

Common Myths about Grants

Myth 1: Grants are “free money” with no strings attached

Grants by definition come with restrictions. Once you’ve landed a grant, your organization is charged with managing a promise to use the money in certain ways, to follow reporting procedures, and to demonstrate programmatic progress. Break that promise, and you could lose that money, as well as future funding opportunities from that grantor. Failure to follow guidelines and regulations for federal grants could result in hefty fines, or even jail time.

Myth 2: Meeting the deadline is the most important goal of a successful grant writer

The two most important goals are to produce a top-quality proposal and to target it to the right grant agency. Far too many professors succumb to the urge to put deadlines ahead of everything else. Resist firing off 11th-hour proposals to meet last-minute deadlines. Slow down, produce a quality proposal, and submit it to the agency next year or submit it to a similar agency now.

Myth 3: My organization can quickly pull together an application

The criteria for all applications are different, as are the agencies that offer them. The reality is that the work that precedes proposal writing can take up more time than the actual writing. All grant work varies according to program and project, and may take weeks or months to complete. The work includes completing a go/no go assessment to make sure you’re best positioned to move forward; planning meetings; identifying partners; assigning roles; setting expectations; gathering and reviewing documentation; making sure everyone involved is on board for evening and weekend work; and writing, editing, proofreading, and submitting.

Myth 4: As long as the “submit” button is clicked by the deadline, I have submitted my application

A successful application submission means that you have transmitted an error-free submission by the deadline. If you click submit and you receive an error message after the deadline date, then you do not have any more time to correct any deficiency, whether the deficiency is a simple administrative matter or is an omission of an important section of your application. *Please note that the Grants Administration Office is the only authorized entity on campus to submit your grant.

Myth 5: Anyone can win a grant award; all I have to do is fill in the application and the government/foundation will give me money

Many grant funding opportunities are highly competitive. If you apply for federal grants, consider that your organization is competing among 50 states, 5 major territories and 11 smaller Pacific Islands, and 565 federally recognized tribes. In some federal-level grant competitions, thousands of grant applications are submitted and fewer than 25 are actually awarded.

Myth 6: Grants are awarded to those who have the greatest need

Most grants go to applicants whose proposals seem most likely to deliver services and meet the agency's goals better than all other applicants. Grants are awarded to those who have the ability to deliver on the agency's interests. Frequently, grantors are looking for proposals that demonstrate credibility, strength, ability, and commitment.

Myth 7: It's okay to spend some of the grant we received on something other than what we told the grantor we were going to spend it on

Your honesty, integrity, ability to raise funds, and ability to run a strong nonprofit agency are everything when completing your grant-awarded project. There are usually strict guidelines on what you can and cannot spend your awarded money on. If you choose to spend it on something that is unallowable, you may be asked to return the grant. Even worse, you may lose future funding, face fines, or even jail time.

Myth 8: All I need is one “standard” proposal and then I’m set

It’s not wise to build one grant template and send it out over and over again to multiple funders. Each grant maker is different and you need to tweak your arguments to speak to their worldview. Sure, some items in the grant are boilerplate pieces that can be re-used time and again (like your mission statement and organization history) but much of the grant will need to be refreshed and retooled with each application.

Myth 9: I can send the same proposal out to multiple grantors and one of them is bound to choose me for their grant

Foundations and federal agencies talk to each other. If they find out you are submitting the same exact project proposal to more than one foundation/federal agency, they will most likely choose not to fund you, and prevent you from getting any future funding; you’ll be put on a grant “blacklist.” It would be unethical and illegal to accept grants from multiple grantors who are all funding the same budget for your one project. However, you can send out the same proposal and ask for funding for different parts of the budget for each submission, or tweak each proposal so that each project is slightly different.