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Introduction to Special Issue: Grants

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Introduction

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America's founding fathers decided that it was not in the best interest of its citizens for the federal government to be directly involved with social welfare, but recognized a duty to assist its less fortunate. They made provisions for non-profit organizations to distribute money to aid those in need. Universities considered it unseemly, before World War II, to accept *tainted* monies from the government, since it might bear undue influence over *pure* scientific research. This pattern has evolved. Today non-profit, corporate, and government grant monies are available to be used by thousands of persons, organizations, and state governments for research, humanitarian efforts, and programs considered valuable in the interest of the *public good*. According to the National Council of Non-Profit Associations, the number of non-profit organizations in the United States grew 68% between 1993 and 2003. The *United States Nonprofit Sector* found that, excluding foundations and religious congregations, there were 837,027 nonprofits in the United States in 2003, and that they had combined assets of \$1.76 trillion. The report also found that expenditures of all nonprofits in 2003 totaled \$945 billion ("*U.S. Nonprofit Sector Is Sixth Largest Economy in the World.*" *National Council of Nonprofit Associations Press Release 2/21/06*) (PND, 2006).

Grants have become a massive industry. In the past, the number of organizations involved in the grant process was fairly stable. Each organization or special interest had few competitors for funding; organizations found consistency and stability in who would assist their projects and programs. Today's world has changed. As the number of non-profit groups and academic institutions relying on grant funding has increased, competition for monies has grown fierce. Job security and the continued existence of an organization, in many cases, rely on being the successful competitor for the available resources found in grants. Grants provide, in many cases, the only revenue stream a person or organization finds to carry out research or humanitarian support efforts in the *public good*.

The surge in the sheer numbers of applicants for the limited monies avail-

able has led to the need for many organizations to add a new set of skills to their personnel inventory — grant writers. Whether they are specialists or staff who have been given the task to write grants on top of their other duties, their chore is to successfully acquire funding. Because competition has increased, the process has gone beyond casual proposal and assessment. It has become extremely precise. Expertise with software has become mandatory. Many applications involve special formatting and are available only by downloading from a website. In an attempt to make the process easier, some organizations and government agencies have only succeeded in making the process more confusing and time consuming. “Why Grant.gov Should be abolished” (Kolmerten, 2007) showcases why many organizations for which the original grant concept was designed are excluding themselves from the process. It describes one poor faculty member who, because she had successfully received a grant, became the “expert” for campus. In her new consulting role, the *simple* act of filling out the form for a fellow faculty applicant turned into a time-consuming nightmare. It shows the discouragement that can occur because many grant guidelines have taken on a life of their own and evolved into arduous, jargon-ridden, complicated tasks. Lack of organizational support (grant writing expertise and time) has led many smaller organizations, for which research or service might benefit the *public good*, to not submit applications. They see no purpose for the time spent when competing against professional grant writers available to the larger institutions. To meet the challenge, organizations and agencies have had to confront their values and their staffing to decide what they can afford to spend in attempting to attract needed revenue.

Money creates obligations for both the grantor and the recipient. Finding the balance between assisting and influencing is not an easy task. Many grant-funded projects include an emotional factor which may cloud judgment. Persons become passionate about their area and may make questionable ethical decisions in order to achieve their goals. To gain funding, they may choose to align themselves with a corporation or political ideology that does not reflect their organization’s or their personal values; reports on grant results may be adjusted to ensure continued funding. In research, less popular theories might be kept out of the limelight to keep the status quo theory from being challenged. Because the grant process relies on the integrity of both parties, the process is easily manipulated by those less scrupulous. The unethical behavior of some taints the process for all.

Grants, when used as intended to fund areas that lie beyond the parameters of governmental obligations to provide for the *public good*, or to explore new ideas and possibilities, are valuable resources. They operate at their best when grantors fund projects and programs to the betterment and enlightenment of society, and grantees align their requests with funding agencies that reflect their or their organization’s values and mission. Whether the monies

originate from a personal, corporate, or governmental source, ethical behavior on behalf of each party ensures that funding is available for many worthy endeavors. If approached with honesty, alliances between grantor and grantee have the opportunity to grow and to achieve results that each find valuable.

References

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