Grant Reviews: Unpopular but Essential
Part 1
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For those of you that are grant writers and find yourselves responsible for grant administration (whether you wanted this added duty or not), I’m confident that we share many of the same frustrations. With years of experience in this area, I have found that, more often than not, my project managers often view internal program and fiscal reviews as a personal affront to their professional reputations.

After all, the vast majority of the colleagues that I have worked with through the years are hardworking, honest individuals that know how to do their job. The last thing that they want is another internal staff person reviewing their files and performance. Well, while they may not want internal reviews, they actually do need them because we all make mistakes.

Why Do Grant Reviews Need to be Quarterly?

When scheduling quarterly program and fiscal reviews, I’ve often found that my organization’s project managers want to debate the need for the grant office to review their files and documentation. Our conversations often include a long list of questions. Why does the grant office want to look at the project’s files? All my files are complete, so why does the grant office feel the need to hassle me? Is the grant office simply trying to find fault with my files to justify their existence? And a hundred other questions that make no sense to me.

What is the Motivation of the Grant Office to Conduct Reviews?

The grant office simply wants to review the files for the sole purpose of ensuring that everything is in order. That expenditures are in accordance with the grant contract. That anticipated benchmarks are being met. That documentation of participant eligibility is being kept in individual files. That confidentially forms have been signed and placed in each participant’s file. In other words, that all contractual requirements and rules and regulations are being met. After all, it is far better to find any errors internally before an outside funder comes in and slaps our hands (or worse yet, yanks funding).

A Necessary Part of a Grant Office’s Responsibilities

To be honest, I don’t like nor want to hassle anyone. Heck, I would prefer that everyone like me. But it’s my job to ensure that everything is in order before funders call to schedule a review (often referred to as an audit). And the reality is that not all project managers actually understand the intricate details, calculations, and recordkeeping that funders expect to find when they conduct a review.

Reviews are not just for fiscal expenditures, either—which I might note are the easier to pass because the accounting folks in your organization nearly always know the rules and regulations
which must be followed. Rather, it is the program implementation and participant files that are typically the challenge. Of course, with experience project managers will learn the ropes of their trade; but again, because we are all human and make mistakes, program reviews should always be an important part of the any grant office’s responsibilities.

Frankly, experience has taught me that I simply can’t trust that all project managers (even the seasoned ones) will maintain complete and accurate files per grant requirements. It’s not that they aren’t trying. It’s just that we all make mistakes—and sometimes the rules change. Oftentimes, mistakes are made simply because project managers misunderstand the meaning of contractual language (or grant-isms)—terms we as the grant office staff can explain to them.

That’s precisely why it is so important that your grant office perform both fiscal and program reviews on a regular basis. Quarterly is my preference. With four reviews annually, any grant office should be able to catch errors or omissions early enough to make corrections easier.

So if you find yourself challenged by closed doors, unreturned phone calls, and ignored emails, it might be a good time to talk to your college’s president and other top administrators, or your organization’s executive director/CEO, as the case may be. Explain to them what is necessary to ensure that you can perform adequate program and fiscal reviews—reviews that ensure you will be ready when a funder shows up at your door to audit one of your grant programs.

In Part 2, I will cover the top five practices needed to ensure that your grant office is most effective in regards to your review duties. Each of the practices I’ll cover is necessary to ensure that a grant office can perform optimal program and fiscal reviews.