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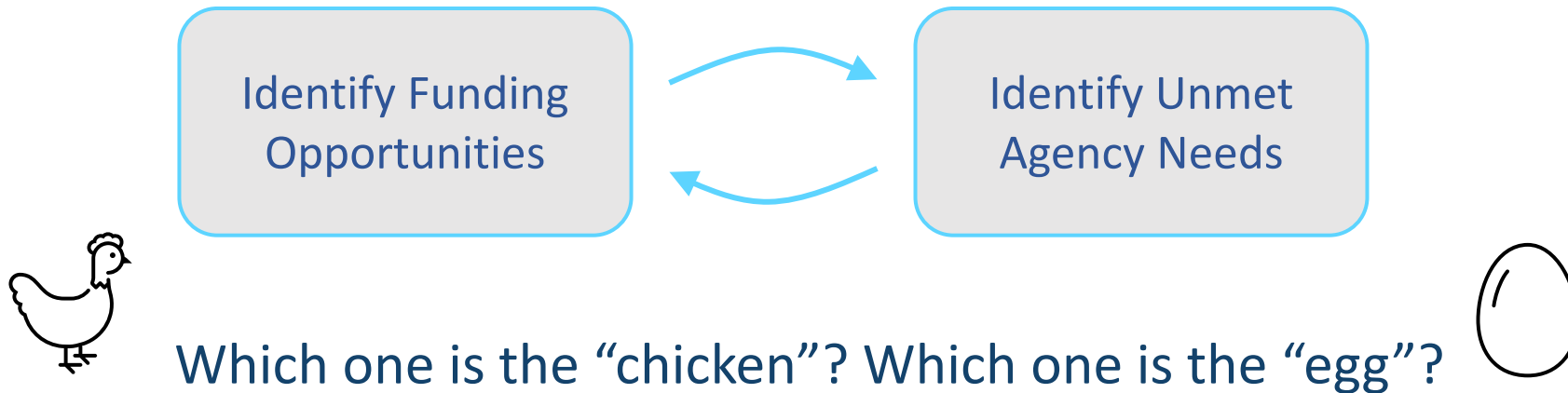
Seeking and Pursuing Federal Grants:
Developing a Competitive Proposal
February 16, 2024

Resource Materials
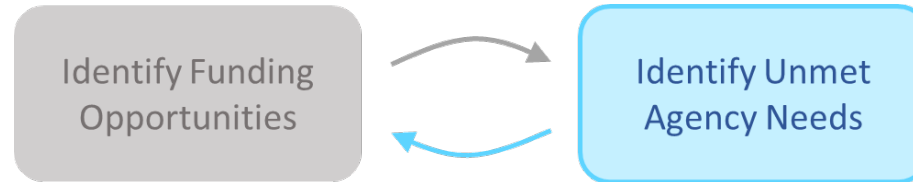
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Seeking federal grants

Where to begin?

| Identify Funding Opportunities | ⇄ | Identify Unmet Agency Needs |

Which one is the "chicken"? Which one is the "egg"?

Either way, it starts with **IDENTIFICATION**

Identifying Unmet Agency Needs

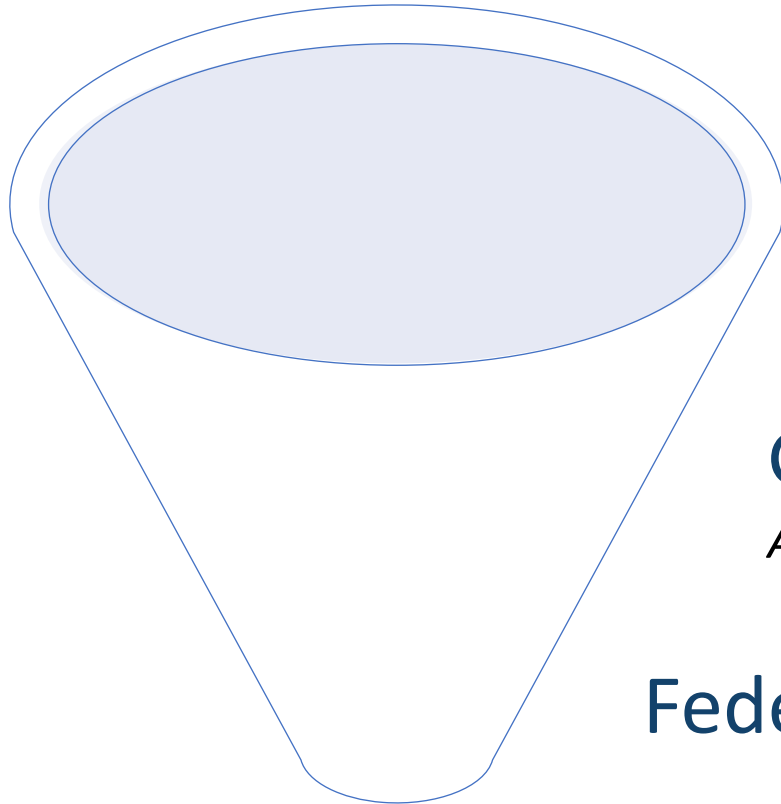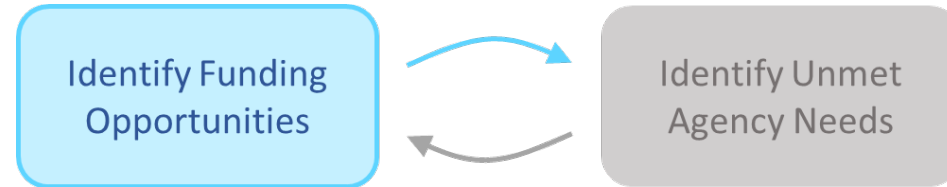| Identify Funding Opportunities | ⟷ | Identify Unmet Agency Needs |

A needs assessment can help you narrow your search

Questions to consider:

- *What is our aim? What outcomes are we hoping to achieve?*
- *Who else is interested in this outcome? (as funder or partner)*
- *Whom will this benefit?*
- *How does this need align to the agency mission?*
- *Will this be new? Or will this expand something that already exists?*
- *What are our non-negotiables?*

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Identifying Funding Opportunities

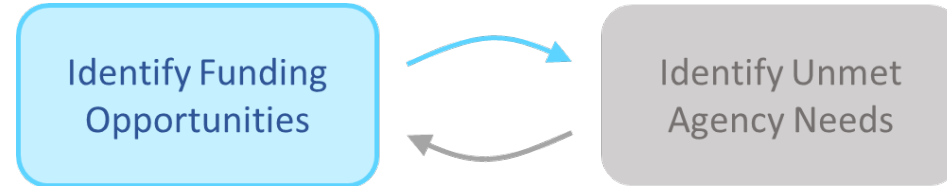Identify Funding Opportunities ⇄ Identify Unmet Agency Needs

Federalregister.gov

Grants.gov
Also the portal through which most federal grants must be submitted

Federal agency websites and forecasts

Identifying Funding Opportunities

Identify Funding Opportunities ⟷ Identify Unmet Agency Needs

Variables to Consider:

- **Eligibility**

  Tip: prioritize opportunities where there is <u>restricted</u> eligibility (instead of open to any applicant); bonus points are sometimes awarded for certain circumstances (e.g., rurality, economic opportunity zones, etc.)

- **Probability of success** (single vs multiple award)

- **Available lead time** (and cyclicality)

- **Amount of funding available** (effort vs return)

- **Relationships** (new vs existing with program officer, partners, etc.)

Identifying Funding Opportunities

Identify Funding Opportunities → Identify Unmet Agency Needs
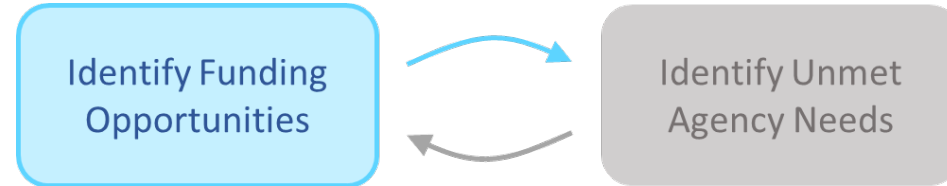
General Tips

- Learn the cycles; many recurring federal opportunities (usually annual)
- Prioritize and learn your targeted federal agencies
- Automate your monitoring
- Proactively engage and communicate with the funder
- Ask questions if given the opportunity
- Check out prior winners

Common Traps

- Assuming the forecast will always be true
- Starting too late
- Failure to prioritize too many good ideas
- Lack of discipline to your intent
- Overthinking "competitors"

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Tips for Unpacking Funding Announcements

Familiarize yourself with the language: RFI, RFA, RFP, NOFO, FOA

Once you find an opportunity you like, create **two matrices**:

Compliance matrix	**Scoring** matrix
Helps you map out requirements and parameters of the application (e.g., required sections, page count, disclosures, etc.)	Helps you optimize your application for scoring; used throughout the preparation process and during reviews

Developing Key Components of the Proposal

Grant proposal components will vary by federal agency
- However, within agencies, grant structure tends to be pretty consistent (learn your agency!)

Regardless of the funder, the following components will almost certainly be required at a minimum:

Why	How/What	What/When/Where	Who	How Much
Rationale	Your "Solution"	Activity Timeline	Key Personnel	Budget

Developing Key Components of the Proposal

Why
Rationale

- Clarify the problem to solve
- Use <u>data</u> to make the point
- Weave the problem statement into the rest of the proposal

How/What
Your "Solution"

- Express the theory of change or logic model
- Why should a reviewer believe this will work? Evidence? Research?
- How will you assess progress? Outputs? Outcomes?
- This part takes the longest

What/When/Where
Activity Timeline

- Balance required (not too vague, not too detailed)
- Reviewers will look for reasonableness
- Under-promise / over-deliver
- Often aligned to *Federal* fiscal year
- Include reporting and evaluation

Who
Key Personnel

- Resumes/Bios (tailor these!)
- Is the team credible?
- Will this require new hires?
- Do partners have a history of working together?

How Much
Budget

- Direct vs indirect costs
- Cost share? Matching?
- Sub-awards/ sub-contracts
- Budget cap typically provided
- "cost reasonableness"

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Other Common Grant Components

- Management plan

- Sustainability plan

- Dissemination plan

- Evaluation plan

- Examples of relevant past projects (past performance)

- Letters of commitment

- Proposal abstract

- Disclosures (e.g., conflicts of interest)

- Federal forms (e.g., SF-424)

Post-Submission

What to expect:

- Radio silence from the funder (this can be frustrating)
- In many cases, application winners will be notified <u>before</u> the broader pool of applicants
  - *Example: they may ask about any desired redactions, they may ask you to confirm a summary abstract*

- *Somewhat common*: You may be asked for additional clarifying information from the funder while they review
- *Less common*: You may be asked to provide an oral presentation
- *Less common*: You may be asked to address additional questions; often called a '2-step' proposal

Post-Submission

Practice good hygiene

- After submission, conduct a lessons learned session with those involved

- Catalog content that's transferrable (e.g., research citations, program descriptions, etc.)

- Document the level of effort required to complete the application (this will improve your ability to budget for future proposals)

Prepare a game plan for what happens when you win/lose

- Who needs to be notified? (where can we minimize surprises)

- What needs to happen to get a fast start?

- Self-care! Most grant applications are rejected; 10-30% win rate is typical)