Formula for a Perfect Grant Application
Part I

By Barbara Norris Coates

If you don't know a lot about grant writing, you're in good company. Over the course of my years as a grant writer, many of the educators I've worked with have admitted that they don't know what makes a "good" proposal and what constitutes a "bad" one. I have a simple formula I follow for laying the groundwork for a fundable grant proposal.

A successful grant proposal describes …

A Proven Need + An Innovative Idea + A Written Plan + A Superhero Funder = Measurable Change for the Better!

Before we look at the qualities that characterize an effective grant, let's look at a short list of what a grant should not be . . .

- **A cool idea just for the sake of a cool idea.** Ask yourself whether the idea aligns with your school or district's strategic direction. Can the impact of the idea be measured? What is the bottom line benefit to students, teachers and staff?

- **A "cut and paste" job.** Grant writing that isn't customized to each potential funder simply isn't worth the effort. After receiving perhaps a hundred or more applications for a single solicitation, grant review committees are looking for ways to bring your proposal to the forefront. Make sure your proposal tells grant reviewers that (1) you understand the mission of the funder from whom you're asking money, (2) your proposed project is a "win-win" for both your organization and the funding organization, (3) you care enough to follow the funder's guidance about how much to ask for, what activities and costs are allowable and, of utmost importance, how well your project responds to the grant-making priorities that the funder has established.

- **Just About Getting the Money.** Grant funding is a competitive process no matter how you consider it. So it is pointless to request money without a competitive project. Remember that the money is simply a vehicle for your organization to do the "right thing" to improve teaching and learning.

So . . . what do you need to get started? Go forth and come up with an idea!

- **Innovative ideas are all around you**. One of the best places to look is in the process of daily teaching. Once you get a broad idea, hone it into an idea that addresses specific educational priorities.

- **The idea should relate to a specific need or problem**. Can you take the idea and relate it to specific measureable objectives? Grant funders look for measurable objectives because they provide evidence that their contributions have truly made a difference.

- **Ideas must pass the "so what" test.** Does the idea have the potential to make a difference in the lives of students, teachers, and/or the community? What, specifically, will the idea change?

To be grant worthy, good ideas need a sprinkling of innovation.

- While you don't have to reinvent the wheel (and in many cases funders don't want you to), you do have to build a few new spokes. Look for existing models for your idea that have proven benefit in the field. How can you take an existing model in a new and exciting direction?

- Your idea should reflect "best practices." Know what they are, where they have been implemented, and what results may be expected. Talk to successful project directors locally and nationally for advice and strategies, and existing gaps you might be able to fill.

- Many grant funders like to see cross-disciplinary efforts. Talk to your internal experts. Grant proposals that are too insular and don't show adequate internal and external collaboration can be a red flag to a funding agency.

Now that you've had an innovative idea for a project worthy of funding, you'll need a plan and the right funder to make it a reality. In Part II of this article I'll review the final two ingredients of the perfect grant recipe: A Written Plan + A Superhero Funder = Measurable Change for the Better!

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