HENRY FORD HEALTH SYSTEM: STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS FOR PREPARING GRANT WRITERS TO INCREASE GRANT WRITING EFFECTIVENESS

MSA 698 Directed Administrative Portfolio

Paper #1 MSA 603 Strategic Planning for Administrators

Submitted by:
Beth Murray

Instructor:
Dr. Patricia Kelley

Submission Date:
September 30, 2017
Strategic Implications for Preparing Grant Writers
to Increase Grant Writing Effectiveness

Section 1: Introduction and Strategic-Level Questions

This study examines Henry Ford Health System (HFHS), a non-profit healthcare organization based in Detroit, Michigan. The system’s primary purpose is to provide health care and medical services. In support of this objective, HFHS conducts a wide range of medical research to develop new, more effective methods of diagnosing, treating, and preventing diseases.

External funding is essential to support the system’s research enterprise, however, funding from federal agencies and private foundations for research studies is limited and there is significant competition for that funding. The major challenge facing HFHS is its need to ensure that its research staff have the training, experience, and innovative ideas necessary to develop research grant proposals that are novel, feasible, and well-written. HFHS must have an effective strategy in order to compete with other research institutions and obtain a sustainable level of external research funding. This need to prepare grant writers to successfully compete in the demanding funding environment affects the entire organization. Without sufficient external funding, the ability to conduct research, a major part of the system’s mission, is weakened.

In order to address this issue, specific questions related to strategic planning have been developed and approved and are analyzed in this paper. The questions are stated below and the subsequent sections of this paper present a brief review of the related literature, relevant organizational information which has been collected, and an analysis using the strategic planning framework and answers to the following questions. These questions are:
1. What internal resources does HFHS have to prepare grant writers to write competitive proposals and how effective are those resources?

2. What factors are impacting the method(s) of grant writing preparation available and the content of preparation required?

3. What functional or technological gaps exist that affect the use of grant writer preparation resources, and how does HFHS organizational structure impact their full utilization?

4. What would be the functional level impact of creating peer-review panels for grant proposals?

5. To what extent have organizational level deficiencies related to grant writer preparation impacted HFHS’s business strategies?

6. What strategies have been used by other research institutions to address grant proposal quality improvement?

**Section 2: Brief Review of the Literature**

There is a wealth of literature related to the importance of adequately preparing grant writers, grant writing preparation techniques, and how to incorporate greater preparation efforts into an organization’s strategic plan. This literature review discusses three such preparation methods: grant writing training programs, dedicated grant writing time, and peer-review panels.

The first step in developing resources to prepare grant writers to write competitive proposals is to identify the reasons why researchers with potentially innovative ideas do not try to submit a grant proposal and the difficulties they have in writing grant proposals. Some major barriers faced by researchers related to submitting grant proposals include a “lack of knowledge of funding source, lack of training in grant seeking and grant writing, lack of knowledge of budget development, and too time consuming” (Boyer & Cockriel, 2001, p. 22).
Once the needs have been identified, the type of training that will be most beneficial must be determined. As a start, grant writing workshops taught by research office staff or researchers with experience in writing competitive proposals can provide basic grant writing skills (Porter, 2007). A survey by Boyer and Cockriel (2001), however, found that short orientation workshops are often insufficient to address researchers’ needs related to the grant seeking process and more in-depth proposal development workshops would be beneficial. Porter (2007) suggests supplementing the beginning workshops with ones focused on specific funding sources’ proposal requirements. It is important that these more specific workshops address grant writers’ lack of knowledge of funding sources by helping to identify potential funding sources whose missions and goals are consistent with those of the grant writer and his/her organization (Klein, 2005).

An example of the kind of training that could be utilized to prepare grant writers was evaluated by Lischwe, Manning, and Willmann (1987). The eight-week course, during which participants prepared individual proposals, included both group development seminars to provide an overview of each step of the grant preparation process and one-on-one meetings with an assigned staff member to address individual concerns. This approach allowed multiple faculty to benefit from the training, while still providing personalized attention. One key suggestion from the participants was that providing examples of successful proposals would be especially beneficial for novice grant writers. Although the seminar discussed was conducted a number of years ago, the issues it addressed are ones that researchers still experience today.

The decision to provide training to grant writers, and what form of training this would include, must be made in line the organization’s overall strategic plan. After understanding what results the system expects from the training and connecting these expectations to the organization’s goals and strategy, organizational leaders can determine who requires training,
who will provide the training, what form the training will take, and how the training results will be evaluated (Daniels, 2003). The organization must also analyze what resources it currently has to help grant writers develop more competitive proposals, as well as what potential changes could be implemented to provide more effective training.

Another step to help ensure that grant writers are sufficiently prepared to draft competitive grants is to make sure that they have the necessary time to devote to grant writing. Carty and Silva (1986) emphasize that sufficient time must be provided to grant writers to focus on writing a competitive grant. Incorporating dedicated time for proposal development into grant writers’ scheduled workload can help ensure that both grant proposal quality and the quality of other responsibilities do not suffer.

After the grant writer has prepared the proposal, it can be very beneficial to have the proposal reviewed by experienced peers. Porter (2007) recommends forming an internal review committee to provide written feedback. An important consideration for utilizing a peer-review panel, though, is that the proposal must be submitted with sufficient time for a thorough review and for changes to be made before the sponsor’s deadline. Additionally, the panel members must be carefully selected to ensure that they have the skills and experience necessary to provide helpful guidance.

Preparing grant writers to successfully draft competitive grant proposal is difficult but essential to obtain research funding. Developing the resources required for adequate preparation involves identifying the grant writers’ needs, determining the most effective methods to meet these needs, and evaluating how efforts to implement these methods will affect the organization’s business strategy.

**Section 3: Brief Description of MSA 603 Organizational Data Collection Efforts**
Organizational information was collected for this report from a broad range of sources. The HFHS external website has a number of useful webpages that detail the system’s mission, organizational structure, and department-level webpages which describe some of the training opportunities that are available to HFHS researchers within that department. A 2012 strategic planning presentation by the Director of Corporate Planning and a 2009 case study by The Commonwealth Fund both provide information about the system and its mission, goals, and efforts to meet those goals. A final source of information was personal observations based on six years of working in research within the health system, which provide insights into currently available grant writing preparation resources and the HFHS organizational structure and strategies.

Section 4: External and Internal Implications of Issue Being Examined

External and internal forces impact the resources available to HFHS to prepare grant writers to write competitive proposals and the effectiveness of these resources. HFHS’s resources are affected by external technological, political, social, demographic, and global forces and internal human resources, infrastructure, and resource production inefficiencies.

Improving technology can dramatically impact the methods of grant writing preparation available. The ability to provide training to a wide audience via live or recorded webinars can extend the reach of such training seminars to grant writers at different locations or with conflicting schedules. Often, the programs used to host such webinars allow for interaction between the presenter and participants, allowing for some adjustment of the course to meet participants’ needs and maintain their interest. Peer-review panels can also take advantage of technological advancements to receive proposals from grant writers at different locations,
communicate with other panel members without the need to physically meet, and return feedback to grant writers.

Threats to grant writer preparation can come from political and social forces. Federal policy shifts can change the regulations governing grant proposals and the availability of research funds, which could potentially necessitate frequent, significant modifications to the content of training required for grant writers. Similarly, training content could be affected by changing societal values and norms that influence grant proposal requirements, the kinds of medical issues the public deems pressing to be researched, and the level of funds available from foundations that fund research studies.

Demographic forces simultaneously create opportunities and threats related to HFHS’s efforts to more effectively prepare grant writers. Increasing diversity of grant writers’ ages, races, nationalities, and genders may require HFHS to provide a wider range of training resources to accommodate different perspectives and learning styles; however, unique knowledge and experience can stem from this diversity, which will benefit grant writers as they complete training courses together and participate in peer-review panels.

HFHS’s preparation resources are also affected global forces. The increasingly globalized nature of research provides opportunities for HFHS to collaborate on grants with researchers at foreign institutions and learn their grant writer training best practices; however, globalization also poses a threat as it allows foreign institutions to compete for the same grant opportunities.

The human resources available at HFHS are a significant strength related to the ability to provide grant writing preparation. There are 81 scientists, dozens of physician-scientists, plus support staff that engage in research activities (HFHS, 2017b). Many of these researchers have
successfully submitted grant proposals and could share their experience with other grant writers through training seminars or reviewing new proposals.

Another strength is the existing infrastructure at HFHS. The system has many auditoriums and meeting rooms that could be utilized for training seminars and hosting meetings of peer-review panels. It also has a strong communication system, including a corporate email system and skype capabilities for conducting remote training sessions or peer-review panel meetings.

A significant weakness of HFHS’s current method of providing grant writer training is its inefficiency. Individual departments are responsible for developing and providing resources to prepare their researchers and staff to write competitive proposals. This results in duplication of efforts, inconsistent training among staff, and lower quality resources.

There are a variety of opportunities, threats, strengths, and weaknesses that relate to HFHS’s goal to prepare grant writers to develop competitive proposals. The primary factors that support HFHS’s efforts to improve its preparation resources include technological advancements, diverse grant writer experiences, global collaborations and learning opportunities, available human resources, and the existing infrastructure. Some factors that threaten or weaken HFHS’s efforts are changing federal policies and social values, diverse grant writer needs, global competition, and the inefficiency of its current training resources.

Section 5: Implications for Business-Level and Corporate-Level Strategy

The HFHS mission is “to improve people's lives through excellence in the science and art of health care and healing” (HFHS, 2017a). Research & Education is considered one of the seven pillars of performance that support the system’s mission and vision (Kippen, 2012). As such, issues in adequately preparing grant writers to submit competitive proposals, and the resulting
low level of external research funding, strongly impact business-level and corporate-level strategies.

One strategy that is being employed at HFHS is horizontal integration. In recent years, HFHS has merged with a number of other healthcare organizations in southeast Michigan. Merging with these organizations has made it more difficult to provide adequate grant writer preparation, as there are now more researchers and research staff in more locations, with a wider range of experience and needs, but it has also made need for grant writing preparation resources more important, so that all researchers are capable of obtaining adequate external funding to support their research.

Section 6: Implications for Structure and Control Systems

The decentralized structure of grant writing training among departments contributes to the difficulty of providing acceptable training and peer-review resources. Currently, each department within the system provides its own type and amount of resources for preparing its grant writers. Very few centralized preparation resources are available from the corporate level. Increased centralization of training resources has the potential to help address the issue of lack of grant writing training. Similarly, centralizing peer-review panel resources could provide additional experienced staff for reviewing grant proposals.

All HFHS research staff ultimately report to the same Vice President, but departments are generally allowed and expected to maintain their own processes. Strengthening the role of the Vice President, and potentially adding an additional leadership position specifically related to increasing grant writer preparation and similar responsibilities, has the potential to address the issue of inadequate preparation.
The strategic control system in place at HFHS would support the implementation of an effective grant writing training program. HFHS has an output type control system, with a standard of setting performance goals and measuring outcomes to evaluate the level of success of initiatives (McCarthy, Mueller, & Wrenn, 2009). Evaluating changes to the level of research funding following a change in grant writer preparation resources would be standard practice.

Section 7: Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

As the previous sections have illustrated, providing adequate grant writer preparation resources is a complicated issue and HFHS’s current resources are not sufficiently effective. Addressing this challenge requires a change to a more centralized organizational structure with stronger central research leadership and a careful assessment of the implications of new mergers on grant writer preparation needs. Implementing strategies used by other research institutions, such as the University of Michigan’s (2017) R01 Boot Camp mentoring program or the Research Foundation of the City University of New York’s (2017) proposal pre-submission peer review program, would have a positive impact on HFHS’s business strategies relating to increasing research funding, but would require many functional and organizational level changes.

The major external and internal factors that positively affect HFHS’s ability to provide effective grant writer preparation resources are technological advancements, a diverse group of experienced grant writers, and a supportive infrastructure. Changing federal policies and social values, diverse grant writer needs, and inefficient training resources, however, hinder this ability.

One of HFHS’s strategic goals is to be a “nationally preferred clinical research partner”, as measured by level of external funding (Kippen, 2012, p. 8). The issue of preparing grant writers to more effectively draft competitive proposals does not require a change in this overall
goal, but it does highlight a key requirement to achieve this goal. Addressing the issue of grant writer preparation will require new business practices and strategies. Changes to required grant writer training, workloads, and the level of resource centralization and cooperation between departments will be necessary. HFHS will need methods to monitor grant writers’ participation in training seminars and their use of peer-review panels, the time required for attending training seminars and conducting peer-reviews, and the quality and utility of review feedback. The system will also need to measure the impact of utilization of the resources on the level of grant funding received.

**Recommendations**

The first recommendation to address the need to better prepare grant writers is for the system to centralize resources. An analysis of the resources currently available to all grant writers in the system and those available in each department to only that department’s grant writers should be conducted. A plan should then be developed to determine which resources can be redistributed and what additional resources are required to implement new grant writer training seminars and peer-review panels. These seminars and panel reviews should be equally available to all grant writing personnel within HFHS.

The second recommendation is to incorporate dedicated time into grant writers’ work schedules for training, grant proposal development, and participating in peer-review panels. New grant writers should be evaluated for current level of grant writing knowledge and experience and these personnel should have time scheduled into their regular work hours to accommodate necessary training, so that training is not viewed as taking away from other responsibilities. Experienced grant writers should have time for reviewing new grant proposals scheduled into their workload. All grant writers should have dedicated time for writing proposals.
References


