

“Building Relationships with Federal Grant Administrators”

By Stacie Harting Marsh, Writing to Win, Inc.

June 15, 2010

Ever wonder how (and when) to approach a grant administrator when applying for Federal grants? Grantseekers should recognize the difference in responsibilities and qualifications between philanthropic and Federal grant administrators in order to maximize their chances for funding in an extremely competitive environment.

Federal Grant Administrators: Who Are They and What Do They Do?

Just like their counterparts in private foundations, Federal grant administrators have a vested interest in the success of eligible grant applicants and funded grantees. However, their responsibilities and qualifications are notably distinct.

Most noticeably, Federal grant-related functions are allocated among several positions, rather than one grant officer handling both pre- and post-award functions. These functions are typically facilitated by “Program Officers” – handling, you guessed it, program related issues – and “Grants Management Officers” (aka “Grants Management Specialists” or “Grants Compliance Officers”) – handling business, administrative and fiscal issues. For the purposes of this article we’ll use the acronyms of “PO” and “GMO,” respectively, within the broad moniker of grant administrator.

Federal grant administrators are assigned by grant program rather than by organization. In contrast, philanthropic grant administrators typically handle multiple grants – in addition to multiple functions – for organizations for which they are assigned.

Program Officers (POs) are largely responsible for fielding programmatic questions from applicants, promoting collaborative relationships, facilitating grantee workshops and technical assistance resources, and serving as the primary liaison between applicants and grantor agencies during the pre-award grantseeking process.

Grants Management Officers (GMOs) are responsible for monitoring grantee compliance with proposed objectives, cost policies and legislative requirements. They are the ones who review grant reports, negotiate drawdowns, monitor subawards, conduct site visits, and facilitate closeout procedures. Ultimately they have the final say in approving or denying program expenditures and accepting appeals. For example, federal grantees must work with their GMO to negotiate budget and personnel modifications per [OMB Circular A-110](#). Although occasionally GMOs field questions regarding budgetary and other technical issues during the application process, most of their work is limited to after grant awards are made.

Both POs and GMOs have largely been absolved from fielding questions regarding electronic submission of grant applications. For such inquiries, applicants are directed to call centers within

Grants.gov or the granting agency's own grants portal (such as **eGrants** for the U.S. Department of Education).

Given their distinct roles, grant administrators in Federal agencies are typically more specialized (both industry and function-specific) than their private counterparts. While most philanthropic grant administrators emanate from the non-profit sector, the majority of Federal grant administrators are permanent Federal employees. For example, many program officers within the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services are **U.S. Public Health Service (PHS) Commissioned Corps Officers**. Some Federal agencies, such as the **National Institutes of Health**, and the **National Science Foundation**, employ highly qualified faculty members as temporary POs and reviewers, with considerable responsibilities in launching initiatives, making funding recommendations based on peer reviews, and managing grants once awarded.

The required qualifications (and associated pay scale) for Federal grant administrators is based on the Federal government's "**General Schedule**" (GS). Most grants administration positions start at the GS-9 level, which typically requires (or gives preference to) applicants with at least one year of specialized experience in the Federal service performing duties related to program effectiveness, in addition to a master's or equivalent graduate degree. GMOs are required to have considerable experience in Federal grants compliance, including managing **A-133 audits** and demonstrated knowledge of **federal acquisition regulations** (particularly FAR 31.2) and **OMB Circulars** A-110, A-122, and A-133. The pay scale for Federal grant administrators ranges from \$50,000-\$100,000 per year, depending on the agency and required qualifications.

Differences between Federal and Private Grant Administrators

In comparison with their counterparts in private foundations, Federal grant administrators are typically **LESS**:

- **Relationship-focused:** While private foundation grant administrators – at least locally-based – often welcome and encourage meetings, site visits, phone calls, and regular communication, Federal Program Officers are actually discouraged from developing relationships with prospective applicants due to a perception of unfair advantage. Federal GMOs, on the other hand, do need to engage in fairly regular contact with grantees (but at arm's length). Bottom line: don't expect a meeting with a federal grants administrator if you're in DC. Be grateful for a return phone call.
- **Accessible:** Although Federal grant administrators have not been affected by layoffs the way their private counterparts have, they nonetheless have demanding jobs with little time for communication with applicants. They are burdened by short deadlines and changing legislative requirements, made more complex by new and revised grant opportunities resulting from the **American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009** and other legislative changes such as the recent **health care reform legislation**.

- **Consultative:** While private foundation grant administrators (primarily those that are locally based) typically welcome applicant inquiries for consultation in determining if the foundation is a good fit and how much they should request, Federal grant administrators are rarely able to provide such guidance. They tend to refer applicants to the legislative statutes for which the grant program is authorized rather than provide objective guidance.
- **Influential:** Federal grant administrators, by nature of their employment in the public sector, are prohibited from advocating on behalf of applicant organizations and grantees. Whereas private foundation officers often advocate for applicants to the foundation's decision-makers based on their relationships with those organizations, Federal grant administrators are not allowed to influence grant reviewers based on their knowledge of applicants.
- **Negotiable:** Given their neutrality in the grant review process and the nature of a large bureaucracy, Federal grant administrators are not able to work with applicants during the review process in the way that many of their philanthropic counterparts are. Some (certainly not all, and particularly locally-based) private foundations ask for budget modifications or other application revisions during the grant review process. In contrast, with Federal applications, you're either in or out.

In summary, just as a grant application is an exercise in following directions, Federal grant administrators' jobs are an exercise in enforcing directions. Program/Grant Officers in private foundations typically have more authority in influencing and interpreting those directions.

Tips for Interacting with Federal Grant Administrators

- **Designate one (or two) contact person(s):** Identify one organizational representative from the applicant/grantee organization to communicate with the Feds, even if the contact is with multiple Federal representatives. (Of course there may be exceptions in the case of large organizations with sophisticated financial staff members that have specific financial questions for a grants management specialist.) If possible, limit communication with the granting agency between a program/agency representative and the Federal PO/GMO directly, although a first time/novice grantseeker may be better off having an experienced grant consultant to initiate correspondence. After the grant is awarded, consultants should no longer be involved in the correspondence.
- **Do your homework:** Target your questions to the appropriate Federal representative(s), which are designated in each funding solicitation. Read the funding solicitation and FAQs frequently and carefully so you don't waste their time. Find out other ways to answer your own questions. For example, if you want to see copies of previously funded applications, submit a [FOIA](#) (Freedom of Information Act) request. Familiarize yourself with the [Code of Federal Regulations](#) regarding appropriate use of Federal grant funds. Explore the grantor agency's web site for a list of previously funded grants.

- **Request responses in writing:** When asking a logistical question about an application, always do so in writing so you have documentation of the grantor's response. In many instances the conversation can be richer and more informative by phone, but always follow-up with email correspondence. Consider starting with an email to ask when would be a good time to call by phone, and then follow-up your conversation in email.
- **Recognize their limitations but press for their guidance:** Acknowledge their limitations in counseling applicants, but ask the Federal PO to review a brief (no more than 3 page) concept paper of your project. Ask several weeks in advance and give them time for ample turnaround (at least a week). Not all POs are willing to review concept papers, but it never hurts to ask! Remember, don't expect guidance on conceptual issues, more so just alignment with requirements, acceptable uses of funds, etc.
- **Participate in a peer review panel:** The best way to understand the ins and outs of the Federal grantmaking process is to serve as a peer reviewer. Most Federal agencies have links on their Web sites for peer review opportunities. Program Officers may also be able to provide insight regarding the [peer review](#) application process.

Conclusion

Federal grantseeking is extremely competitive and demanding, made even more challenging by limited opportunities for contact with decision makers (as well as a range of external factors). With both private and public grantmakers, it is important to always be forthcoming and provide as clear and consistent communication as possible in order to maximize your chances for success. This underscores the importance of always asking for written feedback from declined applications and carefully reviewing funding solicitations and lists of recently-funded recipients. With all grantseeking efforts, perhaps the best advice is to always follow the funder's directions and ensure appropriate alignment with funding priorities. Contact [Writing to Win](#) with questions or more extensive recommendations.