Specialty Crop Block Grant Program

Core Competencies for Effective Pass-Through Grants Management

This year, the Specialty Crop Block Grant (SCBGP) team has had the opportunity to visit many of the States in formal site visits, meeting with you face-to-face, sharing ideas and learning about the challenges you face on a day-to-day basis as you wade through the complexity of federal regulations while still balancing the expectations of sub-grantees and the constraints of budgets. Through these visits, we've been impressed with the unique skills and processes you employ in your management of this program and we've identified some that are particularly helpful in managing SCBGP grants. As part of our ongoing efforts to provide useful technical assistance to you and to help your state achieve strong and lasting results, we wanted to share these key competencies with you. These core competencies characterize effective grants management and offer all grantees ways to identify their own strengths and opportunities for improvement.

We encourage you to assess your own grant management practices against the competencies described in this document and take them into consideration when establishing policies and procedures and making hiring decisions. We also encourage you to develop an action plan to help further activate these qualities in your current work environment.

The seven competencies defined in this document are intended to complement your efforts in running a high quality program, serve your customers and stakeholders, and meet the needs of your organization. They are also intended to empower you to take charge of your program's performance and design appropriate changes. Understanding these competencies will enable you to improve your program's operations and performance as well as minimize the risk of non-compliance with federal requirements.

It is important to point out that there is no easy answer or quick fix for many grant management challenges – much of sound program management is the result of careful, deliberate, time-consuming, and complex work. We hope that you will review these competencies alone and with your management team, and plan specific steps to address any areas of weakness that you identify.

A definition is provided for each of the major core competencies in this bulletin that frames what the competency entails, followed by questions to help you evaluate your proficiency in grants management. This educational bulletin provides a strategic framework for state grantees at all different levels of expertise.

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Highlighting Your Success!

- *Florida*
- *Hawaii*
- *Nebraska*
- *North Dakota*
- *West Virginia*

Florida

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Farm to School: Enhancing Specialty Crop Consumption for School Meal Programs

The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services partnered with the New North Florida Cooperative to increase awareness of Farm-to-School opportunities in Florida and to facilitate the incorporation of specialty crop products into school meal programs. Through this project, twenty-four school districts were trained in the basic tenets of Farm to School and learned how to better incorporate fruits and vegetables into school meal programs. Fourteen of these school districts participated in pilot training activities during the 2010-2011 school year. At the same time, approximately 50 producers and youth entrepreneurs were trained through on-station and on-farm training demonstrations in production and marketing of specialty crop products to local schools. Additional producer/processor and food safety certifications and licenses were needed in some cases to enable the specialty crop producers to fully participate in the program. Throughout the project, schools incorporated approximately 53,340 pounds of specialty crop products such as collards, turnips, sweet potatoes and green beans into school meal programs. An additional 180 flats of strawberries were also utilized by the schools.

Developing Integrated Pest Management Strategies for Controlling Key Pests in Florida Blueberries

The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services partnered with the Florida Blueberry Association to develop integrated pest management strategies for four major blueberry pests in Florida: flower thrips (Frankliniella spp.), Chilli thrips (Scirtothrips dorsalis Hood), blueberry gall midge (aka cranberry tipworm Dasineura oxycoccana Johnson), and flea beetles. Through various experiments, the team attempted to determine the economic injury level of flower thrips to southern highbush blueberries, identified the effects of weed control on flower thrips populations, monitored Chilli thrips populations in six counties, studied the mating habits of gall midge adults, determined the incidence of parasitism of blueberry gall midge, and evaluated cultivar preferences and feeding behaviors of flea beetles. The team then shared the results of its studies with more than 150 blueberry growers, crop consultants and marketing representatives at the spring and fall blueberry meetings in 2011. Research results were also published on the University of Florida, Fruit and Vegetable IPM website at http://entnemdept.ufl.edu/liburd/fruitnvegipm/. Furthermore, the team organized an in-service training workshop on pest identification and management practices for approximately 25 extension agents who work with blueberry growers in all 67 counties in the state.

Nebraska

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Encouraging the Use of Nebraska Dry Beans in the Chinese Diet

The Nebraska Department of Agriculture worked with the Nebraska Dry Bean Commission to encourage the use of Nebraska dry edible beans in the Chinese diet through the facilitation of a trade conference in China. A total of 125 participants attended the conference, which consisted of United States and Chinese manufacturers, suppliers, academia, and other interested stakeholders. During this conference, project staff educated participants about the uses of Nebraska dry edible beans, particularly how the specialty crop could be incorporated into the Chinese instant noodle cups and menu items. As a result, five Chinese manufacturers and processors expressed interest in the investigation of incorporating dry edible beans into the instant noodle cup formula; thus increasing the potential marketing channels for Nebraska and United States dry edible beans.

The Farmer's Alternative Crop: Winter Production of Greenhouse Strawberries

The Nebraska Department of Agriculture partnered with the University of Nebraska – Lincoln (UNL) to determine and recommend cultivars of strawberries that produce the greatest yield during the growing season and have the best health-promoting phytochemicals. Thirteen cultivars of strawberry plants were grown and evaluated from October 2010 through April 2011. Project staff selected berries from each cultivar and analyzed them for health-promoting phytochemicals (total phenols, flavonoids and antioxidant capacity) as well as sugars. The project staff noted that the cultivars that gave the highest yield included Chandler, Albion, Seascape; Cavendish, and Evie-2. The project staff indicated that there was not a significant difference in the total phenol concentration among cultivars. However, the flavonoid concentration was significantly higher in Dar Select, Seascape, Chandler, KRS-10, Cavendish, Evie-2, Albion, and Sweet Charlie compared to Strawberry Festival, Tribute, Honeoye, and AC Wendy. The results of this project were published to UNL's Department of Agronomy & Horticulture website (http://agronomy.unl.edu/cea) and disseminated through presentations to over 900 attendees at a National American Society for Horticultural Sciences meeting. In addition, project staff presented a poster at the 2011 Great Plains Growers Conference, which was attended by more than 450 individuals from across the Midwest.

Highlighting Your Success!

Hawaii

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Buy Local Educational Campaign for Hawaii Schools, Phase II

The Hawaii Department of Agriculture partnered with 4 Ag Hawaii, Inc. to implement a marketing campaign in conjunction with the 4 Ag Hawaii website (www.4AgHawaii.org) that solely benefited specialty crops through the promotion of the "Buy Local, It Matters" branding methodology and provision of a food safety and nutrition child and adult education initiative. In addition, project staff provided mentoring opportunities for specialty crop growers to foster relationships with over 190 organizations in the State of Hawaii that included wholesalers, commissaries, and the hospitality industry. In fact, project staff indicated that over 220 individual growers from 6 different groups participated in the mentoring program. A cost-share program for Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification audit was also implemented by project staff to increase the number of specialty crop farmers in Hawaii that have received a GAP audit. Through the facilitation of this marketing campaign and food safety educational effort, the project staff reported that the "Buy Local, It Matters" website experienced a range from a low of 8,165 monthly to a high of 25,314 "hits." In fact, the states of origin in order of "hits" include Hawaii, Oregon, Washington, and California.

Island Fresh
Buy Local ❀ It Matters
Join the movement!

North Dakota

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Improving the market access characteristics of pulses grown in North Dakota, Montana and South Dakota

The North Dakota Department of Agriculture partnered with the Northern Pulse Growers Association (NPGA) to develop new pulse-based food products, increase awareness of pulse crops, and conduct market development activities. To accomplish these objectives, NPGA worked with the Northern Crops Institute (NCI) and North Dakota State University (NDSU) to develop 13 pulse-based recipes, a food industry guide, ingredient specifications and food safety guidelines for pulses. In addition, the team participated in a number of trade shows and public relations initiatives, which increased pulse awareness in the region. Over the course of the project, lentil production in the region increased, as did the sales price of pulse and pulse products for use in the food industry.

Evaluation of Hardy Roses for Cut Flower Production

The North Dakota Department of Agriculture partnered with North Dakota State University (NDSU) to evaluate 137 rose varieties for hardiness, bloom color and form, fragrance, floral impact, vigor, disease resistance, and repeat bloom. In addition, the team educated 760 gardeners about these varieties of roses through a series of 10 workshops conducted throughout the state in 2010. An additional 280 gardeners were educated through five workshops and tours conducted in 2011. Videos on rose varieties and production were published online.

West Virginia

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Statewide Producer Education and Professional Development Program

The West Virginia Department of Agriculture facilitated a series of training sessions for specialty crop producers to meet federal and state processing and food safety requirements and increase knowledge of specialty crop value-added production. Specifically, project staff held a Better Process Control School (BPCS), Hazard and Critical Control Points (HACCP) course, and two 1 day Good Agricultural Practices/ Good Handling Practices (GAP/GHP) programs, and two GAP/GHP program overview presentations. A total of 149 students were introduced to specialty crop grower and processor education through the facilitation of these training sessions. In fact, project staff reported that the knowledge gained from the BPCS led to the introduction of 17 new specialty crop products in West Virginia by ten participating companies. Furthermore, three attendees were in the process approval stage representing nine additional products.

> The Specialty Crop Block Grant Program website has been refreshed.
>
> **Check it out!**
>
> **www.ams.usda.gov/scbgp**

Core Competency: Managing Risk

I understand what constitutes financial and program risk as it relates to my grants, and can evaluate my program according to risk assessment principles.

An effective risk management plan for SCBGP recipients focuses on maximizing the potential for success and limiting any risks by providing adequate training to and supervision of sub-grantees, screening and monitoring projects, and reviewing relevant project operations. SCBGP grantee organizations may want to characterize their sub-grantees as high-risk, moderate-risk, or low-risk and then develop an appropriate plan to match their level of risk. A high-risk sub-grantee is a recipient that has a history of unsatisfactory performance, appears to be financially unstable, or has a management system that does not meet management standards, or has not conformed to terms and conditions of previous awards.

To the right is an example of a risk assessment that could be used to assign points or classify each sub-grantee as high, medium, or low-risk. The score does not mean a recipient is necessarily high risk, but rather that recipients with these characteristics are more likely to encounter difficulties. Conversely, recipients who do not fit into these categories can be high risk also. For more information on Assessing Risk and Resources, see the Summer 2012 Educational Bulletin.

> *Managing risk isn't just part of federal oversight – SCBGP grantees can identify sources of their potential financial and programmatic risks and take steps to reduce them.*

Category	Criteria
Organizational Criteria	New SCBGP Recipient
	New Federal Award Recipient
	Recent or Frequent Staffing Changes
	Change in Legal Applicant / Responsible Party
Programmatic Criteria	Low Quality Programmatic Performance
	Inadequate Outcome Measures
	Multi-Site Project
	Innovative / Untested Program / Project Design
	Major Changes in Project Scope
	Major Changes in Project Budget
	Multiple Awards
	One or More Projects have the Potential to Benefit Non-Specialty Crops
	Complexity of Project (i.e recipient is purchasing special purpose equipment; generating program income; travelling out of the local area; etc.)
Financial Criteria	Large Unexpended Balances
	Financial Weakness Identified
	Large Budget
Compliance Criteria	Incomplete / Late Financial Status Reports
	Incomplete/Late Progress Reports
	Open Audit Findings
	Last Site Visit More Than One Year Ago
	Non-Responsive Recipient
Program Specific Criteria	One or More Partners or Subcontractors
	Congressional Interest in Project/High Visibility Project

Self-Assessment

⇒ Have I identified the potential risks in my program – i.e., areas where I might be vulnerable to problems?

⇒ Do I assess my program's risks regularly and document them?

⇒ Do I prioritize the risks to my program on a regular basis?

⇒ Do I use a risk-based strategy to assess and manage the risks of my sub-grantees?

⇒ Does my risk management plan include strategies to mitigate my risk factors?

⇒ Do I have a plan for monitoring implementation of my risk management plan?

Core Competency: Understanding Federal Requirements

I understand all federal requirements that pertain to my grant, including my grant provisions, and have taken steps to ensure they are addressed.

By accepting SCBGP grant funds, grantees agree to comply with the grant provisions and all applicable federal statutes, regulations, guidelines, and other assurances made in support of the approved program. The grantee also agrees to operate the funded program in accordance with the approved grant application and budget. The federal requirements that govern your grant include the authorizing statute, grant-specific rules, and relevant federal assistance regulations. Grant provisions (terms and conditions) are supplemental guidance to your grant award that contains specific and general requirements for the grant. Your grant agreement will reference the applicable version of the award terms and conditions.

The grant provisions provide guidance for all aspects of SCBGP grantee program development and administration, and they are your first stop for understanding federal requirements that pertain to each grant and for problem solving and grant related questions. To help you further understand federal assistance regulations, specific program regulations and requirements, and apply grants management best practices, we encourage you to visit the National Grants Management Association website at www.ngma.org. The National Grants Management Association recommends Management Concepts' Grants Management Certificate Program as part of their Certified Grants Management Specialist Program. You can find more information about Management Concepts and training classes being offered in your area at www.managementconcepts.com.

> *The Specialty Crop Block Grant Program's website (www.ams.usda.gov/scbgp) is a great resource for information about all aspects of the Program.*

Self-Assessment

⇒ Have I thoroughly reviewed my Grant Agreement and the associated Terms and Conditions? Do I understand its provisions? Am I in full compliance?

⇒ Have I familiarized myself with the relevant federal regulations that apply to my grant? Am I in full compliance?

⇒ Do I know which Federal Administrative Regulations are applicable to my program and sub-grantees and understand how to use them? Am I in full compliance with those requirements?

⇒ Do I know who else in my organization is responsible for implementing parts of the grant provisions (such as financial staff) and is my work coordinated with theirs?

Core Competency: Developing a Program Management Plan ...and Using It

I have a detailed plan for managing my grant that produces results, ensures coordination, and builds accountability.

A program management plan describes the grant program's strategic focus, and serves as a mechanism for scheduling the use of time and resources over the life of the program. A well thought out program management plan helps the grantee:

- Staff the program appropriately;
- Manage the program resources efficiently;
- Ensure compliance with both federal and internal requirements;
- Establish measurable program outcomes and fund subawards that will contribute to achieving those outcomes;
- Select sub-grantees;
- Monitor subawards;
- Provide effective technical assistance;
- Evaluate program results; and
- Lay the groundwork for improving management of subsequent award cycles.

To ensure and measure the success of the program, consider:

- How the selected projects meet your State funding priorities
- How you are communicating SCBGP Expected Measurable Outcome requirements to sub-recipients
- How you are seeking stakeholder input and incorporating it into your funding plan
- How you will measure/are measuring the overall success of the program in the short-run, the long-run
- Your plan for evaluating the success of the program
- How you are communicating fulfillment of Expected Measurable Outcomes and other project successes to SCBGP and other interested stakeholders

To ensure you have the resources necessary to adequately monitor and manage the program, determine:

- What program management staff and what level of effort will be needed
- What financial management staff at what level of effort will be needed
- How the program and finance staff will interface (and how frequently)
- What internal review (including legal review) of the grant agreement will be required

> *Really good grants management and fiscal and program performance derive from strong organizational and management practices.*

To prepare for the review process, project selection, and post-award management:

- Establish a timeline of when you expect funding will be available and calculate approximately how much funding will be available in each award cycle
- Determine how many awards you wish to make in each award cycle and set maximum and minimum award amounts
- Create a plan/timeline for releasing your request for proposals, due date for proposals, reviewing applicants' proposals, and developing your State Plan
- Establish your application procedures, eligibility requirements, and funding priorities
- Formalize your peer review process
- Review your award terms, making sure you have included all required references to federal regulations
- Formalize your process for negotiating budgets
- Establish templates and processes for notifying applicants about the results of the review
- Establish a comprehensive plan to monitor the projects, including timelines for reports, site visits, and regular communication with all sub-grantees
- Establish your closeout procedures and timelines

Self-Assessment

⇒ Have I identified what federal requirements shape the program and how it runs?
⇒ Which of my internal State Agency's requirements and business processes will shape the program?
⇒ What discretion do I have in establishing program parameters outside of what is included in the federal administrative requirements?
⇒ How does the program fit within my State Agency's overall mission and goals?
⇒ Have I identified how long will it take to complete each step in the program cycle, including tasks needed to develop the program management plan?
⇒ Have I identified which steps can be completed concurrently, and which must be sequential?
⇒ Have I developed written policies and procedures to guide program management and, if so, have I adequately communicated them to staff members?
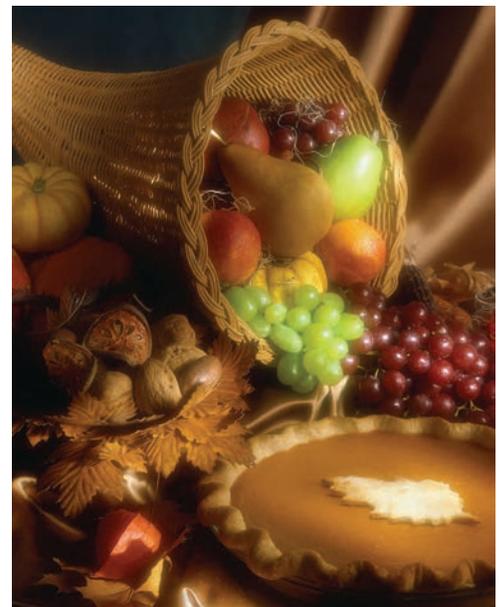
Core Competency: Managing and Administering Sub-grants

I have developed a judicious, reasonable, and effective process for selecting and managing sub-grants.

Definition: *A sub-grant is an award in the form of money made under a grant by a grantee to an eligible recipient called a sub-grantee. Sub-grantees must follow all SCBGP rules and regulations. Grantees are responsible for monitoring and reporting on all their sub-granting activities and are ultimately responsible for managing sub-grantee funds.*

A competitive process for selecting sub-grantees ensures that all sub-grantees are evaluated fairly and that the highest quality applicants are selected. Grant announcements including application guidelines and selection criteria should be published and disseminated as widely as possible to ensure the greatest pool of applicants. Application guidelines should be clearly written and provide all necessary information for sub-grantees to complete an application. The sub-grant selection process should include a peer review process to evaluate and select sub-grantees. Reviewers should be free from conflict of interest and should review the proposals without bias. A written justification should also be prepared for the selection of all awardees based on the selection criteria.

Managing sub-grantee funds and programs is a key grantee responsibility. SCBGP grantees should develop a risk-based monitoring system to ensure adequate oversight of all sub-grantee funds. SCBGP grantees should communicate compliance and reporting requirements, including all grant provisions to their sub-grantees. Providing sub-grantees with the training they need to implement strong programs is a major component of sub-grant management. To help design effective training and technical assistance efforts, SCBGP grantees should develop a plan for providing training, technical assistance, and conducting site visits. This plan should include strategies for linking sub-grantees to networks and sharing ideas.

> *The sub-granting process and the character of sub-grantee performance can present difficulties for grantees of any Federal award.*

Self-Assessment

Sub-grant Selection

⇒ Have I written clear application guidelines and selection criteria?

⇒ Have I used a number of avenues to disseminate the grant announcement as widely as possible?

⇒ Have I published and disseminated sub-grant selection criteria?

⇒ Have I designed a peer review process to evaluate sub-grant applications?

⇒ Do I have a written signed conflict of interest disclosure on file for each peer reviewer?

⇒ Have I documented whether the applicant is included on the *Excluded Parties Listing System* at www.sam.gov prior to award?

Sub-grant Management

⇒ Am I using risk-based principles for assessing my sub-grantees?

⇒ Have I developed and implemented a risk-based monitoring system to monitor sub-grantees?

⇒ Have I established a plan for conducting site visits that review both financial and programmatic aspects of the project?

⇒ Have I developed a plan for communicating regularly with sub-grantees and providing training and technical assistance?

Core Competency: Managing Budget and Finances

I understand financial management principles and have a comprehensive system for organizing financial statements, managing and documenting costs, and ensuring internal controls.

SCBGP grantees must employ sound financial management practices in implementing their grants – practices that effectively manage program funds and provide for accurate, complete, and current disclosure and documentation of the financial results of the SCBGP program. State department of agriculture grantees may expend and account for funds in accordance with State laws and procedures that apply to the expenditure of and the accounting for the State's own funds as long as those procedures are sufficient to permit preparation of required reports and tracing of expenditures to a level adequate to establish that award funds have not been used in violation of any applicable statutory restrictions or prohibitions.

SCBGP sub-grantees' system of cost management should include fiscal and programmatic components as well as cost allocation and monitoring. Managing costs includes the process of identifying all the costs associated with the grant, making informed choices about the options that will deliver the best value for grant expenditures, and managing and documenting those costs throughout the life of the project. The SCBGP sub-grantee's budget is the blueprint for cost management. The budget should be guided by the sub-grantee's proposal and should include all direct and indirect costs.

Grants managers and other personnel, as appropriate, are responsible for implementing all SCBGP-specific financial and grants management guidance and provisions. This includes managing and documenting costs as well as the planning, coordination, control and reporting of all cost-related aspects from project initiation through operation, maintenance, and close-out. Grant agreement provisions provide guidance regarding changes to your budget. Grantees and sub-grantees have flexibility to make any budget adjustments within those parameters of less than 20 percent of their total project budget without prior approval.

Cost management also entails understanding and following cost principles pertaining to allowable costs, and indirect costs. State department of agriculture grantees may follow the same policies and procedures they use for procurements from non-Federal funds. All other recipients must follow the requirements in 7 CFR 3019.40 -48 or 3016.36, as applicable, for the purchase of goods and services through contracts under grants. This means that each grant and sub-grantee must have effective systems for competitive bidding_of contracts and procurement. The regulations require that federal recipients maintain a procurement system that is ethical, promotes full and open competition, and reaches out to women and minority-owned businesses.

> *Questionable financial procedures can sink a grant regardless of its programmatic value.*

Self-Assessment

⇒ Can I readily obtain my organization's budget, my program budget, and my sub- grantee budget?

⇒ Do I understand and follow principles pertaining to allowable, direct, and indirect costs?

⇒ Do I document or request documentation from my sub-grantees on all program-related funds and costs, and have I established processes for clearly tracking expenditures that should be allocated to the SCBGP grant?

⇒ Do I have a monthly report that tracks expenditures against each project's budget to ensure I am not exceeding federal caps?

⇒ Does my system of internal controls include appropriate checks, balances, and review, including segregation of duties?

Core Competency: Keeping Records and Documenting Progress

I understand documentation needs and requirements and am meeting them with regularity.

SCBGP grantees should document policies and procedures throughout the grant process to ensure adherence to all grant requirements and provisions as well as facilitate continuity in program operations. Documentation also helps the grantee stay organized. Important documents to maintain in a filing system (electronic or paper-based) include the Grant Agreement, grant amendments, the approved grant application, documents from sub-grantees, the program budget, all expenditures, correspondence with SCBGP staff, financial reports, program performance reports, and audit and project closeout documentation. All grantee and sub-grantee expenditures should be appropriately documented (i.e., cancelled checks, paid bills, payrolls, contracts, and sub-grant award documents etc.) in a manner that supports why the transactions are allowable (necessary), reasonable, and allocable, and in accordance with the approved budget under the SCBGP grant. SCBGP grantees should retain financial records three years from the date of submission of the final Financial Report, and if there is an on-going audit, three years from the final audit resolution.

Self-Assessment

⇒ Have I set up a system for organizing important grant-related documents?
⇒ Can I easily access financial reports and program performance reports?
⇒ Have I kept all budget and expenditure-related documentation?
⇒ Do I have documentation to support all policies and procedures?

Core Competency: Addressing Weaknesses

I have addressed prior programmatic and financial weaknesses, and I continue to review my program's performance and make mid-course corrections as needed.

Organizations are often subject to internal and external reviews, including audits. If your organization expends $500,000 or more per year under Federal grants, cooperative agreements, and/or procurement contracts, you must have an independent financial audit, or "single audit." A "single audit" is an audit of your entire organization. The auditor will conduct a financial examination of your grant receipts and expenditures as well as a compliance review to determine whether you are meeting grant terms and conditions. Sometimes an auditor will report audit findings, which are problems or issues related to how you spent grant funds or complied with the terms and conditions of a grant. All audit findings should be addressed.

If your organization (i.e., the State department of agriculture) is not required to have an audit, your review should still include audits of the larger organization or department to which you belong (i.e., the state government as a whole) and any partner organizations that you work with. SCBGP grantees should also review any prior internal reviews or other assessments of their organization's fiscal or programmatic management and be sure to address all findings.

In addition, you may be asked to participate in an SCBGP site visit. The overall objective of the site visit is to improve the SCBGP by measuring program performance and ensuring that all grantees are complying with statutory and regulatory requirements, the SCBGP grant agreement, terms and conditions, and other guidance. At the conclusion of a site visit, you have the chance to establish a plan for addressing any recommendations made by the SCBGP site visit investigator, further strengthening your program.

Finally, as an SCBGP grantee, you should be engaged in a continuous process of self-assessment, reviewing both financial and programmatic aspects of your organization's performance and making midcourse corrections as needed.

Self-Assessment

⇒ Have I reviewed and addressed my organization's prior audit findings? Are there recurrent findings that I have not addressed?
⇒ Have I reviewed and addressed any audit findings that pertain to the larger organization or department to which my organization belongs or any partner organizations that we work with?
⇒ Have I reviewed any other reports or assessments of my organization's fiscal or programmatic performance including reports from site visits?
⇒ Do I regularly review my organization's performance and make mid-course corrections as needed?