ANATOMY OF A SUCCESSFUL GRANT

By Cherise Carrera

The enormous potential value in funding opportunities, whether research or program grants, or from governmental or private sources, for higher education faculty, staff, students and institutions has always been clear. However, the time, effort, and faculty and staff coordination that they require can turn that "obvious" revenue prospect into an insurmountable feat–especially while classes are in session.

Notwithstanding, the benefits can be significant. Entire academic programs, campus expansion projects and more that target key institutional objectives—such as attracting and graduating more underrepresented students—can be supported and developed with those funds. The prestige and prospects stemming from awards also benefit the present and future of institutions. Moreover, overall, there is not a dearth of competitive grants opportunities.

Numerous categories of grants are available across federal agencies, with program information available at *Grants.gov,* and through the Federal Register and Federal Business Opportunities (*FBO.gov*). Additionally, a multitude of foundations distribute awards across various disciplines. What's more, as the philanthropy monitoring website Inside Philanthropy noted, grants for higher education "make up the most significant portion of education philanthropy in the U.S." However, of equal significance, is the fact that the requirements of many federal grants can be numerous and multifaceted.

AASCU's Grants Resource Center (GRC) was established to identify competitive grants and make their requisites more transparent and attainable for higher education institutions. Opened in 1967 as the Office of Federal Programs to public and private four-year institutions, GRC gives members access to fundamental resources and guidance. That includes comprehensive up-to-date funding news and opportunities, development education, and expert pre-award advice.

"A subscription to GRC provides members with access to a comprehensive suite of tools, services and expertise to improve their sponsored research office's efficiency and increase their institution's success in securing competitive grants from federal and private sponsors," said Erika Thompson, GRC's interim executive director.

"[The Grants Resource Center] maintains our own GrantSearch database with over 1,500 opportunities, in addition to a funded proposal library. We also have our own annual meeting, the Funding Competitiveness Conference, each February," she said.

The executive director of the office of sponsored programs (OSP) at University of Houston—Clear Lake (UHCL), a GRC member, discovered the U.S. Department of Education's Hispanic-Serving Institutions' (HSI) Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) Program through GRC. From there, "Our OSP executive director, with support from the provost, requested that we find faculty who could develop a suitable project," said Loretta Derrick, grants development specialist at UHCL.

The challenge was coordinating schedules. After four-plus joint meetings of university and community college STEM professors, education professors, program chairs, an evaluator and the Office of Sponsored Programs staff, said Derrick, the university was awarded an HSI STEM grant in 2016.

That type of leadership, faculty and staff coordination is emblematic of the grant application process. And as one philanthropy monitoring nonprofit wrote, "Grant seekers

looking for…grants explicitly geared toward higher education institutions should be prepared to conduct a good deal of research to find the foundation that will be the right fit for their respective projects and programs." Schools may be wise to take UHCL's route. Because the timeframe available to their grant team to complete the application was limited, UHCL OSP carefully created a timeline and divided it into pre-planning and application components, due date, responsible parties and the date of completion for each step.

However, as University of Central Oklahoma Assistant Vice President in the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs Gregory Wilson stated, "The timeline is meant to serve as a guide, and [has to be] readjusted as needed. There are always times when we have to wait on data or encounter last minute budget modifications."

When California State University, Chico, (another HSI STEM grant awardee) applied for the grant this year, the director of the school's engineering program, Paul Villegas,

Search, one of eight TRIO programs, identifies and assists individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds who have the potential to succeed in higher education. To that end, among the grant application's requirements were specific objectives to be assessed annually. Therefore, stakeholders' commitment would need to extend beyond the application process.

"The [grant application] PI and project director met with superintendents and principals to understand the needs the students are facing in the schools, [and] discuss the objectives and services of the grant," in addition to requesting letters of support from appropriate middle and high schools within their community," said Wilson. "Our long-standing community partners were also contacted," he said.

UCO had previously applied for the TRIO grant, and was not chosen during the previous grant cycle. The university was awarded a five-year $1.2 million grant from the TRIO Program during the summer. "At the time [when we first applied], we knew we would reapply," said Wilson. "In grant writing, you

"AASCU's Grants Resource Center (GRC) was established to identify competitive grants and make their requisites more transparent and attainable for higher education institutions."

and grant writer Terry Cook communicated daily. Ricardo Jacquez Dean, dean and a professor of civil engineering, played a central role in acquiring necessary data. And several other staff members from engineering and from natural sciences schools consulted with the necessary agents to fulfill the application requirements.

"There are a lot of moving parts to such an extensive grant," said Villegas. "Given more time we could have explored potential partners, but overall we were happy with the stakeholders that were involved."

Designating and corralling the appropriate team members and planning are essential in grant application best practices. "Some private grant funders don't require a lot of information. But those are typically the smaller, more localized funders," Thompson said. "Most grants take a lot of effort, especially if lots of data is needed and/or a partnership is involved."

Accordingly, the UCO Federal TRIO Talent Search application process included the coordination of senior leaders, including the principal investigator (PI)/content expert, the TRIO Upward Bound Math and Science director, a member of UCO's Office of Institutional Assessment, and a grant writer from the office of research and sponsored programs. Talent

are not always successful on your first attempt, but the process makes the subsequent proposal stronger."

Derrick recommends that application participants start early. "Identify key players and bring them to the table early in the process. Divide up the tasks, and use subgroups to complete them," she said. Furthermore, "applicants must have realistic measurable goals, objectives and outcomes."

In the case of UHCL, their newly acquired funds have helped them meet already set key school objectives, building on projects already in progress at the school. One program beneficiary, the UHCL College of Education's Success Through Education Program targeting low-income, usually first-generation students, has been around for 25-plus years.

However, higher education institutions and researchers may face an entirely different landscape as the new presidential administration's directives roll out. Although state and local appropriations are a primary source for public institutions, and federal policies have potentially little affect on state higher education funding, possible impacts to higher education, of course, do exist.

As an *Inside Higher Education* article (published in November 2016) stated, the possible scenarios include a

slimmed-down federal government, and agencies with less student and school aid money and/or with less attention to issues of interest to private donors. Reduced immigrant student populations negatively affecting tuition rates is also a possibility. On the other hand, the article states that "If Trump's policies like trade protectionism and infrastructure spending end up boosting middle-class families' fortunes, it could mean a boom for enrollments as families attain a newfound ability to send students to college."

According to Thompson, "The only thing that is certain is that STEM will remain a priority since the U.S. is not at the top in that area."

"But, even within STEM, climate change will most likely not be a focus since the president doesn't believe it exists. Arts and humanities aren't really a priority in the federal arena, so I suspect those disciplines will suffer," she concluded.

Keeping up with available funding opportunities and ahead of changes in regulations and programs is increasingly critical within the evolving higher education sector. In what some would call a "constrained fiscal environment," grants can profoundly impact institutions, their students' success and communities. State colleges and universities could find a guide and support in the Grants Resources Center to navigate their school's present fiscal and other priorities, in addition to the unknown ones to come.

For information on GRC membership, please email *grcmembership@ aascu.org*. P

Cherise Carrera is manager of editorial services, AASCU.

Tips on Grant Applications for SCUs

Grants Resource Center's Interim Executive Director Erika Thompson answers questions on the grant application process.

How can members use the AASCU Grants Resource Center (GRC)?
Having AASCU membership doesn't automatically grant GRC membership because we have a separate fee structure. Our members rely on us to keep them up to date on the myriad funding opportunities and priority information that is released every day.

Is there a certain type of grant that most schools should focus on?
Probably program grants to make up for the dearth of funding at the state level. Those tend to focus on student retention and undergraduate research opportunities.

Is there a particular time of year that is best suited for grant applications?
No, grant opportunities are announced every day. IHEs [institutions of higher education] just need to pay attention to the grant cycles of the programs in which they have interest.

What are the essentials for universities to succeed in any grant application process? Applications need to follow ALL guidelines and be submitted ON TIME. The federal government requires grant applications to be submitted down to the exact second, and often have strict formatting and page length requirements. Of course applications need to be well written. But, many times applicants don't get funded simply because the money for new awards has run out. Other times, the particular grant opportunity is very competitive.

What do most grant applications require from schools?
Most grants require information on student and/or faculty demographics, amount of money received from other awards, buy-in from the administration and/or local community, and a budget and evaluation plan.

How long should schools/stakeholders expect to spend to complete a grant application? It depends on the grant. Some grants take months to write because of the information gathering and the many guidelines.

Are there any other organizations besides GRC available to help higher education institutions with grant identification and the application process?
Yes, GRC has several competitors, and some have a more robust grants database. What sets us apart is that a member can contact us to receive information from a real person. Also, the information we gather is curated before we send to members. So much information comes out every day, and GRC knows how to "sift through the weeds."

For more information on the Grants Resource Center, visit **www.aascu.org/grc**.