Beyond the Guidelines, or Better Access to Access Projects

MARCELLA GRENDLER

The term "grantsmanship" has not yet made its way into the Oxford English Dictionary, but the concept does appear in most rare books and special collections librarians' job descriptions. It is not called "grantsmanship"; rather, "responsibility for the solicitation of outside support" or "responsibility for the preparation of grant proposals" are common circumlocutions. Given the present limitations of federal funding, much emphasis now falls on grantsmanship in the private sector. Federal support remains, however, a major potential resource for many research institutions. Many librarians still need to seek outside support in the structured national competition that is part and parcel of federal grant programs. The following article addresses one such competition. It aims to help librarians in their decision-making about seeking federal support, to aid them in formulating strong applications, and to assure them of the fairness of the evaluation.

Every year about one hundred fifty individuals and institutions seeking support for projects to make research resources available to scholars apply to the Access category, National Endowment for the Humanities. About thirty of these applications are successful. This article describes the process by which proposals are evaluated, and the characteristics which distinguish those applications recommended for support from those that are not. It amplifies information available in Endowment publications and from Endowment staff, and attempts to clarify the complexities inherent in a federal grant-making program of interest to the scholarly, library, and archival world.

Marcella Grendler was formerly Program Officer, Division of Research Programs, for the National Endowment for the Humanities. She is now Associate University Librarian for Special Collections at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
The Access category now forms part of the Reference Materials Program, Division of Research Programs. The category embodies most of the activities of the former Research Resources Program, which was divided in January 1985 into the Access category and the newly founded Office of Preservation. Its goal is to make humanities resources available for advanced research by funding catalogues, inventories, union lists, guides, bibliographies, and other finding aids for printed works, manuscripts, and non-print sources. It also supports archival surveys, the microfilming of scattered or endangered humanities resources in foreign repositories, oral history projects, and proposals which address national problems in the library and archival fields. Since its inception in 1975, the program has made almost 900 awards through 1986. (This includes the preservation projects funded in 1979-85 and the U.S. Newspapers Program, 1982-85, both now located in the Office of Preservation.)

With minor variations, the present evaluation process has been in place from the beginning. It lasts about seven months and comprises four stages: specialist review, panel evaluation, National Council on the Humanities consideration, and a final decision by the Chairman of the Endowment.

After log-in and verification of eligibility and completeness, an application is assigned to an Access staff member, who is responsible for seeing the application through the entire evaluation process. The first step is consideration by specialist reviewers. In the past applicants have selected three reviewers, all of whom were asked to assess the proposal. Starting in 1986, applicants are asked to name eight persons; the staff consults this list in selecting some of the reviewers. It is anticipated that this change will make available a suitable group of reviewers for each proposal, while retaining applicants' confidence in the fairness of the evaluation process.

Program staff contact eight or more individuals, depending on the project's complexity, and aim to elicit five or more substantial evaluations.

The mix of reviewers depends on the proposal; in Access, they are most often divided between potential users of the research material and those who would know how to do the project well themselves, i.e., subject and methodological specialists. Some reviewers are chosen from the Endowment's automated database. Others, particularly librarians and archivists, are drawn from files kept by the program. Some come from the ranks of grantees, are listed in professional biographical directories, or are suggested by other reviewers. Proposals addressing unusual topics or those involving most major practitioners in a field are particularly challenging to the staff. In addition to the sources mentioned above, consultations with colleagues in the Endowment or elsewhere and perusal of recent conference programs, Endowment funding lists, recent scholarly monographs and bibliographies may be necessary to locate potential reviewers.
Reviewers are asked to evaluate the proposal on its research value for advanced scholarship in the humanities, on the quality of its workplan and staff, and on the appropriateness of the budget. The difficulty of the reviewer’s task varies greatly. Because blame is easier to express than praise, obviously poor proposals are most easily evaluated. The very best proposals present a challenge to the reviewer. After reading a clearly meritorious proposal, some succumb to the temptation to write a general letter of recommendation rather than a critical evaluation. The judgments may be accurate, but they are not very useful to panelists looking for positive comments that are specific, measured, convincing, and directed to the merits of the project as well as the project’s director. The large number of proposals which are neither clearly poor nor obviously excellent demand most from reviewers. Methodological specialists are more likely to look closely at workplan issues, although they are often insightful about the significance of and need for the project as well. Subject specialists are more likely to examine the research value of the materials, although many put aside their personal research needs or involvement with a discipline to look critically at proposals in their field.

Reviewing an Access proposal is demanding and time-consuming work, almost always requiring more than an hour’s effort of unpaid service. The opportunity to assess elicits a mixed response. Many individuals are pleased to receive a proposal, feeling that it represents an opportunity to keep up in one’s field and to exercise one’s professional skills. Others see it as a sometimes burdensome but necessary professional duty that should be undertaken if at all possible. Still others indicate by the brevity and blandness of their comments that the project and the process spark minimal professional interest.

Reviews matter enormously, though they are not a perfect instrument of evaluation. They are sometimes redundant, predominantly laudatory, and represent the judgments of a limited number of individuals. Their value becomes clear when proposals are considered by a panel convened in Washington. Panelists deal with a group of proposals, reading and discussing not only the applications but also the specialist reviews. Reviewers’ comments corroborate and supplement the panelists’ expertise, often setting the agenda for panel discussion. In the rare instance that a proposal lacks full review (because of late submission, transfer from another program) panelists express less confidence in their judgments and regret at the absence of reviews. The staff will solicit additional specialist review in that instance. As a diagnostic tool, specialist reviews are by nature imperfect but vital; they contribute substantially to the fairness of the evaluation.

While the specialist review phase is underway, program staff implement the next step: panel evaluation. Most panels in the Division of Research Programs have a broad disciplinary focus which mirrors the year’s submissions. In
Access, every year in the recent past has brought sufficient proposals to constitute two American history panels, at which proposals are grouped by media and topic, in combinations which vary from year to year. Non-U.S. history may fill one panel or two (the “Western” world and the “Eastern” world). A literature panel encompassing English, American, and other literatures has been mounted every year in the recent past. Music, the performing arts, and the plastic arts may comprise one panel or two, depending on the number of applications.

Once applications have been divided, the staff member responsible for each panel profiles the scholarly and methodological skills needed for that panel. For example, a recent history panel (the Western world) comprised 23 proposals in European, Russian, and Hispanic studies. The proposals ranged chronologically from the classical to the contemporary period, and covered a variety of media. Applicants proposed bibliographies, early manuscript catalogues, cataloguing of printed collections, foreign microfilming projects, oral histories, and guides to archival resources and to periodical literature. Three subject specialists and two methodological experts were asked to serve: a medievalist, a historian of Latin America, a Russian history specialist, a Latin American studies librarian, and a humanities bibliographer with a background in European studies. That panel, like most, was successfully conducted with the required minimum of five participants. A larger number of panelists would be invited if the number and diversity of applications demanded it.

Panelists are chosen from the same sources as specialist reviewers; obviously, much more attention goes to weighing the individual’s potential contribution to the panel. Sometimes an individual brings both subject and methodological expertise. Regardless of background, all panelists are expected to evaluate intelligently all projects, whether within or outside their specialty. Thoughtful reviewers and competent grantees are likely to prove successful panelists, especially if they have demonstrated intellectual and professional breadth as well as critical ability. A few panelists who served previously will be invited to participate again because their experience fosters confidence in panel deliberations. The search for new panelists is taken very seriously, and overall in a given year more than half the participants will not have served previously on Access panels. A significant minority will not have participated in any Endowment panel.

The role of panelists is crucial, because they are in a unique position to make meaningful absolute and comparative judgments in their search for projects excellent in both concept and execution. By contrast, specialist reviewers, however well qualified, judge projects in isolation. Panelists’ work begins several weeks before the Washington meeting, when they receive instructional material, a package of proposals, specialist reviews, and evaluation forms. Each panelist is expected to read every proposal and all reviews, and to prepare written comments before the panel meets.
Panels last one or two days, depending on the number and complexity of the submissions. The panel proceedings are designed to promote discussion and to give each application the consideration it deserves. After an introduction during which Endowment staff review funding criteria and outline procedures, panelists assign a preliminary rating to each proposal on the agenda (Excellent, Very Good, Some Merit, and Reject). Under the chairmanship of a staff member, the panelists discuss each proposal in turn. When they feel every relevant issue has been aired, they rate the proposal a final time.

Proposals which received uniformly or substantially negative judgments from specialist reviewers generally elicit little panel discussion, although panel members sometimes offer substantial comments in their written evaluations. Those happy few projects which enjoyed highly favorable review and which panelists unanimously endorse take relatively little time to dispatch. Most attention goes to the bulk of proposals in the middle of the spectrum. The issues are complex: worthy but perhaps methodologically flawed projects; worthy but perhaps not critical projects; worthy but very costly projects; or combinations of those issues. In considering methodological problems, the panelists must decide whether the flaws are substantial enough to merit rejection, or whether the present workplan could be improved rapidly and easily by panel recommendations. On this issue, the panelists sometimes solicit the comments of program staff, whose experience with workplan revisions is often helpful.

In assessing research value and need, panelists must make hard choices among worthwhile projects in disparate fields and media. They look, above all, to see what a project would contribute to humanities research. Does scholarship in the field proceed adequately without these resources, or will their accessibility make a real difference? Is this a methodologically complex project that will open significant resources in a small, esoteric, but valuable field? Or is this narrow research pursued by an individual who has borrowed too long and too deep into a small spectrum of resources? These and similar questions are raised in assessing the project’s significance.

Panelists also examine present access to the resources. Are they totally inaccessible as, for example, an unprocessed archival collection closed to researchers? Are they partly but poorly accessible, such as a printed collection whose cataloguing predates AACR1? Is the proposed level and type of access suited to the material, or is it idiosyncratic, overly detailed, or too minimal to serve scholars? While the assessment of significance is crucial, panelists also weigh methodological issues carefully. Thus a poorly planned application on behalf of important resources would be rejected, with encouragement to the applicant to resubmit an improved proposal.

Generally speaking, both reviewers and panelists feel least comfortable in evaluating project costs, although the phenomenon of “sticker shock” has re-
ently appeared among them. During their deliberations, panelists are urged to put aside the issue of cost as the sole determinant of a funding decision. However, if an otherwise significant project appears to be overpriced, they are expected to note that and to discuss alternatives. They may also comment on the suitability and level of specific budget items. As with methodological issues, program staff are sometimes called upon to suggest ways of making the project more cost effective, or to suggest whether treasury matching funds and private support are an appropriate alternative.

When panelists have discussed and rated all proposals, they perform a final task: ranking in priority order those applications which have received positive endorsement, that is, a majority of Es, VGs, and SMs. Each panelist prepares a prioritized list; those individual rankings are melded to form a funding priority list for that panel. After all panels have met, the staff use the six lists as a basis for drawing upon the program’s annual allocation. Some flexibility is necessary, since panels vary in the number of proposals considered and in their overall quality, and since the number of proposals recommended generally exceeds available funds.

The program staff next guide proposals through the last two stages of evaluation: consideration by the National Council on the Humanities and by the Chairman of the Endowment, who has the final decision-making authority. Before the National Council meets, the program staff contact those applicants whose workplan or budget required adjustment. Thus when the Council considers such proposals, needed changes have already been implemented. The National Council, a presidentially appointed body of 26 individuals, reviews as well as recommends on all applications before it. The press of business demands a summary presentation for the overwhelming majority, with detailed consideration only when appropriate. The material presented to the National Council also serves as a basis for the Chairman’s decision; like the Council members, she may read any proposal, but given the number of applications and the thoroughness of evaluation, detailed attention by the Chairman is the exception rather than the rule. Her decisions are made a few days after each Council meeting. In almost every instance, panel recommendations are sustained by the National Council and the Chairman.

While the formal evaluation process is now complete, most rejected proposals receive further attention. Unsuccessful applicants can receive a written explanation of how evaluation is conducted and the reasons why the proposal was not funded, as well as suggestions for improving the project, when appropriate. They also receive copies of evaluators’ comments, with identifying material removed. The staff respond to all requests for explanations, and make a special effort to get in touch with applicants whose proposals panelists thought could be resubmitted in a strengthened form.
Before discussing the characteristics of strong proposals, it is appropriate to draw attention to the changes which have taken place among evaluators and in the professional world over the last decade, since those changes have, directly and indirectly, produced both stronger applications and firmer judgments. In brief, evaluators have become more skilled at their task. In the first ten years of the program, circa 15,000 specialist reviews have flowed from the pens (now the word processors) of archivists, librarians, and scholars; circa 350 panelists have met to consider proposals. At the same time that an ever-growing cadre of evaluators has polished and continues to polish its skills, the professional world has evolved. National consensus has been achieved on a number of major library standards and practices; their presence or absence from a workplan is invariably noted. The development of microcomputers and commercial software packages suited to the preparation of bibliographies, early manuscript catalogues, and other scholarly guides has facilitated judgments that were difficult to make five years ago. These changes are reflected in Access guidelines, which have grown more detailed and precise with each revision. Overall, both evaluators and the tools for evaluation have strengthened in recent years.

Evaluators therefore know what they are looking for. No one familiar with the program will be surprised by their expectations, since the qualities they seek are outlined in Research Division and program publications. It is worth drawing attention, however, to those general characteristics of a sound proposal which have elicited considerable evaluator comments in recent years.

The proposal will make available significant resources for advanced research in the humanities. These resources offer scholars substantial research opportunities on a topic or topics of international, national, or disciplinary significance. The applicant demonstrates convincingly, but without exaggeration, where the resources stand in the universe of humanities documentation by comparing them with other institutional holdings, other bibliographies, etc., on the topic. At present, the resources are scattered, unorganized or otherwise inaccessible to scholars. They are not likely to be made available without federal support. Their availability will permit research that could not have been accomplished, or could only have been completed with great difficulty.

The project is well planned. Careful planning has always been an important element in successful proposals. With limited funding and increased competitiveness, its importance has grown. Evaluators readily distinguish between proposals which embody thoughtful and realistic planning, and those which have been hastily, inadequately, or inappropriately designed. For institutions and professional organizations proposing large-scale projects, it is especially important to plan well. To prepare a strong proposal, it is appropriate to treat a potential grant application as an exercise in institutional planning, subjecting it
to the same process of internal evaluation and cost analysis that other activities undergo.

The applicant plans an appropriate level and kind of treatment for the material. Evaluators look for projects which open resources for scholarly use and which adopt current practices and standards, but which refrain from doing the research scholars are expected to undertake. When comparing otherwise meritorious proposals, evaluators note the needlessly elaborate finding aid, the exhaustively annotated bibliography, the overly detailed cataloguing procedures, and other activities which go beyond the norm and which are not supported by peers. Evaluators display sensitivity to the varying needs of scholars and the desirability of adopting current standards and practices, but they are quick to identify approaches that go beyond what is necessary to support research access.

The project is cost effective. It is budgeted as carefully as if the applicant were to pay the entire cost. The costs are appropriate to the tasks at hand, neither too extravagant nor so limited that the work cannot be accomplished.

The project is strongly supported by the applicant. For institutions and professional organizations, this means that the project’s scope and cost have been planned with available funding sources in mind, a realistic funding request formulated, and an appropriate mix of private and public support assembled. Depending on magnitude, projects may need support both through institutional cost share and by third-party funding as well as federal support. In recent years, applicants with large-scale projects have been increasingly successful in obtaining a mixture of public and private funding. An assessment of federal support possibilities, including consultation with program staff and study of recent program funding levels, will reveal whether private support or enhanced institutional support should be sought in addition to federal funding. It is best to make the assessment before the proposal is submitted, so that evaluators know that this element of planning has been addressed. Projects which will be executed by individuals (such as bibliographies or other scholarly guides) are less likely to need third-party support for a successful completion. Evaluators expect them to demonstrate responsible financial planning and, when submitted through an institution, to embody the kind of institutional support that will genuinely aid the completion of the project.

A substantial period of preparation has taken place, enough for consideration of all relevant project issues, for the composition of several draft proposals, for their critique in-house and by qualified outsiders, and for the preparation of an error-free and complete proposal. When an application, even one for a relatively straightforward project, is prepared in haste, some important elements may be underdeveloped or mishandled.

The proposal is clearly presented. Ideally, it should be completely intelligible to specialists on a first reading, and almost as clear to the learned non-
specialist. Most projects require several drafts to improve clarity and to refine the workplan. Critique by qualified but detached readers is vital in the development of a proposal. Such readers perform an invaluable service, but they can be difficult to locate and involve. Endowment staff are happy to read and evaluate draft proposals for clarity and competitiveness. Because of the breadth of their experience, they can often anticipate the questions evaluators are likely to ask about a specific project, and can identify issues and elements that need further development. The staff comments are most usefully sought well before the program deadline, so that an applicant will have time to discuss and, when advisable, implement suggestions.

Those are the general characteristics which separate the proposals recommended for funding from those which are not. In addition, each project, whether a bibliography, archival survey, or foreign microfilming, etc., presents an agenda of intellectual and methodological issues relevant to that kind of proposal. They are described in some detail in Access application instructions, and evaluators apply them with skill as well as sensitivity to the requisites of an individual project.

Evaluators, especially panelists, express satisfaction with the way in which assessment is conducted and with the criteria by which proposals are judged. Panelists have the best opportunity to see the system at work, and often comment favorably on the thoroughness and fairness with which applications are evaluated. Perhaps the best indicator of the quality of the work done by all those involved with applications is the grants which result from the detailed evaluation process. Projects such as the Women's History Sources survey, the Eighteenth-Century Short-Title Catalogue, the Bibliography of American Literature, and others too numerous to name have had and and will continue to have a substantial impact on humanities scholarship in the U.S.
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