



AmeriCorps Grant Tips and Tricks

Sarah R. Sadowski, Grants Manager, Governor's Office of Community Service

serve.mt.gov

Hello Everyone!

Sarah R. Sadowski, Grants Manager, OCS & VISTA Alum

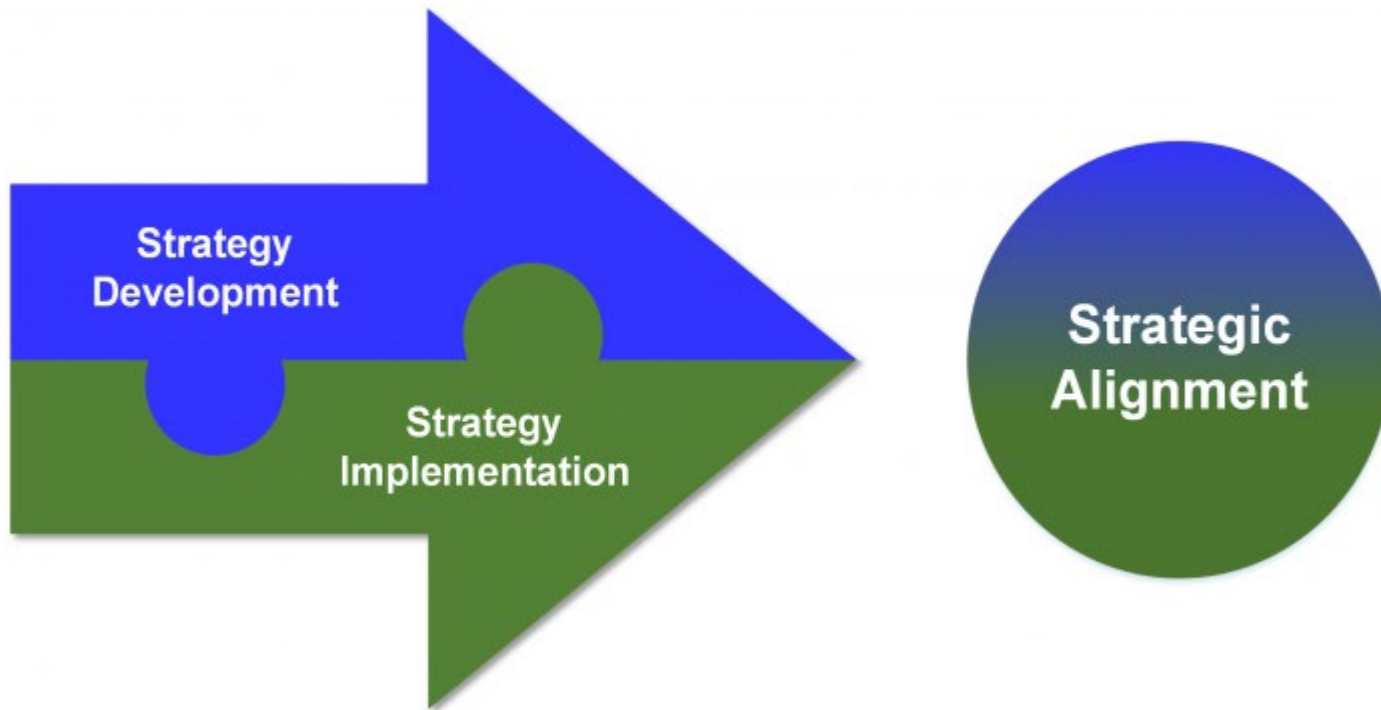
Desired Outcomes

- Review the AC grant application & process that results in CNCS award
- Share tips that result in success across Focus Areas & application types
- Share lessons from recent CNCS grant cycles
- Answer your questions



Strategic alignment

makes AC grant writing make sense



Identify the Need – Plan an Evidence-based Intervention – Budget for Performance – Partner to Serve – Member Experience – Measure...replicate with rigor and fidelity

Alignment in the Big Picture...*needs & resources, at all levels*

- Political podiums – *making the dual mission real*
 - chest pounding, grandma and her baby, landscapes, & reality
- Public trust...*starts with me and you!*
 - Pass Thru Entities & Subrecipients, AmeriCorps funding
- Organizational Capacity *and* Mission Capability
 - Systems: financial, programmatic, data collection & more
 - Uniform Guidance
- Are you sure you want a federal grant from CNCS *and* a subaward agreement with the State of Montana?
 - Is the investment worth the effort? Not do we need funding?
 - AC State should be a strategy to bolster efforts, not a new mission
 - 3+ year commitment, transformative grant management & org culture

AmeriCorps grantmaking – how it happens

Corporation for National and Community Service www.nationalservice.gov

State Service Commissions

- prime recipient, subrecipient, service location, member(s)



NOFO, NOFA, State Service Plan and Governor Priorities

- What's the difference between the A and the O?

CNCS NOFO becomes OCS NOFO and RFP...then a series of Hit Submit

- Begins the long process
- Letter Of Intent...amounts in LOI
- Line item or Fixed award?
- Planning or program?
- New, renew, continuation
- eGrants



AmeriCorps grant writing – it's technical

A complete application consists of all these elements

- **Standard Form 424 Face Sheet:** automatically generated when applicants complete the data fields in eGrants
- **Narratives**
 - Executive Summary
 - Program Design
 - Organizational Capability
 - Cost Effectiveness and Budget Adequacy
 - Evaluation Plan (if applicable)
- **Logic Model**
- **Standard Form 424 Budget**
- **Performance Measures**
- **Authorization, Assurances, and Certification**



AmeriCorps grant writing is challenging, and can be fun!
... but wait, you know that already

How would you answer *your friend* if they asked “What is it like to write an AmeriCorps grant?”

What is *your best gem of advice* for writing an AmeriCorps grant?

What is *your one burning question* when it comes to writing your AC grant?

Think it through *before* writing...visualize vertical alignment

See “Narratives”Think “what, how, who, what, and why”

- Executive Summary = Think summary: follow the template (pretty please)
- Program Design = Think: Theory of Change in words and numbers
 - Evidence Base & Tier/quality, Notice Priority, Member Experience
- Organizational Capability = Think: Org Background, Staffing, Accountability, Culture that values learning, Member supervision
- Cost Effectiveness & Budget Adequacy = Think: “See budget” (seriously, only those words)
- Evaluation Plan (if applicable) = Think: where is my application/program on this? Plan & Report
- Logic Model = Think: Theory of Change in a table format, program design in a table
- Standard Form 424 Budget = Think: calculations and alignment with performance & org policy
- Performance Measures = Think: outcomes, results for people and places
- Authorization, Assurances, & Certification = Think: authorized representative, fine print is real

AmeriCorps grant writing Tips...general

#1 Advice is Read, Rest and Think, then Read again! Look for Changes

- The Notice: Requirements & Thresholds...CNCS and OCS
- Application Instructions & Mandatory Supplemental Guidance
- Performance Measure Instructions

Start writing and budgeting as early as possible in a creative way that works for you

- draw pictures, write poems...make notes throughout the year

Program and financial staff should meet several times in the application process and regularly

- Performance based budgeting leads to mission capability and accurate coding
- Application narratives should flow and align with the budget

Use the Technical Assistance Period to ask questions and point out errors

Tell story, explain the problem, and how AC service is the solution

- Speak the truth and stick to the facts
- Your organization is already working in the issue area
- Performance measures, data collection and evaluation

AmeriCorps grant writing Tips...from the Notice

Use assessment criteria in the Notice – to gauge length of each narrative

Literally start **sentences with the info** in the Notice.

- “The program will recruit AmeriCorps members from the geographic or demographic communities in which the programs operate. “

Follow NOFO guidance on the correct way to title, name, and submit required additional docs. What is the correct way?

Evidence and Evaluation Reports - CNCS Evidence Exchange, Mandatory Supplemental Guidance (MSG) and life

Think like a reviewer - engage an outside person to read and score with real tools, such as the Notice and score sheet

What would you add from **your experience** writing AmeriCorps grants?

AmeriCorps grant writing Tricks



eGrants/system of application *and* system of record...

- A unique system - grants AND member management
- determine how relates to your orgs policies & procedures

Start in a word processing software (**typing into eGrants is a big no-no**)

eGrants sets the standard for page limits

- What is the best way to verify your application is within stated CNCS page limits?
- Do all elements of the application count?

Narratives - Use headers – watch where eGrants adds a header and where it does not - save space and meet page limits!

Have a fresh eye review **budget narrative calculations** as printed from eGrants

Continuation narratives and expansions – address the criteria, please!

Strive to **Hit Submit *at least one day early***

Communicate with OCS so we can serve you!

A Series of “Hit Submit” = Patience & Persistence

Eligible applicants Hit Submit to OCS Notice

- Equitable process, tailored to federal Notice & Application Instructions and state priorities...implies procurement and public meeting laws will be followed

OCS Review Process...Grant Review Workgroup, composition

- Individual scoring and in-person consensus, with applicants present = funding recommendation
- Funding recommendation to Commission for approval
- Score sheet and feedback, applications returned for clarification, **applicant Hits Submit again** after application is strengthened
 - Sept RFP, Oct due, Nov Review, Dec Commission

OCS Hit Submit to CNCS...January to CNCS, then we wait...

- Clarification period @ March/April or ??
- Approved! Then perhaps a Resolution period
- Funding determination, if goes well, Notice of Grant Award (NGA)
 - Dollars, positions and Education Awards
 - Subaward agreements...Sept or January start



AmeriCorps grant writing...Perspective CNCS Review

Narratives, Evidence, Interventions, Performance Measures

- Articulations of need, intervention and anticipated outcomes
- Proof what you are proposing will impact change in people or places
- Evidence, read carefully and use as current reports as possible
- Reality is your application may or may not be read in whole

Technical writing for strangers in far away places

- credibility on parts of application, evidence, and more
- Hydrologic cradles, compelling tapestry of needs, and more

OCS completes past performance & competitive applicant ranking

CNCS evaluation planning & challenges from year-to-year changes....and Due to COVID

CNCS clarification and resolution periods

- may or may not be stated, or as stated and require fast response

CNCS application and evidence feedback may or may not be helpful

CNCS TSP, changes, and moving goal posts...certainty is uncertain

AmeriCorps grant writing...Success! CNCS, OCS & You

Funded = a program!

- <https://www.nationalservice.gov/about/open-government-initiative/transparency/results-grants-competition>
- Performance = program grant & budget carried out. Thresholds for change - name one
- Not Funded = gaps, disconnects & learnings...or no real explanation or useful feedback

Post-Award Evaluation Plan approval process, CNCS & OCS

- Opportunities and Special Conditions

Monitoring & Oversight

- Risk assessment, considers ability to manage the grant and achieve the targeted outcomes for the intended beneficiaries with a high level of compliance
- Risk-based monitoring
- Performance, risk, monitoring, oversight and financial management generate 'past performance' data that impacts OCS and CNCS grant scores, especially continuations!

Compliance vs. best practice vs changing goal posts...grantee burden, its real.

- How do you balance the burden and protect yourself from the weight of the institution?

AmeriCorps grant writing...Looking Ahead



What do you need to learn more about to write AC grants?

- Strategic Development Framework
- Highly recommend ALL of the PDC writing courses!
- CNCS courses, theory of change, performance measures and more

Your input, please!

- What suggestions do you have for me for the Notice?
- What suggestions do you have for the OCS review process?

Forward, for AmeriCa

- Programmatic or Financial Changes to Awards Due to COVID
- Prepare for the competitive and formula grant reviews together

Anything else?

Remember the big picture and what we are doing here...National Service in Montana, USA



Thank you!

Questions?



Sarah R. Sadowski

ssadowski@mt.gov

406.444.5547

serve.mt.gov