Start Small!

Wondering why you just can’t attract those grant dollars for your tech initiatives? Try thinking ‘mini’ before ‘maxi.’

I’VE BEEN WRITING grant applications for years, and though some weren’t worth a plug nickel, more than 90 percent of my applications have indeed been successful. Here’s why: Over the years, I have discovered that learning how to write mini-grants helped me transition to writing successful major grants. (Note: if you don’t get funded the first or second time you apply for a grant, do not get discouraged! There are usually many more applicants than there are funds for grants, so just keep at it—with some smart grant-writing skills, the monies will start to flow in.)

Going for the Mini

I think of a mini-grant as any grant under $5,000, but you can use your own definition. The important thing to understand is that many, many corporations and foundations have mini-grant programs. Accessing the websites of corporations and foundations in your city, county, and state, before researching grants opportunities elsewhere, will alert you to the funding opportunities that are out there for the asking. Now all you have to do is write the grant flawlessly.

Regardless of the size of the grant opportunity, there are six basic components to any grant application—including the mini grant. Hit them all effectively, and you’ll be on your way to racking up those minis, and becoming a grant-writing pro.

The 6 Components of a Successful Mini-Grant Application

There may be differing opinions about what you should include (and what you can skip) in a mini-grant application, but as far as I’m concerned, no application should be without the following well-fleshed-out components:

The needs assessment analyzes the extent of the problem and the conditions you wish to change. The statement of the problem or need is a representation of the reason for your proposal.

Your goals should be general in nature, broad-based, and overarching. They summarize what you want to accomplish in your grant application. I recommended that you state just one or two goals in your application; too many and you diffuse attention from your primary goals and possibly send up red flags about an overly ambitious project.

Objectives. When writing the objectives for your project, I suggest you divide them into “program objectives” and “process objectives.” Program objectives specify the “outcomes” of your project; the end product. Program
objectives should be measurable and time-specific, and become the criteria by which your program will be evaluated. Process objectives are also measurable and are written to ensure that the program objectives are carried out.

Example of program objective: At the conclusion of the project period, at least 80 percent of the target students will learn how to access the internet, research globally, and write a term paper (including graphs and charts) using Microsoft Word, as measured by a teacher observation checklist.

Example of process objective: At the conclusion of the project period, at least 80 percent of the target students will have spent at least five hours per week learning how to do research in the technology lab, as measured by records kept by the technology lab assistant.

The activities (methods) section of your application will explain in detail how you are going to achieve the desired outcomes stated in your objectives. Activities explain what will be done, who will do it, and when it will get done. Several activities are presented for each objective. The activities section should flow smoothly from the needs statement and the program objectives.

Evaluation specifications. This part of your application should help the funding agency determine the extent to which the objectives of your project will be met and the activities carried out. Be certain to describe your evaluation plan as clearly and succinctly as you can. First, take a look at the overall project. Study the goals, objectives, and activities. If the objectives written are truly measurable, then it should not be difficult to evaluate each objective. The objectives should have built-in evaluation criteria. (See objectives above.)

The budget that you present to the funding agency delineates the costs involved in carrying out your project, and expresses what you are trying to accomplish. It is important that you prepare this section carefully, because it has an impact upon your credibility with the funding agency. You might want to consult on this section with your immediate supervisor or business manager as you break out your costs. A number of funding agencies have a specific budget page that they want you to complete; others ask you to prepare your own budget page. For a mini-grant, the following budget categories will suffice for most funding agencies:

- Personnel
- Fringe benefits
- Travel
- Equipment
- Supplies
- Contractual
- Other
- Total costs

Sample Applications

Need a little more structure before you work up that first mini-grant proposal? No problem; there are many sample mini-grant program applications available to work with, easily searchable on the web. [Editor's note: Stan Levenson's new book, Big-Time Fundraising for Today's Schools, (Corwin Press, 2007) provides a two-page application on pages 55 and 56. You can use this application to practice putting together a mini-grant or to actually submit to a funding agency that has no standard application. It covers all components that most funding agencies are looking for.]

No Mini Satisfaction!

Take the time to produce a well-thought-out grant proposal; you'll be surprised how thrilling it is to see that proposal for technology funding—no matter how "mini"—succeed. Even a mini-grant will bring you much recognition and acclaim among your colleagues, and once you learn how to write the small ones, you should have little difficulty snagging the big ones. CT

Stan Levenson (www.grantsandgiftsforschools.com) is a nationally recognized fundraising consultant and writer who has raised more than $50 million; his students have raised over $100 million. Levenson writes frequently for major publications, and conducts seminars, workshops, and webinars nationwide.