

This article addresses the importance of recognizing what sustainability means to getting grants and more important, developing great programs with long-term effects.

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Sustainability... What Separates Good Grants from Great Programs

Acquaint yourself with the concept of project sustainability

If you're not familiar with the concept of project sustainability, you'd be well-served to acquaint yourself with it before applying for a US Department of Education (ED) or foundation grant, where you'll get a quick lesson in its importance. You're likely to find that your proposal must include a description of how you will sustain your project beyond the grant period. Many schools and districts receive federal and private grants that are used to implement programs, but these programs all too often end when grant funds dry up.

So what is project sustainability?

First of all, sustainability does not refer to an organization's ability to keep its staff and activities after the grant period ends. Project sustainability denotes an organization's ability to accurately determine and maintain desired outcomes, achieve long-term growth, and change in accordance with evolving community conditions and needs.

In 2003, the ED commissioned a field study of the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program (www.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/other/field-focusedstudy/ffs-vol1.pdf), which helped at-risk schools make the necessary reforms so that students meet achievement standards. The study examined two views on sustainability.

View 1:

The first view maintains that the "central changes" to be sustained should be the practices associated with the originally supported research-based method.

View 2:

The second view holds that "successful sustainability" is not necessarily associated with the continued use of one particular method, but could involve the transition from one research-based method to another, over time. This view is based on the idea that, rather than just adhering to the same initial practices, methods may need to be adapted as student improvement occurs.

Sustainability Findings

A 2003 ED study on the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program, which provides academic enrichment opportunities for children attending low-performing schools, also addressed the issue of sustainability (*When Schools Stay Open Late: The National Evaluation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program First Year Findings*; www.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/other/learningcenters/clcreport2004.pdf). The study revealed that grantees relied "heavily" on grant funds, and few had developed "concrete actions" toward

sustainability. Three factors were cited by grantees as having the greatest impact on sustainability efforts:

1. Program directors hold the responsibility for sustainability, but more than 50 percent hold other responsibilities, as well.
2. Grantees in remote and low-income areas have limited local resources.
3. The 21st Century program did not require any matching funds. When the 21st Century program was reauthorized, it addressed sustainability by extending the number of years a grantee can receive funds and allowing states to set matching requirements.

Although funding is a sustainability issue discussed in this national study, it is important to recognize that funding is a result of effective sustainability planning and not the single factor measuring sustainability.

Source: Keeping Your Program Growing After the Money Runs Out; T.H.E. Journal, December 1, 2005; Sheila Fernley