Grant Applicants and Grant Reviewers in Counselor Education and Supervision: Complementary Roles for Ethical Funding Literacy

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Complementary Roles for Ethical Funding Literacy

External funding is one of the clearest ways counselor educators and counseling organizations translate values into services, especially when institutions, community agencies, and students are expected to do more with fewer internal resources. In counselor education, grants often support training clinics, supervision innovations, workforce development, and research that improves client care. In community mental health service delivery, grants can stabilize staffing, expand access (e.g., bilingual services, telehealth infrastructure), and create programs that would not exist under fee-for-service alone. CACREP explicitly positions doctoral training as including "grant proposals and other sources of funding," underscoring that funding literacy is not optional for counselor educators who lead programs, supervise clinicians, and advocate for communities (CACREP, 2024).

The purpose of this essay is to reflect on the distinct (but connected) roles of grant applicants and grant reviewers, explain essential skills required in each role, demonstrate how grant-funded initiatives can advance equity, and consider how experience on both sides of the process strengthens my professional identity as a counselor educator and scholar.

Roles of Grant Applicants: Key Responsibilities and Stages of Grant Seeking

The grant applicant's role begins long before a proposal is written. At the systems level, the applicant is responsible for identifying a problem that is important, measurable, and fundable, then building a coherent solution that fits a specific funding mechanism. In practice, grant seeking is typically staged: (a) scanning and identifying funding opportunities, (b) assessing fit and feasibility, (c) developing the proposal (narrative, budget, evaluation plan, partnerships), (d) submission and follow-through, and (e) post-award management and reporting.

1) **Identifying a fundable need and fit.**

Strong proposals start with alignment: the applicant ensures the project matches the funder's priorities, eligibility requirements, allowable costs, and reporting expectations. In counselor education contexts, this often means connecting a program need (e.g., rural supervision support, trauma training, integrated care placements) with funder goals such as workforce development, access, or prevention.

2) Designing a feasible, evaluable intervention.

Applicants must demonstrate not only that the problem matters, but that the proposed solution can realistically be implemented and evaluated. Logic model thinking helps here, showing a defensible pathway between inputs, activities, and outcomes. Logic modeling is widely used in program planning and evaluation as a structured way to clarify causal assumptions and measurable results (Millar et al., 2001).

3) Developing a persuasive narrative and defensible budget.

A common pitfall is writing like an academic article instead of a proposal. Porter (2007) describes grant writing as a distinct genre—more direct, outcomes-focused, and reader-centered than most scholarly prose. Applicants must translate scholarly ideas into a clear "why now, why us, and why this approach" story, with a budget that matches scope and justifies personnel, evaluation, and sustainability.

4) Managing compliance and implementation after award.

Winning the grant is not the finish line. Applicants (often as PIs or Co-PIs) become stewards of funds, responsible for deliverables, ethical compliance, and reporting. This is where counselor educators' skills in supervision, systems leadership, and ethical decision-making matter: grants are not just money—they are accountability structures.

Essential Skills and Their Application

Needs assessment. Applicants need credible evidence that a gap exists (local data, stakeholder feedback, service utilization trends). In counselor education, needs assessment might include community mental health partner input, student competency data, or clinic outcomes.

Logic modeling and evaluation planning. A logic model provides the "map" of change, while the evaluation plan provides the "proof." Logic models support performance management by making program theory explicit and testable (Millar et al., 2001).

Persuasive, audience-centered writing. Grant reviewers are busy and often scoring across multiple criteria; clarity matters. Porter (2007) emphasizes that proposal writing must be structured for skimming and scoring, not just deep reading.

Ethical considerations. Applicants must anticipate risks: confidentiality protections, equitable recruitment, culturally responsive design, and data security, especially if the project involves minors, documentation, or technology. In counseling settings, this includes informed consent and ensuring that evaluation does not become coercive or punitive for clients.

Advocacy for Marginalized Populations Through Grant-Funded Initiatives

One of the most concrete ways counselor educators advocate is by building programs that reduce access barriers for communities disproportionately affected by inequity. Delaney and Gibson (2019) found that counselor educators recognize grant funding as important for advancing the discipline and strengthening research and service capacity, while also noting that many faculty, especially junior faculty, want more training and experience in grant writing. From an advocacy standpoint, grants can fund culturally responsive services that are often under-reimbursed (e.g., bilingual counseling, outreach, integrated care coordination).

For example, a counselor education training clinic could pursue funding to expand services for immigrant families, add bilingual group counseling, or build community-based supervision placements. Grants can function as an equity lever: they allow counselor educators to respond to structural gaps (transportation, language access, stigma, limited providers) with structural solutions (community partnerships, workforce pipelines, sliding-fee models, and rigorous evaluation to sustain the work).

Sample Grant Proposal Introduction

Project Title: Raíces Resilientes: *A Bilingual, Community-Embedded Counseling and Training Clinic Initiative*

Many Latinx immigrant and mixed-status families in our region face chronic stressors linked to discrimination, economic instability, and limited access to culturally and linguistically responsive mental health care. Local agencies report long waitlists and a shortage of bilingual clinicians, while community members describe practical barriers (transportation, childcare, fear of systems, and stigma) that reduce help-seeking even when services exist. In response, the Raíces Resilientes initiative will establish a bilingual (Spanish/English), trauma-informed counseling program embedded in a university-affiliated training clinic and delivered in partnership with trusted community sites (e.g., schools, churches, immigrant-serving nonprofits). The project has three aims:

(1) increase access to counseling by providing no/low-cost services with flexible scheduling and community-based delivery options;

(2) strengthen clinical outcomes by offering evidence-informed individual and group interventions tailored to immigration-related stress

(3) expand the bilingual workforce by training counseling students through structured

supervision and culturally sustaining competencies aligned with counselor education best practices.

Program evaluation will use validated outcome measures of depression and anxiety, session attendance and retention data, and client-reported satisfaction to determine effectiveness and inform sustainability planning. By pairing direct service with workforce development, Raíces Resilientes aims to reduce unmet need while building long-term capacity for equitable mental health care in our community.

Roles of Grant Reviewers: Responsibilities, Ethical Duties, and Criteria

Grant reviewers serve as gatekeepers for limited resources and are tasked with making defensible recommendations based on published criteria.

Their responsibilities include (a) preparing by reading proposals closely, (b) scoring or rating proposals against criteria, (c) identifying strengths and weaknesses, (d) participating in panel discussion (when applicable), and (e) providing feedback that supports transparency and improvement.

A reviewer's evaluative lens is shaped by the funder's priorities and scoring framework. In many research contexts, criteria include significance/need, innovation, approach/methods, feasibility, evaluation rigor, team capacity, and environment. Reviewers must assess whether the program theory is coherent, whether the evaluation plan matches the claims, and whether the budget is justified.

Ethically, reviewers carry duties of confidentiality, fairness, and bias mitigation. Evidence suggests peer review can be variable and subjective; for example, Pier et al. (2018) found low agreement among reviewers evaluating the same NIH grant applications, highlighting the importance of structured criteria and careful reviewer training.

Concerns about inequity also matter: Ginther et al. (2011) documented racial/ethnic disparities in NIH R01 award outcomes, which has fueled ongoing attention to fairness and bias in funding systems. Marsh et al. (2008) further discuss reliability, validity, and bias issues in grant peer review and emphasize the need for improved processes.

When reviewers do the role well, they support resource distribution, program quality, and systemic accountability: funding goes to projects that are feasible, ethical, impactful, and evaluated in ways that produce credible learning for the field.

Importance of Serving in Both Roles

Serving as both an applicant and a reviewer develops a kind of "funding bilingualism." As an applicant, I learn to design projects that are fundable and evaluable without losing the counseling values that matter to me (access, dignity, cultural responsiveness). As a reviewer, I learn how proposals are actually read: what confuses reviewers, what signals readiness, and what makes a plan feel trustworthy.

This dual experience strengthens leadership because it forces systems thinking: I must understand budgets, timelines, partnerships, and outcomes, not just good ideas. It strengthens ethical reasoning because I must confront fairness questions from both sides: as an applicant advocating for marginalized communities and as a reviewer responsible for impartiality. It also strengthens funding literacy by clarifying how priorities are set, how evidence is weighed, and how accountability is operationalized through deliverables and evaluation.

For my development as a counselor educator and scholar, this dual perspective connects directly to CACREP's expectation that doctoral graduates are prepared for research and scholarship roles that include grant proposals and funding strategies (CACREP, 2024). In other

words, learning grants is not separate from identity, it is part of becoming the kind of counselor educator who can build, sustain, and evaluate programs that matter.

Conclusion

Grant applicants and grant reviewers occupy different seats in the same system: one designs and argues for a project's value, while the other safeguards fairness and quality in how resources are allocated. Applicants must master needs assessment, logic modeling, persuasive writing, budgeting, and ethical planning to produce proposals that are feasible and defensible (Millar et al., 2001; Porter, 2007). Reviewers must apply criteria consistently, mitigate bias, maintain confidentiality, and provide meaningful feedback, especially in light of documented concerns about variability and inequity in peer review (Pier et al., 2018; Ginther et al., 2011; Marsh et al., 2008). Ultimately, developing grant competencies supports counselor education's broader goals by expanding access to care, strengthening training pipelines, and translating social justice commitments into funded, measurable initiatives that improve lives.

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