You’ve Got the Grant, Now What? Post-Award Administration and the Grants Professional

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In prior *Grants and Foundation Review* articles Adriana Ercolano, Larry Trachtman, and I have responded to one another’s articles about the appropriate role for the grants professional in program planning.

What about after the grant? For those of us without an official “grants administrator,” how involved should the “grant writer” be with the program after the grant is awarded?

While the right answer is different for everyone, I make a case below for staying out of program “operations,” while carefully educating program and accounting personnel regarding their responsibilities, and checking in at appropriate intervals to ensure all is going smoothly.

Moving Chairs

I was shocked when a “grant writer” from a hospital told me that part of her job was tracking down chairs for a training session because the project director just didn’t know how to do it. The thinking at her organization was, “You wrote the grant. It’s your responsibility to make sure that the program runs smoothly.”

This poor “grant writer” has just become a program manager. To oversimplify, if she’s moving chairs, that’s time not devoted to bringing in her next grant. What do you suppose my boss evaluates me on each year? Proposals out the door and money in the door.

Your Interest in Program Management

Of course, grants professionals have a vested interest in how programs are run. Our proposal committed our organization to fulfilling certain promises. As grants professionals, we want to ensure that the organization lives up to those promises because we’re thinking ahead and considering stewardship, cultivation and the next proposal. When it’s time for the final report, we don’t want to find out that we actually did something different than what was promised. I hate writing that report!

We must find the “Golden Mean” between being a program control freak and being completely
laissez-faire. And, you must become excellent friends with the accounting people.

The Post-Award Meeting

After a few hard lessons, I’ve instituted the post-award meeting. In my college setting, this includes the faculty member who is the project director, the dean over the project director, and the comptroller. In smaller non-profits, this looks more like the project director, the executive director (this may be the same person!) and the treasurer/accountant, if there is one.

Regardless of the size of your organization, even if there are only two of you, here is what is covered in the post-award meeting:

- **Program Review**—a review or executive summary of all of the program activities, outcomes and timelines promised in the proposal. In other words, “Here is what we promised to do, when we promised to do it and what we said we would accomplish.”
- **Grants Ethics**—essentially, this is the “we must do exactly what we promised” talk. Over the years, this talk has gotten firmer and firmer. I emphasize the contractual nature of the agreement between us and the funder. If the funder is a government agency, then there probably is an actual contract and woe unto you if you spend your funds on unallowable costs.
- **Accounting Guidelines**—an introduction/review of the organization’s purchasing, payroll and accounting practices. What records must we keep on expenditures? What is the procedure for getting approval to spend grant funds? Who is watching expenditures during the grant period?
- **The Final Report**—a discussion of what we will have to report about the use of the grant funds, when we have to report it, and a decision on whose responsibility it will be to produce this report.

This meeting is designed to accomplish several purposes, beyond the obvious ones. First, it establishes your interest and right to remain involved in ensuring that the program is operated as promised and that the funds are spent correctly.

However, it should also serve to initiate and commission the newly-minted project director. You are making it clear to everyone that the project director must now take on responsibility for making the proposal elements succeed. Often, this is a big reality check for a person who, up until this point, has been thinking only theoretically about a possible grant, and may have
depended largely on you to flesh out the actual details.

You will especially want to make clear exactly what role you expect to play in producing and submitting the final report. Will you write it yourself? Is it the program director’s job to write it, but you’ll edit it? This may change from grant to grant in the same organization, depending on the program, the project director and your work load. Whatever you decide, get the date on everyone’s calendar today, in the meeting, so there is no chance of forgetting it.

Hopefully, at your institution or organization, the Post-Award Meeting will result in a smooth hand-off to the program and accounting people, and you can then move on to the next grant. Or maybe not.

Progress Meetings

After a few more hard lessons, our university has decided that the Post-Award Meeting is not adequate, especially for multi-year grants. We are now instituting quarterly grants progress meetings. These meetings include the comptroller, the project director and me. We sit down with budget reports and discuss any possible red flags. Here is what those red flags could be warning you about:

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<th>Spending Red Flags</th>
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<td>Red Flag</td>
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| Over-spending in an account line | · Improper classification of an expense within the grant budget (e.g. a supply classified as equipment)  
|                                | · Improper/excessive expenditure  
|                                | · Accounting error (e.g. something charged to the grant that should not be)  
|                                | · “Mentally” re-allocating between individual budget lines, or the “bottom line” concept: as long as the “bottom line” balances, it doesn’t matter what happens in individual account lines  

| Under-spending in an account line | · Improper classification of expenses  
|                                 | · Not performing a program activity promised in the proposal  
|                                 | · Accidentally not charging the grant for authorized expenditures  
|                                 | · The “bottom line” misconception  

Under-spending Grant Funds

“What!” you say, “I can’t imagine anyone not spending their grant funds.” Oh yes, it happens all the time. One of the most common reasons to under-spend grant money is that the grant writer and the grant “implementer” have fundamentally different understandings about the nature of the project. Maybe the project director is hired after the grant was awarded and had no role in designing the program activities. He or she may not fully understand what you promised in the proposal or may not buy in.

You don’t want to discover near the end your project that the university never implemented the student summer research fellowship that was a major aspect of your proposal. The day I discovered that was the very day we added the quarterly progress meetings.
Why You?

So, why should you, the grants professional, be sticking your nose into all of these operational and accounting issues? Because you are the person at your organization who understands best how your program aligns with the funder’s requirements. Because you want the final report to be submitted, on time. Because no one else will take it as seriously as you do. (Rejoice if this is not true for you, and never change jobs!)

I dream of the day when all of our processes are running smoothly, all faculty and administrators understand how to remain in compliance with funding agency requirements, and I can just sit back and stay out of post-award administration. But until then, I’ll be scheduling progress meetings.

And maybe begging the business office to hire a grant administrator.