

Advice to funding organizations

The not-for-profit environment is often limited by financial resources. This reality, combined with the importance of using resources most efficiently, should encourage funding organizations whose goal is promoting knowledge sharing and education to adjust their granting opportunities to enable organizations to maximize their outreach while minimizing their costs. Given the ubiquitous nature of the internet and the ever-growing list of available IT solutions, investment in technical innovation should become one of the main priorities for funding organizations interested in promoting education among a wider audience. However, as mentioned in previous chapters, technical innovation is a difficult process involving not only issues surrounding technology itself, but also changes in work processes, work organization and others. Throughout our discussions with all of the eight project teams they mentioned several issues involving the grant structure that they found helpful or harmful to their projects. In this section we briefly touch upon some of these issues.

Bring grantees together early in the grant period to facilitate knowledge sharing and community building

One of the aspects of the grant opportunity the grantees found to be among the most helpful was the unprecedented information exchange facilitated by their ability to meet with their co-grantees at the November workshop. This meeting gave all those who attended an excellent opportunity to network with other colleagues and share ideas and resources used in each individual project. As one participant at the workshop stated, *"I am not used to this type of collaborative environment within a grant structure – normally I am competing with each of you. This has been refreshing to come together and share success stories and challenges so that there is a knowledge sharing among like entities."* Many of the grantees felt their projects could have benefited greatly from an earlier meeting, when input from other organizations undertaking similar projects would be very valuable. All felt strongly that the exploratory nature of this type of work was very important and should not be treated like other grant programs.

Provide ongoing substantive support for project teams

Many participants also spoke of the importance of the guided discussions held in the teleconference calls. They found the discussions to be instrumental in some cases and at the very least very valuable to their efforts to achieve their project objectives. Participants strongly urged funding organizations to design similar support in future exploratory grant opportunities as a way to encourage networking and collaboration among grantees. The process of talking through the issues, many of them unfamiliar to members of the project teams, provided a unique opportunity to bring in expertise for short periods of time to assist in brainstorming, problem solving and course corrections.

Having the representatives from the funding organizations themselves on the calls was also valuable to the grantees as it gave them an opportunity to share some of the problems connected to the grant administration itself and explain in more detail the progress of their projects.

Get grant money into the hands of grantees quickly

One of the often mentioned complaints related to the grant structure was the delay in getting the funds to the project teams. The nature of this project required that a lot of resources be extended at the beginning of the project in exploring the various technical solutions available. Although most projects were able to overcome the delay by using resources from other sources, the need to search for these new resources was detrimental to their ability to concentrate on the project itself. In addition, in exploratory projects one often faces unforeseen challenges that require prompt access to financial resources to enable the project lead to manage the unexpected.

Advice to future project leaders

When writing a grant proposal involving technical innovation and multi-organizational team dispersed over wide geographic area, one should pay attention to several issues that speak to the team's ability to successfully complete the proposed project. One of the issues is communication. When working in a multi-organizational team, it is important to describe your communication plan, including the medium and proposed frequency of contact, which should be dictated by the phase of the project as well as the familiarity of the team with each other. If the team consists mainly of new partners, the writer should also illustrate how they plan to create an environment conducive to productive partnership.

The second issue of interest to funding organizations is how their grant dollars will complement existing resources

of an organization. In other words, is the team planning on extending the funds by using existing resources and have they planned on using existing partnership to minimize the cost of the project while maximizing its effect. This is important in particular in terms of long term maintenance of the new resources. Logically, funding organizations are interested in funding initiatives that are sustainable. Therefore, while not always possible, it is important to speak to how the new resources will be maintained after the grant period.

The third issue one should pay attention to in the development of a grant proposal for a technology-based knowledge sharing innovation is the technology itself. Participants noted that they would have benefited in the long run in they had addressed more fully in their proposals the topic of technology selection. In particular, it would have forced them to more fully think through the process and, more importantly, the criteria they would use to select the most appropriate technology, and further who would be assisting the team in the selection process.

Drawing on their experiences in the **Electronic Commons Program** and based on discussion at the reflection workshop, project participants identified the following thirteen questions as a guide for their colleagues as they engage in similar proposal writing efforts. The questions guide future teams to create clarity both in their own thinking about the challenges of technology-based innovations in knowledge sharing with teams drawn from multiple, geographically dispersed organizations and to encourage the clear and effective communication of strategies about meeting these challenges in proposals to funding organizations.

- Have we discussed in our proposal how we will handle communication and team development across geographically dispersed areas? Have we outlined our meeting strategies and the consequences of those choices?
- Have we clearly communicated how we will use technology to manage the dispersed project team and that we have the capability to use the technology in this way?
- Have we clearly shown the existence of and success of previous collaborative efforts among team members?
- In those cases where no previous relationships exist, did we clearly communicate how those new relationships will be facilitated and nurtured?
- Have we shown the level of understanding that already exists regarding the needs of the selected end-users of their project? Have we shown that we have knowledge of the extent to which users are equipped to take advantage of the new resources and the plans we have to bridge the gaps that exist (i.e. access to the Internet)?
- Does the project proposal speak effectively to how we will leverage existing resources and partnerships?
- Have we effectively demonstrated our willingness and capability to enter into a collaborative engagement?
- Have we outlined how we will or did establish a shared vision? Have we articulated it in the proposal?
- Have we discussed how we will evaluate our progress against our vision throughout the project?
- Have we included performance measures?
- Have we effectively shown how we will provide technology expertise either through our own resources or through a partner?
- Have we outlined a strategy for sustaining the resulting program over time?
- Have we effectively communicated the commitment of the sponsorship of the project during all phases and in the long term?