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# Meeting the Moment: How Higher Ed Institutions Can Compete for Grant Funding

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*Presented by Ashley Schultz and Dr. Marc Smithers • Grants Office, LLC*

## Welcome and Introductions

**Ashley Schultz:**
Hello everyone, and welcome to our event. My name is Ashley Schultz, one of the managers of research and consultation here at Grants Office. Today we're going to be discussing how higher education institutions can compete for grant funding.

### Housekeeping

**Ashley Schultz:**
Before we get started, I've got two quick housekeeping items for you. You can ask questions at any time during today's event using the question and answer interface on the right-hand side of your screen. Feel free to submit as many questions as you'd like, and we'll get to as many as possible toward the end of our time here today. If we run out of time and don't have a chance to answer your question, you can email us directly at education@grantsoffice.com.

You should also note that this session is being recorded. The recording is going to be available for download at the Grants Office website starting tomorrow. The PowerPoint slides shared here today will also be available in that same location.

### Today's Speaker and Agenda

**Ashley Schultz:**
So again, today we're talking about higher education funding opportunities. We're joined today by Dr. Marc Smithers, who is a Grants Development Associate here at Grants Office. Marc is one of our specialists in higher education, and he has a career background in higher education administration. So he's seen the grants application process for colleges and universities from a variety of different perspectives. We're very excited he's able to set aside some time with us today and share some really amazing information and expertise.

High level, this is what we'll run through today over the next 30 minutes. We'll talk about the current context of grant seeking for higher education entities in the United States. Then we'll talk about the

challenges that those institutions face in terms of finding the right opportunities and getting all their ducks in a row, and then how they can increase their competitiveness, including some tips and tricks and additional next steps you can use to get ready as a grant-seeking organization. Again, we'll end today's session with a Q&A, so just look for that Q&A box down in the bottom right-hand corner. We'll get to as many questions as we can. With that, I'm going to pass things over to Marc to get us started on grant seeking and higher education. Marc?

**Dr. Marc Smithers:**
Thank you, Ashley. Welcome, thank you everybody for being with us today. It's great to be with you.

## The Higher Education Grant-Seeking Landscape

**Dr. Marc Smithers:**
Before we actually start talking about increasing your effectiveness in grant seeking, I'm a big context person, so I love to look at things first from a high level just to see where we are.

### Public Funding by Sector

**Dr. Marc Smithers:**
To get a clear picture of how higher education institutions can most effectively seek grant funding, it's important to first get an idea of what kinds of institutions make up the wider grant-seeking landscape. Altogether, about $1.79 trillion worth of public funds are awarded annually between the federal and state governments. Government bodies like state and local governments get the lion's share of this money — about 30 percent, or $560 to $565 billion. Colleges and universities receive a bit more than 20 percent of all available public funds, or about $417 billion. Of that, a little less than 10 percent, or a little over $40 billion, comes from the federal government.

This split is understandable given that the education system in America is largely a power given to the states. While we see this very clearly in state oversight of K-12 education, it's also true of higher education. Colleges and universities, whether they're public or private, still have large oversight by individual states in things like educational standards and licensing. We can see it also in the ways that the majority of public funding for higher education actually comes from the states.

### Federal vs. State Funding Priorities

**Dr. Marc Smithers:**
When we dive into what this funding actually supports within higher education, you get a picture of what the federal government prioritizes versus what the state values in education funding. You can see, for instance, that a large portion of state funding for education goes directly to a few key areas. The first is the education piece, which encompasses things like student learning and student access. There's also

a sizable portion of state funding that goes to things like renovation and construction — building and improving student learning and living spaces.

The federal government, meanwhile, provides the bulk of funding to areas like advanced research, which is a large source of funding that colleges and universities seek from the federal government. These splits are really important to keep in mind — not so much because there's going to be a test or anything at the end of this; you don't have to keep these specific figures in mind, but more so to get a sense of the kinds of priorities that the state has versus the kinds of priorities that the federal government has as it relates to public funding for higher education. These priorities are going to be seen in the kinds of grant programs that you see coming out of these two levels of higher education funding.

## Five General Themes of Higher Ed Grant Funding

**Dr. Marc Smithers:**
In general, the areas where we see the most grant funding opportunities in higher education fall into five general themes. Student learning is a large focus, and there are several federal and state programs that seek to support student learning environments in general, but then also in specific academic areas like science and math, or to develop faculty's ability to teach more effectively, or bring innovative teaching methods or advanced learning opportunities to students in college.

Another area of focus is faculty research. As we saw on the previous slide, a lot of this funding comes from the federal government rather than state governments. There have also been large investments at both the federal and state level into increasing access to higher education for various groups, and knowledge completion as well — things like scholarship programs for students from various backgrounds, or tutoring and student support programs.

And finally, there's another large area of focus in job readiness and workforce development programs. This has been especially true at the state level, with a number of states offering funding for institutions to offer credentialing programs, reskilling opportunities, and initiatives in line with the workforce development aims of each state. The federal government has also increased focus in these areas as well.

Taking a closer look at these differences between federal and state programs, you can see that while both federal and state governments have prioritized funding for higher education in a couple of key areas like student learning, research, and workforce development, the federal government prioritizes research more than the states, while states offer more funding in areas like renovation and construction. So it's helpful to understand this broader context of funding for higher education, ultimately so that as a grant seeker, you are, particularly in this competitive environment, focusing your efforts on programs where you're going to be the most competitive.

# Finding the Right Opportunities

**Dr. Marc Smithers:**
That's the broader context. Let's look specifically at the challenge, which is how do you find the right opportunities? When you think about becoming a more competitive grant seeker, the most important step that your institution can take is to ensure that you're finding the right opportunities for your college to pursue. This ultimately comes down to knowing how and where to look for the right opportunities.

## Popular Sources of Higher Ed Funding

**Dr. Marc Smithers:**
The most popular sources of higher education funding at the federal level include probably agencies that you're already familiar with: the Department of Education, the National Science Foundation, but also the Departments of Labor, Energy, and Defense. They also have a lot of programs that colleges and universities are eligible for and competitive for.

When you get down to the state level, there are a lot of different structures to these agencies, but in general typically states will have something like a Department of Education, Department of Labor, Department of Public Safety, things like this, that offer programs colleges and universities should consider. These agencies can have a lot of different names, and one of the most important things you can do as a grant seeker is to familiarize yourself with the state agencies — know their names, their basic structure, and familiarize yourself with their websites just so you can navigate it easily to see when programs open.

Finally, there are some foundations as well — several foundations that prioritize funding higher education programs, and I've included just a handful of these for your consideration.

## Common Errors in Higher Ed Grant Seeking

**Dr. Marc Smithers:**
One of the main reasons why knowing these agencies is important is because one of the first common errors that higher education grant seekers make is getting consumed by the onslaught of available information. Even if you're an experienced grant seeker, you may be tempted to go to a site like Grants.gov and see what programs might be available for your institution to apply for. If you don't know how to filter out irrelevant information on a site like that, you will very quickly drown in the information published each day on these kinds of sites. But if instead you filter this information for programs from that smaller list of relevant agencies I mentioned, this can help you more accurately direct your attention to relevant programs for your institution to consider.

In addition to the number of available programs that are out there, the funding announcements themselves often can total 30 or more pages of information. So familiarizing yourself with how to read a grant opportunity announcement quickly for relevant information can really get you far ahead of the curve. One of the main pieces of information in those announcements that you should review is the eligibility section. That ensures that your institution is actually eligible to apply to that program. But going a step beyond that, if you want to increase your effectiveness in grant seeking, make sure you're not equating your institution's eligibility with your institution's competitiveness for these programs. Your institution is going to be most competitive for programs where the funding goals of that grant program and your institution's characteristics and qualifications match. So paying attention not only to eligibility but also the overall goals and purpose of the program is essential for grant seekers to keep in mind.

Another big temptation for grant seekers — this goes for both experienced and those new to grant seeking — is just trying to go it alone. It's definitely possible for an individual to apply for and win a grant award, but if you want to increase your competitiveness in grant seeking, one of the best ways to do this is to build a grant-seeking team at your institution. This ensures that your proposal will be sharpened by various parts of your institution, and it's not just going to represent the views of one person or one department. This also demonstrates to grant funders that your project has collective institutional buy-in and it's more likely to succeed. Grant funders can really easily pick up on a proposal that's short-sighted or shallow in its approach, and one of the best ways to add depth and broad expertise to your proposal is through the support of a team.

Lastly, another way that institutions can really decrease their competitiveness is simply by giving up when their project's rejected if they've applied to a program. So turning this around and looking at every rejection as serving as an opportunity for your institution to learn how to strengthen your next proposal — take a critical eye to that rejected proposal and try to see how the reviewer saw it. We suggest even reaching out to the funder themselves, see if they'll provide you with any critical feedback. Ultimately use this as an opportunity to improve and build upon all the hard work you've already done in crafting that proposal.

## How to Avoid These Traps

**Dr. Marc Smithers:**
How do you then avoid falling into these traps? This list is not exhaustive, but a few key things you can do to increase your effectiveness in grant seeking: first, again, by focusing on specific agencies. This helps avoid the trap of information overload. Pick a small handful of agencies and include both federal and state agencies in this list. Go to their websites and look at their published priorities. Look at past programs they've offered, and even look through some of their agency contacts. If they have a listserv, sign up for this, because this is a great way to see what the agency themselves is saying about their work

and their priorities. You can start to see patterns and areas of focus by narrowing down your focus to just a few agencies.

In addition to that, networking can really be your friend in many ways, but especially in grant seeking. Try to connect with some colleagues at other institutions that hold similar roles as you, and talk with them specifically about initiatives they have at their institutions and whether and how they may have engaged in grant seeking. This can give you some ideas about how to diversify where you're looking, and even see what kind of projects your institution should be pursuing. People love to share their success stories, so don't assume that they don't want to share their wins with you.

Finally, go a step further and set some grant alerts for yourself in search engines like Google. This can be a great way to keep up on news and press releases about programs and agencies that you want to keep tabs on. You can set alerts for a wide variety of things, so try to select search terms that are specific to whatever project is going to be about. Things like “grant award and artificial intelligence,” or whatever those focus areas are. This is a way that you can stay up on what's happening in this field.

## Increasing Your Competitiveness: The Three Ps

**Dr. Marc Smithers:**
Once you've found the right opportunity, how do you increase your competitiveness on your next proposal? I am admittedly a sucker for alliterations. So the three key ways that you can focus on increasing competitiveness are focusing on the Three Ps: project-based, prioritization, and partnerships.

### Project-Based Proposals

**Dr. Marc Smithers:**
First, ensuring your proposal is project-based means that your proposal is focused on the project your institution is seeking to carry out rather than just on any products your institution is interested in funding with your grant awards. Very few grants are focused just on funding products. They instead fund projects, and specifically projects that have specific outcomes in mind. So you, for instance, may be seeking funding for technology for a new healthcare program you're starting, or funding a new computer lab for your engineering students. But the project is not the technology. The project is the healthcare program or the innovation in your engineering program. Focusing on the project and its outcomes rather than the products themselves greatly increases your competitiveness in these programs.

## Prioritization

**Dr. Marc Smithers:**
In terms of prioritization, it's important to keep in mind that most agencies receive far more proposals for a program than they can fund with their limited award budget. Of these proposals that they receive, a lot of them are going to be from qualified applicants that are eligible and likely have fairly competitive projects that are well developed.

With an abundance of applicants, these programs will then turn to their agency priorities, and these are most often stated in the applications themselves. If your institution wants to be more competitive, paying attention to these priorities and aligning your project with them if possible will ensure that your proposal gains a little bit more traction with reviewers. Of course, it's not always possible based on your institution's strengths and qualifications, but this is actually where giving the most attention to programs where your institution already stands a better chance of being competitive is important.

## Partnerships

**Dr. Marc Smithers:**
In addition to prioritization and project-based proposals, the last thing you can do to increase your institution's competitiveness is by leveraging partnerships. Similar to building an internal grant-seeking team, a proposal that includes not just your institution and its expertise, but also the expertise and support of external partners, really helps your institution be more competitive. Grant funders want to support programs that help reach broader societal goals that they have, rather than simply just supporting a single institution with a singular focus. So any way that your institution can widen the scope of your project's impact increases your attractiveness to grant funders. Consider what partners you may be able to approach for your next proposal, and consider how these partners may help to strengthen your project through their support and expertise.

## Additional Steps to Improve Your Proposal

**Dr. Marc Smithers:**
In addition to the Three Ps, you can also take a few additional steps to improve your proposal, not the least of which is considering an external review of your application. It's often hard for those on the inside to view a proposal with a sincerely critical eye, because you're just too close to the work itself. So consider bringing in an external reviewer that has no connection or emotional buy-in to your project to give you open and honest feedback to strengthen your application.

Additionally, and this may sound really simple, but just make sure that you have all the required pieces of your proposal in place. This is actually where an external reviewer can help as well. But even if you don't have an external reviewer, just make sure that you're doing a quick double-check before

submission to ensure that you have all the required information and documentation. Nothing is more frustrating than to do a ton of work to develop an amazing proposal and have it returned without review just because you forgot to submit one piece of documentation or didn't use the right font size or something like that. These may seem like really small things, but keep in mind that each grant award is an investment that the funder is making in your institution's ability to steward their money well, and one of the key ways that you demonstrate your ability to steward that well is simply by showing that you can follow directions.

Another way to beef up your proposal is to ensure that you're writing a data-based narrative. A compelling story of your project is great, but it's made much stronger with data that supports your story. So take the time in the proposal development phase to gather as much supporting data as you can to demonstrate to your reviewers that your project is worth their investment.

Finally, as I said earlier, don't go it alone. Make sure you're using all the resources that you have at your disposal and at your institution to strengthen your proposal. So connect with your colleagues, be a part of a team that commits to effective grant seeking.

## Getting Grant Ready

**Dr. Marc Smithers:**
A lot of information. Where do you go from here? Now you have some tools to employ for your next grant-seeking journey, but before you jump in, think first about how you can ensure that you and your institution are grant ready. Application windows for grants are on average about 45 days, and unfortunately, these windows seem to be getting shorter and shorter. Institutions really need to ensure that you're ready for programs as they open and not just trying to pull everything together during that short application window. Here are five things that you can do to ensure that your institution is grant ready.

### Build Your Team

**Dr. Marc Smithers:**
First — and at the risk of sounding like a broken record, but I'll say it again — build your team. Get support from institutional leaders, because they will ultimately be the ones to sign off on your project. Grants are not awarded to individuals at institutions, but to institutions themselves, and that requires leadership approval. More than that, though, you want to ensure that your project has institutional support so that you have all the resources you need to effectively seek funding. So in addition to leadership, get someone from your fundraising team, your sponsored programs team if you have one, as well as IT folks and procurement folks, so that you know all the capabilities needed for your project to succeed. Also think about designating a grant champion for your team. That'll be the person who

organizes and pushes your team forward, and ultimately ensures that your project succeeds if it's awarded.

### Gather Your Data

**Dr. Marc Smithers:**
As you build your team, gather the data you need. This can take some time, so don't wait until a program opens — gather it now. This is the data that will ultimately help give your story structure and support, and make sure that you also can clearly identify your needs for your project.

### Identify and Articulate Your Needs

**Dr. Marc Smithers:**
What are you hoping to do in your project and why is funding needed for it to be successful? Make sure these needs are clearly and succinctly stated — maybe even thinking of it like considering how you would give an elevator pitch for your project. In 30 seconds or less, explain to someone what your project is and why it needs funding. Make sure, though, that you're focusing on the project itself and its outcomes, not just on the products that'll be funded by the award. Funders are most concerned with what their money is enabling you to do, not ultimately on what the money is being spent on.

### Develop a Proposal Timeline

**Dr. Marc Smithers:**
Lastly, look at the previous application guidances to see how the program was structured previously. Look at what the application window was like and work backwards from there. Construct an outline of a proposal development timeline so that you can stay on task. And most importantly, so that you're not saving things till the last minute. Competitive proposals, sad to say, are almost never written in a coffee-fueled weekend. They take time to craft, so make sure that you're giving yourself that time to do it. The time you spend preparing your institution to be grant ready is time very well spent. I'm going to pass things over to Ashley to talk a little bit more about some of our resources. Ashley?

## Grants Office Services

**Ashley Schultz:**
Thank you so much, Marc, that was really wonderful information. Really appreciate that. I will talk very quickly about some free resources available to you in addition to the advice Marc just gave, and then we'll go to questions from our audience. I have three questions so far, so while I'm talking here, if you have a couple more questions, feel free again to drop them in the bottom right-hand corner for that Q&A box.

High level, I just want to let you know we have additional free resources on our website under our Guidance for Grant Seekers tab. In there there are several videos that walk you through a proposal from building your project team and identifying your project idea or your concept, all the way through until you're editing and preparing to click Submit. We also have a series of articles on there as well, so if instead of watching the videos, you'd rather just read up — lots of really great content on that website.

If you need some additional assistance, if you'd like to talk to someone like Marc or someone on Marc's team, we also have a variety of paid resources for you. You can fill out our contact form. Essentially what we ask of you is, who are you and where are you looking to get funded? Marc and the higher education team are available to chat with you about your project goals, any sort of technology or other budgetary needs that you have to achieve those goals, and then go out and find those best-fit funding opportunities for you. So they can go out, look at that federal, state, and foundation funding landscape that Marc mentioned, and talk through all the available funding opportunities, help you identify one or two that you'd like to move forward with, and then help you through that application process all the way up until you click Submit.

Some folks follow us through all five of these steps; some folks join us on step four or on step five. All of our services are there to help you wherever you are in your grant-seeking journey. You can contact us at education@grantsoffice.com or head over to GrantsOffice.com or scan the QR code here to chat with us.

I will also say, before we switch over to Q&A, that this is our last webinar until we announce a little project that Grants Office has been working on. So a little project is actually a huge project. We are going to be going live with a grants search and collaboration platform. More details about that are going to be announced in the first part of September. So if you are invited to this event by a colleague or if this is one of your first free webinars that you've joined from the Grants Office team, then I definitely recommend that you make sure that you're subscribed so that you can get more updates on that platform as we have them, in the first part of September.

## Q&A Session

**Ashley Schultz:**
Marc, I have a few questions here for you. I'll read them out to you.

### Q1: Are changes to federal grant programs affecting state programs or state agencies?

**Ashley Schultz:**
The first question is about some changes that are happening to the federal programs. Are any changes happening to the federal grant programs affecting state programs or any of the other state agencies that you mentioned?

**Dr. Marc Smithers:**
That's a good question. So yes and no — it really depends on where the funding originates in those different programs, and sometimes that can be a little hard to tell. There are some programs that may look like state programs that are actually what are called federal pass-through programs. Things like the Perkins program that funds some career and technical education, or some programs out of the Department of Homeland Security — things like that. The State Homeland Security Program, for instance, that institutions of higher education have received funding for in the past.

Those programs are going to be affected because that money actually does originate in the federal government. There's a little bit more oversight there, so those will be affected to a certain extent. Some state programs that are truly just state funded — they're not seeing the same level of changes that we're seeing at some of the federal programs. So it's really going to differ and depend on where the funding actually comes from.

One of the other things is, obviously, we've seen some changes around some priorities at the federal government. We haven't seen the same level of changes of priorities at the state programs. That's one of the ways that I think some of those changes are not being seen at the state programs — not just in terms of the funding amounts and programs themselves, but also in the priorities as well. That's why I think knowing your state's agencies really well can give you a leg up as opposed to some other grant seekers in your state.

## Q2: Do the tips you've mentioned also work for foundation funding?

**Ashley Schultz:**
This question is somewhat related to that. This person is saying their institution is looking at foundation funding opportunities more because of the changes in the federal funding landscape and because of the changes in some of the priorities. Do the tips that you've mentioned work for those foundations as well?

**Dr. Marc Smithers:**
Absolutely. I didn't talk too much about foundations just because there's so many out there, and foundations can be a great way to diversify the ways that you seek funding. There are some nationally focused foundations, there are some more locally focused foundations. In general, a lot of the things that were mentioned really do apply to grant seeking from foundations. They also want to fund projects, not products. They also want to see collective buy-in. They have, I would say, even more interest in reaching some of these broader societal goals, and they are pretty specific and strategic around investing in institutions that they believe will help reach those societal goals. So again, broadening some of the impacts that your institution's project is going to have — not just on your institution but on maybe the community or the county or the state — that would be very interesting to them. So

definitely, the tips that were mentioned today absolutely can be applied to foundation grant seeking as well.

### Q3: How can a small institution build a grant-seeking team with limited energy or resources?

**Ashley Schultz:**
This question says: our institution is pretty small. I don't know what we have in terms of energy or resources to build a grant-seeking team. Any advice there — what should we do?

**Dr. Marc Smithers:**
This is definitely a concern, because having worked in higher education institutions, there's always more to do than there are hands to do it. It's helpful to approach grant seeking with the right mindset. Grant seeking is a great way for your institution to do some long-range strategic planning. It's not going to be a great way to get quick funds or anything like that. So looking at it as a marathon, not a sprint, can actually help you approach those people who may feel like they don't have the energy or resources to be a part of a team. Just really being clear with them about the level of time commitment and the overall sort of race that you're running. So I think that's important.

The other thing is really being strategic about the timing of when you're actually talking with them about being a part of a grant-seeking team. Institutions of higher education are real busy right now as they seek to welcome students back to campus, so going from this meeting and going to talk to somebody about, “Do you want to join my grant-seeking team?” — probably not the week to ask them that. But this could be something you approach them about in late October or November, depending on what the rhythms of your institution are. Being very strategic about that timing question is going to be really helpful.

The other thing that I would suggest is to really connect with some colleagues at other institutions. There are a lot of small institutions that have pretty robust grant-seeking teams, even though they don't have the level of people devoted to those efforts. They wear a lot of hats, and so connecting with other colleagues, I think, would be really helpful just to see what their institution does, how they manage it, and get some tips that way.

### Q4: Should our institution be wary of federal sources given executive orders around grant rescissions?

**Ashley Schultz:**
Thank you so much, Marc. So I have one last question here. There's some concern about the wording in a recent executive order around grants, where grants can seemingly be rescinded at will. We operate on a reimbursement basis. Should our institution be wary of federal sources, or will such rescissions not happen all that often?

**Dr. Marc Smithers:**
That is a great question, and I wouldn't say that your concerns are unfounded, because there's a lot of uncertainty right now in federal grant seeking especially. Should you be wary of federal sources? I would not say you should be wary. I think you should just go with your eyes wide open, just to see what the administration is saying about what sorts of programs they want to fund and what those priorities are.

I think now is a great time for institutions of higher education to take a step back and see how aligned they can be with some of the changes and priorities, and just be very honest with themselves and with their constituencies about how much they can be supportive of that. I don't necessarily think you should be wary because of the reimbursement model or rescissions like that. I don't think that's going to be the biggest concern. I think the bigger concern is just to have some internal strategic planning conversations with your leadership team. Is this something that your institution wants to be devoting time and energy to? Not because of the possibility of those funds being pulled necessarily, but because of the institution's ability and/or willingness to support those measures.

## Closing

**Ashley Schultz:**
Thanks, Marc, and thank you to all the folks who asked questions here today. And thank you to all for joining us here for this session. Again, if you would like to see the recording and/or the slides, they are available on GrantsOffice.com starting tomorrow. You're also welcome to contact us at any point in time. Here's our website, here's the QR code over to those Guidance for Grant Seekers resources that I mentioned, and we look forward to seeing you on a future webinar event. Thanks again, Marc, and thanks to you all.

*— End of Transcript —*

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