something that Matters

When you want to pursue grant funding from federal, state, or foundation sources, the first step is to focus on what matters to you, your work, and community. As you start, ask yourself several initial questions:

1. Is this project something you believe to be very important?

2. Does the project fit your mission?

3. Does this project have strong community support?

4. Does this project fill a significant need in the community?

It is also important as you start your grant development process to understand who you are as an entity or organization. For example, are you a faith-based organization, a volunteer fire department, and mission-focused nonprofit organization, or another entity? By understanding your mission and purpose, it will help you know the types of potential funding sources for you.

As you begin, think about when and why you are looking for grants. For example, if you need funds in six months, one year, or three years, the answer helps you know which types of

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funds are best. Federal funding is often not best for a shorter time frame while foundation community-based funds may be better for first time fund seekers. As you are exploring funds, it is important to understand the eligibility for different funding opportunities and ensure your organization is eligible for the funds.

Developing a Clear Goal

Next, have a clear goal for your grant writing request that speaks to your mission and purpose in the community. Your goal cannot simply be to generate funds for the community. A SMART goal can be a helpful tool to utilize in developing a clear goal for your work. SMART goals are specific, measurable, attainable, measurable, and time-framed (Heathfield, S.M., 2011). The benefit of a SMART goal is that it helps you think about your goal in time-focused, measurable ways that are important for funders to understand the context of your request. Funders are investing funds in your success, and it is important for a funder to understand your clear objectives. You will also build on the SMART goal throughout your writing process.

Identify Local Assets and Build Partnerships

The goals and purpose of funding requests should be directed by people in the community and those directly impacted by the grant results. Communities have strengths, and leadership that can drive positive change.

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) is a useful lens to view grant writing and community development in Extension. ABCD sees communities and the people within them as having strengths. Every community has something that is working, however small it may feel, that is strengthening their communities. ABCD practice focuses on what is strong and not what is wrong in the community as a place to foster and build local leadership for positive, collective change (McKnight, J.L., & Kretzmann, J.P., 1993). Long before writing a grant, it is important

to host listening sessions with community members directly impacted by your work.

Grant writing is not a solo endeavor! Partnerships with other organizations, government, institutions, and others enable your organization to have access to greater resources. It is important to utilize a partnership matrix.

For a simple partnership matrix,

- Draw a circle in the center for your organization.
- Add surrounding circles for current partners.
- Add circles for potential partners needed for success.
- Strong partnerships are mutually beneficial, not one-sided.

As you step back and look at your SMART goal(s), partnerships and existing assets, take a look at the gaps and needed resources. These resources needed are the focus of your grant proposal!

Finding Potential Grants

It is important to utilize your professional network and talk with others in service to your community. While it is sometimes tempting to think of other organizations as competition, all organizations are working together to make the community better and can be stronger together than separate. Content experts and state offices are often aware of funding sources in their area

of knowledge. There are also specific databases that can be accessed for a fee. The public library is a good resource locally and offers access to the internet locally.

Funding requests come by different names whether request for proposal (RFP), notice of funding availability (NOFA), or notice of funding opportunity (NOFO), all point to a call for a grant application. For public and private foundations, it is important to view their website for funding priorities, timelines, and processes. There may not be a active call for proposals but a process for submitting a letter of intent or interest (LOI). As you review funding sources, look to see if funding is by reimbursement or awarded up front. If reimbursement, funds must be spent and then reimbursed by the funder. It is important to understand whether or not your organization has capacity for reimbursement or needs funds to accomplish the project upfront.

Grant Writing as Story Telling

Your grant proposal tells the funder a story about your organization, community, and project. It is important that you both meet the technical components of the grant and tell a clear logical and reasonable story about your work and project. As you put together your proposal, you will need basic information (contact information, address, organizational information) for a cover sheet. You will then have a project summary and narrative. Your proposal file should have a bibliography, listing of facilities and resources, documentation of existing equipment, support letters, key personnel for the project, budget, and budget narrative (description of your budget numbers).

The narrative in your grant proposal is the heart of the proposal. It first introduces your writing with a clear purpose of the proposal (SMART goal) followed by any additional background on your community including data and specifics that gives great context and credibility to your approach. As you write the narrative, build on your SMART goal

to clarify the timeline and success of your proposed project. A logic model is a helpful tool that is critical to grant writing. A logic model invites you to think through your project from short-term to long-term outcomes and set clear goals that establish a timeline for the project. A strong grant proposal must include an evaluation process that shows how the organization will know it has achieved the goals presented in the proposal.

Preparing a Budget and Budget Narrative

A budget is the numerical story of your project and how you will use funds to support the project. Like the narrative, the budget must correspond with the goals outlined in the proposal. It is important to review the RFP or NOFO/NOFA for specific allowances and categories that should be addressed in the proposal. For example, it is important to know if indirect costs are allowed by the funder. Common budget categories include staffing with salaries and fringe costs, contracts for professional services relative to the project, travel, supplies, equipment, meeting expenses, and other costs related to the project known as direct costs for the grant. The budget narrative explains these numbers in words—why each cost is necessary and how it supports project goals. A clear narrative builds funder confidence in your plan.

Reflecting on the Process and Pursuing Final Steps

The grant writing process is not a solo process! It is important to engage others outside of your immediate project to review the grant before submission. Like an outside grant reviewer, someone outside of the grant writing process will notice points of weakness in your proposal and areas for editing. If you are pursuing a federal grant, it is imperative to register with grants.gov before beginning the grant writing process. The SAM.gov process is necessary, time worthy, and requires regular

updates for sustained compliance in the system. As you write a grant proposal, it is critical that you think through a grant management plan as well. While it is important to receive grant funds, it is imperative that the funds be managed properly for your ongoing success as an organization and for your ability to fulfill grant requirements.

Grant writing is an excellent tool for increasing resources in your community. Most importantly, the grant development process helps you and your community accomplish shared goals for local community development together.

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