

The School Counselor as Grant Writer

Debbie Vernon

Hudson Middle School, Hudson, Ohio

John S. (Steve) Rainey

Kent State University

Abstract

An important role for school counselors is that of advocate for resources. Grant writing is one way in which school counselors can secure financial resources to develop and maintain school counseling programs. An outline of the grant writing process is provided along with strategies for implementation, potential benefits and challenges, followed by a discussion of next steps as school counselors explore the world of grant funding. Recommendations for school counselor education programs are also presented.

The School Counselor as Grant Writer

Today's school counselor is charged with many responsibilities in an ever-changing landscape. This landscape is impacted by both student achievement mandates and finance reform which are intended to create accountable and fiscally responsible schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). In the wake of decreased federal, state, and local funding for education, school districts may resort to cutting school counseling and mental health services that ultimately support student achievement and development (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2004). Recent reports from the National Center for Education Statistics (2008) reported that the national average student to counselor ratio in the United States in the 2006-2007 data year was 475:1. In 14 states, the average well exceeds the national average, let alone the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA, 2005) recommended maximum student to counselor ratio of 250:1.

In light of such changes, school counselors must advocate for resources, which are required to maintain comprehensive school counseling programs and related services for the students and families they serve. As change agents, school counselors are in a position to lead the way in seeking additional funding sources that can keep schools safe and minimize risk factors that may impact academic achievement. The purpose of this article is to explain the significance of grant writing in a climate of decreasing federal and state dollars appropriated to develop and maintain school counseling programs. Specifically, this article will provide school counselors with the following: (a) an overview of the grant writing process; (b) strategies for implementation; (c) a description of potential benefits and challenges that school counselors may

encounter along the way; and (d) a discussion of next steps as school counselors explore the world of external grant funding.

Importance of Grant Writing

In 2003, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) published *The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs*. This publication set out to define unifying standards for school counseling programs, including both conceptual principles and a practical model for implementation. In addition, the ASCA National Model (2005) provides a vision of transformation for the school counseling profession as we enter the 21st century. Given the changing landscape of education and its implications for the future, school counselors must seek ways to rise to the challenges associated with funding comprehensive school counseling programs. Grant writing allows school counselors to address the needs of their program and the students they serve (Letsch, 2002). Whether school counselors are seeking funds for school counseling program development, for specific at-risk populations, or for direct services to students, grants are available from a variety of sources (Appendix A). These sources may include the federal government, private foundations, or local agencies (Lum, 2005). Since little has been written on the topic of grant writing specific to school counselors, the following sections will provide a description of the grant writing process, the benefits and challenges, and suggestions for additional steps to be taken to further your interest in writing grants for your school counseling program.

The Grant Writing Process

At first glance, the process of grant writing can be a daunting task for those school counselors new to the process. Just mention the topic in a room of school

counselors and one can imagine the range of reactions. In most cases, the subject of funding opportunities, let alone those specific to school counseling, generally elicits some degree of anxiety about the future of funding effective and quality education for all students across the nation. Anxiety also stems from a lack of understanding about the grant writing process itself. In this section, we will describe each step of grant development process in an effort to provide the reader with a greater understanding and working knowledge of the skills required. Although most grants may not fund an entire school counseling program, federal and state level Departments of Education may provide a significant amount of money to design accountable school counseling program initiatives. For those programs already in place, external funding is also available to supplement existing resources, particularly in targeting academic achievement or focusing on special populations, such as violence prevention or programming for at-risk students (Gysbers & Henderson, 2006).

Grant Planning Stage: Where Do I Start?

The first step in pursuing a grant is to determine goals and develop a basic vision for your program. One way to accomplish this task is to conduct a needs assessment (see Brown & Trusty, 2005; Schmidt, 2003). According to Ripley, Erford, Dahir, and Eschbach (2003), the needs assessment is a critical component in either identifying the needs of various populations in a school or establishing the main goals and foci of a comprehensive school counseling program. Whichever rationale for funding fits, a needs assessment can help identify goals. The more data a school counselor has to justify a proposal the better. Funding sources require applicants to be descriptive and thorough in the explanation of school counseling program goals and objectives. Data

demonstrate that applicants have done preliminary work, that applicants are serious about solving a potential problem in their school, and that the proposed program is a good fit with the mission of the grant source. In short, grant sources want to make sure that their money will be spent effectively and not present a risk to their organization (Letsch, 2002). Depending on the source and scope of the request, grant applicants will be asked how many students or people will be affected directly and/or indirectly by the proposed program. When conducting the needs assessment, remember to include various stakeholders and how they may be affected by the proposed program, including students, parents, teachers, administrators, and the community at large (ASCA, 2005).

With data in hand, the next step involves identifying potential grant sources to fund the school counseling program or project. At the federal level, a number of grants are available that support school counseling services and related programs (ACA, 2008). The largest of grants available is through the *Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Program* (ESSCP), which is a *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2002 (NCLB) initiative (U. S. Department of Education, 2002). Although ESSCP funding has increased to \$52 million for FY 2008, grants are made each year to school districts that demonstrate the greatest need or have the most original program proposals (ACA, 2008). Other sources at the federal level can be located through a federal web site (www.grants.gov), which announces various calls for grant proposals targeting national initiatives such as safe schools, violence, and drug prevention. Funding may also be available through state Departments of Education or other state educational organizations. Those interested in applying for grants are advised to contact the funding agency of interest to ask questions. Examples of successfully funded programs may be

available to you for consultation and consideration as you develop your own proposal. Do not be afraid to contact individual districts and/or school counselors who have received grant funding. Often times, their advice can help you with additional ideas for preparing a successful grant application.

State school counseling associations are ideal sources for seeking grant funding. For example, in Ohio, the Ohio School Counselor Association (OSCA) offers grants up to \$1000 available for innovative programs. At the yearly All Ohio Counselors Conference, there is generally a break-out session that addresses how to apply for grants, including examples of successfully funded grant program applications. In the case of the first author, these presentations provided information and opportunities to ask questions of grant evaluation committee members. The session provided a greater understanding of what was expected and helped to decrease anxiety about applying for a grant. This information assisted in a successful grant proposal for \$650 from the Ohio School Counselor Association (OSCA) in 2005 to provide programming for at-risk students (Vernon & Rainey, 2006).

Many other smaller non-profit organizations and private foundations have money available to support school counseling programs. Grant money is available to those who are willing to do the research and justify the request. For example, in the first author's school district, mini-grants are available from the local Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) in amounts ranging from \$150 to \$500. (Vernon & Rainey, 2006) These grants are open to teachers and other educational professionals for supplies, curriculum materials, and innovative programs. In many cases, mini-grants can help school counselors obtain funding for curriculum materials and other supplies necessary to

support their programs. In past years, this money was obtained to purchase supplies for small group guidance programs, including a television with a built in DVD and VCR player to be used in the small group counseling room was purchased. Larger grants may also be available from the PTO for programs that affect more than one building. For example, grants can be written for district-wide initiatives, such as anti-bullying campaigns, bringing in speakers to present to parents, students, and-or train teachers on interventions and prevention on key issues.

Beyond the school district, school communities can be another rich source of grants. Contact the school administrative office to find out who writes the most grants in your district. This person can serve as a guide to a variety of sources and serve as a consultant as school counselors start the grant search process.

A number of additional resources are available to school counseling programs seeking grants. A list of resources for potential grant sources is provided in Appendix A; however this list is not exhaustive. School counselors who are interested in obtaining funding are encouraged to search a variety of resources to find the funding source that best matches your program goals with the mission of the funding organization. With a list of potential sources in hand, contact the organizations and request an application. In many cases, the required application materials are accessible through the web site of the funding source. Furthermore, make sure your grant request aligns with the guidelines identified by the funding source. For example, some grants will not allow requests to pay for additional personnel, but others will. Above all else, take your time and be realistic about what your program or project can reasonably accomplish.

One final suggestion for the planning stage is to remember to seek "buy-in" from key others, meaning all those who may be affected by the grant. The exact process varies from school system to school system and requires special mention, because school counselors work with many other educational professionals. Administrators and other stakeholders want to be apprised of any special programming. It is in the best interest of school counseling professionals to work within their systems and to collaborate with key others for easier navigation through the internal approval process so you can begin the application process.

Writing the Grant

At this point, you have defined your school counseling program's needs, identified your grant funding source, and received authorization from appropriate stakeholders within your school community to continue to the writing stage. It is important to familiarize yourself with the application and begin assembling the required support materials. Make note of the deadline and follow the directions carefully. Allow yourself enough time to write the grant. Most grant applications contain similar sections. These include the following sections: (a) a statement of need; (b) the project goals and objectives; (c) a project description; (d) an actual amount of money requested; (e) a detailed budget for your project; (f) a timeline for implementation; and (g) an evaluation procedures and measures. Depending on the grantor, application guidelines may vary. According to Kerney (2005), grant readers are most interested in how well your grant proposal adhered to the guidelines delineated in the application, your attention to each component, and your supply of the requested information requested by the deadline.

Grant sources are also interested in how well the proposal communicates the need for the funding.

Readers of your proposal will have many applications to review; therefore, it is important to write your application in a manner that is easy to read. That is, it should be written free of jargon, in a clear and concise manner, and with headings for each of the required responses in the application (Letsch, 2002). To ensure you have met these writing suggestions, have others proofread your application and check the math on your budget request before submission of your grant. Failure to address any of these key points may result in rejection of your proposal.

Try to avoid discouragement if your proposal is rejected. In the case of the first author, several first attempts at large grants from community organizations were rejected on the basis of either incomplete information or incorrect addition on the total budget (Vernon, 2006). This did not necessarily mean the proposal idea was bad. Attention to details is part of the proposal evaluation process. Should your proposal be rejected, talk to the grant funding source and ask for additional feedback on ways to improve your proposal resubmission. And finally, regardless of the outcome, be sure to thank the grantor for considering your proposal (Letsch, 2002).

Implementing the Grant

After what seems like a long waiting period, the much anticipated day comes when the outcome of your grant proposal is received. Once accepted, the grantor will send a packet of information that outlines the requirements for the implementation stage. In many cases, a letter of agreement will have to be signed by the main contact person on the grant and an administrator in your district stating that you agree to

implement the grant in accordance with the guidelines outlined by the grantor. Once the signatures are received by the organization, you will receive the funds and can proceed with implementation of your proposal.

During the implementation stage, there are several key points to consider. First, do what you said you were going to do in your proposal. The timeline you created can help break down the tasks and keep you focused on the steps involved in implementation. Second, make sure you keep good records. This involves both data collection and documentation of expenditures. Maintain all records and materials in a central location. This allows for easy access to materials. Organizing your data and expenditures will help you produce any updates requested by the grant source or other interested stakeholders. Several spreadsheet programs are available to help track data and project expenditures along the way.

A final recommendation is to ask for help if you need it. Today's school counselors are charged with many responsibilities. In most cases, administration and implementation of the grant proposal is in addition to regular duties. In the case of the first author, someone was needed to help co-lead the group counseling portion of the grant program. Rather than cancel groups due to an unexpected emergency, the district Social Worker was asked to help. This not only helped implement the grant as proposed, but it also provided services to at-risk students and built additional supports for participants as they transitioned to the High School where the Social Worker had her office (Vernon, 2006). In addition to in-house support, the grant funding organization can also provide assistance to you if you run into difficulties or have questions along the

way. The grantor is interested in your progress and success, so it is important to maintain open communication with the funding source by providing periodic updates.

Final Evaluation of the Grant

After all of the hard work of implementation has concluded, the final task involves providing a final evaluation report to the grant funding source. As the funding period of your grant comes to a close, it is likely that the funding source will send a final evaluation packet to the main contact person. It will include a deadline for submission and an information summary packet. Although the content of the final evaluation will vary by funding source, it typically includes the following: (a) an accounting of your expenditures and original receipts; (b) a summary of goals and objectives including how they were met; (c) a statement of the effectiveness of the project; (d) applicability of your project to other settings; and (e) results of your summative and formative evaluations. According to Letsch (2002), it is important to meet the submission deadline because grant management and dependability are of great importance to the funding source. Your dependability may affect any future applications made from that grant source.

Short and Long Term Benefits

Beyond simply having more money for the school program, there are other benefits to applying for and receiving grant money. Some of the benefits are relatively short lived. Obviously, grant money can provide more supplies of a higher quality for programming. When quality supplies and materials are available, programming is better received, and can reach more students in an efficient manner. Students, faculty, and parents recognize when highly professional materials are used. Stakeholders are more

receptive to the content of the programming, and school counselors are perceived as being more professional. With adequate material quality and quantity, time is also used more effectively. Rather than spending time reproducing materials or developing them, time can be spent implementing the program.

Another short term benefit is that school counselors may be able to try new and innovative programs at no cost. While there are many school counseling resources and curricula available for use, rarely do school counselors have the opportunity to try them out without risking large amounts of money. When working within a limited budget, schools may be unwilling to spend money on materials that focus on a small, specific population. Grant money provides school counselors with the opportunity to pilot programming to a specific group without damage to the overall school budget.

Other benefits of receiving grant money are more long lasting. The grant writing process requires school counselors to evaluate at least a portion of their school counseling program. This evaluation helps to identify areas of student need that may not have otherwise been identified. The grant process also allows school counselors to become more comfortable in conducting this type of assessment. The long term benefit is that once you are more at ease with the process, you are more likely to conduct future assessments. An ongoing needs assessment program will only benefit the students in your school.

A final long term benefit is the perception of school administrators regarding the school counselor who was able to apply for and receive a grant. School administrators will likely view the school counselor as being more professional and more committed to their work if they take the initiative to evaluate their program by assessing for needs and

take steps to address those needs. Furthermore, if the school counselor is able to provide funding through a grant to implement a needed program, the administration will be even more impressed with the school counselor's work and the contribution to the comprehensive school counseling program.

Addressing Challenges

The foremost cited reason for a school counselor's reluctance to evaluate their school counseling program, a prerequisite for applying for and receiving a grant, is a lack of time (Brown & Trusty, 2005). In order to do the work required to apply for and receive a grant, time must be allotted. Many school counselors work after hours to complete the work. Others have the time provided to them by their administrators. If you are fortunate enough to work on a school counseling team, duties could be divided in a way so you would have time to work on the grant during your regular work hours. When writing a grant for a project that you alone will be implementing, remember, if you receive the grant, it is an additional responsibility that you are undertaking. If everyone on the team is working on the grant proposal, tasks can be delegated. Be sure to set mini-deadlines along the way and keep the lines of communication open regarding progress. It is important that the extra tasks associated with the grant process not deter you from moving forward with a request for funding. Many larger districts have personnel whose main duty is to write for grants. If this is the case, make contact with the district grant writer who can assist you with the grant writing task.

Another possible barrier is lack of experience and a fear of the process. This begins with finding appropriate grants for which to apply. Worry about whether or not you can write well enough, concern about completing all of the associated paperwork,

negotiating the school district bureaucracy, managing money and materials, and other more clerical tasks can sometimes seem overwhelming. View the process and organize step by step. School counselors have overcome these types of challenges through their graduate training and other times. Use whatever methods have worked for you before.

There may even be barriers to face once the grant has been received and implementation of the programming has begun. In some situations, these barriers may not be anticipated or preventable such as those related to system supports or school counselor inexperience. For example, the first author had difficulty finding interested participants, getting program evaluations filled out by parents, obtaining original receipts from internal sources, and funneling money through the purchase order process (Vernon, 2006). While these barriers were difficult to anticipate at the onset, experience with unexpected situations related to the process proved to be learning opportunities for subsequent grant proposals and program implantation in general.

Conclusions and Implications

Whatever the need, many school counselors are in a unique position to provide leadership as advocates for systemic change. (ASCA, 2005; Bemak, Chi-Ying Chung, & Murphy, 2003; Gysbers & Henderson, 2006; Ripley et al., 2003). As partners in academic achievement, the 21st century school counselor can respond to the varied needs of students through developing linkages with resources beyond their own school (Erford, House, & Martin, 2003). As one can see, grant writing is time consuming and challenging, but the benefits far outweigh the challenges.

At the present time, research on the topic of grant writing by school counselors is lacking. For those interested in conducting related research, some possible ideas

include: (a) counselor's attitudes toward grant writing; (b) how school counseling programs are currently funded; (c) funding sources; and (d) the need for instruction in student advocacy in counselor education programs.

One step in the direction of helping school counselors apply for and receive grant money is by teaching the process to pre-service counselors in counselor education programs. Incorporating instruction in grant writing, possibly at the internship level, may prove to be as beneficial to school counselor training programs as any other part of counselor preparation programs. As a course assignment in internship, students could be assigned to find a grant and complete the forms for submission. The instructor and other students could evaluate the quality of the work. Benefits of this type of assignment are that the student will have gained grant writing experience, they will have a grant application completed to be added to their job search portfolio, they will have a completed application that could possibly be modified and submitted once they have a position, and they may be able to submit it for the school in which they are conducting their internship.

Counselor education programs could also provide instruction to internship supervisors and other local school counselors on the process of grant writing. Universities and state and local school counseling and counselor education organizations could host workshops on grant writing. The opportunities for collaboration between institutions for grant writing instruction are limited only by the participating professionals' imagination.

References

- American Counseling Association Office of Public Policy and Legislation. (2004). *No child left behind: Sources of funding that support school counseling and mental health services*. Alexandria, VA: Author.
- American Counseling Association. (2008, October). *Elementary and secondary school counseling program (ESSCP) and FY 2009 federal education funding*. Retrieved February 14, 2009, from <http://www.counseling.org/PublicPolicy/PositionPapers.aspx?AGuid=8d08ec97-286e-4b85-ae5c-a053093894d0>
- American School Counselor Association. (2005). *The ASCA national model: A framework for school counseling programs*. Alexandria, VA: Author.
- Bemak, F., Chi-Ying Chung, R., & Murphy, C. S. (2003). A new perspective on counseling at-risk youth. In B. T. Erford (Ed.), *Transforming the School Counseling Profession* (pp. 285-296). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
- Brown, D. & Trusty, J. (2005). *Developing and leading comprehensive school counseling programs: Promoting student competence and meeting student needs*. Belmont, CA: Brooks Cole.
- Erford, B. T., House, R., & Martin, P. (2003). Transforming the school counseling profession. In B. T. Erford (Ed.), *Transforming the School Counseling Profession* (pp. 1-38). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
- Gysbers, N. C., & Henderson, P. (2006). *Developing and managing your school guidance and counseling program* (4th ed.). Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.

- Kerney, C. A. (2005, June). *Inside the mind of a grant reader*. Retrieved July 22, 2006, from <http://www.techlearning.com/story/showArticle.jhtml?articleID=164300838>
- Letsch, D. (2002). Catch the cash. *ASCA School Counselor*, 40, 32-35.
- Lum, C. (2005). *Getting a grant: Sources of funding and how to pursue them*. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association Office of Public Policy and Legislation. (ERIC Publication No. ED484779)
- Ripley, V., Erford, B. T., Dahir, C., & Eschbach, L. (2003). Planning and implementing a 21st century comprehensive developmental school counseling program. In B. T. Erford (Ed.), *Transforming the School Counseling Profession* (pp. 63-120). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
- Schmidt, J. J. (2003). *Counseling in schools: Essential services and comprehensive programs*. (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2002, January). *No child left behind act of 2001* (Public Law 107-110). Retrieved July 19, 2006, from <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html>
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2008, November). *United States student-to-counselor ratios* [U.S. Schools Overall]. Retrieved February 14, 2009, from <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/pdf/stNfis061agen.pdf>
- Vernon, D. (2006, June). *Grant writing 101*. Paper presented at the meeting of the American School Counselor Association, Chicago, IL.
- Vernon, D., & Rainey, S. (under review). Money matters: Grant writing and funding your counseling program. In J. M. Allen (Ed.), *21st century school counseling: Professional and personal perspectives and practices*. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.

APPENDIX A

Grant Resources

American Counseling Association Web site (Links to Press Room, Public Policy, and Resources): <http://www.counseling.org/>

American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Foundation: <http://www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?contentid=176>

American School Counselor Association Resource Center (members only):
http://www.schoolcounselor.org/resources_list.asp?c=15&i=14

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation: <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/Education/>

Corporation for Public Broadcasting: <http://www.cpb.org/>

The Foundation Center: <http://fdncenter.org/>

The George Lucas Educational Foundation: <http://www.edutopia.org/foundation/grant.php>

Grants.gov: <http://grants.gov/>

The National Education Association (NEA) Foundation for the Improvement of Education: <http://www.neafoundation.org/>

Philanthropy News Digest: <http://foundationcenter.org/pnd/>

School Grants: http://www.schoolgrants.org/proposal_samples.htm

State School Counselor Associations: <http://www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?pl=127&sl=179&contentid=179>

Target Corporation: <http://sites.target.com/site/en/corporate/page.jsp?contentId=PRD03-001818>

The U.S. Department of Education: <http://www.ed.gov/fund/landing.jhtml?src=rt>

The Wallace Foundation: [http://www.wallacefoundation.org/WF/GrantsPrograms/
FocusAreasPrograms/SchoolCounseling/SchoolCounselingReform.htm](http://www.wallacefoundation.org/WF/GrantsPrograms/FocusAreasPrograms/SchoolCounseling/SchoolCounselingReform.htm)

APPENDIX B
Grant Writing Tips

Planning Stage:

1. Identify needs for programming or other resources.
2. Select a funding source that matches your project goals.
3. Keep your project proposal goals simple and realistic.
4. Work with a team.
5. Adhere to the details of the grant application and follow the guidelines as written.
6. Have extra sets of proof readers available before you submit the grant.
7. Do not wait until the last minute to submit your grant proposal.

Implementation Stage:

1. Do what you said you were going to do in your grant proposal.
2. Follow your timeline.
3. Collect data along the way.
4. Provide updates to your grant funding source along the way.
5. Track project expenditures and keep copies of receipts.

Evaluation Stage:

1. Have all of your supporting documentation ready to go so that you are not trying to pull it all together at the last minute.
2. Follow the guidelines for submitting your final report as written.
3. Adhere to the deadline for submission of your final report.
4. Remember to thank your funding source for supporting your project.