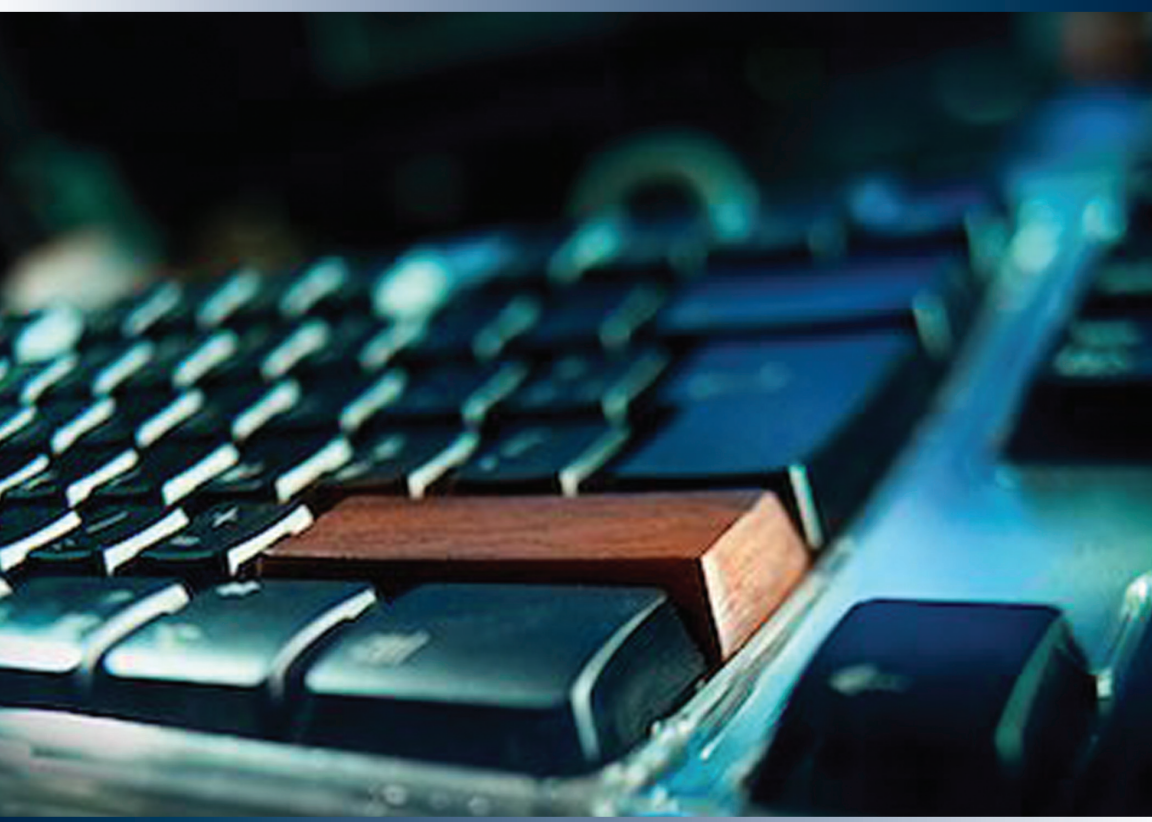


# Developing Competitive Proposals



The American Association of State Colleges and Universities' Grants Resource Center (GRC) is committed to strengthening the competitive edge of college and university faculty members and administrators pursuing sponsored programs funding from public and private sources. With a pre-award focus, GRC offers a range of informational services to personnel on member campuses:

- The GrantSearch database promotes efficient searching for higher education funding;
- A Funded Proposal Library allows access to successful applications;
- Agency summaries describe priorities of federal funders; and
- Campus policy statements on a range of topics— from intellectual property to research ethics— disseminate best practices.

Offering access to timely and actionable information on funding opportunities, providing personalized support to meet specific campus needs, and promoting networking among sponsored programs professionals, GRC supports the realization of institutional goals and program development priorities.

For additional information, visit GRC's general information Web site ([aascu.org/grcinfo](http://aascu.org/grcinfo)) or contact the GRC Director at 202.293.7070.

# **DEVELOPING COMPETITIVE PROPOSALS**

**Grants Resource Center**  
American Association of State  
Colleges and Universities

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The ability to secure external funding for research and service projects has become a necessary skill for many in academe. This guide is designed to help individuals understand the process by which government agencies and private foundations support research, education and service activities on our nation's campuses. In addition, it outlines a methodical process for transforming project ideas into grant-winning proposals.

## **UNDERSTANDING SPONSORSHIP**

Government agencies and private foundations have long recognized the value of using academic talents to assist them in meeting their goals. Funding from both sources has supported a wide range of activities to expand scientific knowledge, promote social equality and foster economic development. Although, in practice, it can appear that virtually any activity could be supported, sponsors fund projects that fit within specified parameters.

Government agencies disburse tax dollars to meet public needs that have been recognized by Congress or state legislatures. In many cases, the agencies' authority to spend is broadly defined. There is wide variation in the level of specificity of funding criteria, with some programs defined very precisely and others providing only suggested strategies. However, in all cases, an agency can fund only those activities that fit within its mission. Each agency also wishes to support worthwhile projects so it can persuade

Congress or the state legislature that continued, or even increased, funding each year is in the best interest of the nation or state. Given the regulated process by which government agencies establish and fund specific programs, it can be relatively easy to gather the information necessary to construct a responsive project and translate it into a competitive proposal.

Foundation grant making is more idiosyncratic than that of government agencies, but it is not without its own inherent logic. Foundations have much greater discretion in disbursing their funds. Although they do have to operate within the boundaries established by the Internal Revenue Service to maintain their tax-exempt status, each foundation is basically free to dictate how and on what it spends its money. No legislature overseer determines what the foundation's funding priorities will be for a given year or how it must dispense its funds. Due to this individualized means of disbursing grant dollars, it is often necessary for grant seekers to build a relationship with a specific foundation first before securing funding. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways, from simply contacting a foundation with a project idea to networking through local organizations or local chapters of national foundations.

Private foundations and government agencies are alike, however, in the requirement to spend their money wisely and support projects that hold the greatest promise of making a real contribution to their area of concern. Consequently, whether you

are applying to a government program or a private foundation, it is important to propose a well-conceived project that addresses a topic of interest to the agency or foundation and will result in an outcome that can be objectively measured.

## **STEPS IN PROPOSAL DEVELOPMENT**

Developing a winning project proposal can be a long and, at times, difficult process, so it is beneficial to begin early and involve your campus's office of sponsored programs (sometimes called the grants or sponsored research office) from the start. Ideally, your proposal development activities will fall into the following sequence:

- Refining and polishing your idea;
- Putting your idea into a project format;
- Assessing your position;
- Evaluating administrative issues;
- Identifying potential sponsors;
- Ascertaining sponsor interest; and
- Preparing a full proposal.

## **REFINING AND POLISHING YOUR IDEA**

A concise, specific and targeted statement of the proposal idea is essential to the successful development of the grant application or contract response. This three- to five- sentence statement can take the form of a hypothesis, problem statement or research question, and should include evidence of the idea's importance, clear indication of the

variables, and criteria for assessing the solution. It is recommended that proposal writers develop this project idea statement prior to starting to write the proposal, and then revisit the statement periodically to determine if the research design is developing coherently or the statement needs to be adjusted. Throughout the proposal writing process, the statement serves as a concise explanation of the research target, outlines the importance of the issue and identifies the basis for assessment. This statement is useful in explaining the research effort to funders, administrators and colleagues, and helps you put your ideas into a project format.

## **PUTTING YOUR IDEA INTO A PROJECT FORMAT**

Sponsors fund activities, not ideas. No matter how good your ideas or noble your intentions, you must translate them into a specific set of activities in order to secure funding. Whether you want to establish a training program, demonstrate a novel approach to service delivery or conduct basic research, the task of moving from an idea to a practical work plan is the same. You must define the problem or need you wish to address, formulate the goals and objectives of your response to that problem, and then decide what specific actions you will undertake to fulfill those goals and objectives. You should also give thought to potential pitfalls, how the project will be evaluated to determine its success, and whether it will be sustainable after the funded project period has ended.



An excellent way to start is to develop a concise outline containing each of the elements discussed below. An outline allows you to organize your thoughts into a coherent action plan and will help you formulate your arguments to persuade a potential sponsor of your proposed project's value. Work on each section until you have established a strong, logical connection between the activities you propose to undertake and the resolution of the problem you have defined. Try to look at the project from a potential sponsor's perspective. Why would someone support this activity? Who might benefit from it? What might the project accomplish? Can this project be replicated or disseminated broadly? Finally, you should share the outline with colleagues, who can provide valuable feedback and guidance.

## **DEVELOPING A PROJECT OUTLINE**

### **Statement of Need or Problem to be Addressed**

What really needs to be done? What significant need(s) are you trying to meet? What services need to be delivered to whom, or what gaps exist in the knowledge base of your field? For research projects, conduct a thorough bibliographic search to uncover information that may strengthen your proposal and verify that your project idea is indeed unique. Your reviewers will expect your proposal to reflect an awareness of the major and recent research studies and publications in your field.

Remember that the problem must be both significant and manageable. Potential sponsors must

be convinced that a problem is important enough to deserve attention—and that some impact on the problem is possible and that you are the person or are representing the organization that can make that happen.

### **Goals and Objectives**

Set an overall goal for your project by delineating what you intend to accomplish. Think about what impact you hope to make on the problem. What caused the problem, or what factors contributed to it, and how could these factors be modified to alleviate the problem? What specific measurable changes could be made? What are your short-term and long-term goals? What broader impact will your project have? Your answer will allow you to develop a set of project objectives—i.e., a statement of specific outcomes that could be measured to determine actual accomplishments. You will need to address how you will evaluate your project’s success and ensure that it will be sustainable.

### **Plan of Action, Project Design or Methodology**

What specific activities would enable you to meet the objectives you have set? How can they be conducted? How realistic is your plan of action? Do you and any other project directors have the necessary experience, interest and ability to carry out the project? What is the timeline for completing your project? For a research proposal, you must select an appropriate methodology and then establish a clear rationale for its adoption. For a service or demonstration project, you must think about the number and types of people who would

be served and who would provide the specific service components.

### **Budget and Personnel Requirements**

For many applicants writing a proposal for the first time, estimating a project's budget and personnel needs can be daunting. However, your campus sponsored programs office, having expertise in developing project budgets, will be glad to assist you in putting together a realistic estimate. Your institution may actually require the office's involvement in proposal budget development, another reason why it is important to involve them early in this process. They can help you answer such questions as:

- How many people with what types of qualifications are needed to carry out the project?
- What space, equipment and travel resources are required?
- How much time is necessary to complete each of the project activities?
- How will release time and salary reimbursements be calculated and decided upon?

Once these questions have been answered, you should be able to generate a fairly accurate estimate of the project's financial requirements. You should be prepared to include a table or line itemization of costs and a "budget justification," in which you will explain the necessity of certain budget items such as travel for professional meetings, purchase of laboratory equipment or the use of consultants.

### **Title**

Choose a simple title that explicitly, yet concisely, explains what you plan to do. Avoid cute, catchy, or vague titles and confusing acronyms. Starting your proposal with an appropriate title will increase your odds of getting funded.

## **ADDRESSING ADMINISTRATIVE ISSUES**

This is the time to assess how your project will work on an administrative level. Does your project fit with your institution's mission, size and resources? How will your institution support you in your role as project administrator? Grants normally are awarded to institutions, not individuals, and in most cases sponsors require evidence of institutional commitment before they will consider supporting a project, however impressive the individual proposal may be.

Consult your departmental chair and dean and the office of sponsored programs to discuss such topics as institutional cost sharing, laboratory space, availability of research assistants, travel, and release time. You should also assess whether it will be necessary to collaborate with other researchers or institutions to fulfill your project's goals. Many agencies and private foundations specifically encourage collaboration among researchers and/or institutions.

It is vital that you address other administrative concerns that will have a bearing on your project.

You should consider major ethical or compliance issues (such as regulations on human subjects protection and animal welfare, and potential conflicts of interest). Often, verification that these requirements have been addressed must be presented within your proposal; it is important that you budget enough time to address these issues, as verification can be a long process and can depend on other staff members at your institution and at others with which you may be partnering. Because a successful proposal will be legally binding on your institution, it is vital that these policies and regulations are accurately addressed.

After you have thought out each of these elements, review your entire plan for logic and consistency. Now you are ready to move forward with a clear project in mind.

## **IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL SPONSORS**

Having written your project plan, estimated the financial resources needed, and begun to address the various administrative issues involved, you can now start the process of identifying particular sponsors that might have an interest in funding your work. Although it is possible to research sponsors on your own, your campus's sponsored programs office is especially equipped and knowledgeable in assisting with funding searches. Most offices maintain extensive files and other information resources that describe both public and private funding organizations. These resources may include

searchable electronic databases (such as the Grants Resource Center's GrantSearch), government-sponsored funding platforms (such as Grants.gov), or private funding directories (such as *The Foundation Directory Online*). The information they contain may range from the funding priorities and award sizes of an agency or foundation to its geographic limitations on giving and other eligibility requirements. This information should enable you to match your interests with those of potential sponsors. Your sponsored programs office also can help you find information on a particular agency or foundation. Finally, because your campus sponsored programs office is familiar with prior awards made to your institution, it may be able to refer you to people on campus who have successfully applied to funders of interest to you. The previous applicants, in turn, should be able to provide insight into what worked and what did not as they proceeded through the sponsor's application process.

Beyond the resources that your campus sponsored programs office can provide, you have access to a vast amount of information online. Government agencies are subject to stringent reporting requirements and foundations are required by law to make information on their giving practices available to the Internal Revenue Service and the public. Agency and foundation Web sites often fulfill these requirements and thus are valuable resources for information on specific funding opportunities, as well as goals and priorities. To be successful in your funding search, it will be necessary to write a proposal that fits with the organization's mission

statement, whether that be to further biomedical research or teach the next generation of researchers. It is also vital that you understand the way in which the agency or foundation intends to fulfill its goals and the way in which it processes and evaluates prospective projects. Much of this information is readily available online. In addition, the federal government and its agencies maintain online access to abstracts and/or searchable databases of previously funded projects. On the private side, *The Foundation Directory Online* will allow you to search foundations by keyword or subject category, search funded grants, and gain access to foundations' IRS 990 forms. More information on these resources is available in the companion to this guide, *Resources for Proposal Development*.

## **ASCERTAINING SPONSOR INTEREST**

Once you have identified potential sponsors and obtained as much information as possible about likely funding sources, you can begin to ascertain the likelihood that your project or idea would interest your target audience of sponsors. You can begin this process by compiling the following information about a funding program:

- The program's purpose;
- Stated program priorities and special proposal guidelines;
- Recipient eligibility requirements (including geographic restrictions);
- Types of activities eligible for funding;

- Particular funding mechanisms used (grant, contract, cooperative agreement);
- Total funds available and projected number of awards;
- Evaluation criteria, review process, selection of reviewers, and/or reviewer guidelines;
- Application deadlines and review cycles (length of time between receipt of application and award of grant); and
- Giving history (types of organizations, individuals and activities funded in the past).

If you decide that an agency or foundation program is relevant, it is generally advisable to contact the program staff unless the sponsor directs otherwise. Many agencies and foundations strongly encourage potential applicants to initiate early contact with staff before submitting an application. Such contact will help establish a rapport with the sponsor and will be useful to you throughout the application and review process. Establishing contact with foundations is especially important, as many prefer to fund organizations or individuals with whom they have built a professional relationship.

For both federal and private sponsors, you should verify your project's suitability for the program, discuss points that need clarifying, and determine the program's current status (application deadlines, any changes in program priorities, anticipated funding levels, etc.). Your sponsored programs office can help you locate the appropriate contact person. Many agencies and foundations also provide program contact information on their Web sites.



You may initially contact a potential sponsor by telephone, e-mail, a scheduled office visit, or any combination of these approaches. The method of contact you choose should depend on the sponsor's stated preference. For example, well-staffed federal agencies usually will respond to phone calls as well as e-mail inquiries; however, many foundations with limited full-time staff require that all inquiries be submitted electronically. If the sponsor does not express a preference, initiate contact in the manner you prefer. If you decide to seek a telephone conversation, it is a courtesy to call or e-mail the program officer first to discuss a time when this phone appointment can be scheduled. In addition, it is advisable that you have your project outline, abstract or concept paper already prepared before you initiate contact with potential sponsors. This will allow you to clearly articulate your project's goals and to provide program staff with more information about your project in advance of a scheduled meeting.

You should not expect a commitment for funding at this point, but you should be able to obtain an indication of your work's relevance to the sponsor's funding interests. The sponsor's reaction to your preliminary inquiry will allow you to assess whether it is worth your time and effort to submit a full proposal.

Before you begin to write the proposal, it is advisable to prioritize your potential funders and apply one at a time. Shotgun approaches to proposal writing are notoriously unsuccessful

because they don't address the specific funding criteria in each proposal.

## **PREPARING A FULL PROPOSAL**

No secret formula exists to guarantee a winning proposal. You can prepare a more effective document, however, if you keep certain general principles in mind:

- First, the proposal is the primary basis for evaluating your project and determining whether financial support is justified, so you must give reviewers a reason to fund your proposal. Your proposal should leave reviewers with a clear understanding of what your objectives are, as well as the implications or “so what?” of your project. Reviewers must be convinced that your project is worth doing and that you are qualified to do it.
- Second, keep in mind that reviewers must evaluate many excellent proposals in a short time. Therefore, your proposal must stand out for the reviewer by being readable, well-organized and concise, and it must avoid technical jargon that could confuse lay readers.
- Third, writing a grant proposal to obtain funding differs from writing an academic paper for publication. While both focus on an idea's significance and broader impact, you must market the ideas in your proposal to obtain grant funding by turning them into practical, realistic and fundable projects for the reviewer to evaluate.

By following the guidelines below, you should be able to develop a convincing and competitive proposal.

### **A. Letters of Intent or Pre-Proposals**

Agencies and foundations often solicit a two- to three-page letter of intent or require a short letter of interest as the initial approach for funding. This is done in order to gauge the project's appropriateness. If your project meets with approval, then you are invited to develop a formal proposal. The letters of intent or pre-proposals should briefly describe your project, budget, institution, and the project's societal contributions or broader impacts. You should be thoroughly knowledgeable about the agency or foundation's priorities so you can directly link your project to their funding interests.

### **B. Full Proposals**

The proposal format will depend on the individual sponsor's requirements. Government agencies post specific information, forms, and proposal guidelines online, while private foundations can be less forthcoming with information. Whenever sponsors provide guidelines or directions, follow them explicitly. "Follow the directions" is the first, sometimes the only, grant seeking tip provided by program directors and experienced reviewers. It is also important to re-read the program guidelines as you write your proposal because ideas often take on a life of their own as you write, and could stray outside the firm boundaries laid out in the guidelines.

Whether or not a sponsor publishes guidelines, all proposals should contain certain elements (outlined below).

**Narrative**

The main body of the proposal should be a narrative laying out exactly what you plan to do, why, and how you propose to do it. The narrative should include all of the elements in your outline, with supporting information and elaboration.

- Generally, begin with a statement of the need or problem you will address. The importance of the problem should receive considerable and persuasive attention. For service projects, you should provide the results of a needs assessment. For research projects, you should provide a clear rationale as to why the work in your particular area is likely to be fruitful, including a literature search to build your case.
- Next, state the overall goals and specific objectives of the project, making sure there is a clear, logical connection between the problem you have defined and the response you are proposing, including how the activities carried out within your project are related to the expected outcomes.
- Finally, describe your plan of action or methodology, providing sufficient detail for the reader to judge whether your project can be run both efficiently and effectively. The narrative should demonstrate that you have carefully thought through all aspects of the project. It must convince the reviewer of the significance

of the problem, the appropriateness of your proposed response, and your ability to conduct the planned activities. Be sure its logic is cogent, its organization strong, and its writing convincing and concise.

### **Project Evaluation**

How will you assess your project's accomplishments? Funders want to know that their dollars will serve their intended purpose, so you must assess the project's impact. Include information on what records you will keep or data you will collect, and how you will use that data. Evaluation should always be built into the fabric of the proposal, not tacked on at the end. The best way to do this is by associating your overall project goals with your project's short-term objectives and long-term outcomes. In order to help the reviewer better judge your project's impact and worth, these objectives and outcomes should be specific, measurable, action-oriented and realistic.

Use of either an internal or external evaluator has become common in fields such as education and the social sciences. It is often useful to get the evaluator on board as the proposal is being developed to assure the project's goals can be adequately evaluated.

### **Timeline**

In order to help the reviewer understand what you plan to do and when, include a well-developed timeline for project activities. A realistic, careful

timeline demonstrates to the reviewer your thorough organization and planning skills. It also shows that you have thought through your project's long-term needs and goals.

### **Budget**

Although too often viewed as a tedious technicality, the budget is, in fact, a key element of any proposal. Every budget should tell a story, and budgets, along with the timeline, are often used by reviewers for a quick sense of a project's organization and the proposal writer's credibility as a manager. Budgets also present your project in quantitative terms. Personnel costs are usually a major budget item. They should be broken down to indicate the number of professional and support staff, their salary and fringe levels, and the percentages of their time to be devoted to the project.

Other typical budget items include travel, equipment, materials, and facilities and administrative costs (also called indirect costs or overhead). Facilities and administrative (F&A) costs are based on negotiations between the federal government and applicant institutions. These negotiations establish an amount that can be applied to grants and contracts to cover the aggregated educational and general expense contributions that an institution makes to a sponsored project. In theory, overhead pays for such things as building, maintenance and utilities, libraries, administrative costs of managing grants

and contracts, and departmental/school/college academic administrative costs.

Your budget also must show any proposed institutional or third party matching funds or cost sharing contributions, which sponsors increasingly expect or require. If institutional cost sharing is being requested, this must be shared with your sponsored programs office as soon as possible. When an award is given based upon a proposal that has cost share/matching commitments, whether mandatory or voluntary, this becomes a condition of the award.

Strong budget sections also feature an accurate estimate of all costs. Reviewers know the cost of doing work in their field and figures that are too high or low may cause them to question your familiarity with your specialty and your abilities as a project manager. Always consult your sponsored programs or business office staff for guidance in compiling realistic budget estimates.

### **Abstract**

An abstract must be a compelling presentation of your case. Reviewers will look at your abstract first, so you must prepare the brief proposal abstract knowing that readers heavily rely on it to get a sense of your project. Be sure to cover all the proposal's key elements, especially any priorities that are mentioned in the application, within the stipulated length limitations. Finally, the abstract must be written for the lay reader, as reviewers will represent varied backgrounds and disciplines.

In the final proposal the abstract will appear first, but it is best to write it last after you have completed the proposal's main sections.

### **Appendices**

Appendices, if allowed, should include any materials that add important data but would interrupt and be cumbersome to the narrative—such as charts, graphs, tables or illustrations. Letters of support should be included in this section, as it is always important to give the reviewer a sense of your credibility as a program director. Such letters should always figure prominently whenever a partnership agreement is involved. You also may want to include endorsements from institutional officials, preferably the chief executive officer. *Curricula vitae* of key project personnel should also be included here, but bear in mind that the sponsor is interested only in relevant work and experience, not entire career histories.

### **Table of Contents**

Make sure to number each page and, if possible, include a table of contents as a service to your reviewers. Like the project timeline, this document serves a dual purpose. It aids the reviewer in quickly locating the various elements of your proposal (this can be especially valuable in instances when proposal sections are being copied and may be placed out of sequence), and it reinforces the reviewer's impression of you as an organized and capable project manager.



## **TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE PROPOSAL WRITING**

As you write the full proposal, keep in mind the following points:

- Follow application guidelines explicitly. Your proposal should always fit the sponsor's priorities, rather than make reviewers work to find your proposal's relevance.
- Address stated review criteria thoroughly. To help reviewers, use headers to clearly identify each criterion.
- Draw on your strengths and the strengths of your institution.
- Use clear, precise language. Avoid jargon or unnecessarily technical terminology.
- Make use of bullets and tables to summarize your ideas, rather than long descriptive paragraphs.
- Include a table of contents and clearly identify the various proposal sections that meet the criteria of the funder.
- Ask a colleague outside of your field to review your proposal for format and readability.
- Go to your sponsored programs office early in the proposal writing process to alert them to what you are doing, and then return well before

the submission deadline for help with internal clearance and sign-off procedures.

## **STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS**

- Be creative in examining the applications of your work. If you are used to providing services in one institutional setting, to one particular group, think of other settings and groups that could also benefit.
- Become thoroughly familiar with the federal agencies and foundations most likely to fund your project. While the overall structures of federal and state governments may appear hopelessly complex, often the specific offices with which you are dealing can be much less complicated and quite approachable. Focus on those offices or foundations most relevant to your interests. Get on foundations' mailing lists for annual reports and other materials. Check federal agencies' Web sites regularly. If they have advisory groups, monitor their deliberations.
- Volunteer to serve as a proposal reviewer. It is an eye-opening experience to review a large group of proposals. Some always stand out by virtue of the clear writing.
- Review awards lists of funded projects by your potential sponsors. Look over final project reports and lists of funded proposals. Many of these documents are available online.

- Ask colleagues with prior funding or reviewing experience to examine your outline, funding strategy and draft proposal. Their suggestions may strengthen your proposal and help you avoid a resubmission.
- Explore summer residencies or sabbatical internships; serve as a consultant to or subcontractor on a colleague's funded project; or consider what other services you could provide to agencies that might have a long-term interest in your work.

Given the state of grant giving at foundations and the federal government, multiple submissions may be necessary. It is still important to contact your sponsored programs office for additional direction if you are not successful. For example, they can help you to obtain reviewers' comments for applications to federal agencies. Also, don't hesitate to contact the program officer for feedback and suggestions for improving your proposal. Many successful proposals are the result of revision and resubmission. Most importantly, if your proposal is turned down, do not give up. Successful proposal writing takes perseverance.

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*Developing Competitive Proposals* was prepared by Linda K. Anthony and Jessica Weaver, AASCU's Grants Resource Center, and Christina Bitting, AASCU Membership Services.

## Delivering America's Promise

AASCU's membership of 430 public colleges and universities is found throughout the United States, Guam, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. We range in size from 1,000 students to 44,000. We are found in the inner city, in suburbs, towns and cities, and in remote rural America. We include campuses with extensive offerings in law, medicine and doctoral education—as well as campuses offering associate degrees to complement baccalaureate studies. We are both residential and commuter, and offer on-line degrees as well. Yet common to virtually every member institution are three qualities that define its work and characterize our common commitments.

- We are institutions of access and opportunity. We believe that the American promise should be real for all Americans, and that belief shapes our commitment to access, affordability and educational opportunity, and in the process strengthens American democracy for all citizens.
- We are student-centered institutions. We place the student at the heart of our enterprise, enhancing the learning environment and student achievement not only through teaching and advising, but also through our research and public service activities.
- We are “stewards of place.” We engage faculty, staff and students with the communities and regions we serve—helping to advance public education, economic development and the quality of life for all with whom we live and who support our work. We affirm that America's promise extends not only to those who come to the campus but to all our neighbors.

We believe that through this stewardship and through our commitments to access and opportunity and to our students, public colleges and universities effectively and accountably deliver America's promise. In so doing we honor and fulfill the public trust.



Grants Resource Center

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