

Planning Grant-Funded Projects to Enhance Your Organization's Economic Viability

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How can grants, especially federal grants, help increase your science center's economic viability? By asking the right questions and then planning and managing a grant-funded project effectively, you can fulfill your educational mission and build your infrastructure. But if you don't ask the right questions and plan your project well, your grant-funded project may take you off course from your mission and lose money (yes!).

Science centers are businesses with educational missions -- they must make money to support their missions and projects. How can you tell if a project is right for your institution and contributes to economic success?

Evaluating Potential Projects

Projects can be evaluated as prospective candidates for development by analyzing if they are "right" for their institution's mission, target audiences, commitments, and resources by asking these questions:

- Who is the targeted audience and how will the project address their needs?
- Is there a market for the project (e.g., will someone pay for it)?
- Who are the key stakeholders in the project and what are their interests in the project?
- What are the key risks or barriers standing in the way of project success?
- Is the organization in a strong position, relative to expertise, facilities, and resources, to carry out the project?
- Does the project relate strongly to the organization's mission?
- Does the program fit in with the organization's long-range plans?
- Does the program have the strong support of your organization's Board and CEO/Director?
- Can your organization make a long-term institutional and financial commitment to the project?

If the answer is unclear or "No" to any of these questions, a science center should make adjustments so the answer becomes "Yes" or seriously consider whether it should even do the project.

Does the Project Support Your Institution's Economic Viability?

How can you plan a grant-funded project so it contributes to your organization's financial success?

1. Plan for the future. Think in a strategic way about how your project can build your science center's future. Can an exhibit project build your attendance? Have you planned for funding to support exhibit maintenance after grant funding? Can an education project generate revenue through fees or otherwise to sustain its operation after grant funding?
2. Reflect a project's true costs in the project budget. Exhibits and programs require staffing, space, marketing and other items than cost money. An education program's cost is not simply consumable supplies.
3. Ask for indirect cost support. Projects require office space, accounting services, support staff, utilities and perhaps other support services. Ask for indirect cost support when funders allow it or reflect these costs as direct costs if the funder does not allow an indirect cost line. If you don't ask for these funds, the project will cost you money you don't have. You will still have to pay the utilities, accountant, and other costs, even if the grant doesn't cover these expenses.
4. Ask for the right amount of funding. Base your grant budget on your institution's prior experiences or seek estimated cost information from colleagues or elsewhere, Don't "low ball" your budget because you think it will increase your chances of getting funded. If you get the grant, you won't be able to deliver without adequate funds. Don't "pad" your budget. Expert reviewers can usually see through these poorly designed budgets.
5. Keep track of the money. Make sure your institution has accounting procedures in place to assure that grant funds are used appropriately and in compliance with the funder's reporting requirements. If you don't, you may have to give the money back!
6. Evaluate performance. Most federal funders require project evaluation. Use the evaluation to help you track project performance and to help you do an even more effective job.

How Can a Grant Go Wrong?

When I was a young and inexperienced museum director, I wrote a successful National Science Foundation grant proposal to support science outreach to Latino and African-American students. It was an exciting project – a school bus outfitted to look like a Space Shuttle to bring students to the museum, "mini" science museums in community centers, and a variety of off-site programs. But I

didn't ask for indirect cost support and failed to plan for the future. While the immediate educational impacts were positive, the project cost us time and money that we didn't have. It was an ambitious project, but it didn't last very long after grant funding ended – we didn't have a good business or fundraising plan to sustain it. Finally, while the project was a good fit with our mission, it was not a well-articulated part of our strategic plan.

Finding the Money

There are many websites with listings of governmental and private funding sources. The Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance (CFDA) is a government-wide compendium providing information on nearly 1,400 grant and loan programs administered by more than 50 federal agencies. The primary purpose of the Catalog is to assist users in identifying programs that meet specific objectives of the potential applicant, and to obtain general information on federal assistance programs, as well as appropriate contact information for those programs. The Catalog is available online at <http://www.cfda.gov>, and can be searched by keyword, agency, program function or applicant eligibility. The U.S. Government's Nonprofit Gateway has Web pages of interest to nonprofits across the federal government, allowing searches of the over 300,000 federal agency Web pages: <http://www.firstgov.gov/Business/Nonprofit.shtml>. The Foundation Center has a variety of free and fee-based online funding resources: [foundationcenter.org](http://www.foundationcenter.org). <http://www.researchresearch.com> links to a variety of sources of science research and education funding.

Grant Seeking Strategies

Science centers that are consistently successful in developing grant-funded projects are always “in the game.” Think of the Exploratorium, Sciencenter (Ithaca, NY) or the New York Hall. These institutions are constantly monitoring potential sources of grants, determining how well these opportunities fit within their strategic priorities, and submitting a constant stream of proposals each year to potential funders. The same project may be shopped around to multiple funding sources or re-submitted a second time if the first application was not successful (and reviewer critiques can be effectively addressed). In short, grant-seeking is an integral and ongoing part of how these successful institutions operate.

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