

# Identifying Professional Competencies

*By Deanna Nurnberg*

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## Introduction:

- What exactly is a grant professional?
- What do grant professionals know (or need to know)?
- How do you know if a grant professional is competent?
- Are grant professionals fundraisers — do they need the same skills and knowledge?

Many of us have to answer questions like the ones above, as we explain our work to coworkers, governing boards, organizations we serve, and others. These questions are but a few of the many questions that are being addressed, and must be answered in the coming years as American Association of Grant Professionals (AAGP) examines certification or credentialing of grant professionals and looks to further expand and refine its educational programs and services for its members.

I had the opportunity this year, with the open input and generous contributions of AAGP members to begin to answer some of these questions. I was seeking to identify the skills, knowledge, and expertise grant professionals consider necessary for demonstrating competency within the field. Through this effort, I found that there are seven basic competency areas for the grants profession.

In the paragraphs below, I briefly present these core competencies and how they compare with those that are tested in the Certified Fundraising Executive (CFRE) credential, to see how grant proposal writing and fund raising competencies are alike and different.

## Part I: The Core Competencies of the Grant Profession

**(1) Proposal Development.** As might be expected, one of the largest and most significant areas of competency for a grant professional is the development of grant proposals. These skills and knowledge generally fell into two categories:

- *Coordination*, in which a grant professional was involved more in a coordination than a writing role — working with others to develop a program, write proposals, and implement a project.
- *Writing*, in which a grant professional served as the main program developer and/or proposal author.

(2) **Compliance and Grant Management.** Grant professionals are responsible for compliance and management in a number of areas, such as regulatory compliance; grant acknowledgement, project oversight, and reporting; maintenance of grant-related records; and financial management of grants and grant-funded activities.

(3) **Prospect Research.** Grant professionals must collect and analyze data on grants and foundation trends, activities and services as well as identify prospective corporate, foundation, and government donors through a variety of research tools. Vitally important is the ability to “qualify” donors by matching funders’ interests with an agency’s needs and determining a donor’s potential interest and the feasibility of requests and projects.

(4) **Planning.** Grant professionals need to be competent planners and should be able to help their programs or organizations conduct strategic/long-range planning. They also need to be able to develop measurable goals and objectives for the organization, the programs for which they are seeking funding, and their own unit within the organization. Finally, they need to be able to help their agency/clients identify and prioritize needs and funding opportunities.

(5) **Communication.** Grant professionals need to be able to communicate effectively with both internal and external audiences. They must possess solid written and oral communication skills. For instance, they need to be able to communicate with agency staff and leadership to share opportunities for funding and program development and to seek buy-in and involvement from administration, the board, and front-line program staff in grant programs and initiatives. They also need to be able to communicate with external audiences. Often, they fill public relations and marketing roles as part of carrying out their grant responsibilities, including acting as a spokesperson for the organization and coordinating written communications regarding the organization.

(6) **Relationship-Building.** An important competency is the development and nurturance of key relationships necessary to support grant acquisition and implementation. For instance, external relationships enable professionals to solicit feedback on proposals, represent their organizations, and visit with potential donors. Internally, grant professionals need to communicate about programs and grant opportunities, as well as prepare staff to seek and manage grants.

(7) **Evaluation.** Grant professionals require knowledge related to evaluating and monitoring programs and initiatives to ensure that programs are achieving the objectives promised to funders. Many grants require evaluations, and professionals often identify and work with evaluators to design project evaluations; coordinate follow-up and evaluation of funded projects and proposals; and coordinate data collection for their agencies for a variety of purposes.

## **Part II: How do Grant Professionals and Fundraising Professionals Compare?**

There are several different views about where the grants profession fits in the fundraising field. No doubt you have, at some time or another, heard one of these views. For instance, one view is that grant professionals are not to be fundraisers at all — and fundraising competencies are different from those needed for grants. A contrary view is that the grants profession is a specialty within fundraising.

I am not attempting to support either view in this article. However, I want to share some information I have gathered that compares core fundraising competencies with grant professional’s competencies.

In 1997, Certified Fundraising Executive (CFRE) International commissioned a formal study called a “job analysis” to identify the knowledge, skills, and abilities involved in the fundraising profession. The current CFRE credential is based upon their 1997 Job Analysis.

The seven grant-related competencies were compared against the fundraising competencies identified in the CFRE Job Analysis, which was graciously provided by Morgean Hirt, executive director of CFRE International. According to the CFRE Job Analysis, there are seven core competencies for the fundraising profession. In order of importance, these are:

- (1) solicitation;
- (2) donor relations;
- (3) prospect identification;
- (4) stewardship;
- (5) management;
- (6) volunteerism; and
- (7) public policy.

As might be expected, there were a number of areas of overlap and similarity between the fundraising and grant profession’s areas of competency, and many of the grant-related competency areas fit within these seven areas, although the grant competencies are more specific and detailed because of its specialty nature within the larger nonprofit and fundraising fields.

One of the most interesting findings was that the CFRE Job Analysis showed that grant-related fundraising carried a heavy weight within fundraising’s technical areas. Five of the ten fundraising techniques specifically and directly pertain to the grant profession. These included federal giving, proposal writing, corporate and foundation solicitation, and grantsmanship.

This finding appears to contradict the opinion that the CFRE does not measure the grant profession and is not a relevant measure of grant-related skills and knowledge competency. Further, this finding raises questions about the CFRE process. For instance, is the credential really favoring individual fundraising versus grant-related or organizational fundraising? Or does this indicate that perhaps the CFRE is not being adequately explained and marketed to grant professionals? This finding has been shared with the CFRE International board and will hopefully be addressed by them in the near future.

### **Conclusion:**

In the coming years, as AAGP and the grant profession as a whole continue to grow and develop, it will become increasingly important for us to tailor and advance an educational agenda that will provide training at all levels in the core competency areas for our field. This research was an initial step in identifying what those core competency levels are, as well as gathering data that will inform the dialogue within the association about how we want our profession to evolve. I look forward to seeing the grant profession’s body of knowledge continue to expand in the years to come!