

# Strategies for Sustainability of Grant-funded Programs

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## Introduction

*While some grants are awarded to address a specific question or conduct research trials on a one-time basis, others are broader in scope and carry an expectation that projects/programs begun with start-up funds will continue after original awards are expended. The issue, defined as sustainability, will be discussed in this fact sheet.*

Nearly every state and federal grant Request for Proposal (RFP) involving human subjects and programming components requires the submission to include a plan for sustainability. The sustainability plan is often the most difficult piece of the proposal to write and can be a huge hurdle to complete the proposal. However, strategies are available for systematically designing and presenting the sustainability plan, including: utilizing data obtained from the project; aligning the targeted audience with the Request for Application (RFA), developing detailed descriptions of services and activities post-funding; identifying key staff needed to manage future programming; involving key stakeholders in identifying strategies; and finding champions for your cause.

Addressing each of these strategies in the proposal narrative assures grantors the writer has systematically considered the main aspects of sustainability. After receiving funding, these key

points will need to be revisited regularly to receive additional funding throughout the term of the grant.

Why do funders place such great importance on program sustainability? Consider that introduction of a new endeavor (program) may have high visibility for a short period but fail to be sustainable after initial efforts. If this happens, a sense of resentment within local communities is likely. Communities may become wary of participating in other opportunities in the future if it is perceived that these, too, may be short lived. The possibility of this result alone is reason to require grantees to document sustainability beyond the life of funding even though it can be very difficult. (JOE, Feb 2002).

## **I. The reality of sustainability, if funding is received**

When an author puts together a successful application and receives word the proposal is going to be funded, it is news certainly worth celebrating. However, once the initial excitement wears off, receiving a grant may also produce anxiety. One of the greatest causes of anxiety is the reminder that along with the start-up money comes the expectation the program will be sustainable when the funding is over. (JOE, Oct 2001). Inevitably, new grantees will find themselves asking the

questions “Now what?” and “How do we get to where we said we will be in 3-5 years?”

## **II. Breaking it down. What is sustainability? What does a sustainable program look like?**

Sustainability refers to the continuation of a project’s goals, principles, and efforts to achieve desired outcomes. Although many grantees think that guaranteeing the sustainability of a project means finding the resources to continue it “as is” beyond the grant period, ensuring sustainability really means making sure that the goals of the project continue to be met through activities that are consistent with the current conditions and resources that are available. (U.S. Department of Labor).

In fact, grant-funded programs may be considered sustainable even if they don’t look exactly like the program that has been running for several years. As funding runs out, an assessment will need to be made regarding the specific activities that can and should be continued, how many employees or volunteers will be needed, and how large (scale) the program will be (how many youth will be served; how many mentors to be recruited, etc.) (U.S. Dept. of Labor).

## **III. Refining the Plan- Looking to the Future**

Once a new program has its feet on the ground, so to speak, one must always be looking forward to the future. As the next phase of a project approaches, (perhaps in year 2) and sustainability becomes a more tangible future need, the project administrators must use feedback and evaluation to determine how and if the program is moving in the direction of initial goals. At this point, the administrators and evaluators have a new series of tasks to tackle what is termed the 3R’s: review, refine, and renew. All members of the team need to review what has worked, what needs modification, what needs expansion, what budgetary issues have surfaced, and what the findings from early evaluation data indicate? Also, members of the program team need to work on refining goals (with staff and stakeholders), objectives, the program design, and the research design.

## **When should plans for sustainability be addressed?**

Movement towards sustainability requires appropriate decisions be made at each stage of program development. This is a journey that must be taken by stakeholders, program participants, university/Extension Service faculty and program staff. Involvement of stakeholders is a critical responsibility of program administrators. What the stakeholders want remains an essential question to consider at each stage if there is to be true collaboration and movement towards sustainability (JOE Oct 2001).

Even if the grant recipient does everything right and has an exemplary program, keep in mind that as worthy as a project or program may be, it is not going to sustain itself. The plan must be carefully planned followed by systematically undertaking the appropriate steps to sustain it.

To continue a program after initial funding is gone, consider the following tips from the U.S. Department of Labor:

- 1. Base decisions on data, to the extent possible.** A good starting point is quarterly performance reports. Assessing the project now compared to what it was three months ago or three years ago can allow project staff and partners to make informed decisions on any changes or adaptations that may need to be made to meet goals and objectives.
- 2. Specify target audience.** If there has been a need to change the targeted audiences, for whatever reason, make certain it is justified. If the targeted audience was youth referred by juvenile court, for example, but the numbers are low, there may be a need to include youth in foster care, or youth from single parent homes to meet the number of youth served as identified in the proposal.
- 3. Develop a detailed description of what services and activities are planned for sustainability.** All activities do not need to be sustained; just the ones that are intended to achieve desired outcomes. For example, will 4-H youth activities still be available for

the youth? Is there potential to find sponsors for Family Night Out?

4. **Identify what is needed to manage and operate the selected activities.** Once the project activities have been established, it may be determined that either a smaller or larger commitment of management resources, including the number of paid staff will need to change.
5. **Make current and potential partners and other stakeholders aware of sustainability planning activities.** Whether it takes place in a formal meeting setting or in written form, disseminate key information to them.
6. **Find champions.** Locate and encourage organizations and interest groups that benefit from the project’s activities or who are interested in the target groups being served. These make the best allies. (U.S. Department of Labor- Employment and Training Administration)

#### IV. Refining the Plan using Stages of Program Development

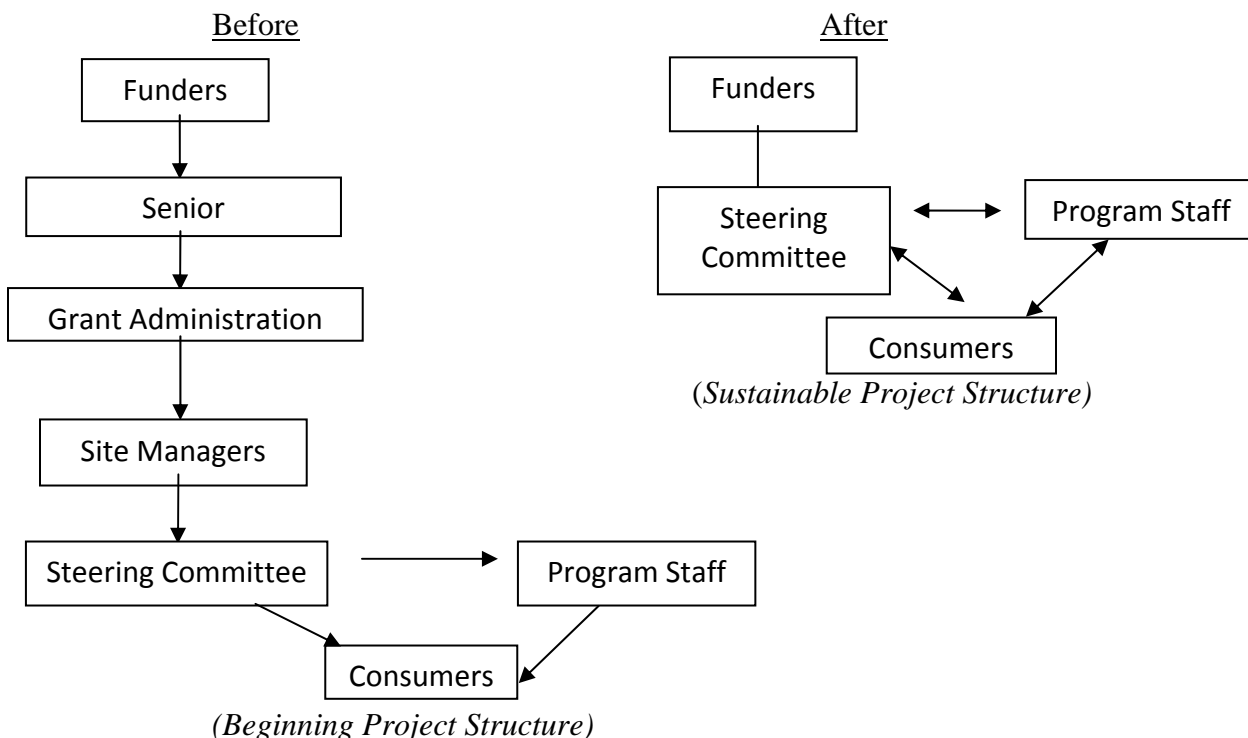
Another way of looking at a sustainability plan is in stages laid out in charts. Banach and Gregory (JOE,

Oct. 2001) offer a detailed example that charts progress in community-based program development over six distinct phases. Included in their detailed charts are roles for an administrator, evaluator or program staff. Then, they include details for tasks to be completed, core questions to ask, and feedback loops for all who may be included in a particular stage of development. For example, as the project administrator prepares to conduct a needs assessment, he/she may question, “What resources are needed?” “What skills are needed from the community?” and “How will feedback flow through the community, the evaluator, and the funder?” (See Five-Stage Model of Developing Sustainable Programs.) (JOE, Oct. 2001.)

#### V. Sustainable Program Structures: Before and After

Again, grantees should remember that what a grant-funded program looks like now, may not be the same as it will look in sustainability mode. To help the grantee visualize what the difference in structure may look like, Banach, LaPointe and Zunz (JOE, 2006) illustrate a sample for consideration below:

**Figure:** Sustainable Program Structures: Before & After



## VI. Remaining Focused on Sustainability

A final reminder is to remain focused on the goal of sustainability throughout the duration of the project or program. Although this is particularly important for programs funded with time-limited start-up grants, all programs can benefit from constantly monitoring viability. A focus on sustainability requires:

1. Monitoring whether the community has embraced a program and its efforts through steering/advisory committee member feedback. Discussions may include possibility of future financial support from the community to support specific program components, in-kind contributions of time, space, etc., and even perceived popularity with participants based on rate of participation or waiting lists.
2. Advancing public relations to highlight the need for the program and publish its successes. Keeping the media informed of events or inviting a member of the press to participate on advisory boards can improve publicity and make the public more aware of what the community is offering in support of families.
3. "Keeping an eye on the clock." The pursuit of multiple sources of funding is needed early on. Consideration of steering/advisory committee composition is important to ensure that there are members who are knowledgeable about financial considerations and avenues for future funding. (Banach, LaPointe and Zunz 2006)

## VII. Crucial Points for Success

- a. It is interesting to point out that in a report summarizing projects funded by W.K. Kellogg Foundations in the 1990s an "insightful lesson" was indicated as to what sustainability really means. According to their report on lessons learned from these projects, those coalitions and projects most likely to be sustained after the initial life of the project were ones that created project materials and developed new

"organizational legacies" (i.e., changes in organizational structure, changes in how the work is done, and changes in prioritization of program implementation (Hahn, Greene, & Waterman, 1994 as cited in JOE, Feb. 2002).

- b. In addition, Stevens and Marin-Hernandez (1999) point out that programs that don't address the local realities of the community will not be sustained. (As cited in JOE, Feb. 2002). In other words, projects must address real needs of the community in order to obtain community buy-in.
- c. Don't forget the crucial role of a Coalition or Advisory Board- (JOE, Feb 2002, Results).

### Additional Considerations for Sustainability now and in the future

No funders like to think that their grant will only fund a project for a short time. Before investing in a project, the funder will want to know what plans are in place for carrying the project into the future, with or without this particular funder's help.

Cheryl A. Clarke, author of the very useful, *Storytelling for Grantseekers* Second Edition, (Jossey-Bass, 2009), suggests that grant writers think of the sustainability part of the grant (or the future funding plan) as the sequel to the story told throughout the proposal. Make sure that the future funding section provides a solid and specific blueprint of how the writer's agency and partners intend to raise the money to continue operating programs and continuing to serve its clients and community. ([www.About.com](http://www.About.com) "How to Write the Sustainable Section of Your Grant Proposal")

Clarke provides a menu of funding strategies that a nonprofit can draw on to compose a future funding plan. One or more of these strategies could be included as part of the overall sustainability plan.

- Fee for service. Can clients be charged a fee for the services provided? This can be a flat fee or a sliding fee based on individual income.

- Entrepreneurial business ventures. Consider hosting a thrift/yard sale, create and sell greeting cards or family photos, create a DVD or CD starring clients/youth and families.
- Create annual fund campaign. Is there a way to create a membership program that charges dues? Or an annual fund campaign to reach donors interested in this kind of charitable program?
- Major gifts program. Can donors that have the potential of making large financial gifts be identified, befriended and then solicited?
- New donor acquisition program. Consider starting a direct-mail campaign to add new donors and thus increase income for the project.
- Use the internet. This provides easy ways for donors to give online.
- Corporate sponsorships. Partner with corporate and business sponsors, especially for funding events such as galas, golf tournaments, or charity runs.
- Tap employer-based fundraising. Can the agency qualify to participate in employer-based fundraising campaigns such as the United Way or other federated campaigns?
- Government funding. Do some research to find out if local, state, or federal agencies provide funding for the program being implemented.

- Market the idea both internally and externally  
(U.S. Dept. of Labor factsheet, p.1-2)

In summary, key questions regarding sustainability have been addressed here as well as various strategies to sustain programs initially funded by grants that now need local buy-in to continue. As an assurance the reader understands key sustainability points, below are some statements to wrap-up and reinforce the highlights covered above.

1. *T/F Searching for funding to continue programming that is grant-funded is most effectively done as the grant is coming to an end.* This statement is *False*. Sustainability must be addressed throughout every phase of the program including before it even begins.
2. *T/F Most successful programs may use grant dollars for “start-up” funds but look to the community or other sources for long-term sustainability.* This statement is usually *True*. While there are times follow-up grant funding may be obtained to extend a program, the longest and best successes of programming will take place when a community adopts a program and is willing to allocate resources for its continuation.
3. *T/F There is currently an increase in state and federal grant dollars available so applications are not as competitive as they were five years ago.* Generally, this statement is *False*. Most state and federal grantors have seen drastic reductions in available funding over the past five years. Hopefully, levels of funding have at least stabilized with increases to be seen in future years. The private sector and foundations are still offering grant dollars but in most cases, the amounts being offered have decreased.
4. *T/F It is more important to focus on successful program activities than evaluation to prove to grantors a program/project should continue to receive financial support.* Successful activities are what may win the hearts of program

## SUMMARY/CONCLUSION

Thinking about sustainability is not something that should be left until a grant is coming to an end.

Time will be needed to:

- Identify short-term and long-term sustainability strategies that will work.
- Conduct an assessment of the current project, and use collected data to help determine what the future scale/scope of the program will be.
- Conduct a planning process for sustainability
- Identify what resources are needed to sustain the project
- Develop buy-in among advisory board members and other strategic partners

participants and build community support. However, programs operating with grant dollars need evaluation to justify funding so this statement is *False*. Funders/grantors will want to see outcomes that can be measured. So, evaluation must be considered a crucial piece of program planning. The type of evaluation will depend heavily on whether the program design lends itself to qualitative or quantitative research results.

5. *T/F Diversifying funding is a key principle to sustaining programs.* This statement is *True*. Especially if a program has more than one site, or several staff members, diversifying the funding helps ensure that partial or smaller programs can still operate if one or more sources of funding end. This also allows time to locate financial resources to expand the program back to previous levels without losing a presence in the community; an important aspect of maintaining community trust.
6. *T/F If only a portion of a grant-funded project can continue to be funded when the start-up funding (grant) ends, it is not considered a sustained program.* As has been pointed out above, streamlining a program to keep only a few key components still indicates sustainability. Therefore, this statement is *False*. It may be that there is local funding for a staff position but the program will depend on donations to carry out activities. This is still a sustained program even if it may be smaller in scope.

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