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From the Other Side: A Reviewer's Perspective

TIPS AND HINTS FOR IMPROVING YOUR PROPOSAL IN THE EYES OF THE REVIEWER

By Ron Flavin, Contributing Writer



Despite the persistently slow economy and ongoing budget cuts at every level, the U.S. Federal Government awarded nearly \$600 billion in grants in 2011, which represents a 20% increase over the approximately \$500 billion in grants awarded in 2009. On average, only about three to five percent of grant proposals submitted to the federal government are awarded funding. With more budget cuts on the horizon, the already tough competition for federal grant dollars is poised to become even more fierce. That means that now more than ever, only the 'best of the best' proposals will get funded. The loss of just a single scoring point can make the difference between success and failure. I regularly work as a peer reviewer for a number of federal funding agencies so I see firsthand what sets winning grant proposals apart from the others. I would like to share with you several common pitfalls that I frequently run across that ruin an otherwise solid proposal's chances of getting funded.

First and foremost, follow the proposal instructions. This seems obvious but I cannot tell you how many proposals I have reviewed where the applicant did not fully follow the instructions outlined in the program guidelines. Follow the instructions exactly and never omit information requested or leave out a required section outlined in the proposal guidelines. Even if it feels like you are being asked to provide information you have already discussed in an earlier section, include the requested information where it is requested. Never leave a section blank or fail to include a requested attachment. If the requirement is not applicable

to your organization then let the reviewers know that this is the case. Otherwise, they may mistakenly believe that you overlooked it, which can negatively impact your score.

Second, do not include letters of support unless the person or organization providing the letter is willing to make some sort of tangible commitment toward the project's success. Letters of support are so easy to obtain that without a defined contribution to the project, they just don't have any meaning. Letters of commitment do not necessarily have to include 'substantial' contributions but they should be meaningful. In other words, the letter writer must commit something measurable such as time, effort or resources that will add value to the proposed project and support its success.

Next, never use a boiler plate proposal. The proposal requirements inevitably vary from one funding program to another. Some people mistakenly believe that if they create one 'perfect' proposal that covers everything, then they can use that to apply to nearly any funding program, which is just not the case. Grant reviewers are typically required to participate in training sessions before they begin to review proposals. By going through this training reviewers learn how to quickly identify and weed out proposals that are obviously using a template or a boiler plate. Every funding program has its own unique priorities and areas of focus. During the review process reviewers score each section of the proposal based on how well it addresses a specific focus or priority outlined in the RFP. A template or boiler plate will not be aligned the proposal requirements and when key information is not where it is expected to be, critical points



are lost.

Lastly, when developing your funding request do not automatically ask for the maximum allowable amount. Budgets that coincidentally total the exact amount of the maximum allowable request can appear to be 'padded' from the reviewer's perspective, meaning that the budget could be subject to a much higher degree of scrutiny than it might otherwise. If every last dollar of your request is not adequately justified, it could mean the loss of valuable points. In the highly competitive grant seeking process, losing just one point can make the difference between getting funded and not getting funded. Instead, you should build your budget from the bottom-up, stopping when all necessary expenses are accounted for, even if the amount is considerably less than the maximum allowable request.

While this is certainly not a comprehensive list of every error that I have seen in my years as a professional grant reviewer, these are the most common I run across. Avoid these pitfalls and you will be well on your way towards developing a winning grant proposal.

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- E-Rate Whitepaper and Guide (for K-12 Applicants or for Service Providers)
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2012 COORDINATED TRIBAL ASSISTANCE SOLICITATION

A REVIEW OF KEY CHANGES TO THE CONSOLIDATED TRIBAL JUSTICE PROGRAM

By Susannah Mayhall, Grants Development and Administration Coordinator

The Coordinated Tribal Assistance Solicitation (CTAS) was developed by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) in 2010 to consolidate the DOJ's existing Tribal-specific grant programs into one combined application package. Thus, the overall program is comprised of several individual programs or "Purpose Areas." CTAS is intended to foster a comprehensive approach to public safety and victimization issues by encouraging tribal governments to collaborate efforts and plan a community-wide strategy for addressing a variety of law enforcement and justice issues.

The 2012 Coordinated Tribal Assistance Solicitation was announced on January 18, with a deadline of April 18, 2012. Over \$100 million is available through this program, providing funds to support tribal public safety and justice initiatives such as community policing and tribal youth programs.

After incorporating feedback from Tribal meetings and consultations, DOJ has made the following changes to the program for 2012:

1. A new strategic planning pilot program has been added.

Purpose Area 2, Comprehensive Planning Demonstration Project (BJA, CFDA #16.608) encompasses projects that will develop comprehensive strategic planning programs designed to improve Tribal justice and community wellness and safety. Under this purpose area, applicants may apply for funding to engage in a data-informed planning process, purchase general office equipment such as computers, complete training

to support the planning process, and cover the costs of travel associated with regional and national training sessions. Templates for applying to purpose area 2 can be found at <http://justice.gov/tribal/ctas2012/narrative-profile-template.pdf>.

2. A question-and-answer template has been incorporated into the solicitation to make the document more user-friendly.

Templates for each Purpose Area are included in the solicitation (available at <http://www.justice.gov/tribal/ctas201>

Grant Program At A Glance: **Coordinated Tribal Assistance Solicitation (CTAS)**

Deadline description: Applications may be submitted starting January 23, 2012. All applications are due no later than 9pm EST on April 18, 2012. Only one application may be submitted by each Tribe/Tribal consortia.

Available funding: Over \$101.4 million; individual awards range from \$75,000 to \$4 million (ranges vary by purpose area)

Eligible applicants: Federally-recognized Tribes, Tribal Consortia, or organizations acting as the authorized designee of a federally-recognized Tribe (Purpose Area 6 only). See individual purpose areas for specific eligibility requirements.

For more information, see <http://upstream.grantsoffice.com/GrantDetails.aspx?gid=27899>



[2/ctas-solicitation.pdf](#)). Each template contains a list of questions and guidelines for developing the specific purpose area's narrative. Applicants must submit a separate narrative for each purpose area. Templates contain instructions for: project/program design and implementation; capabilities and competencies; and impact/outcomes and evaluation/plan for collecting data for performance measures. Be sure to use the correct template for each purpose area to which you are applying.

3. Purpose Areas have been adjusted to address the Tribes' feedback and concerns and allow for greater flexibility in funding requests.

This year's solicitation includes 10 Purpose Areas. Notable changes from the 2011 solicitation include the removal of the methamphetamine- and elder abuse-specific programs and the inclusion of broader program areas such as the Comprehensive Tribal Victim Assistance Program (Purpose Area 8).

4. The request for additional data on Tribe demographics will help DOJ to gain a better understanding of the unique characteristics of each Tribe.

The Tribal Narrative Profile, requested as a portion of the Tribal Community & Justice Profile, accounts for 35% of the application's total score. This section requests a variety of

details concerning the needs of the community, why the identified needs are pressing, and how the community currently operates/how it will improve after project implementation. This section provides an expanded space for applicants to illustrate their communities' particular needs and provide a compelling argument for why these needs must be addressed with CTAS funding. Make the most of this section by being as detailed as possible in your description. Remember, reviewers may not be familiar with your region and this is your chance to introduce them to your community and persuade them that your application deserves funding.

Because of the changes made in year's guidance, take some time to read through the instructions carefully and note any new or additional information you may need to provide in your proposal narratives.

For more information about the current CTAS competition, join Dan Casion, Manager of Grants Development and Administration, on March 6 for an informational webcast exploring the Coordinated Tribal Assistance Solicitation in depth. To register for the webcast, go to <https://grantsofficeevents.webex.com>.



Many people submit their grant application and anticipate the end of the process: notification from the funder on whether funding is approved. Of course, those who win awards understand that the notice is not the end, but a transition to a new phase in post award administration and project deployment. Unfortunately, many who are denied funding simply accept the fate of their application as the end of the road. Being notified that an application has been denied funding may be a depressing setback, but it should never be viewed as the end of the grantseeking process. Some of the most successful organizations at pulling down grants don't win every time they submit an application.

I Didn't Get the Grant - Now What?

BY CHRIS LAPAGE, SENIOR GRANTS DEVELOPMENT CONSULTANT

Successful organizations are denied funding and ask themselves: How do we pick up the pieces and move forward? What follows are three tips to consider the next time you are denied funding:

1. Nobody has ever won a grant award by throwing a pity party –

adopt the right attitude!

Subsequent success starts with adopting the appropriate mindset. It's normal to feel some level of disappointment with a negative funding decision on an application for which you have devoted countless of hours of time and energy. However, once you are over the initial disappointment, your future success hinges on taking a more optimistic perspective. There are many valuable lessons to take away from the process but the decision makers must have the appropriate mindset to move forward. Start with the assumptions that there are lessons to be learned and begin analyzing the process and outcome to garner feedback. At this point you need to take the perspective of an outsider and view your original proposal through a critical lens. Once you identify where the original submission went wrong, you can begin to consider next steps and moving forward with your grantseeking efforts.





Was your proposal rejected for funding? Grants Office can work with you to retool your application for the next deadline with our proposal re-write services. For a discounted proposal development fee, we will evaluate your current materials and revamp the proposal to give you a competitive, compliant application for the next funding round. For more information, contact us today at grantwriting@grantsoffice.com.

2. Utilize reviewer feedback and commentary.

How do you figure out where the original proposal went wrong? Your greatest asset at this stage, if available, is feedback directly from the team that reviewed your application for funding. Many federal grantmaking organizations provide reviewer feedback, commentary and scoring to applicants. Commentary directly from the reviewer removes a lot of the guesswork that you may encounter when trying to conduct an assessment on your own. Furthermore, it gives you insight into how a reviewer approaches the scoring process, which will be valuable information for any future proposal you develop. Make a list of the gaps and weaknesses that the reviewer identified and begin creating strategies to address those areas. Some of the weaknesses in the proposal may simply be a result of missing or unclear information. Sometimes what is clear to the folks in the trenches does not make sense to an outsider. In other cases, the reviewer may be pointing to deeper-rooted issues that require you to go back and do some project

development. Perhaps they identified a potential challenge that would require you to build a mitigation strategy into the project plan. Analyzing the reviewer feedback and incorporating it into your project plan and future proposals will put you in a good position to secure funding for the project at some point down the road.

If reviewer commentary and feedback are not automatically supplied to you with the funding decision, you should explicitly request it from the grant maker. If the funder is an arm of the government and they are reluctant to provide such information, you can move forward by formally requesting the feedback through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). More information on FOIA requests can be found at <http://www.foia.gov/>.

3. Don't think of it as a waste of time - Reuse what you have written.

The moral of the story is that there are other options on the table. Many federal and state grant opportunities are cyclical and available on an annual basis. If the grant program was a one-time deal, there may be similar programs or private foundation funding available to support the project. With

billions of dollars available in grant funding every year, you can be confident that another opportunity exists. Furthermore, while your application may have been denied, you now are in a position where you have a substantial narrative and budget formulated to articulate your project. This is a tremendous resource to have available when moving forward with other funding opportunities. Well-written and dynamic proposals sometimes are denied simply due to limited availability of funds. Moving forward with subsequent funding opportunities will not require you to start from scratch. If you are able to do an honest analysis and incorporate reviewer feedback (see tip 2), your written materials will be reusable. Every grant program will require you to do some tailoring to address specific objectives and goals they are targeting. They also may require the narrative to be structured differently than your original proposal. However, the bulk of the heavy lifting has already been completed with your original proposal that was denied funding. In this case, start thinking of your failed submission as a resource rather than a waste of time.

Grant Program Spotlight: Investing in Innovation (i3)

The i3 program first came out during the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 with a \$650 million allotment dedicated to advancing innovation in our nation's public schools. The program was continued in FY with a much smaller pool of available funds (\$150 million), and is likely to receive similar support in future funding periods.

On November 10, 2011, twenty-three applicants from fourteen states were announced as the highest-rated applications of the FY11 funding round. These applicants were required to produce private sector matching funds by early December 2011 in order to receive grant funding. A look into the funding trends evident in this announcement will provide future applicants with an idea of what to expect in FY12.

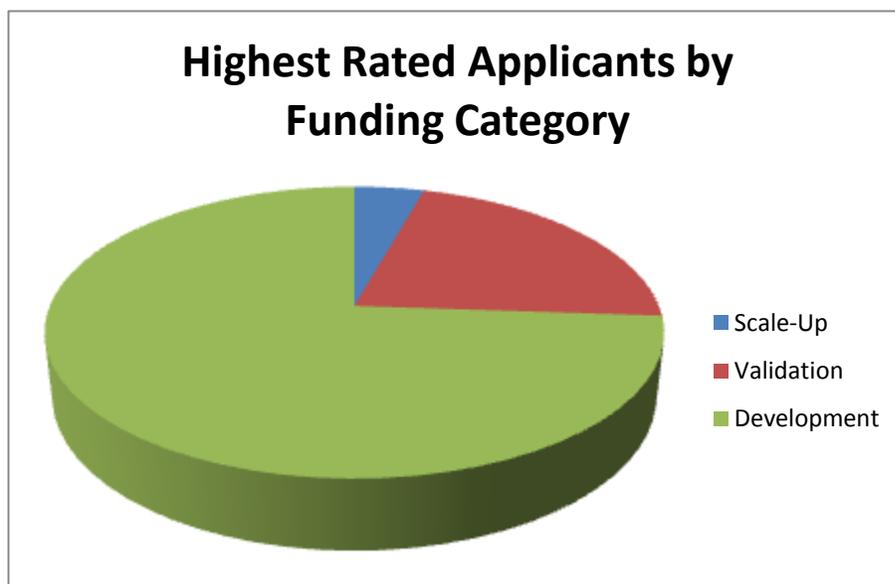
Highest-Rated i3 Applications 2011

BY ALI PALMIERI, HELPDESK ADMINISTRATOR AND RESEARCH ASSOCIATE

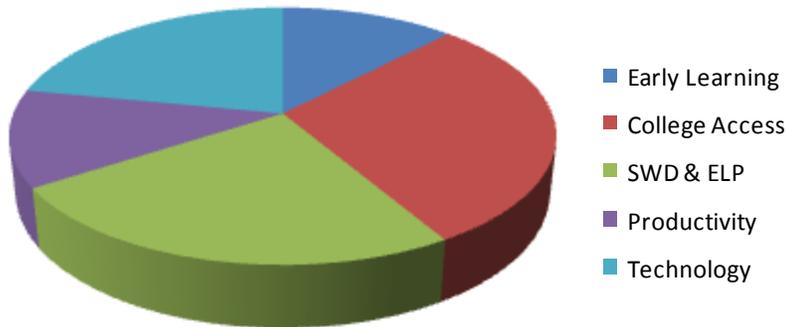
THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION recently announced the 23 highest rated applicants for the Investing in Innovation Fund. With over 600 applicants and \$150 million in funding in 2011, this was a highly anticipated competition. Awaiting a private match that was to be fulfilled by December 9th 2011, applicants ranging from school districts to nonprofits in partnership with districts or a consortium of schools would receive funding under either Scale up, Validation or Development awards. The partnership that appeared to stand out the most to reviewers were the nonprofit partnered with an LEA. They accounted for 10 of the 23 highest rated applicants. On the other end, the smallest amount of awards went to a nonprofit partnered with a consortium of schools, with 6 of the

23 highest rated applicants. Scale-up grants, which accounted for one of the highest-rated applicants, were awarded up to \$25 million to support innovation projects with the strongest evidence and track records of success. Validation grants, comprising 5 of

the highest-rated applicants, received up to \$15 million to fund innovations with proven effectiveness supported by moderate levels of evidence. Finally, Development grants, for which 17 applicants of the highest-rated proposals applied, provided up to \$3 million to support promising but



Highest Rated Applicants by Competitive Preference Priority



relatively untested innovation projects with high potential for positive impact. Along with these three types of grants, there were 5 absolute priorities under which the applicants had to apply, two of which were new in this year's competition. The two new absolute priorities focused on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education and also rural communities and the increase of graduation rates and promotion of college education. The other three priorities consisted of raising the bar for standards and quality assessments, rewarding teachers and principals who achieved success and helping to bring up low performing schools.

The applicants that chose rural, STEM and standards and assessments were rated highest over the other 2 priorities (effective teachers and low-performing schools). On yet another level of priorities, the two competitive

preference priorities that were highly rated were College Access & Success and Students with Disabilities and Limited English Proficient Students.

The breakdown of the states that received the highest rating were Arkansas, Arizona, California, Illinois,



Kentucky, Massachusetts, Maryland, Minnesota, North Carolina, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas and Virginia. California and New York were in the lead with 4 of the highest-rating applications, followed by Kentucky, Maryland, and Texas with 2 applications. The rest of the states had 1 application.

Among the highest scoring projects were

The Metropolitan Education Commission's "The Wisdom Project", the New York City Board of Education's "InnovateNYC" and The College Board's "Student Success in AP Biology: Expanding the STEM College Readiness of High-Need Students." Out of these three highest rated, two were based heavily on STEM education and the ability to affect a large group of high need students. These projects clearly outline the issue at hand and create actionable solutions in order to produce results. The third project, InnovateNYC, focuses on bringing up low achieving schools and producing higher graduation rates by 2015. They plan to improve college readiness, enhance the use of technology for instruction and improve alternate education options.

As you can see, the three highest scoring applications followed the priorities word for word and took the priorities literally, translating them into achievable goals that would stand out to reviewers. The Investing in Innovation Fund provides many opportunities for schools to explore improvements through its priorities. These 23 applicants focused on the needs of the school and how to place projects into action that would affect the broadest range of students and in turn were awarded the highest scores and access to the optimal funding for the 2011 competition.

UPCOMING EVENTS

February 2012 Webcasts

- **February 16, 2012:** Building a 21st Century Workforce with Grants, *Sponsored by Cisco*
- **February 23, 2012:** Reimagining Education by Investing in Innovation, *Sponsored by Cisco*

March 2012 Webcasts

- **March 6, 2012** Navigating the Coordinated Tribal Assistance Solicitation
- **March 15, 2012:** Distance Learning & Telemedicine Webcast Series: Part III, *Sponsored by Cisco*

April 2012 Webcasts

- **April 19, 2012:** And Justice for All: DOJ Grants for Your Public Safety Projects, *Sponsored by Cisco*

May 2012 Webcasts

- **May 17, 2012:** Grant Funding from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), *Sponsored by Cisco*

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