Finding Grants for Those Difficult to Fund Support Services – Part One

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As most of our regular readers know, I am the director of grants for a relatively small community college in a rural/suburban area of Texas. Located about 50 miles south of Houston and six miles north of the Gulf of Mexico, we are not in close proximity to a large metropolitan community, nor the associated private foundations. In fact, as one of my exchange students once said, “There is a whole lot of nothing in between a little bit of something in Texas.”

With that said, I often find that those of us without ready access to large and supportive foundations must become accustomed to “thinking outside the box”—in every way possible. This is especially true when seeking funds to secure monies for support services.

Why? Because many funders want to financially contribute to the success of well-defined program services that are easily recognized as being part of a specific initiative. Unfortunately, the behind the scene services are equally important to the success of any program. Because just as an unemployed person needs help finding a living wage job as well as food, clothing, rent, and utility assistance, students at my college need more than shiny scholarships. They need counseling services, mentors, tutoring programs, and a wide range of other services that comprise the holistic approach that research has found to be most impactful.

So recently a former colleague asked me to be a webinar presenter for the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, I was not surprised to learn that the topic that was of upmost interest was acquiring funds for the complementary services that student service departments provide. As I developed the PowerPoint presentation, I realized that I really do approach the problem of securing these types of funds differently than many of my colleagues. Out of necessity, I learned many years ago to think outside the box.

In fact, I don’t think that I even have a box left to think inside of—and I do believe that I enjoy the freedom that having no walls, lids, or bottoms offer me. This allows me to mix and match our college’s support services to the individual programs that are enhanced by them. In other words, I integrate support service costs into every organizational program or initiative for which we request grant funds.

SO WHERE IS THE MONEY?

First and foremost, I want to assure you that the money is out there – though it may not be easy to locate. There is no treasure map on which you will see grant dollars marked,
but I promise if you simply dig a little deeper and use a bigger shovel, you will unearth the “gold” that your agency so desperately needs to sustain its support services. You may even feel that you are piecing together a million broken shards of an ancient pot. However, it is important to remember that all grant development and acquisition requires time and dedication – so be confident and believe that with determination and persistence, you will put the figurative shards together.

**HAVE YOU READ YOUR AGENCY’S STRATEGIC PLAN LATELY?**

Too often, grant developers begin writing a proposal before they have developed a plan of attack. Never forget that funders want to financially support programs which are part of your agency’s strategic plan and primary mission.

So as a first step in your search for the hidden gold, re-read your agency’s strategic plan. Does it contain any supportive wording for the supportive types of services that your agency offers?

For example, as a community college, our students need extensive career and college counseling services. They must be guided through a cumbersome process (known as admissions, registration, and degree selection). For many of our students their efforts are the first time that anyone in their family or extended community of friends has attempted to navigate these procedures. Most do not know what to expect, how to ask questions (many of which they have not yet thought of), or how to secure the financial aid that they qualify for and need. Therefore, our strategic plan highlights the needs for comprehensive services that address the holistic needs of our students—counseling in particular.

Each time our strategic plan is updated, I review it looking for (and noting) specific wording that supports the programmatic initiatives for which we will be submitting grant applications. For it will be these quoted plans that will demonstrate to our future funders the college’s dedication and determination to provide these services.

Note that every agency or organization is faced with similar funding challenges. In my years of working with social service agencies, I found that they had a most difficult time securing money for their food pantries, work uniform funds, and transportation support (such as bus tickets and minor car repairs). As mentioned earlier, the typical unemployed person most certainly needs assistance with finding a job that will support their family, but they more than likely also need financial or in-kind assistance with every day needs such as food, clothing, and heat. Unfortunately, it is these types of support services that I found most difficult to win grant funds to support.

So you will need to thoughtfully and purposefully build a case for supporting such complementary services—whatever they may be in your agency. Review your strategic plan and prepare a file of specific quotes from it that correlate with each of these services. These statements will help you build your case for funds as you prepare future
grant applications—for they will reinforce the importance of and correlation with your clients’ success and the holistic approach that you plan to implement.

Remember that you never want to leave a funder wondering if your proposed project or plan is a one-time attempt to fix a temporary problem—or worse, that you are simply in need of money to cover staff salaries. Quoting directly from your strategic plan illustrates your administration and board’s commitment to providing the services outlined in their written plan for the future.

Note that if the specific services for which you are seeking support are not included (or at least eluded to) in the strategic plan, you will want to begin discussions about adding them. Funders are typically much more likely to support a program request if you present proof that your agency has made a deliberate and data-driven decision to add it to your long term goals and thus included it in the strategic plan.

**HAVE YOU PREPARED A LIST OF PROPOSED GRANT SUBMISSIONS FOR THE NEXT YEAR?**

Based on what you learned by reviewing your college’s strategic plan and your own knowledge of what are ongoing funding needs, you should make a list of grant initiatives for which you plan to seek funding in the next two to three years. Planning ahead will be critical to your long-term success—because many funders provide very short time periods between the announcement of their competition and the due date.

To create a planning calendar, consider the following steps:

1. Review your agency’s past grant submission dates.
2. Visit Grants.gov website for information upcoming competitions.
3. Go to the websites of funders (federal, state and private) to review information about their policies and procedures.
4. Talk to your colleagues about what grants are expected to become available in the near future.
5. Remember to note multi-year funding cycles for grant cycles – especially for federal grant programs.

Note that most federal grant competitions are conducted on a fairly strict timetable; however, state grant competitions are not always as predictable. Many of them are not offered on a set calendar schedule or definable cycle.

Likewise, country funds and private foundation applications are oftentimes sporadically offered. Thus, you will oftentimes find yourself writing these types of grant applications within tight time periods. These challenges make planning ahead all the more important.

But never forget, there is never a guarantee that any grant competition or awards will be made. The financial circumstances of foundations can change with the stock market. Federal and state tax dollars may shrink. So while you should plan for submissions to
those that are expected to hold a competitive grant competition, you will need to maintain some flexibility in your time schedule.

**ARE YOU COLLABORATING WITH OTHER AGENCIES?**

If you think “outside the box,” you will realize that there are many opportunities for you to collaborate with other agencies in your area with who you share similar target populations. Working together on a collaborative grant submission can provide both of your agencies with much needed support services funding.

Several years ago, I wrote a Department of Labor Community-Based Job Training grant for my current college in which I proposed collaborating with three other colleges. Each of the partners shared a similar workforce training degree program and served similar student populations. I explained to my colleagues, that by joining forces, we would collectively be more competitive on a national level because of the sheer numbers and outcomes that we could project – and that we could include support services needed to help our students succeed. As a result, we submitted one of my college’s first collaborative proposals – and won the federal grant award. Based on this experience, we continue to work collaboratively with other colleges and can proudly say that as a result, we have received many other multi-million-dollar grant awards.

So think about who you might partner with for support service programs. For example, many grant opportunities are limited to secondary schools and/or school districts. And while a college won’t be eligible to be the lead applicant, they can certainly partner with your area high school and school districts.

I have found that most agencies welcome the opportunity to collaborate on grant applications for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, very few small non-profit agencies or public schools have an experienced grant developer on staff. Thus, they need all the assistance that they can garner. But even if they do have a grant writer on staff, there are multiple grant competitions running at all times. They more than likely don’t have the staff time to devote to each available opportunity and thus will be happy to have help with one. So offer to take the lead and prepare the grant applications. Your partners will appreciate your support (and oftentimes repay you ten-fold in the future).