

# U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

## BUREAU OF EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL AFFAIRS (ECA)

### TIPS FOR WRITING COMPETITIVE GRANT PROPOSALS

The following points are tailored to the Bureau's institutional grant opportunities. But much of this information is generic, relating to institutional grant programs funded by both the public and private sectors alike and may help you when applying for individual scholarships and fellowships as well. While some of these comments and suggestions may seem basic, it is often the basic rules that are not followed, with predictable results.

- 1. Understand the mission of the Bureau and the purposes of the program to which you are applying.** What are the Bureau and program objectives? Why is the grant program important to your organization? Do your interests and needs mesh with the Bureau's and program's stated missions, purposes and objectives? Are you clearly eligible?
- 2. Confer with the program officer administering the program before you begin the writing process.** This can be done by email, by telephone or in person. Share your ideas regarding what you would like funded. Clarify program objectives and requirements. Ask to talk with grantees that have competed successfully in the program and seek their advice and counsel.
- 3. Before applying, consider submitting your proposal in partnership with other organizations.** This may be particularly valuable if your organization is small, is less experienced in grant writing, or if you see programmatic advantages through collaboration. Generally, consortia proposals are well-received in Washington, giving "more bang for the buck."
- 4. Read the RFGP (request for grant proposals) and the application instructions thoroughly before writing the proposal, and make sure you understand what you have read.** If you have any questions, contact the program office.
- 5. Follow the instructions exactly as you go through the proposal writing process.**
- 6. REVIEW, FULLY UNDERSTAND AND BE SURE THAT YOUR PROPOSAL RESPONDS TO ALL THE CRITERIA AGAINST WHICH PROPOSALS WILL BE EVALUATED!!!** These are spelled out for you. Remember that reviewers are instructed to assess proposals against **each and every** criterion, and all review criteria are equally weighted. Grant proposals submitted to ECA need to respond to from four to twelve or more review criteria, depending on the complexity and purpose(s) of the grant program. Five review criteria often inadequately addressed include the following:

Diversity --- Does your proposal demonstrate your organization's commitment to promoting the awareness and understanding of diversity? "Diversity" includes participants representing different ethnicities, races, genders, religions and geographic locations as well as people of different socio-economic status and people with disabilities. But diversity is more than that. Does your program topic relate to diversity? Are your employees a diverse group? What about program volunteers? Does your grantee orientation program discuss diversity matters? Do your host program sites, whether in the United States or abroad, represent geographic, cultural and ethnic diversity? Think broadly and creatively. Note that this particular review criterion is in every Bureau RFGP.

Value to U.S. – Partner Country Relations --- A majority of ECA programs emphasize mutual understanding. This means that projects need to benefit both the United States and the partner country. When working with a foreign partner organization, make sure that letters of support specifically pertain to the proposal you are submitting. Demonstrate that you have already conferred with the Public Affairs Section of the U.S. Embassy in the country(ies) in which you are proposing to work. If not, demonstrate that you are willing to do so, including working with them in the final selection of participants. State Department geographic area desks and officers abroad will assess your proposal for program need, impact and significance from the standpoint of the partner country.

Cost-efficiency and effectiveness --- Keep your request for overhead administrative funds as low as possible. Maximize cost-sharing efforts through private sector support, including providing institutional cash and "non-cash" contributions, if possible. If an organization demonstrates that it is making a cash or non-cash commitment to the effort, even when not required by the program, it is likely to be considered a stronger proposal.

Evaluation --- Because of the passage of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) in the 1990s, all proposals submitted to ECA are now required to include an evaluation plan. What are the proposed program outcomes? What is measurable? Who will measure or evaluate these outcomes and what are their qualifications? Does your evaluation take place both during the project and after it is completed? How will the evaluation be reported to the Bureau?

Follow-on Activities --- Have you clearly demonstrated how your project will continue when Bureau support has ended? It is important that Bureau funds not simply support isolated events.

7. **Be sure to address how you will undertake the necessary tasks to fulfill the project's goals, as spelled out in the RFGP.** Your detailed work plan and program agenda should address such topics as participant selection and placement, foreign language issues, program monitoring and fiscal management.

8. **Make your budget submission as clear and specific as possible.** This is an area where many proposals suffer. Costs for selected items are excluded, other costs may be unreasonable or budget items are not spelled out or justified. Have you shown all your “non-cash” contributions? Is your budget submitted in the proper format? (Review the Proposal Submission Instructions (PSI) carefully for information on budget formatting). Do your budget totals add up and do the numbers match your budget notes and program narrative?
9. **Include attachments that demonstrate your organization’s capabilities, experience and track record.** These might include samples of past program outlines, program schedules, evaluations and endorsements. But make sure they are germane to the proposal you are submitting.
10. **Have someone review your completed proposal for you.** The reviewer should be someone not associated with the proposal writing effort. Have it read thoroughly and carefully for clarity and definition and for grammar, typos, jargon, acronyms and consistency. Then run the proposal through spell check and grammar check. And then proof it again manually. While proposals with missing sections, misassembled pages or grammatical errors may not be disqualified, these kinds of problems negatively affect readers’ general impressions of the proposal.
11. **Meet all the RFGP’s technical requirements.** Have you completed and included all the required reporting forms? Have you included resumes, if necessary? Did you include required organizational financial reports, including IRS proof of tax-exempt status documentation? Does your application include supporting recommendations or letters of reference? Have you obtained the necessary organizational signoffs and signatures? Does your proposal fall within the maximum length allowed? Have you made the correct number of copies?
12. **If you are not funded, try again.** If you are not funded, the ECA program office generally will provide you with information regarding why your proposal was not funded. If you do not receive this information, ask for it. Often very competitive proposals are not funded because of an insufficient amount of available funding. You can’t control that. But if your proposal was not funded because of quality, that you can address. Many unsuccessful proposals are improved upon and funded the second time around.