



THOUGHTS ABOUT STATE HUMANITIES COUNCIL GRANTMAKING*

Structuring a grant program

- A council structures its grantmaking programs by deciding when to fund broadly and when to fund deeply. The impact of its grantmaking on the humanities in its state or jurisdiction should always be taken into consideration as well as what effect the receipt of a grant will have on a grantee. While few councils ever run the risk of making grants that are too big, they almost always run the risk of making grants that might be too small.
- An additional structural issue for council grantmaking is whether to state that applications will be accepted in specific areas of interest or whether the grant program will serve any kind humanities program/project.
- A quick grant category is an excellent concept. Another potentially valuable category would be “innovation” or “blue sky” grants that would encourage grantseekers to propose new and creative humanities programs/projects.
- Most council grants are directed to project/program support. Councils should consider making general operating support grants as well, especially for key, strategic humanities organizations that could be centers of excellence. Both project/program and general operating support funding could go to the same organization.
- Consider the long term impact of making capacity building grants in order to help build sustainability into the cultural institutions in a council’s state or jurisdiction. The Smithsonian Traveling Exhibition Service’s Museum on Main Street program, for instance, gives councils opportunities to engage rural communities and identify which organizations in them would benefit from capacity building grants.
- Councils should consider making multi-year grants, particularly to key organizations. This will help these organizations plan more effectively and also assist in building their institutional capacity and sustainability.

*This guide is adapted from suggestions made by two site visitors from a foundation background; revised April 2010.

- Review the cash flow issues of grantees and be open to providing them with full grant amounts at the time the grant award is made. Smaller organizations often have significant strains on their program budgets if the project funds are not fully available at the beginning of the project. Cash flow has an inevitable impact on the quality of grantee programs and operations.
- For planning, monitoring, and evaluation purposes, a council should consider clustering similar grants/ projects. This should improve tracking and provide better understanding of the impact that grants are having. It will also provide valuable and needed information when considering replication of programs either within the state or nationally. Convening grantees of clustered projects might also be considered in order to encourage networking and sharing lessons learned. Collections of success stories can become powerful tools for fundraising and advocacy.
- If a council is providing grantwriting assistance, is it duplicating such services provided by other organizations within the state? If so, the council should consider partnering with these organizations in order to expand its own outreach while lessening its workload. Basic grantwriting skills are transferable from one grantmaker to another.
- A council should know the full costs of making a grant or of operating a specific grant program. This data is critical not only for monitoring current operational costs but also for strategic planning purposes, especially when considering the initiation of a new grantmaking program.

The application, review, and assessment process

- Streamline application processes and reduce the complexity of the information required in both applications and reports.
- A council's list grant programs can be confusing. Categorize grant programs by type of activity or program—categories that the public can easily understand and identify with.
- Review grant applications with sensitivity to the sophistication of various grantees so that all grant products are accessible to all populations.
- Put in place a system of partnerships with other funders that would allow programs of merit that a council is unable to fund to be passed along with high recommendation to other funders. An onerous grant application process, coupled with a small number

of awards, might give rise to grantseeker concerns about the cost of applying for council grants.

- The review process should be open and transparent and information about the process should be easily accessible to grantseekers, grantees, and the general public.
- Assessing all grants, even the smallest grants, is important and valuable; however, it would be most cost effective to use external evaluators only for the largest and most significant grants (those breaking new ground and/or those with the potential of being replicated). If a council and its grantees can negotiate solid benchmarks for all grants when the proposal is being reviewed and considered, then internal council assessments via site visits and reports and the grantee's own assessment should be adequate.
- If a council were to implement cluster grantmaking followed by cluster evaluation, this will provide sufficient data: the success of funded programs, goals in relation to outcomes, wise use of funds, lessons learned, and best practices followed. There may be occasions when the Council will wish to hire external evaluators to conduct such cluster evaluations.