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U.S. Department of Education Proposals: Preparing for the “New Normal”

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Abstract

Since spring 2014, U.S. Department of Education educational programming grant solicitations have included many new patterns. To understand the changes taking place and to identify common themes, the authors conducted a thorough review of solicitations for 15 opportunities. This Strategy Paper examines the themes and their implications for grant professionals and provides recommendations for preparing to meet the new standards—the “new normal.”

Introduction

The U.S. Department of Education (ED or the Department) offers many grant opportunities that are targeted by community colleges, liberal arts colleges, private universities, and state-funded universities; these include the Title III Part A strengthening institutions program and the TRIO outreach and student services programs. In the last several years, anticipating ED solicitation requirements has become difficult as changes occurred within the Department. These changes are causing alterations in longstanding patterns of project planning and narrative construction. To be successful in obtaining funding, applicants need to adapt to these alterations moving forward.

Background

Public Law 107-279, enacted in 2002, directs the establishment of the Institute for Education Sciences (IES) and describes the intention to develop what would become the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC). This law, amended and reauthorized in 2004 (National Board for Education Sciences, 2008), directly impacts the current situation for ED applicants, as both IES and WWC, entities established by the Act, have become important influences on solicitations released by the Department.

The George W. Bush administration’s concerns for accountability and cost reduction, both separately and in combination, also played a role in the changes at ED. Accountability concerns emerged in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001, more commonly known as No Child Left Behind, and in federal budgets like that proposed in 2005 (Allen & Baker, 2005). The Obama administration’s policies also reflected both of these patterns as part of the federal response to the financial crisis of 2007-2008.

For example, the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA) increased the grantee community's data gathering and reporting responsibilities for federal grant programs; this became the "new normal" across the federal grants spectrum after ARRA ended. Specifically, ARRA's ED grants included a variety of funding opportunities like Race to the Top, Investing in Innovation, State Educational Technology Grants, School Modernization, and Vocational Rehabilitation State Grants (ED, 2013). These funding opportunities mandated new and more involved data gathering and reporting standards. In addition, during ED-hosted webinars explaining these opportunities' new standards, ED informed applicants that reviewers from IES, as ED's research arm, would be specifically tasked with vetting the degree of fit with WWC standards and, for some competitions, with determining the validity and usefulness of the expected research results.

Emphasis on cost reductions grew stronger during the recession in 2007-2008 (Economic Policy Institute, n.d.). This financial crisis led to federal investments to stimulate recovery, like the ARRA grant opportunities (White House, n.d.) and restrictions on funding of government agencies known as sequestration. Sequestration was first approved as part of the Budget Control Act of 2011 and was intended to be an incentive to stimulate compromise (Matthews, 2013). While it failed to bring about a compromise in Congress on cutting \$1.5 trillion from the federal budget, it succeeded in limiting federal spending. Domestic discretionary spending, the portion of the budget in which significant grant programming falls, decreased by 5.1%. In addition to this initial sequester, the Budgetary Control Act of 2011 also included "'cap sequestration,' caps on discretionary funding" (Matthews, 2013). For those in the grants realm, these actions resulted in disruption in the typical appropriations process and decreases in the actual dollar amounts available for awards.

Accountability and cost reduction were integrated into the OMB Uniform Guidance, the stated intention of which was to align with "a larger Federal effort to more effectively focus...resources on improving performance and outcomes while ensuring the financial integrity of taxpayer dollars in partnership with non-Federal stakeholders" (Federal Register, 2013). This involved a standardization of practices across multiple federal grantmaking agencies.

The cumulative effect for grant professionals is change—including new emphases on accountability, increased cost consciousness, new standards, and new formulations of federal guidance. All of these mandate new and more rigorous expectations of ED applicants.

Method

To identify patterns and general themes of activity, the researchers performed a review of ED solicitations (excluding IES solicitations) from spring 2014 to late fall 2015. These two experienced grant professionals have over 25 years of combined experience with ED solicitations. They noted changes to requirements from previous years and then compared changes in ED educational intervention solicitations. They formed groupings of similar changes, articulated general themes summarizing them, and identified three general categories of change from the material gathered: (1) an emphasis on innovation and evidence, (2) a focus on resources and replication, and (3) changes in guidelines and application standards. The researchers cross-checked these against the list of specific changes and presented them to multiple grant professionals as a means of verification. As both researchers have extensive experience in higher education, they then generated recommendations for adapting institutional and grant professional practice to meet ED's new expectations.

Emphasis on Innovation and Supporting Evidence

The researchers identified five themes relevant to innovation and supporting evidence: (1) innovation/educational reform, (2) higher standards of evidence, (3) data collection and analysis changes, (4) What Works Clearinghouse standards, and (5) evaluation as research. Each exists across multiple programs and funding opportunities.

The combination of emphases in this category, originally encountered in ED's initial First in the World (FITW) grants competition to encourage development of educational innovations, has been a disruptive change. ED applicants had been familiar with the concepts of innovation and proposing educational

reforms, recognizing them as “innovative and creative thinking... that improves...significantly upon outcomes” (ED, 2014). However, applicants encountered a shift in meaning for the phrase “significant outcomes.” Originally meaning “of local consequence,” its definition changed to having strong evidentiary support, being statistically verifiable, and having the potential to “ultimately reach widespread effective usage” (ED, 2014), thus raising the bar for corroborating information in proposals.

In addition to the higher level of supporting evidence, the new standards involved learning to provide a global “conceptual framework” by creating a logic model portraying theoretical relationships among project elements (ED, 2014). This “framework” intended to show links “between at least one critical component and one relevant outcome” in a “statistically significant or substantively important...favorable association” (ED, 2014). The favorable associations required must be found in studies that employed specified research methods in a manner meeting What Works Clearinghouse standards.

This higher level of scientific rigor changed the playing field for ED applicants. As they learned, meeting these standards expands the variety of data they gather about projects and substantially increases the rigor required in data assimilation and analysis. This pattern also affects project evaluation as the application of WWC standards extends to reporting on project outcomes and results. Some programs like the Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISI) initiative have included WWC language without altering the rigor of evaluation required (ED, Feb 22, 2016). Others—for example, FITW, Hispanic-Serving Institutions - Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (HSI STEM), and Title III and V—have elevated the role of evaluation by requiring the project be structured in a manner consistent with a WWC-level research project so that evidence regarding outcomes yields publishable research. This effectively expands the role of project evaluation from being a thorough investigation of implementation and reporting achievement of objectives (ED, Feb 22, 2016) to including production of evidence that meets WWC standards (ED, March 4, 2016).

Focus on Resources and Replication

Demonstrating the presence of adequate institutional supports for projects is a longstanding review criterion for programs like Title III, Title V, and TRIO opportunities. This criterion is now generalized to a broader set of programs. Related to this are cost-consciousness (“expected cost-effectiveness of the practice,” ED, April 9, 2014) and concern that costs be “reasonable” (ED, April 9, 2016; ED, Feb 22, 2016; ED March 4, 2016). Both enable continuation of grant-funded processes and practices, which ED refers to as institutionalization (ED, n.d.#1). In fact, ED expects its grantees to go beyond absorbing funded projects into their institutions and producing replicable and scalable reform strategies; that is, ED wants projects that can be implemented at other institutions and at different levels of complexity and size (ED, n.d.#1; ED, n.d.#3).

Changes in Guidelines and Application Standards

The researchers grouped changes in guidelines and application standards into two main categories, technical and content, each of which included departures from earlier ED application guideline norms.

They found technical changes in four primary areas. First, changes occurred in eligibility practices and standards (e.g., one eligibility calculation stated in the FY 2015 Title III/V competitions was “core expenses per FTE student” versus the earlier “educational and general expenses”). Second, in some competitions, applications from Minority Serving Institutions were filtered out and set aside from the rest of the applicant pool. Third, IES became part of the review process for the initial FITW competition and later for other opportunities like the Title III (ED, n.d.#2) and Title V (ED, April 9, 2016) programs. The final technical change was proposed tiered standards of evidence that could result in tiered funding levels, as described in the initial FITW solicitation.

The researchers found content changes in four areas:

1. Changes to Competitive Preferences Priorities (CPPs). One CPP was eliminated from the FY 2014 Title V competition, and standards of evidence for the other two CPPs (increasing post-secondary success and increasing productivity, respectively) increased. Since 2014, CPPs continue to change and are a means of demonstrating project alignment with a WWC-level study that had a statistically significant and positive impact for the proposed intervention (ED, n.d.#2; ED, April 9, 2016).
2. A new requirement for “a project design supported by Strong Theory,” a phrase meaning “a rationale for the proposed process, product, strategy, or practice that includes a logic model” (ED, n.d.#1).
3. A new emphasis on “evidence of promise,” indicating that “there is empirical evidence to support the theoretical linkage(s) between at least one critical component and at least one relevant outcome presented in the logic model” (ED, n.d.#2; ED, 2014). Additionally, applicants were required to adhere to WWC standards in providing evidence of promise and told to “ensure that the citations and links are from publicly or readily available sources” (ED, 2014).
4. Increased emphasis on more explicitly research-based standards. Both the need (i.e., the literature review) and the solution (i.e., the applicant’s approach and plan of work) were mandated to be grounded firmly in the education research literature, to utilize evidence that met WWC standards, and to be formulated specifically to provide appropriate levels of evidence for future education research projects (ED, 2014). These requirements have subsequently been applied to other programs (ED, March 4, 2016; ED April 9, 2016).

Recommendations and Conclusion

The changes outlined in this article reflect an increased emphasis on appropriately gathering and analyzing data, understanding how those data provide evidence for current and future conclusions, and determining ways in which those conclusions impact policy and implementation. Interestingly, this is also occurring in disciplines other than education and in other sectors than grants at the federal level. This is not a coincidence. Across all fields of intellectual inquiry, there is an increased emphasis on valid and reproducible research results.

Many U.S. Department of Education applicants, including former awardees, were taken aback by the speed and comprehensiveness with which the Department moved from a programmatic, activities-focused approach to a more theory- and research-based approach. Like it or not, this is indeed “the new normal” as the changes have persisted and have been applied within more ED programs.

Therefore, the authors offer the following recommendations for competing in this changed environment. To address the challenges presented by changes to ED expectations, grant professionals and nonprofit leaders should consider the following approaches, grouped into a *proposal development set* and a second group that can be described as *organizational adaptations*.

Proposal Development

In a proposal development process, it is important to ask regularly and repeatedly about the material being presented in support of assertions and the level of academic rigor those sources represent. A related concern is that project evaluation be planned as educational research, both the investigation of the effectiveness of implementation and the analysis of the outcomes of the project. Project planners

and narrative writers will find that maintaining a familiarity with the following topics is increasingly important: commonly deployed social science data collection patterns, research methods and assessment processes, conceptions of replicability and scalability, and general statistical analysis terminology.

Cost analysis must be part of the proposal development discussion. Along with the ability to replicate and scale up proposed interventions, applicants' approaches and work plans should be cost-effective at all levels from pilot to broad implementation.

Applicants must also adapt to changes related to information patterns required in proposals. More rigorous requirements regarding evidence and method make greater expertise in multiple fields necessary. As this is the case, it is advisable to identify persons within organizations who can function as resources. One important group is education research specialists. People with these skills can be found within schools of education in the research and assessment departments and among researchers in sociology and psychology departments. While ED currently emphasizes quantitative methodology, the inclusion of qualitative methodologists in the group of "consultants" maintains the ability to consider all project practices. Rigorous investigation of the outcomes and quality of a project often call for mixing quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

Organizational Adaptations

Because data gathering, analysis, and the level of evidence produced is an expanding concern, information about institutional capability and practice in tracking and analyzing data is also important. Institutions should consider the types of proposals they produce, the forms of data required for each, and draft templated language describing applicable data storage, access, security, sharing, and retention practices. Templated language of this type requires annual review to maintain currency.

Competitive Preferences Priorities (CPP) appear to be the new approach for demonstrating methodological rigor. Consideration of studies demonstrating statistically significant positive impacts for the proposed interventions will need to enter project planning and proposal production earlier than in the past. They are the foundation of the project plan in the "new normal," rather than being preferred patterns of supporting evidence. It also appears that CPPs are following White House policy commitments like the ideas in President Obama's 2020 College Completion Goal.

Institutions should seek a strong relationship with an external evaluator or evaluation consulting group. The increasing standards of evidence and analysis of outcomes mandate the inclusion of an evaluation specialist in project planning.

Grant professionals and nonprofit leaders must alter longstanding patterns of project planning and narrative construction in order to respond to changes at ED in the last several years. These recommendations will aid grant professionals and ED applicants in adapting to this "new normal."

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Paul Tuttle holds an MA in English. After 15 years as a writing tutor and instructor, he began his research administration career in 2001 as a funding opportunities specialist at North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University. Later, he managed proposal development at Winston-Salem State University and The University of North Carolina at Greensboro and grants administration at the North Carolina Research Campus. In 2011, he joined Hanover Research as a Grants Consultant, providing proposal development and strategic consultative services to university, healthcare, K-12, and nonprofit clients. In 2013, he became Hanover's first Managing Grants Consultant, hiring and supervising what became a team of 16 consultants. In 2015, he returned to NC A&T as Director of Proposal Development. To date, he has helped to win over \$100 million in grants from federal, state, private, and corporate sources.