U.S. Department of Education

Office of Acquisition, Grants and Risk Management

2023 Grantee and ED Staff Interviews
Final Report

Objectives and Research Methodology

Overview
The need to understand customers and employees remains critical to the success of government agencies. While the quantitative data provided by the Grantee Satisfaction Survey plays a crucial role in capturing the opinions of grantees and Education Department (ED) staff, these data can stop short of answering questions about why respondents feel the way they do and what is behind their ideas and opinions.

Qualitative research can help clarify what grantees and staff need and expect. It can help provide insights into how service quality can be improved, and which factors, such as customer service, technical assistance, and communications, may be causing service failures. It can also be used to explore topics and ideas in detail and help bring to light topics that may not be otherwise uncovered by the survey.

In order to gain these insights, a series of interviews were conducted from July 5 to August 30, 2023 with grantees and Department of Education (ED) staff.

Key Objectives

1. Obtain feedback from grantees and ED staff regarding their interactions with one another, including what elements may or may not be working well and what can be improved.

2. Use suggestions from grantees and ED staff along with insights gathered from the Grantee Satisfaction Survey feedback related to the technical assistance grantees receive. These insights will be used to propose initiatives and activities that can be addressed and possibly adopted by the Department during FY 2024 in an effort to optimize the support ED provides to help grantees successfully implement the goals and objectives of their respective grant projects.

3. Report findings in a manner that provides ED stakeholders with clearly defined ideas and suggestions related to customer service and related technical assistance that can be addressed and, potentially, implemented.

Data Collection Methods

1. Conduct follow up interviews with grantees and ED staff who participated in interview sessions that occurred in 2021 to learn how, or if, their grant-related experiences have changed over the past two years.

2. Conduct interviews with grantees who did not participate in the 2021 sessions to gather detailed feedback on their experiences working with ED staff.

3. Conduct interviews with ED staff who did not participate in the 2021 sessions to gather detailed feedback on their experiences working with grantees.

The following table provides the breakdown of the 68 interviews conducted according to each of these segments:

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Cohort	Number of Interviews	Approximate Length of Each Interview	Method
Grantees interviewed in 2021	11	45 minutes	Teams with transcription (video optional)
Grantees NOT interviewed in 2021	49	45 minutes	Teams with transcription (video optional)
ED staff interviewed in 2021	4	45 minutes	Teams with transcription (video optional)
ED staff NOT interviewed in 2021	4	45 minutes	Teams with transcription (video optional)

Methods of Analysis

CFI Group's qualitative process involves in-depth research that focuses the discussions on the interactions and technical assistance support provided by ED staff. While the interviewer uses a guide to structure the framework of the conversation, there is enough flexibility in the approach so that interviewees speak to related items that are not specifically listed on the discussion guide. This allows for previously unidentified topics or details to come to light that may otherwise not if only using a survey to gather feedback.

The approach also uses social-psychological techniques to explore the feelings and perceptions of individuals. The team utilized a case study research technique by interviewing individuals from a variety of backgrounds (e.g., type of grant, length of tenure, role, etc.) to provide a rich context for the analysis and reporting.

The qualitative data collected is used in conjunction with the quantitative data from the Grantee Satisfaction Survey to provide results based on a combined approach. Although the survey explores certain areas of the grantee experience that is not a focus of the interviews (e.g., online resources) there is much overlap between the survey content and topics of discussion in the interviews (e.g., staff interactions, technical assistance).

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<u>*Grantee and Department Staff Interactions*</u>

Key Takeaways

❖ **The vast majority of grantee-ED staff relationships are overwhelmingly positive. Over 75% of those interviewed provided favorable feedback regarding their program officers.**

❖ **Grantees have a high degree of trust that their program officers will provide knowledgeable guidance to successfully implement their grants. Nearly 90% of those interviewed said they have confidence in their program officers to provide accurate information.**

❖ **Despite the majority of grantees providing very positive feedback regarding their ED staff interactions, there are others at the end of the spectrum that feel unsure of who they can contact or find response times significantly delayed.**

❖ **Grantees' preferences for frequency of contact vary greatly, largely dependent on their own personal experience in their roles. A little over half of interviewees asked prefer regular contact of monthly or more often.**

Staff Support Remains Strong

Grantees described their interactions with Department of Education (ED) staff overwhelmingly positive. The high performance ratings consistently observed in the survey results are backed up by the qualitative feedback from grantees during this series of interviews.

A driving force of the high satisfaction grantees reported center around key factors:

- Responsiveness
- Subject matter expertise
- Willingness to help

Responsiveness

ED staff consistently respond to grantee questions or requests for assistance in a timeframe that meets or exceeds grantee expectations. This important aspect of the service staff provides and builds both confidence and trust that when a situation arises, grantees will be able to quickly connect with their program officers to receive helpful guidance without significant delay. During the interviews, grantees often described the length of time it takes to receive a response from a program officer as "immediate" or "right away." One individual said that 50% of the time they get a response within hours, 25% within a day, and 25% within two days, which was seen as acceptable. Another said they "never have to wait more than a day."

There were a select few who said their program officer is not as responsive as they would like. Among those interviewed, there was a higher proportion of OPE grantees who described their program officer's responsiveness as unsatisfactory. Within the OPE cohort of those interviewed, there was a fairly even split between those who found their program officer's response time adequate and those who did not.

Subject Matter Expertise

ED staff consistently demonstrate a wide breadth of knowledge and are able to provide prompt guidance to grantees when called upon. While the level of expertise does vary based on the individual, nearly 90% of those interviewed indicated their program officers know their programs well and are able to effectively consult on a variety of common topics including eligibility, technical assistance, and indirect cost rates.

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Willingness to Help

In addition to the aforementioned attributes, program officers were generally described as being willing to help and approachable. It is apparent that more programs are offering open "office hours" to grantees. These are designated times throughout the week or month that program officers make themselves available to grantees. Usually done through Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or some other virtual platform, these sessions give grantees the opportunity to connect with their program officers and/or other grantees to ask questions and discuss relevant grant activities. Office hours are generally seen as valuable and since they are optional, do not impede anyone's work if connecting with a program office at that time is unnecessary.

Areas for Opportunity

While grantee interactions with ED staff remain positive overall, the interviews gave grantees the opportunity to voice ways their experiences could be improved.

Questions where legal consultation is required frequently cause delays in response. Some programs officers seem to rely heavily on legal counsel before responding to grantees which can cause frustration.

Program officers in some cases present themselves as detached from the actual goals and objectives of the grant. Some grantees said they would appreciate more tailored guidance related to the actual grant activities. In these cases, the vast majority of communication coming from program officers is focused on compliance and reporting requirements.

While approachability is generally a positive, some grantees indicated they are reluctant to reach out for help due to a fear of being perceived as uninformed or incompetent. At least one grantee even said they were unsure if they are "allowed to" reach out for assistance.

Method and Frequency of Contact

The preferred frequency of interacting with program officers varies greatly. Some grantees enjoy monthly meetings while also having the ability to attend office hours or reach out to their program officer directly as needed. Others indicated they prefer to "be left alone" and that less communication is better. This latter sentiment predominately came from individuals with long tenures in their roles and with significant experience administering their grants.

The majority of grantees interviewed said that most of their interactions with ED staff came in the form of on-demand sessions or other ad-hoc calls and emails. Some indicated there are monthly and quarterly meetings held, which were generally viewed very positively. While Teams and other instant messaging platforms were not used by many grantees, the idea was well received by most.

Recommendations

- ✓ **Ensure consistency in program officer training such that program officers understand the details of their program's budgetary and compliance regulations. Seek to mitigate the need for program officers to direct grantee questions to legal counsel unless necessary.**

- ✓ **Continue to provide options for communication to grantees, in terms of frequency and channel. Some grantees prefer consistent interaction to ensure they stay "on track" while others prefer limited interaction.**

- ✓ **Train program officers to provide direct guidance on carrying out the grants' goals and objectives and not just on compliance or regulations.**

- ✓ **Ensure that all program officers have an open and inviting line of communication with grantees so that all grantees understand the role of the program officer. All grantees should understand who they can reach out to for which types of questions or guidance.**

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Technical Assistance and Collaboration

Key Takeaways

> ❖ **Webinars are a key resource for grantees that are made particularly useful when produced based on direct grantee feedback. Nearly 100% of those interviewed said they have access to webinars provided by the Department.**
>
> ❖ **Grantees' desire for more peer-to-peer collaboration has been realized.**
>
> ❖ **Collaboration is happening through a variety of ways in groups of many different sizes. Nearly all participants connect with peers, with the frequency ranging from weekly to annually.**
>
> ❖ **In-person conferences are instrumental in building a relationship with program officers and making key connections with other grantees.**

Webinars: A Common and Useful Tool

The most common form of technical assistance grantees report taking advantage of are webinars. There are a variety of webinars offered and for the vast majority of grantees, these sessions are very valuable and convenient. One characteristic of some webinars that is particularly valued is the inclusion of an accompanying transcript. When a grantee is reviewing the content but particularly interested in a single topic, searching the transcript allows them to quickly navigate to the relevant subject matter. Another important element of the webinars is the inclusion of live, or pre-solicited, questions from grantees with answers from ED staff. Reaching out to grantees directly for their questions ensures that the most pertinent and useful information is being provided.

When asked what kinds of content would be useful to include in future webinars, common responses included guidance regarding Government Performance and Results Act or GPRA measures and reporting requirements.

Peer-to-Peer Collaboration

Interviews with grantees were last conducted in 2021 and at that time, a prevalent theme in the feedback was an appetite for an increased level of peer-to-peer collaboration. This year, grantees largely reported that this type of collaboration is happening more than before and playing a critical role in the success of carrying out their grant's goals and objectives.

Interestingly, the collaboration efforts happen in a variety of ways. For some grantees (approximately 75% of those asked), their assigned program officer made a concerted effort to bring their grantees together. For others, it has been a more organic process of connecting with peers outside of any structured gatherings and growing into consortia where ideas and activities are shared. Some grantees gather in very large groups, usually remotely, to collaborate with the entire grant population. Others have formed small cohorts where the grantee's circumstances are closely aligned. And in some cases, the collaboration groups can be as small as two individuals working in a mentor-mentee relationship.

Whatever the group's size or composition, the collaboration effort is optimized when grantees are able to share best practices, success stories and techniques they have used to overcome obstacles related to their grant activities. Additionally, the benefit of collaborating with grantees is maximized when grantees in similar situations are connected. A grantee in a small state with relatively limited resources reported that during many of their group sessions, they marvel at the accomplishments and offerings made available by grantees in much larger states. The ideas

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and practices shared are seen as impressive but, unfortunately, not applicable to their situation given a limited staff and far fewer resources. This illustrates the importance of linking grantees in subgroups according to similar circumstances.

Annual Conferences
Agreed upon in near unanimity was the value of the in-person annual meetings, often held in Washington DC. Many grantees remarked on how it is very helpful to meet the program officer and other grantees in person periodically to establish relationships and share ideas in an environment advantageous for collaboration. Many grantees commented on their appreciation that these meetings are being held again after going on hiatus or held remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. The usual format of large group meetings supplemented with smaller breakout sessions that more deeply explore particular topic areas is seen as optimal with no need for major change.

Recommendations

- ✓ **Include transcripts for webinars wherever possible.**

- ✓ **Make Q&A sessions with grantees directly a focal point of webinars.**

- ✓ **Include content on GPRA and continually solicit grantees for the subjects that would be most valuable to learn more about.**

- ✓ **Continue to prioritize peer-to-peer collaboration opportunities by making a dedicated effort to connect grantees with others so that grantees have available resources in addition to their program officers.**

- ✓ **Organize sessions effectively by conducting meetings with individuals of similar size, activity, or geographic region.**

- ✓ **Prioritize in-person annual conferences to promote relationship building and collaboration.**

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Application Process & Annual Reporting

Key Takeaways

> ❖ **Reporting requirements are burdensome for grantees but also acknowledged as being important.**
>
> ❖ **When interim or semi-annual reporting is also required, the task becomes a year-round endeavor. This requirement was mentioned by fewer than 25% of those interviewed.**
>
> ❖ **Preferences for consultation with program officers after Annual Performance Reports (APRs) vary but in general are appreciated and found to be beneficial.**
>
> ❖ **Feelings toward G5 are mixed, but the general feeling, held by more than 50% of participants, is that the platform is outdated and not user friendly.**

Annual Reporting Requirements

The general sentiment of the annual reporting requirements shared by grantees was that they are burdensome and require significant time to complete but also understood to be appropriate. Some remarked that the process of looking up individual student information and documenting can be extremely tedious and speculated that much of the data the grantee was collecting already existed elsewhere in an Education Department database. One grantee remarked that, if that is the case, there could be a more efficient and automated process available where necessary data is imported rather than gathered student-by-student.

Some grantees noted that recently they have been required to submit an Interim Performance Report (IPR), which was announced suddenly and only four weeks before the deadline. Something closer to two full months was seen as being more reasonable. Additionally, while there was a PDF with instructions available, an instructional video was suggested as being much more helpful. In any event, the common feeling among grantees who are required to submit annual and semi-annual reports is that reporting is happening year-round with no real break.

Discussions with POs

Some grantees met with their program officers prior to submitting their full reports, which was very helpful. This gave the program officer time to perform a general review of the data and offer guidance for revisions or other points of clarity that improved the quality of the report. However, this meeting seems to be the exception rather than the rule as fewer than 25% indicated having a discussion about the composition of their reports prior to submission.

For the past few years, the understanding of how the Department uses submitted data from the APR has been the lowest rated attribute of the Grantee Satisfaction Survey. During the interviews, grantees were asked if meetings with ED staff were occurring after the reports were submitted to review. The answers were mixed; some said not at all, some said a meeting had been offered but declined, and others said a meeting did occur with the submitted APR review being the central topic. While there were some grantees who indicated they prefer not to hear back from their program officer after submitting the APR, as they perceive "no news is good news," it is clearly a best practice to at least offer a meeting session with grantees.

G5 and Other Platforms

Reviews of the grants management and reporting system G5 were variable. Some (roughly 30%) felt the platform was easy to use and had no complaints. Others (more than 50%) found it

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to be an archaic system full of bugs and idiosyncrasies that made its use very frustrating. However, it is a commonly shared opinion that the G5 Help Desk is a great resource and provides prompt and effective service.

Complaints regarding G5 include:

- Unable to toggle between grants.
- No sorting or filtering functionality makes finding a particular grant very difficult.
- Unreasonable character/word limitations.
- Microsoft Word and G5 (also the IRIS platform) seem to count words differently.
- Errors are not explained with any specificity, so the user does not know what the problem is.
- There is an inability to upload documents, creating the need for substantial copying and pasting.

Several grantees mentioned having multiple logins would be very beneficial. This would allow several administrators access to the grant information, which would be particularly useful for the annual reporting. Oftentimes, the reporting is a joint effort, with various individuals tasked with gathering distinct pieces of information that go into the reporting template. If everyone was able to access G5, the input of these data would be much more efficient. Another grantee pointed out that only having a single login prevents the ability for a second individual to review and proofread the information before being submitted.

Application Process

The application process is generally well-received by grantees. The most common complaint was timelines that are too tight, with most grantees asking for a minimum of 60 days to complete the application. Webinars that provide information on completing the application are overwhelmingly seen as very helpful and a resource that should continue to be provided. Some grantees commented that the applications ask for too much information and present repetitive questions, but these comments were rare.

Recommendations

> ✓ **Ensure program officers are consistently offering meetings with grantees to discuss their APRs, before and/or after submission.**
>
> ✓ **Incorporate the feedback regarding G5 into the G6 release or as part of a future patch/enhancement.**
>
> ✓ **Give grantees at least 60 days to complete their grant applications.**
>
> ✓ **Continue webinars or other knowledge sharing activities that outline the application process and post the sessions for on-demand use.**

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Other Feedback

Additional feedback, not tied to any prevailing theme of the discussions is summarized below:

- The grant money received from the Education Department is instrumental to the programs they benefit and greatly appreciated.

- Inflation is "eating up" the grants' value as the same number of dollars are awarded in each annual cycle.

- It is difficult to keep personnel when there are gaps in funding.

- Perkins Collaborative Resource Network (PCRN) is not accomplishing its original purpose. If resources could be moved there for discretionary grantees, it would promote much needed organization.

- Grantee organizations have been expected to increase their scope of work at the same level of funding.

- Grantees would like to know the high level findings of this research and how the Education Department is going to use the feedback.

- Adult Education program grantees feel like a low priority compared to K-12 programs.

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