



It's Not About Me: Musings of a Grant Writer

By Virginia Burggraf

world. Of course we also had the newspapers, but as a “little one” I was often fearful of what I heard. We lived in New York City, so we were a potential site for the “enemy” and had black shades that were pulled when an air raid occurred. One particular night, Winchell announced that there had been an earthquake in Chile (sound familiar?) and thousands were killed. His voice was chilling and often registered fear and dismay. When he mentioned that the Red Cross was collecting clothes, I asked, “Daddy, is there anything we can do?” My Dad went to work, mimeographed signs for to place on our neighbor’s doors or in their door-slot mailboxes, and thus we began collecting clothes in our garage. The Red Cross came for weeks. That started me on a path as a grant writer.

Grant writing is just that: “how can we help?” It was not until 1990 when I was employed by the American Nurses Association with my MSN in gerontology that this helping concept came again into focus. We were in the midst of a measles epidemic in the U.S. and hundreds of children were dying. I wrote a cooperative agreement grant to partner with the Center for Disease Control where each State Nurses Association was to receive about \$20,000 to mobilize nurses and create immunization clinics—and it has been non-stop since that time. After achieving my Doctorate in 1998, it was time to look for an academic setting where I could put my research and scholarship to work with students. Radford University School of Nursing has been home now for a decade and throughout this time, grant-writing has been an integral part of my academic career..

Grant writing is not easy—it’s tedious, at times seems fruitless, often fatiguing, and, depressing (particularly when you are the only one who believes in the concept). That being said, it is also one of the most rewarding aspects of my nursing career. Of course there have been many other positives and rewards, particularly patient care. Grant writing, for me, is worth the weeks of diligence. It’s motivating and joy filled. It allows me

to use my talents to the best advantage. I love selling others on a grant concept and seeing partnerships become a reality. I have often been accused of having “boundless” energy but that is only a perception. I just believe in what can be accomplished with a vision toward the future.

Requests for proposals come across my desk often. When I read them, I begin to vision, set goals, think of partners and the beat goes on and on, often leading to sleeplessness until I get it on paper—at least in draft form. A grant writer, I have learned over the years, must have that vision, set goals that are realistic, and often mobilize partners within the institution, and sometimes outside, to help with researching the topic. I am very possessive of my gerontology grants, and protective of my ideas. I do my own writing; however, if I am writing a public health grant or a psychiatric mental health grant I will mentor others and work with the experts.

Grant writing also gives me a means to express my creativity. Creativity not only in developing the original idea but also selling it to the reviewers, whether through coming up with a catchy phrase or acronym that captures the key innovative concepts or providing graphic illustrations or flow charts to provide a clear visual representation of the proposed project. This type of creativity has been my hallmark, but that does not equate to getting the grant. You win some and you lose some.

So grant writing isn’t about building my resume or vitae, but I am sure that it helps. Writing and possibly obtaining a grant means using funds that were once unattainable to do good things for others. Just think about what you can do in your own discipline, particularly with budget cuts that are hitting nearly all of higher education. Grants are my way to deal with hardships and challenges and I hope will soon become yours. ■

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As a faculty member at a Predominantly Undergraduate Institution, the question often comes up among my colleagues: “Why write grants?” They are seldom necessary to achieve promotion and tenure (although they do help) and the few other extrinsic rewards that come with grant writing seldom serve as adequate motivation. At my home institution, Radford University, faculty teach a 4 x 4 load leaving precious little time to prepare fundable proposals. This teaching load is not uncommon among PUIs. Years ago, a reasonable estimate for preparation time of a fundable proposal was a year. Funding ratios were approximately 1 in 5. I would submit requests for proposals have become more detailed and demanding and that 1 in 5 has probably expanded to 1 in at least 8 or 9 or more by now. The risk for a return on investment of time by faculty grows in tandem with these estimates. So, “Why write grants?”

My motivation to write grants in almost entirely internal and stems from some of my earliest recollections. I can still hear the raspy voice of Walter Winchell, the radio announcer in the 1940 and ‘50s. I had to be about 7 or 8 years old, and I recall that World War II was coming to an end and we continued to listen attentively each evening to the radio. This may sound like ancient history to many of you, but that was our only mode of communication about the events of the