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**Designing Performance Metrics for Grant Professionals:  
Recommendations from the Field**

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**Abstract**

In the November 2018 issue of the *Journal of the Grant Professionals Association*, the authors examined the topic of performance evaluation for grant professionals. This research, 'Measuring Up: A Review of Current Grant Professional Performance Metrics' identified the most commonly used performance metrics among grant professionals practicing in nearly every area of the field. This strategy paper is a follow-up to the research. It seeks to provide an overview of the most frequently used metrics for grant professional performance evaluation. It also aims to provide examples of targeted performance metrics grant professionals can use to better capture the value they bring to their employers and clients. Additionally, this paper will discuss the limits of performance metrics in measuring the contributions of a grants professional.

**Introduction**

Grant professionals have been calling for the establishment of standardized performance metrics for the field almost since grant writing became recognized as a profession (Faruqi, 2004; Tiernan, 2012; Tilzey, 2016). Yet, in spite of these urgings, there has been little progress in developing or vetting common sets of key performance metrics to assist grant professionals in measuring and reporting on the value that they bring to their institutions (Calabrese & Mason, 2014).

In the spring of 2018, authors Amanda Neese and Julie Boll embarked on a research study to identify the performance metrics grant professionals are using and why. The goal of their research was to propose a set of expanded metrics that all grant professionals, regardless of their field of practice, could use to comprehensively track and measure their performance. The results of this study were published in the *Grant Professionals Association Journal* in November 2018 and affirmed anecdotal evidence that:

- Grant professionals are responsible for a host of work functions that stretch far beyond proposal development.
- Many of these functions—relationship building skills, knowledge and expertise in the field, and the ability to manage multiple projects with competing deadlines—are difficult to measure. This is in part because they are more qualitative, and thus more subjective, in nature.

This strategy paper will build on the most commonly used performance metrics previously reported by grant professionals in the 2018 Neese-Boll survey. It will also take a deeper dive into the specific metrics grant professionals can use to demonstrate the scope of their work and the value they bring to their employers and clients. The suggestions provided within this paper are meant to start a conversation around the idea of developing standard performance metrics for grant professional evaluation while also discussing the limitations of the metrics presented.

The authors propose three steps to strengthening grant professional performance evaluation: (1) Begin by incorporating the most frequently used performance metrics into any evaluation tool already in use; (2) Add the suggested metrics that best reflect the role(s) and function(s) of the grant professional being evaluated, either within an organization or in service to clients; and (3) Develop a mechanism for tracking and reporting the metrics selected consistently.

### **A Place to Begin: The most frequently used performance metrics for grant professional evaluation.**

When designing a performance evaluation tool for grant professionals, it is helpful to understand how most grant professionals measure and track performance. Independent of their area of practice, respondents to the 2018 Neese-Boll study identified the following performance metrics with the highest frequency, meaning that at least 50% of respondents ( $n \geq 108$ ) reported that they were currently using one or more of the following metrics to evaluate their performance.

1. Dollar amount of funds awarded (90%);
2. Number of proposals submitted (84%);
3. Number of proposals funded (82%);
4. Dollar amount of proposals submitted (pending but not yet awarded/denied) (58%); and
5. Rate of proposals funded vs. proposals submitted ('Win Rate') (53%).

While these metrics offer a place to begin designing grant professional performance evaluations, they do not capture the full scope of work for most grant professionals. Additionally, focusing solely on a dollars in/dollars out model for performance evaluation can be damaging to an institution's grant seeking operations. It can create risk aversion in grant professionals (Poderis, 2011) who may then seek to return to funders and projects with which they have had previous success instead of stretching to pursue new opportunities. And, creating systems that require grant professionals to 'stretch' their goals and increase their efforts without the addition of resources can lead to burnout and job dissatisfaction (Poderis, 2011).

An additional challenge of using performance metrics that are largely numbers-focused relates to benchmarking. In order to evaluate performance using these types of metrics, grant professionals must have existing benchmarks against which they can compare their current and future performance. These benchmarks vary from institution to institution and even within institutions and between grant professionals. As a result, institutions and grant professionals who choose to use these types of metrics should take care to benchmark grant professional performance only against his/her past performance in these categories--not against other grant professionals' performance at the same or similar institutions (Poderis, 2011).

This is not to say that quantitative, numbers-focused performance metrics should be abandoned, only that they should be developed thoughtfully. Grant professionals should give consideration to the institution or client's past successes and grant portfolio, as well as the grant professional's own past performance.

### **Adding Performance Metrics That Reflect Value**

Success or failure of a grant professional cannot be measured by numbers alone (Poderis, 2011). As one respondent to the 2018 Neese-Boll survey observed,

When judging a grant writer's performance, it seems that the bottom line (i.e., the total dollar amount of grants funded in a fiscal year) is the only metric that *really* matters to most [employers]. Meeting or exceeding the organization's annual grants funded goal is paramount. Doing things that contribute to the long-term sustainability of the organization's funding **is also important**. This might include (1) researching new sources of grants and sponsorships; (2) building relationships with program staff, board members, community partners, and other stakeholders; and (3) contributing to the nonprofit's special events, marketing communications, and donor database. However, little credit is usually given for the often-substantial amount of time that a grant writer spends doing these things.

### **Expanding The Grant Professional's Performance Evaluation Tool**

The performance metrics provided in Table 1, while extensive and varied, are not designed to be comprehensive in nature, or applicable to every grant professional. Rather, this list is presented to encourage grant professionals to consider how they might expand their own performance evaluation tools to better capture the full scope of their contributions to their institutions and clients.

The authors recommend developing a personal performance evaluation worksheet that includes just **2-3** new metrics (chosen from the list above or from another source) that help demonstrate the complete scope of the grant professional's work and contributions. The goal is not to exhaust grant professionals with endless tracking and analysis, but to provide solid metrics that can be used for personal satisfaction, to identify areas for change, and/or promote the grant professional's contributions to his/her employers or clients.

After foundational performance metrics are incorporated into a grant performance tool, the authors encourage the grant professional to identify other metrics that reflect the broader contributions and represent the full scope of responsibilities to employers and/or clients.

These metrics include:

Category of Performance	Specific Performance Metrics
Grant Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Dollar amount of proposals funded/funds secured from new funders, through new competitions, and/or for new initiatives</li> <li>● Error rate (number of times supervisor needs to intervene due to grant professional's mistakes)</li> <li>● Positive feedback from funders on well-crafted proposals (written feedback/formal scores)</li> <li>● Dollar amount of proposals under development (not yet submitted)</li> <li>● Number of faculty/staff meetings held re: new grant projects (excludes specific grant project meetings)</li> </ul>
Grant Management & Reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Number of active grants in portfolio</li> <li>● Hours spent assisting staff with current grant programs (reporting, management, implementation, etc.)</li> <li>● Percentage of grant objectives/outcomes achieved by project close-out, compared to original objectives/outcomes</li> <li>● Client/Stakeholder or PI ratings related to satisfaction with grant administration functions</li> <li>● Number of grant reports completed per quarter; percent of grant reports submitted on time</li> <li>● Percentage of grant dollars spent according to original timeline ('Burn Rate' or Expenditure Rate)</li> </ul>
Institutional Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Number or percent of grant proposals linked directly to an item (or sub-item) in institution or client's strategic plan</li> <li>● Number of new cross-sector relationships formed as a result of grants received that benefit clients, community, and organization</li> <li>● Number of grant awards tied to external collaborations</li> <li>● Number of collaborations formed, as evidenced by MOUs/MOAs/Letters of Support</li> <li>● Annual increase in grant conversion rate (measured by number of grant prospects resulting in funded projects or dollar amount of funds secured from new grant prospects)</li> </ul>
Organization Capacity Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Number of consultations with staff as part of the proposal development process (not trainings)</li> <li>● Number of hours spent on work or committees not explicitly grant-related</li> <li>● Number of internal policies or Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) developed annually</li> <li>● Support provided to programs in (1) launching new grant-funded programs, (2) complying with funder requirements for new and repeat grants, (3) assisting with non-grant program development. Measured by quantifying hours spent on these activities or volume of related actions/meetings) (4) Number of hours spent maintaining grants data, tracking, reporting, etc.</li> </ul>
Funder Research/Prospecting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Number of site visits</li> <li>● Number of grants/funders identified for departmental consideration</li> <li>● Number of grants researched but did not apply to</li> <li>● Lead conversion rate (number of "high match" leads pursued)</li> <li>● Number of requests received for support related to funding research</li> </ul>

Table 1: Targeted Performance Metrics by Work Function

Additionally, survey respondents recommended that metrics reflecting 'soft skills' should be considered for inclusion in the grant professional's performance evaluation. These skills might include the grant professional's ability to effectively manage grants, build/sustain relationships that encourage stakeholder engagement, and develop partnerships with funders over time.

Specific performance metrics related to these skill sets are presented in Table 2.

Category of Performance	Specific Performance Metrics
Relationship Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Number of stakeholder contacts related to grant-seeking activities</li> <li>● Number/percent of stakeholders engaged in grant activities</li> <li>● Number/percent of new stakeholders engaged in grant activities, compared to previous year</li> <li>● Number of proposals submitted to new funders</li> <li>● Number of hours spent building relationships with future collaborators and organizations that can assist with support letters, match requirements, etc.</li> </ul>
Funder Stewardship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Grant retention rate (year to year support)</li> <li>● Dollar amount of funds secured by grant professional/with support from the grant professional</li> <li>● Progress (percentage) to fundraising goal or revenue awarded compared to goal</li> <li>● Response rate of targeted donor communications</li> <li>● Number of contacts with new and existing funders</li> </ul>
Mentoring & Training Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Improved confidence of project team in project planning and grand production as a result of mentoring activities (measured via survey)</li> <li>● Number of internal trainings held and/or workshops conducted</li> <li>● Number of hours spent assisting staff with proposal development and grants management</li> <li>● Number of consultations with staff as part of the proposal-development process (not “trainings”)</li> <li>● Public outreach (explaining the field) and mentorship (helping train new grant professionals)</li> </ul>

## Conclusion

While metrics cannot reflect the entirety of the grant professional’s work, if they are properly selected with input from the grant professional and contextualized alongside other responsibilities, they can provide insight that helps the grant professional know what to aim for. When tracked and measured consistently over time, such metrics can identify strengths as well as opportunities for additional growth.

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### AUTHOR'S BIOSKETCHES:

**Amanda Ellinger Neese, MRA** has over 13 years' experience writing and developing grants, managing sponsored projects, developing research programs, and leading others through the research process. She was responsible for helping Jefferson College of Health Sciences secure more than \$15M in grants, including a 46% increase in its federal grants portfolio and the largest single grant award in the College's history, a \$1.36M grant from HRSA for the creation of a Veterans' BSN Program. She is currently employed as a Grants Management Specialist for Liberty University.

**Julie Boll, M.Ed, GPC** is the founder of Julie Boll Consulting, which provides grant writing and strategic planning support to nonprofits. Over the course of her career, Julie has secured more than \$9.4 M in competitive grants from foundation, state and federal funders. From 2011 to 2017, she secured more than \$6.2 M in competitive grants for Quincy University including the university's first NSF grant in over 25 years and a \$2.25 million US Dept of Education grant. Julie is a GPA Approved Trainer.