Chapter Four

Generating and Refining Proposal Ideas

Chapter Topics:

Understanding the Community
Problem- or Need-Based Program Ideas
Understanding Barriers in Program Design
Agency Capacity and Sustainability
Formulating Program Ideas
Applying the Logic Model

The program proposal represents a request for resources to address a need or problem in your community. A strong case must be made as to why this is a problem or need, what has been done previously to address the concern, what will be achieved with the resources requested, how the resources will be used (e.g., services, training), and how success will be measured. The entire proposal rests on the assumption that you have a clear understanding of the nature of the need/problem and have a sound approach or strategy that will have a significant impact in addressing the
concerns. This means that your program idea must be rooted in an understanding of the community and the factors that contribute to the need/problem in the first place.

Understanding the Community

Along with assessing the capacity of your agency/organization to achieve the goals and objectives of a new or expanded initiative, it is also imperative that you demonstrate an understanding of the community in which you will be operating. An awareness of the political and social climate; the issues, needs, and problems faced within the community; and the gaps that exist in addressing them are critical to determining the suitability and the nature of your proposed project.

Moreover, the funder will want to know the extent to which you have clarity about the needs of the target populations and their characteristics, and whether you can effectively navigate within the setting to achieve the stated outcomes. Oftentimes, agency/organization directors will “test out” their ideas with their boards or other community contacts as they proceed to conceptualize the needs/problems and shape the proposed project.

Ideas for proposals start with an awareness of the problems or needs you wish to address. Data can be useful for understanding which group(s) have the need(s) or are experiencing the problem and the magnitude of the concern. Simultaneously, you want to discern whether there are impediments or barriers to the participants/community accessing or using the proposed services that should be considered when designing the program strategy. Additionally, the magnitude of the need or problem may be so great, or complex, that a single approach is insufficient; instead, collaboration or partnership among agencies may be the most effective approach to addressing the problem. This section will discuss how data can be used to understand the nature and magnitude of the problem and can provide implications for shaping the design of the proposed project/program.

Analyzing the Community through Data

Have you ever gone without medical or dental care because you couldn’t afford it? Have you seen homeless mentally ill persons pushing shopping carts up your city streets? These are examples of community needs because they affect the quality of life of the population in a geographic area, and each geographic area can have very unique needs. Other examples include the incidence of HIV infection, the number of babies born with birth
defects, the number of persons who go to bed hungry, the incidence of high school dropouts, domestic violence or date rape, or, perhaps, the quality of air or water. In short, there is a problem in the community that requires attention, and this problem is expressed as a need.

An essential first step in determining the focus of your program is to assess the needs of the community and its resources that can support your efforts in addressing the problem. To document community need (i.e., to show research, demographic data, or other scientific evidence that the problem exists), the grant writer may become involved in conducting research as well as locating various sources of existing data. The following samples of data-collection categories will provide you with a guide to the kind of data useful in both developing programmatic ideas and writing the need statement:

1. Data on the incidence of the need/problem: whether the need has increased, decreased, or remains the same; clients’ current physical, emotional, social, or economic status
2. Data depicting the factors contributing to or causing the problem, and data on related problems
3. Data comparing the need in your target area with other cities, counties, your state, and other states
4. Data on the short- or long-term consequences of no intervention (including cost analysis if available)
5. Data on the activities and outcomes of other organizations responding to the same or similar need
6. Data evidencing a demand for service: waiting lists, requests for service, lack of culturally appropriate services, and costs
7. Data from experts in the field, including research studies on effective intervention strategies and evaluation results

The following section identifies sources for the types of data just described.

Client/Community Need Assessment

A needs assessment gathers information about the client’s/community’s perception of the problem and needs. This type of assessment is usually conducted through interviews with program recipients, through focus groups, or with questionnaires. Many agencies have conducted needs assessments and may be able to share the results with you, such as a local health care council or the United Way. These documents are invaluable to making
a case for your project. If you conduct an assessment on your own, it is important to involve members of various ethnic groups (stakeholders) who experience the problem and who will benefit from the proposed program as well as individuals who serve this population. You may find that there are different perspectives on the problem—and thus different solutions.

City, County, and State Demographic Data

Most county governments and universities compile information about the residents in geographic areas based on U.S. Census data conducted every 10 years. These demographic data provide such things as the number of single-parent households, the income level, the number of children, educational levels, and housing density. Some university-based research centers have “geo-mapping” (geographic information systems) capabilities that allow a user to define a geographic area and extract demographic data and other indicators for that region.

Specific problems or issues are often tracked by county government and by state departments working in those issue areas. Teen pregnancy rates, for example, may be found at the County Health Care Agency, or child abuse rates at the County Department of Social Services. Community-based organizations will frequently have data already compiled on certain community problems. The most organized of these agencies will have the incidence of the problem at the local level (city or county), the state level, and the national level. It is frequently necessary to determine how your geographic area’s needs compare to other areas.

Journal Articles

There is a rich storehouse of information in scientific journals. You will find research into the causes of problems as well as research on effective solutions to the problems. Often, there are discussions of what are called evidenced-based practices that provide data on the outcomes associated with various intervention strategies. Journal articles can help provide the grant writer with the rationale required for a particular program design, with program ideas, and with evaluation strategies. In addition, the bibliographies in the articles in academic journals can help a newcomer to a particular field find other important work quickly. Many journals are now accessible through the Internet.

Local Newspapers

Articles in local newspapers can be another resource to help the grant writer develop a sense of the community’s perception of the problem and
of local resources. (However, the grant writer must be cautioned not to depend solely on newspaper reports, as their articles are only as accurate as their informants.)

**Problem- or Need-Based Program Ideas**

Funders look for convincing evidence that your proposed approach will have the intended impact on those identified factors. How does one go about proposing a solution to address the problem or need? Often, one implicitly or explicitly begins with a theoretical framework that emerges from research and practice. Such a framework indicates the underlying causes and posits possible solutions to the problem or need. Using this evidenced-based practice, we draw on cumulative and repeated evidence or data collected by others addressing the same or similar problem. The outcomes achieved suggest the benefits to using particular approaches or practices. These frameworks identify the factors contributing to the problems and how they interrelate depending on certain conditions or client/community characteristics (see Figure 4.1). For example, X Problem (e.g., homelessness) may be associated with Y Factors (e.g., mental illness, unemployment, drug abuse). Social problems tend to be multi-dimensional, and there is rarely a single factor that explains the phenomenon.

![Figure 4.1 Problem Analysis](image-url)

Figure 4.1      Problem Analysis
In defining the problem, Kettner, Moroney, and Martin (2008) state,

A problem that is inadequately defined is not likely to be solved. Conversely, a problem that is well defined may be dealt with successfully assuming that adequate resources are made available and appropriate services are provided. Still, it must be understood that problem analysis is by nature more an art than a science. (p. 42)

They provide the following questions as a guide to problem analysis (pp. 45–49):

1. What is the nature of the situation or condition?
2. How are the terms being defined?
3. What are the characteristics of those experiencing the condition?
4. What is the scale and distribution of the condition?
5. What social values are being threatened by the existence of the condition?
6. How widely is the condition recognized?
7. Who defines the condition as a problem?
8. What is the etiology of the problem?
9. Are there ethnic and gender considerations?

The theory about how your proposed intervention will address the problem and achieve the desired result is your “theory of change.” Your theory of change stems from the research (evidence-based practice) and other information about what you believe are the best approaches to addressing the primary causes or factors contributing to the problem or need. Different approaches to addressing the same problem often stem from different views or different theoretical frameworks. In conceptualizing program ideas, time should be spent reflecting on the outcomes you desire, the reasons for the success achieved, and the underlying assumptions about what you believe are the causes or contributing factors. One should be able to logically connect the proposed outcomes with the proposed solutions back to the underlying causes or factors.

Since it is recognized that there is rarely one precipitating factor, but rather a multiplicity of underlying factors that contribute to the needs or problems, agencies/organizations will often seek integrated solutions. Thus, while an agency may proffer a single solution, it may be that success is not sustainable across different groups until a combination of strategies is used. This points to the benefits of using a collaborative approach, which is discussed in Chapter 3.
Understanding Barriers in Program Design

In addition to the theoretical frameworks that suggest a particular strategy or approach, there are other dimensions to consider when conceptualizing proposal ideas. Key among them is the service delivery model to be used. For example, you may decide that job training will be provided to improve the economic status of single mothers. While evidence-based practice may indicate that this is a critical strategy, the way in which you implement the strategy may determine how effective or the level of success attained. There may also be actual or perceived barriers to service that impact a client’s willingness or ability to fully engage the service. The following example will illustrate:

An individual whose quality of life has been impaired by a disease process most often sees improvement once he/she obtains treatment. When, for example, a child is treated for a painful ear infection, the child feels better, the parents are happy their child is well again and the mother is able to return to work, and the teacher may remark that the child is doing so much better in school. These are examples of outcomes that were the result of the medical intervention.
However, there may have been several reasons why the child did not see a doctor sooner to resolve the painful infection: Perhaps the parents were without the financial resources to pay for a visit to the doctor, or maybe they had no transportation to the clinic; perhaps they spoke a language other than English and feared they would not be understood. The reasons why a client does not access service are known as barriers to service.

Barriers to Service

Barriers may exist as a result of a client’s orientation to services wherein he/she may lack the knowledge, desire, or skills necessary to seek treatment or prevent a problem. An example of this type of barrier exists in drug treatment services when the client denies that he/she has a problem. The client may also hold attitudes or beliefs that are not compatible with the seeking of certain types of services. For example, an individual who uses traditional cultural healers may not value the services offered by Western doctors. Many times, however, barriers are created by the service providers themselves or through the program design, and are usually assessed in five domains:

1. **Availability:** Are services provided in the community, or is the cost prohibitive? Are the hours of operation convenient for the client?

2. **Accessibility:** Can the client get to the site? Does it take special physical needs into consideration such as handicap access? Is there transportation to and from the site? Are there eligibility criteria that may influence accessibility? To what extent are multiple services provided at a convenient single location?

3. **Acceptability:** Are the services in the client’s language and sensitive to cultural issues? Is the staff perceived as friendly, professional, competent, and helpful? Is the decor and design of the service setting inviting to and respectful of the client?

4. **Appropriateness:** Is this the right service for the client? Will this service address the problem as the agency expects?

5. **Adequacy:** Is the service sufficient in amount and approach to meet the individual or community’s needs? Are services as comprehensive as possible?

**Agency Capacity and Sustainability**

Another consideration when generating proposal ideas is the agency’s capacity to implement the proposed program and to sustain it at the end of the funding cycle. Even if funding is provided for the program, the agency/
organization may not have the ability to fully offer the service proposed, or to continue it after the proposal funding ends. The full cost may not match the amount received, staff training and development may not be sufficient in the areas needed, or there may be a lack of experience in serving the designated population, that is, the service is not within the provider’s ability or range of practice. The fundamental question is, “Does the agency have the ability to provide sufficient service to achieve the impact expected within the resources provided?” All of these factors must be analyzed and considered as you explore proposal ideas.

While your immediate goal is to obtain funding for your program or initiative, funders will also request that you address what will happen to the program once they discontinue funding. The typical question is, “Do you plan to continue this project in the future? If so, how do you plan to support or fund it?”

In the majority of cases, the answer to the first question will be “Yes,” followed by a brief description of how the program may be developed in the future, what major changes may occur in program format, or what new opportunities may be on the horizon. The answer to the second question may be more problematic for the grant writer. Human nature being what it is, we are more likely to have fixed our minds on obtaining the initial funding for the project rather than concerning ourselves with the funding of the project beyond the current request.

If you view the question from the funder’s perspective, you will realize the wisdom of this inquiry about future funding. It is nice to support projects that will do wonderful things over the course of the funding, but rather frustrating to find that they simply cease when your funds are no longer available. From a funder’s perspective, it is reasonable to look for projects that have the potential to continue the work into the future.

It is extremely useful to consider ways to “institutionalize” your project, meaning, to imbed it into existing service delivery systems such as schools, hospitals, churches, or other agency services so that it continues forward when you have completed the contract. For example, the state is funding drug-prevention education programs for middle school students. Can you design the program so that it provides direct services and teacher training in year 1, so that a minimum of supportive service and training is required in year 2 when the funding is reduced or ends? This will allow the program to continue on into the future with minimal funding.

Working with a collaborative or in partnership with other organizations can offer excellent opportunities for incorporating aspects of the project across agencies beyond the initial funding. The following discussion will assist you in thinking about the sustainability of your program. Do not be surprised if, again, consideration of this element during the proposal
development process impacts or helps to reshape the project and leads you to emphasize certain aspects of the project over others.

Sustainability: Determining Income-Generating Potentials

In reality, most human service programs have the potential to generate some income through the services they provide. However, as many clients are unable to pay the full cost of services rendered, future funding plans often combine the income that can be generated for services and materials with some combination of new grants and contracts. Ask yourself the following questions to ascertain whether the project has the potential to generate some income on its own:

- Can you charge a fee-for-service to your clients?
- Is it possible to market products or materials developed under the project?
- Can you ask your program recipients for a donation?
- How can a collaborative sustain the program through fee structure?

The Life Cycle of a Project

What happens when you forecast the project over a five-year period? This perspective is useful for seeing yet unrecognized potential for the project. Consider the project as having three stages:

1. There is total reliance on public or private funds as you develop and implement the project.

2. You receive some income as a result of implementing a fee-for-service structure, some grant money, and some donated services of both volunteers and product. You are also selling some of the products and materials developed by the project in the first one to two years.

3. By the end of the five years, the project has enough income to enable at least a small-scale program to continue.

Multi-Source Funding

Consider whether, perhaps, there is a way to tie the service into other markets over the course of the funding so as to develop a future for the project. For example, the program you are delivering may also meet the needs of individuals in the workplace. You may develop contracts with corporations over the course of the contract that will maintain services in the future. In other words, you will charge the corporations full fee for the services and be able to use this income to subsidize low-income clients.
There may be some opportunity to seek corporate advertising donations to support your project, especially if the company has an interest in reaching a particular target group. You might include a corporate sponsorship in a newsletter, on materials developed for community use, or on an agency website. The steps you take to ensure the continuance of your project into the future will pay off significantly. As discussed in Chapter 1, agencies will have multiple sources of revenue to support and sustain their programs. Such resource diversification has become critical in the current economic climate, and it is wise that some consideration be given to sustainability as one prepares the proposal. You will want to write the answers to these questions with optimism for the future and creativity. In fact, what you plan for the future may just come true!

Formulating Program Ideas

The previous sections of this chapter helped you to think about developing a program with those to be served foremost in your mind. It also challenged you to look beyond your own ideas about what might be a good program idea and review the scientific and professional practice literature. You have also been advised to consider the capacity of the agency/organization to successfully launch the project and to think of ways in which all or parts of the initiative can be sustained post-funding.

You now need to begin refining your thinking and honing your ideas to formulate the specific direction you are heading in with the proposed program. Similar to a funnel, you start with a number of ideas and directions that could address the need/problem (see Figure 4.3). You consider these in light of current resources, opportunities, agency capacity, as well as constraints, along with any parameters that the funder may have. Ultimately, you develop a program that you believe will achieve the desired results and address the need/problem.

The following steps and the associated questions will provide you a foundation for beginning to prepare the proposal.

**Step 1: Understand the need/problem.** Answer these questions: What is the problem? Why is this a problem? Who is experiencing the problem? Is it recognized as a problem/need, by whom, and how widespread is it? Are there social/political implications? What factors contribute to the need/problem?

**Step 2: Brainstorm solutions.** Think creatively and freely about what might be done to address this problem. Dream of what might be possible and effective in creating change and positive results. Examine the scientific and professional practice literature. Consider the strengths and resources within your target population and the community that can be coalesced to achieve positive results.
Proposal Writing

Step 3: Select solutions. Identify the best program ideas from your list that will achieve the desired outcomes. Consider your organization’s mission and capacity to undertake the program. What are the strengths and the constraints? How can these be addressed? How can the work be sustained or integrated after the funding ends? Develop a succinct statement of how proposed solutions will lead to the expected outcome.

Step 4: Describe expected results and benefits. What will be the goals and the outcomes from the program recipients’ perspective (both short and long term)? How will the community benefit?

Step 5: Think about barriers. What will keep this program from being successful? Is the agency prepared to deliver these services? Are there any broader service delivery barriers, such as regulations related to sharing client information? Can you find a way to solve these problems? Would linkage to other agencies address these barriers?

Step 6: Determine tasks to accomplish solutions. What are the major activities needed to implement the program—for example, contacts to schedule, staffing, curriculum development, site procurement, and so on?

Step 7: Estimate resources needed. What are resources needed in both human and monetary terms? What kinds of skills will be needed to implement this project? What will it cost? What other groups need to be
involved? Are resources sufficient to achieve the desired outcomes? What are the community’s assets or strengths?

**Step 8: Make necessary adjustments to solutions and benefits.** Most of the time, we think of programs that cost more than available funding or we find an insurmountable barrier or other problem in implementation. We have to make some adjustments in the project.

**Step 9: Identify measurement of outcomes.** How will we measure success? What evidence is needed to determine whether we have been successful? (We will address this in greater detail in Chapter 7.)

The following example illustrates how program development, theoretical orientations, and service delivery strategies come together. Let’s say that I want to design a teen pregnancy prevention program for young adolescents. I am aware of the fact that this is a developmental period in which peers have a significant influence on each other. In the professional literature, “social learning” theory is one way to examine peer pressure and social norms. I select a curriculum developed on the principles of social learning theory and design my program to include traditional classroom instruction, a teen theater component, a parent-education component to improve parent–child communication, and a community advocacy component to address social norms promulgated through advertising and the media.

Then, as I am reading the program-evaluation literature, I find the types of activities that have been used in the past in such programs, and their success in reaching their goals. Suppose that I learn that the classroom educational component is more effective when provided by college-age adults as compared to teens or older adults and, consequently, I choose to design my educational intervention using college-age students. In this case, I can be said to be following “best practices” in that I am combining a sound theoretical orientation with a proven service delivery plan. I am now most likely to succeed.

**Applying the Logic Model**

The questions identified in the previous section can now be incorporated into what is referred to as a *logic model*. The logic model is another way of presenting your ideas and integrating the various proposal components. The following defines this tool and process:

Logic models are a visual method of presenting an idea. They offer a way to describe and share an understanding of relationships among elements necessary to operate a program or change effort. Logic models describe a bounded project or initiative: both what is planned (the doing) and what
results are expected (the getting). They provide a clear roadmap to a specified end. (Knowlton & Phillips, 2009, p. 5)

The basic logic model is derived from systems theory and depicts a sequence of events that are expected to achieve the predictive impact. Using the logic model can help shape the overall proposal and provide confidence that your proposed program or intervention can be successful. Knowlton and Phillips (2009, p. 43) identified components in the program logic model, which fundamentally answers three questions:

“What human and material resources will we have available?”

“What will we do?”

“What will we get from what we did?”

What human and material resources will we have available to conduct the project?
What are the inputs or resources associated with the project? Examples include

- human resources, for example staff, volunteers, consultants, project clients or participants; and
- material resources, for example facilities, funds, project materials, technology.

What will we do in the project?
What is the process or the set of activities to be conducted using the human and material resources? What is the overall strategy to be employed? Examples include

- education,
- training,
- counseling,
- physical activities, and
- evaluation and assessment.

What are the outputs or the measurements associated with the activities or services provided? Examples include

- number and types of participants who attend or complete the program;
- number of hours associated with the activities;
- client logs or other data collected on participants;
- products or materials produced, for example curricula and manuals; and
- perceptions of participants toward activities or services.
What benefit or what will be derived from the project?

What are the short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes or demonstrated changes or benefits to those who participated in the program? Depending on the length of the program or service and the nature of the intervention, changes may occur at different rates. It may be easier to increase one’s knowledge about a subject (short-term outcome) but take longer to change behavior (intermediate or long-term outcome). Examples include:

- increased knowledge about healthy foods (short term), and
- reduced Body Mass Index (intermediate or long term).

What is the long-term impact? What individual, community, or societal changes occurred? It is assumed that with a successful program, there will be changes that will, over time, have an effect on the overall need/problem. Examples include:

- improved community health indicators, and
- reduction of domestic violence reports.

Knowlton and Phillips (2009, p. 55) argue that to “test” the quality of your logic model, you should apply the SMART principles:

Specific: The model describes clearly and concisely what you plan to do so that one can see the direct connection to the desired outcomes.

Measurable: The ability to evaluate in both quantitative and qualitative means is evident.

Action-oriented: The approach or strategy employed will produce the desired change in knowledge, skill, or behavior.

Realistic: The nature of the project/program is feasible; it can be accomplished under the circumstances that exist.

Timed: There is a specified time associated with undertaking the work and achieving the expected outcomes.

Figure 4.4 depicts a program logic model. The content of this chapter provides you with a framework and foundation needed to begin writing the proposal. The next four chapters are focused on how you organize and write the typical sections required in the RFP. Though the headings or labels may differ by funder, there are standard expectations that you will (1) identify the need or problem; (2) establish your goals, objectives, and the plan for achieving them; (3) measure how successful you were; and (4) identify the resources needed and requested. Let’s get started!
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<tr>
<th>Inputs—Resources (Examples)</th>
<th>Process—Activities (Overall Strategy) (Examples)</th>
<th>Outputs—Measurements Associated with the Activities or Services Provided (Examples)</th>
<th>Outcomes—Demonstrated Changes or Benefits (Short Term, Intermediate, Long Term) (Examples)</th>
<th>Long-Term Impact (Individual, Community, or Societal Changes) (Examples)</th>
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<td>Human Resources</td>
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<td>• No. and profile of participants who attend</td>
<td>• Increased knowledge about healthy foods</td>
<td>• Improved community health indicators</td>
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<td>• Staff</td>
<td>• Training</td>
<td>• No. and profile of participants who complete the program</td>
<td>• Weekly moderate exercise</td>
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<td>• Volunteers</td>
<td>• Counseling</td>
<td>• No. of hours associated with the activities</td>
<td>• Reduced Body Mass Index</td>
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<td>• Consultants</td>
<td>• Physical activities</td>
<td>• Client logs or other data collected on participants</td>
<td>• Lowered Blood Pressure</td>
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<td>• Clients/participants</td>
<td>• Evaluation and assessment</td>
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Figure 4.4 An Example of the Logic Model