

Some Thoughts on Grantwriting...

By Norton Kiritz

More than 20 years ago I sat down to talk with Ron Pavalko. Ron was a Professor of Sociology at Florida State and had just completed the first extensive evaluation of Grantsmanship Center training. Our discussion turned to his area of specialization--careers. Having spent so much time in evaluating our training, Ron wondered about the career of "grantwriter." Was this a career path he could research, as he had done with so many professions? We concluded that most "grantwriting" was done by staff who held another primary responsibility (director, administrator, teacher, counselor), and that so few people worked full time at this activity that it did not warrant being called a career.

Has anything changed over the past two decades?

A look at our training program participants suggests that most grantsmanship is still carried on by staff who have another primary role. In a typical workshop we find a foundation relations officer and a development assistant along with a flock of planners, administrators, managers, executive directors, administrative assistants, police officers, educators, park rangers, and so on.

To tell you the truth, I like it that way.

In the first place, I object to the term "grantwriter." Nobody really "writes" a grant. They write proposals in order to get a grant. To do that well, they need a thoughtful plan for a necessary program or service. I don't think organizations should turn this responsibility over to a "grantwriter," and abdicate their responsibility for good planning.

So, should proposals be written by a "grantwriter" or by program staff? While I would like to have a good writer available to help with the presentation, I think the concepts, the ideas--the heart of the proposal--should be the responsibility of program staff.

There's another reason I don't like the term "grantwriter." It implies that writing is what you do to get a grant. That may be largely true when applying to the federal government. But good writing gives way to politics when applying to other government agencies, especially at the local level.

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And when it comes to foundation and corporate funding , writing may be a lot less important than organizational credibility and personal contacts. I'd rather send a bright, charming and informed staff person in search of foundation contacts then send a proposal or letter of inquiry through the mail.

Just one more thought. I'd hate to see grantsmanship viewed as one more fundraising specialty--like special events, planned giving or direct mail. The grants process represents an opportunity to get an agency's ideas, experiences, goals and objectives down on paper. To consider seriously the needs of clients or constituency, and to find out what they think they need. To develop programs that have a chance of resolving the real problems that exist within a community.

As we define it, grantsmanship is more than a fundraising approach. It ties together planning, management and fund development. A person who can coordinate the different facets of grant development is not just a "grantwriter," but an integral part of the management of an organization. What do you think?