

## NCCER Partner Grant Seeking Workbook

This workbook is a companion to the grant seeking webinar series produced by NCCER and Grants Plus. It includes tips, best practices, and forms that you can use to win grants to support your work!

### First: About Foundations

Foundations are nonprofit organizations that exist to advance a mission and create change in the world. They are required to use 5% of their total assets to support this mission annually. Most foundations do not do the work of creating this change themselves but make grants to nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organizations that create this change.

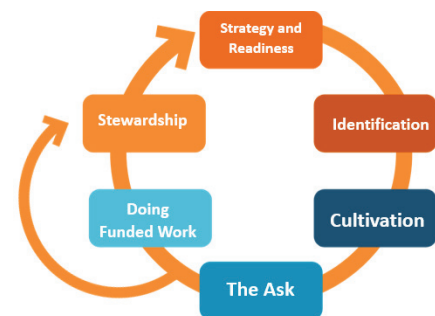
- The most common grants from foundations are to fund a specific program, and not usually to fund the ongoing operations of an entire organization.
- Foundations generally make grants for one year of funding and have an annual submission cycle.
  - Some will fund the same programs for several years, others will not fund an organization or program in consecutive years.
- Foundations expect programs they fund to have specified activities and objectives, and track progress towards those objectives.
- Most foundation funding is for programs that help populations who would not otherwise be able to afford the services provided by the grantee.
- Most foundations make grants from existing assets, and the amount they have available to give in any year can vary with the economy and markets.

Successful grant seekers demonstrate how their work will support the funder's mission and create the change that the funder seeks.

### Section 1: Grant Seeking Is a Cycle and Relationships are Key

Successful grant seeking is an ongoing cycle of preparing grant-ready programs, finding grant makers, building relationships, asking for grants, keeping funders informed about your work, and then doing it all again.

The most successful grant seeking is built on long-term relationships between organizations and grant makers who have a mission that aligns with the organization's work.



Relationships allow genuine, two-way conversations between your organization and the grant maker, letting them understand how your work supports their interests with more nuance than a written proposal can provide alone. Relationships can also help level the power dynamic between grantor and grantee, setting up a dynamic of two organizations working together toward a common goal, not just a funder and an applicant. In the best relationships, the funder becomes your partner to create a change in the world that both you and the funder want to see.

Relationships also matter in government funding. Most government programs have staff members that serve as points of contact and are knowledgeable about the grant programs they are responsible for. In fact, it's often easier to find phone numbers and emails for these points of contact than it is for foundation staff.

Government grant program staff are generally constrained from giving their opinion about whether a given program has a good chance of being funded, but will often ask very pointed questions, or even point organizations to specific lines in a request for proposals that will help the organization see their fit, or lack thereof. They are also generally open to answering technical questions. For most federal and many state and local grant programs, the staff will also hold a webinar or other meeting to review the proposal.

Developing relationships with the relevant government grant program staff in your location can help your organization stay informed of future funding opportunities, get more in-depth answers to questions, and even be given opportunities to work with the agency outside of the grants process.

***Even a surface-level relationship can make your grant seeking more efficient:***

- A quick conversation can help gauge the grant maker's interest in your work before you write and submit a proposal.
  - If nothing else, this will save time and effort.
- A slightly longer conversation can help target a proposal to specific funder interests.
  - Even a 10 minute conversation can allow a grant maker to identify aspects of your work that might hold particular interest.
- A follow-up conversation after a request is can help differentiate a no that means "not this time" from one that means "not ever."

**Call Before You Submit**

Contacting a foundation before submitting a proposal is a critical part of the grant cycle. Even in 2023, your first attempt to connect should be a phone call. If you cannot connect via phone, send an email follow-up with an invitation for a phone or video call.

The object of your first zoom, call, or email with a foundation is to begin a relationship while leaving no doubt that your work will advance the funder's interests so that you do not waste time submitting an unwelcome proposal, or waste the funder's time in reading an unwelcome proposal. A single contact can also lead to an invitation to submit a proposal from a foundation that does not accept unsolicited proposals.

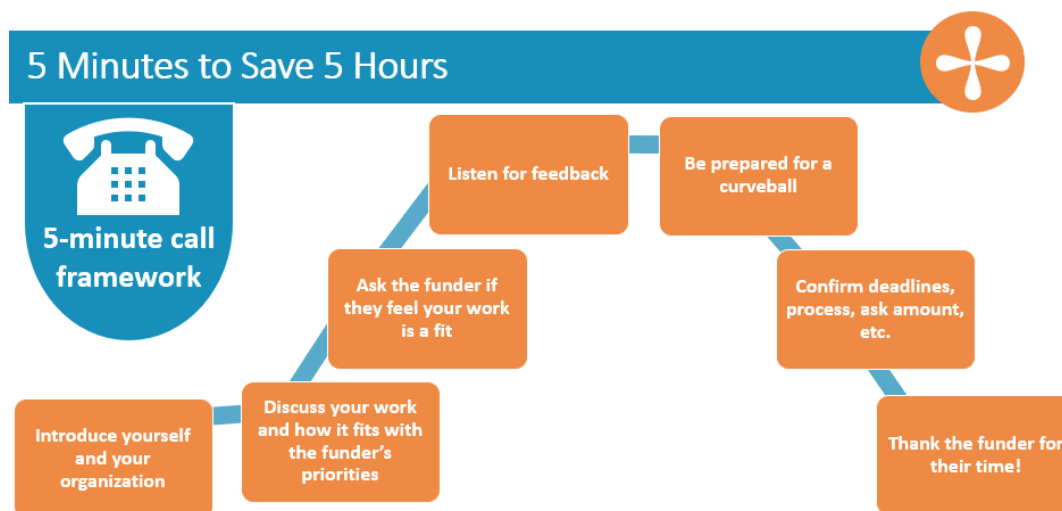
- **Who should call?**
  - Someone with knowledge of the funder and of the program for which you seek funding and who can make decisions on behalf of the organization
- **When to reach out?**
  - At least 4-6 weeks before a submission deadline, unless you just have a technical question

- Calling without a submission deadline in mind to introduce your work is also a great, low-pressure way to create a connection, but avoid doing so around deadlines when others may be calling.

*Note: Some grant makers explicitly do not wish to be contacted or have relationships with organizations, while others may ask that you submit a brief “concept paper” or other formal communication before any contact. These will generally not have contact information available to the public and may even have a statement about not contacting them directly on their website or other materials.*

- **What to talk about?**

Follow this simple phone call outline to make sure that you get everything you need out of a conversation with a grant maker:



## Section 2: Grant-Ready Programming

Grant makers have limited resources and want to be confident that they are making grants for well-designed programs that will address a genuine, urgent need. Use the following list to be sure that your programming is “grant-ready.”

**A program or project is grant ready if it meets all of these qualifications:**

- Addresses an identified, urgent need.
  - You should be able to articulate why this need is a negative for the community that you serve and why it must be addressed now.
- Is targeted to a specific population that faces this need.
  - This should be an underserved population that is not able to afford the services being provided, and can be defined by geography, demographic, common need, or a combination of each.
- Produces outcomes that address this need in the targeted population

- These should be concrete steps that clearly help address or reduce the need in the population and/or individuals that you serve.
- Measures progress toward these outcomes
  - Evaluation and measurement is critical to funders, who want to see that their money is being well spent and that those it funds are advancing its mission and goals.
- Engages in clear activities that will result in the desired outcomes
  - These must be tied directly to the outcomes, and you must be able to articulate how each action will advance the program's goals and objectives.
- Qualified individuals are in place to do these activities.
  - These can be staff, volunteers, consultants, or partners, and must have the experience or skills required to successfully complete the planned work.
- Has a concrete, realistic, and complete budget to provide these activities.
  - This doesn't mean the smallest budget possible, but a realistic budget that includes all expenses required to successfully do what you propose.

For tools to assess your program's readiness for grants, see Appendix 1

### Section 3: Writing Grant Proposals That Stand Out

Producing a grant proposal that stands out from the competition is not difficult. The following tips will help set your work apart from others. Remember, your proposal will be one of several that the funder is reviewing, and anything you can do to make yours easy to understand and remember will help it be funded.

- Start your proposal with a **clear ask** that identifies:
  - **Community need:** This should be an urgent need that must be addressed now.
  - **The activities you will do to address this need:** These should be directly tied to addressing the need, and fully explained in the full narrative.
  - **Who will benefit:** Include how many will be served and be sure that the population to be served is matched to the need.
  - **What will result:** This can include short-term outputs, longer-term outcomes, and even long-term change.  
*See Appendix 2 for a tool to help develop a clear ask*
- Connect your request to the funder's mission and interests
  - Even if it seems obvious, state how your work creates the change the funder wants to see in the world and advances its mission.
  - Start and end your proposal with this connection, even restating the funder's own language
- Follow the instructions (if the funder has them).
  - Follow both the letter and the spirit of the law—don't get cute with the rules.
  - Respect page and character limits.
  - For funders with character/word limits on each question or section, do not put information in unrelated sections simply because it will fit there.
- Write simply, logically, and persuasively.
  - Use clear, personable language—when in doubt, simpler is better.

- Avoid jargon and terms of art—do not make the reviewer look anything up.
  - Make sure the submission is free of any typos, grammatical errors, etc.
- Keep it interesting.
  - Use stories to illustrate key points.
  - Feature clients wherever possible.
- Make your proposal easy to navigate.
  - Assume that not every reviewer will read your proposal from the first to the last page
  - Where possible use headers, breaks, bold, and bullets to highlight key points.
  - Include graphs, charts, and photos to illustrate your points.
- Don't neglect any required attachments.
  - Some proposals require board chair signatures, letters of support, unique financial reports, or other documents that can be difficult to get at the last minute.

## Writing a Proposal Without A Required Format

Although many grant makers—especially government grant programs and larger foundations—have a required proposal format, often with strict character or page limits, others have no requirements. These are the most common sections required by funders, in logical order, with the contents that should be included in each.

### **Opening: A Clear Ask**

- Before getting into the major narrative sections, open with a clear ask that identifies how much funding you seek, exactly what it will be used for, why it's important that the funder support those activities, and how the request advances the funder's mission.

### **Organization Qualifications/History**

- A brief (1 page) overview of your organization, its major programs, its successes, and its history.
  - Be sure to highlight any past work that also advances the funder's mission.

### **Need/Target Population**

- This 1-2 page section should convince the reader that your community faces a serious issue with real consequences, and that your organization understands exactly what community needs must be addressed and who faces them. It should not convey a need that is insurmountable or intractable, but one that can be addressed with the right resources and approach.
- Using the identified need and population from week 1's exercises, describe who you will serve and why the project is necessary for that population.
- Describe the urgency of the problem and how your community is being negatively affected by the problem.
- Use data to back up the need in your community.
  - This should be as localized as possible or extrapolated from state/national data.

### **Goals/Objectives**

- Using the goal and objectives from the week 1 exercises, briefly (1/2-1 page) state clearly what your long-term goal for the program is, how that fits with the funder's mission, and what objectives you will achieve to help reach this goal.

### **Program Description**

- This 2-4 page section should outline all of the activities you will undertake and outcomes you will produce within this program, and should be based on the readiness matrix from week 1.
- Include what the expected outputs are and how they tie to the objectives and long-term goal.
- Include what activities will be undertaken to produce those outputs, providing enough detail to convince the funder that you have thought through everything that is needed. This can include:
  - Personnel that will provide the services
  - Technical details about each activity
  - Location of services
- Program timeline
  - Include start and end dates and schedule of activities, even if they are ongoing.
- Outcomes
  - What will be different among those served or the community because of this program?

### **Evaluation**

- Drawing on the readiness matrix from week 1, describe how you will measure the performance of the program. How will data be collected, analyzed, and shared? Will the data guide internal decisions?

### **Funding and Sustainability**

- Briefly describe how the program will continue beyond this grant term, what other funding is supporting it, and any plans to expand funding.
  - The answer to this question often involves continually seeking new sources of funding for your organization's priorities, but any other funding secured for the program should be highlighted, since funders generally prefer sharing costs with others.

### **Attachments**

- Different funders require different attachments, but common requirements are:
  - A cover letter signed by your executive director and/or board chair.
  - A program budget for the proposed program (see below).
    - Some funders require a narrative that provides detail for each budget line item.
  - A current-year organizational budget.
  - A listing of your organization's board of trustees.
  - Your organization's most recent audit or financial statement.
  - Your organization's most recent annual report.
  - Your IRS 501(c)(3) determination letter

## **Developing a Strong Program Budget**

A strong program budget includes all expenses needed to achieve the program's desired outcomes. This does not mean the smallest budget possible, but a budget that provides for reasonable expenses and attainable income.

Many organizations get in trouble trying to keep budgets as low as possible thinking a small bottom line will make them more competitive. Ironically, a too-small budget often has the opposite long-term effect, preventing organizations from successfully carrying out the grant's activities and meeting its objectives.

This provides a poor investment for the funder, who may form a negative opinion of the grantee that makes securing future funding more difficult.

Below is a guide to commonly required budget categories. These can be modified to meet the realities of your organization's needs, capabilities, and financial reporting structure. Some funders have their own format for proposal budgets that will require you to combine or further break out line items from these commonly used categories.

### Income Categories

- **Individuals:** Income from individual contributions. Can also include bequests
- **Membership:** Income from membership fees for individuals and organizations.
- **Grants:** Income from membership fees for individuals and organizations.
- **Fundraisers:** Income from fundraising events, sales, etc.
- **Corporate contributions:** Income from corporate giving programs, corporate foundations, or sponsorships.
- **Federated giving:** Income from United Way, Combined Federal Campaign, Community Shares, or other federated giving programs
- **Fees for service:** Income from any fees charged for your services, whether for this program or not. Also called "earned income."
- **Endowment and Interest Income:** Income from endowments and interest on investments.
- **Miscellaneous:** Any income that is not recorded elsewhere. Unless prohibited by a funder's required format, this should always include a note outlining what income is included.

### Expense Categories

- **Salaries and wages:** This includes all staff required for the program to be successful, and should capture direct service staff, supervisory staff, and administrative staffing costs, but not expenses for consultants or organizational partners that may carry out the work. List each position (not each individual, as a position can be held by multiple people), and what percentage of full time equivalent (FTE) time each position will spend on the program's activities.
- **Fringe:** This includes non-salary staff costs like benefits, insurance, social security and unemployment payments. These can either be calculated on actual costs, or as a general percentage across your organization.
- **Occupancy and utilities:** This is the direct cost for using your facilities for the program, if you are doing so. This should only reflect the program's use (for example, if your facility rent and utilities cost \$4,000 per month, and the program uses half of the facility for 50% of the time it's open, the occupancy would be \$1,000).
- **Equipment:** This includes any durable equipment used by the program such as computers or medical devices, and should be pro-rated if used for other programs as well.
- **Supplies and Materials:** This includes non-durable items that will be used up by the program, such as workbooks, medical supplies, etc.
- **Printing and Copying:** This includes any printing or copying expenses required to create program materials.
- **Telecommunications:** This includes any phone, internet, or other communication expenses used directly by the program.

- **Travel and meetings:** This includes mileage (almost always at the current federal mileage rate) for staff carrying out the activities, as well as airline, hotel, and per diem expenses for travel related to the program, as well as any meeting fees.
- **Marketing and advertising:** This includes all expenses required to market or advertise the program to the public or target audiences.
- **Training:** This includes any expenses required to train staff or volunteers to carry out program elements. It can include professional development, but only if it is directly related to the request's activities.
- **Contract Services:** This includes all expenses for program-related contractors, including those hired to carry out program activities and those that will support the program. This often includes pro-rated accountant/audit fees and legal fees.
- **Miscellaneous:** This includes all other expenses that do not fit in any category, and should always include a note describing the expenses (unless prohibited by a funder-required format). See Appendix 2 for a sample program budget

*Note: Some funders, including most government programs, allow indirect expenses to be included in program budgets. Indirect expenses are also called "overhead" and are items that are required to run your organization. These are not included in the program budget but are required for the program to happen. Examples include executive staff oversight, accounting, and front desk expenses.*

*Indirect expenses must ultimately help the program for which you are seeking funding, and cannot also be included in the budget's direct expenses.*

*Government programs generally have a predetermined percentage of the program budget that can be added for indirect expenses (often 10-13%), and many foundations will not question a program budget that includes indirect expenses in the same range.*

## Writing to a Funder's Format

Many funders—especially larger foundations and government grant programs—now require grant seekers to use an online form or other prescribed format. These will include some or all of the information above but may require it to be broken up in different sections. To make the most of pre-formatted proposals:

- Online proposals almost always require organizations to create an account to submit. Do not wait until the last minute to do this, even if the funder provides the application questions without registration.
- Copy the questions into Word or other word processing software to create the full proposal, then cut and paste back into the online form when ready to submit. This makes the proposal easier to save, share, and edit.
  - Some online systems may require you to remove formatting, which can be accomplished by copying each answer into Notepad on a PC or TextEdit on a Mac before pasting into the application.
- Strive to have each section tie back to the need and what your program will do to address it.
- Answer the specific question. Don't try to force in other information because you have space.



- If needed, do not hesitate to use the full character or word limit to answer each question, but don't feel obligated to use every last character for the sake of filling the character count.
  - Note: some online systems disagree with Word's "word count" feature, counting line breaks as two characters, or other small discrepancies.
- Use the cover letter or other attachments to include elements that the proposal format may not allow (qualitative stories, pictures, etc.). For example, if attachments are permitted, consider creating a testimonial page that tells a client story.
  - Reminder: follow the spirit of the rules, not just the letter. Do not use this as an opportunity to create a shadow proposal or include an additional 10 pages of narrative.

**For tools to prepare a great grant proposal, see Appendix 2**

## Further Reading




**The following resources provide more information about grant seeking best practices:**

- Federal Grants 101 (courtesy of Grants.gov): <https://www.grants.gov/learn-grants/grants-101.html>
- "Getting the Grant 101: The Essentials" (courtesy The Grantsmanship Center): <https://www.tgci.com/getting-grant-101>
- Grants Plus Grant Seeking Guides: <https://grantsplus.com/resources/>
- US Department of Labor "How to Apply": <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/grants/apply>

## Appendix 1: Readiness Tools

### Population and Need Tool

The first step to successful grant seeking is to clearly articulate who your organization or program will serve, and what urgent need you will address. A good answer to each of the following three questions means that you are on the right track to be ready for grant funding. If you do not have clear answers, you will need to identify a focus population and specific, urgent need to address to be competitive for grant funding.

|  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| <p><b>Identify the population that your organization or program serves, being as specific as possible.</b><br/>To be funder-friendly, this should be an underserved population that is not able to afford the services being provided.</p> |    | <p><b>Example:</b> <i>High school juniors and seniors at in the four City School District schools.</i></p>   |
| <p><b>What issue or need does this population face that your organization or program addresses?</b><br/>To be funder friendly, this should be an urgent need that must be addressed now to avoid more complications or problems later.</p> |  | <p><b>Example:</b> <i>Students that do not plan to go to college often start low-wage careers that will not allow them to build sustainable income.</i></p>  |
| <p><b>What data demonstrates that this need exists for this population?</b><br/>This data should be as local as possible and show the negative community impact caused by the issue or need.</p>   |  | <p><b>Example:</b> <i>According to the state education report card, 43% of students in our district have no interest or plans to attend post-secondary education. Department of Labor statistics show that those with only a high school diploma earn an average of \$42,000 annually. Jobs in our trade start at \$45,000 for first-year employees and average almost \$80,000 annually over a career</i></p> |




## Grant Readiness Matrix

The **Readiness Matrix** allows you to lay out your program’s long-term goal and objectives, then list the outputs and activities that will support the goal and objectives. It also allows you to state how you will evaluate the effectiveness of each activity and output, who will do the work for each activity, and what other items or requirements are needed.

The completed matrix provides a skeleton for you to describe your program and what it will accomplish when you are talking to funders or developing a grant proposal. See the example on the next page for how to use the matrix for a program.

If you can provide information for each section, you are well on your way to being grant ready.

|  <b>Long-Term Goal:</b> <i>This is a large but measurable change that will not be achieved in a single grant term (if ever). Insert the long-term goal that the request will support.</i> |  |   |  |   |  |
|--|--|---|--|---|--|
| Objective  | Outputs  | Activity  | Evaluation Tool(s)   | Responsible Individual(s)   | Other Needs  |
| <p><i>Objectives are medium-term steps that achieve progress toward the goal. A request may include multiple objectives, which may or may not be achieved during the grant term.</i></p> <p><i>List one objective in each row.</i></p>                                     | <p><i>Outputs are specific tasks undertaken to achieve objectives. A request may include multiple outputs related to each objective.</i></p> <p><i>List all outputs that advance the objective in the previous column.</i></p> | <p><i>Activities are specific actions taken to achieve each output. Each output may have one or more activities, and each activity should be tied to an output. These activities should be based on best practices and have a track record of success.</i></p> <p><i>List all activities that produce the outputs in the previous column.</i></p> | <p><i>An evaluation tool is anything that tracks your progress toward achieving the objective.</i></p> <p><i>These should directly measure outputs, but also track overall progress towards the objective.</i></p> <p><i>List the evaluation tools you will use to track each activity and progress toward the objective. Each output and the objective should have a related evaluation tool.</i></p> | <p><i>Each objective must have qualified individuals that are accountable for making it a reality.</i></p> <p><i>List any and all individuals that will work on this objective’s activities. These can be staff, contractors, volunteers, or partner organizations.</i></p> | <p><i>List other requirements for successful completion of the activities and outputs for this objective. This may include space, materials, transportation, or any other item required for success.</i></p> |

## Appendix 2: Writing Tools

### A Clear Ask

The first step to developing a great proposal is to develop a clear ask. This must include a clear statement of need, a brief introduction to what you will do to address the need, a statement of who will benefit, and what will result from your work.

**Example:** A clear ask for an after-school career introduction program

| Prompt  |   |
|---|---|
| <b>What is the need in the community?</b>   | <i>Many of the students in our service area are not aware of post-secondary education options other than college</i>  |
| <b>What will you do to address it?</b>  | <i>Provide an after-school program that allows juniors and seniors to explore craft careers and complete basic certifications</i>   |
| <b>Who will benefit?</b>  | <i>75 public school who are not planning to attend a traditional two or four-year college after graduation</i>  |
| <b>What will result?</b>  | <i>Every student who completes the program will have a clear pathway to a career after graduating high school, and the basic certifications (CPR, OSHA basic safety, etc.) that will allow them to quickly transition to craft career training if they so desire.</i> |
| <p><b>Write Your Clear Ask:</b><br/> <i>The Craft Career Academy will provide after-school programming for 75 public school juniors and seniors that will help them explore and create career pathways that do not involve college. Studies have shown that students graduating with a clear career path find sustainable employment at a rate almost double that of their peers without a plan, and those going into craft careers will make livable wages starting in their first year. A \$25,000 grant from the XYZ Foundation will offset expenses of an after-school instructor, virtual reality training equipment, and certification fees for each student. This will allow 75 students to choose rewarding careers with sustainable wages—while also supporting the XYZ Foundation’s mission that “every child will transition into productive adulthood.”</i></p> |   |

### Sample Program Budget

The following is an example created for an after-school tutoring program:

| INCOME                              |                  |   |
|-------------------------------------|------------------|---|
| Income Source                       | Amount           | Notes   |
| Individuals                         | \$22,000         |   |
| Membership                          | \$0              |   |
| Grants                              | \$65,000         | XYZ Foundation (\$25,000 secured), this request (\$15,000), three other pending requests (\$25,000) |
| Fundraisers                         | \$20,000         | Annual golf outing proceeds   |
| Corporate Contributions             | \$25,000         | The Friendly Corporation (secured)  |
| Fees for Service                    | \$0              |   |
| Endowment and Interest Income       | \$0              |   |
| Miscellaneous                       | \$0              |   |
| <b>Total Income</b>                 | <b>\$132,000</b> |   |
| EXPENSES                            |                  |   |
| Personnel Expenses                  | Total Cost       | Notes   |
| Tutors (3 @ .375 FTE Each)          | \$50,625         | Includes 5 hours/week of prep time  |
| Art Therapist .375 FTE              | \$12,000         | Includes 5 hours/week of prep time  |
| Director of Education (0.1 FTE)     | \$6,000          | Executive oversight   |
| Outreach Coordinator (0.05 FTE)     | \$2,400          | School outreach   |
| Administrative Assistant (0.1 FTE)  | \$2,800          | Administration  |
| <b>Total Salary</b>                 | <b>\$73,825</b>  |   |
| Fringe Benefits                     | \$13,289         | 18% fringe benefit total  |
| <b>Total Personnel Expenses</b>     | <b>\$87,114</b>  |   |
| Non-Personnel Expenses              | Cost             | Notes   |
| Rent/Occupancy                      | \$5,135          | Classroom use for 9 months of the year  |
| Equipment                           | \$15,000         | 75 Chromebooks at \$200 each  |
| Supplies and Materials              | \$3,000          | Annual ABC learning software license  |
| Printing and Copying                | \$0              |   |
| Telecommunications                  | \$900            | 9 months of expanded wifi-\$100/month   |
| Travel and meetings                 | \$2,100          | Travel for tutors, annual meeting   |
| Marketing and advertising           | \$0              |   |
| Training                            | \$2,500          | Annual software training  |
| Contract services                   | \$0              |   |
| Miscellaneous                       | \$4,000          | \$100/week for food   |
| <b>Total Non-Personnel Expenses</b> | <b>\$32,635</b>  |   |
| <b>TOTAL DIRECT COSTS</b>           | <b>\$119,749</b> |   |
| Indirect Costs (10%)                | \$11,975         | At program's defined 10% allowable rate   |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                        | <b>\$131,724</b> |   |