

**STRATEGY PAPERS
COMMITTEE**

David Lindeman, GPC
Editor

Andy Rawdon, JD
Editor

Dana Boe, AA
Peer Review Manager

Robyn Gibboney, PhD,
GPC
Peer Review Manager

Barbara Roberts, MA
GPA Publications
Committee Chair

GPA Strategy Papers offer practical solutions to current and emerging issues facing grant professionals. *The GPA Strategy Papers Committee* accepts concept proposals on a quarterly basis and uses a double-blind peer review process. Members and nonmembers may submit concept proposals and have electronic access to approved papers.

www.grantprofessionals.org

**Writing Grant Applications that Speak to Community
Review**

*Leigh Nanney Hersey, PhD, Assistant Professor & MPA
Coordinator, University of Louisiana at Monroe*

Abstract

Many grant making organizations now incorporate community members in the grant review process. Rather than depending solely on staff members, these organizations include community members to gather feedback from a larger population, to recruit and retain donors, or to increase civic engagement and leadership skills for citizens, members, or students. This shift has the potential to alter how grant professionals approach the grant application. This strategy paper identifies how funders use community members in the grant review process and suggests practices to write grant applications that appeal to these volunteers. The paper shares examples from the author's participation in community-based reviews and highlights strategies for connecting the issues of the grant seeking organization to the passions of the volunteers engaged in the community review process.

Introduction

The grant review process has evolved over the years. Founders of early philanthropic foundations heavily influenced which organizations received funding. In the 1970s, the field of philanthropy became more professionalized, leading to grant applications that were longer, more detailed, and outcomes-driven (Frumkin, 2006). Today, large national and international foundations still depend heavily on program officers for guidance in the grant-making process. However, smaller foundations that focus on local issues and community-based nonprofit organizations increasingly include community members in the review process. This shift toward community engagement can have an impact on how the grant application is reviewed.

Similarly, many corporations now conduct voting contests on social media to award resources to nonprofit organizations. For example, the Toyota "Cars for Good" program ran from 2011 to 2013 "to involve and engage communities across the US... to determine which one hundred NGOs will receive free Toyota autos" (Kesavan, et al., 2013, p. 64). While the application process tends to be significantly shorter than traditional applications, this corporate social responsibility program speaks to the trend of engaging the community in philanthropic efforts. This paper helps grant professionals identify some ways that funding organizations include community members in the review process and suggests how grant professionals can adapt their writing to appeal to this group of reviewers.

Types of Community Review

Although some organizations traditionally engage community members in the grants process, this trend has recently increased to include a broader scope of reviewers in grant evaluation. The local offices of United Way of America have long depended on volunteers to participate in allocating funds to the member agencies. Membership organizations that award grants depend heavily on their members to review grant applications. However, more recently, foundations such as the Durfee Foundation and the Triangle Community Foundation began including community members and representatives from previous grants in the review process (Bourns, 2010). Also, university students often review grants through courses that include student philanthropy.

This section identifies the primary ways that community members may participate in the grant review process and influence decision-making for grants. The most common ways to include community members in the grant review process are through federated fundraising campaigns, membership organizations, giving circles, community foundations, and student philanthropy.

Community members have historically helped allocate funds from federated fundraising campaigns, such as those conducted by the United Way of America or Jewish federations. These organizations act as intermediaries “receiving gifts and often making decisions on the donor’s behalf out of a general fund” (McCambridge, 2013, p.7). The local affiliates of United Way of America recruit volunteers from workplace campaigns to visit member agencies and assess their programming before making funding recommendations to local boards of directors. Since many volunteers in the review process lack topical program expertise, United Way offers training for volunteers on the criteria expected of a successful partner (Harris, et al., 2011).

Jewish federations also have a long history of supporting their communities through federated fundraising campaigns and subsequent grant making. While Jewish federations are successful in fundraising, many recognize the need to improve their grant making strategies (Edelsburg, 2004). In an effort to accomplish this goal, some Jewish federations engage in more participatory philanthropy that creates interactive experiences for donors and demonstrates that contributed dollars make a difference in the community (Edelsburg, 2004).

Another way community volunteers play a role in grant making is through various membership organizations. For example, members of the Junior League develop leadership skills and give back to the community through volunteerism and grant making. The organization focuses on developing leadership skills for women (Association of Junior League International, Inc., 2016) and incorporates grant making as an activity that helps meet this goal. Members participate in the review of applications for grant funds that will help their communities. While Junior League is one of the more prominent membership organizations currently awarding grants, many cities have other local groups that conduct similar programs.

Giving circles are another area of community-based philanthropy showing recent growth. Giving circles encourage “individuals pooling money and other resources and then deciding together how and where to give these away” (Eikenberry, 2007, p. 859). Some giving circles have more structure than others, leading to differences in the decision-making process. Giving circles vary from other membership-based organizations in that their sole purpose is philanthropy.

Community foundations connect philanthropists to local nonprofit organizations through donor-advised funds. The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation (2012) recognizes that keys to success for community foundations include incorporating local leaders and residents and representing the entire community in the foundation’s governance and decision making. Community foundations include local leaders and residents through programs that encourage younger donors to contribute smaller amounts of money. “This innovative program allows members to pool their money and, for a dollar a day, to make a positive impact on our community” (Community Foundation of Greater Memphis, 2016). Donors to the fund make a collective decision about which organizations receive grants.

The final category of community review is student philanthropy or “an experiential learning approach that provides students with the opportunity to study social problems and nonprofit organizations, and then make decisions about investing funds in them” (Olberding, 2009, p. 463). For example, the Learning by Giving Foundation supports student philanthropy in more than 40 colleges and universities (Learning by Giving Foundation, 2016). Other programs of note include those at the University of Oregon and Northern Kentucky University. However, unlike other forms of community review, students in these programs are less likely to contribute financially to the grant award.

Writing for Community Review

Johnson (2016) found that the processes leading to final decisions on grant awards vary between foundations with traditional boards and those with community boards, suggesting that grant professionals need to adapt their applications to target this review audience. Five key strategies will help grant professionals make this adaptation: (1) know the review process, (2) connect the heart and the head, (3) speak the community reviewers’ language, (4) help the reviewers understand the problem and the solution, and (5) pretend the reviewers do not know the grant seeking organization. While some grant professionals may already incorporate these strategies, they may need to make additional adjustments to address this review strategy. The point here is *not* that community-based grant review is new, but that grant-seeking organizations still experience difficulties in connecting to this group of reviewers.

Know the Review Process

The first key to understanding how to write grant applications for community-based review is to understand the process. While all examples depend on the community for input, the final decision-making process may vary. For example, in the case of student reviewers, students can either make the final grant decisions (direct philanthropy) or be part of a multi-tiered review process (indirect philanthropy) with staff members from the funding organization making the final decision (Olberding, 2009). Giving circles can also vary in the amount of input members have in the decision-making process, from all members reaching a consensus to a subcommittee of some members deciding on the awards (Eikenberry, 2007).

Connect the Heart and Head

Grant opportunities are increasingly results-oriented and depend on the grant seeker’s ability to demonstrate impact. While this is also true with grants selected with input from community members, the heart still plays an important role in the decision-making process. When writing for community reviewers, grant professionals must ensure that they address the problem at hand and connect the reviewer to those impacted by the problem. Even if the organization’s results are impressive, if the reviewers do not connect to the need, the impact will seem unimportant to them.

Communicating this need to student reviewers may be a particular challenge for some organizations. Many students have limited experience with the issues at hand and do not understand their full impact. For example, in one philanthropy course, the student review team could not connect to a grant application on senior transportation. The students did not understand why seniors were not comfortable calling a taxi or ride-share driver. The students failed to recognize the underlying needs of the population which made existing transportation options unfavorable. The inability to make this connection through the grant application led to poor reviews by the students.

Speak Their Language

The best practice of avoiding jargon in grant applications is especially important when community members are the reviewers. Program officers who focus on a specific issue will become familiar with common industry terms. However, community reviewers are less likely to be familiar with these terms. Therefore, the narrative of the grant application should use more common language. If students are the reviewers, grant professionals should pay particular attention to avoid language that students may not grasp. For example, people who work for organizations addressing hunger issues may be familiar with terms like 'food insecurity' and 'food deserts.' However, students may lack exposure to these terms and not clearly understand the meaning. Grant professionals can increase understanding by providing brief definitions of these terms in the narrative of the grant application.

Help the Reviewers Understand the Problem and the Solution

Many community reviewers may be informed of community issues as reported by the mainstream media. However, they may not be familiar with the underlying research behind the problem and how the proposed project will make an impact. Grant professionals should include data that clearly states the problem and the methods the organization will use to address the issue. In addition to providing quantitative data, grant professionals should provide a narrative example that will help the reviewers connect with the issue on a personal level.

Pretend the Reviewers Do Not Know the Organization

Community members that serve on review teams may be interested in impacting their communities and may consider themselves knowledgeable about community issues and the nonprofit organizations available to solve them. However, most of them have other jobs and are unable to dedicate a significant amount of time to researching the issues and organizations beyond the applications. Additionally, reviewers new to the community may participate in a collective grant making opportunity as a way to meet people and are unfamiliar with local organizations. This contrasts to foundation program directors and government agencies with paid staff who spend a large part of their days addressing community issues. Therefore, the grant professional should assume the reviewers do not know much about the grant seeking organization. The application should provide reviewers with complete information about the organization that will help them understand the organization and its approach to community problems. This clear context can help an organization stand out and garner further discussion during the grant review process.

Conclusion

Experienced grant professionals understand the importance of adapting grant applications to the values of the funding organization. Even with this knowledge, the pressure of deadlines and work with multiple types of funding organizations can lead to overlooking some best practices. This paper presents best practices in making particular adjustments when writing grant applications for organizations that incorporate community members in the funding decisions rather than depend solely on staff members. Grant professionals who are purposeful in making the connection between the organization and the review team will improve the likelihood of the application's receiving the full, thoughtful review it deserves.

References

- The Association of Junior Leagues International, Inc. (2016). Mission and vision. [web page]. Retrieved from <https://www.ajli.org/?nd=p-who-mission>
- Bourns, J. C. (2010). *Do nothing about me without me: An action guide for engaging stakeholders*. Washington, DC: Grantmakers for Effective Organizations.
- Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. (2012). *Community foundations: Rooted locally. Growing globally*. Flint, MI: Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.
- Community Foundation of Greater Memphis. (2016). Give365. [web page]. Retrieved from <https://www.give365memphis.org/>
- Edelsburg, C. (2004). Federation philanthropy for the future. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 80(1), 31-38.
- Eikenberry, A. M. (2007). Philanthropy, voluntary association, and governance beyond the state: Giving circles and challenges for democracy. *Administration & Society* 30(7), 857-882.
- Frumkin, P. (2006). *Strategic giving: The art and science of philanthropy*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Harris, L., Hersey, L. N., Brown, J. (December 2011). *Why they do what they do: Reports from the United Way allocation team members about their volunteer motivations and experiences*. Prepared for the United Way of the Mid-South.
- Johnson, J. M. (2016). Necessary but not sufficient: The impact of community input on grantee selection. *Administration & Society*, 48(1), 73-103.
- Kesavan, R., Bernacchi, M. D., & Mascarenhas, O. A. (2013). Word of mouse: CSR communication and the social media. *International Management Review*, 9(1), 58.
- Learning by Giving Foundation. (2016). Learning [web page]. Retrieved from <https://www.learningbygivingfoundation.org/learning>
- McCambridge, R. (2013). Philanthropy – Not even the same stream twice. *The Nonprofit Quarterly*. Summer, 6 – 11.
- Olberding, J.C. (2009). "Indirect giving" to nonprofit organizations: An emerging model of student philanthropy. *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 15(4), 463-492.

Dr. Leigh Nanney Hersey is an Assistant Professor and MPA Coordinator in Political Science and Public Administration at the University of Louisiana at Monroe. She entered academia after working in the nonprofit sector for more than a dozen years, including both writing and reviewing grants. For the past four years Dr. Hersey has taught an undergraduate course that includes a student philanthropy component. In addition, she sits on several community-based grant review teams. Contact Dr. Hersey at leigh.hersey@att.net.