ALEIA MCCORD: Hello, everyone. Today we're going to talk about three grant applications that were submitted by my organization, W2E Uganda, Limited. And just to let you all know, we did have to submit these three applications to the same granting agency, and the same granting program three times in order to get funded. So the first two submissions were rejected, and the final submission was eventually funded.

These granting applications follow the progression of our business over the course of the year 2012. The first application that we submitted was the application entitled" "LPG". This was the one about compressing bio-gas and putting it into canisters. That one was rejected. We submitted that in January of 2012. The second grant application was a revision that focused on creating a proof of concept system. That's the one entitled "Proof of Concept" in your materials. This one was also rejected. We submitted that in August of 2012. And the final revision was the application entitled "Woman Entrepreneur". We submitted that in December of 2012, so at the end of the year and that was the application that was indeed eventually funded, and in fact has been a very important part of our funding since that time.

Why were the first two applications not successful and the third application successful? What stood out? I want to walk you through a little bit the evolution of these ideas and the evolution of our writing, so you can understand that grant writing is really an iterative process, and you shouldn't be afraid of rejection, and you should continue to submit applications even if your early applications are rejected.

I think in our case, I really like these three applications because I think they really demonstrate the evolution of our project over the course of the year 2012, and the evolution of our thinking. And I think the feedback that we received from the reviewers was in many cases very helpful in helping us identify what particular parts of the application needed more attention and more focus.

As I mentioned, these grants really follow very closely the progression of our thinking about our project and our business from January of 2012 until the end of the year in December. And just to give you a quick background on our business, of course, we're focused on bringing bio-gas technology to folks in Uganda. We are a Ugandan based for-profit business, and we're seeking to

transform municipal solid waste and other types of waste, into a high quality fertilizer product, and a renewable source of energy in the form of methane.

In the beginning of our journey as a company, as we'd been struggling in the past three years to define what our organization's business plan is, and what our role is in the community, and what kind of work we want to do, we were really focused on large scale bio-gas systems. And we really struggled to identify an appropriate end use for the gas that would meet the needs of the communities in which we work. So when we first began this project, we really thought that we were going to take this municipal solid waste, and we were going to produce this gas, and compress it into LPG or propane canisters, and sell it as an alternative to charcoal or firewood. And that's what this first grant application suggests that we want to do.

Later on, we would find out probably around February or March of 2012, after we had already submitted this grant along with a lot of other grant applications, we would discover that compressing bio-gas into existing propane or LPG canisters is actually [LAUGHING] really dangerous and could result in the explosion of those canisters. And if you just put enough bio-gas in these canisters so that the canisters don't explode, you have enough cooking gas for about two hours. So that was really disappointing to learn, and that learning process was part of the development of our idea. When that information came to light, we had to really dramatically shift our approach.

So the second application called "Proof of Concept", I think, shows that new switch in approach, where we've acknowledged that we actually really don't know a lot about the sector, and so what we're asking for support to do is to design this proof of concept system that can kind of illuminate the appropriate end uses of the gas, the appropriate management of the effluent which is generated, or the fertilizer, and also the appropriate systems by which we collect our feedstock, or our municipal solid waste. By the time we've gotten to this second grant application, our organization has really realized that we don't understand the sector as well as we thought we did, and we have a lot of unanswered questions.

By the time we get to December, to the third granting application on the woman entrepreneurship, we have constructed our proof of concept system, we have spoken to communities already, we have gotten a real sense of where the opportunities are in Uganda, and

we have gotten a sense of where this project can be very successful very easily. For example in Uganda, the benefits of renewable energy production are pretty well articulated, there's a pretty clear legal framework that supports renewable energy development. And so by the time we get to December, we've met with all the key stakeholders in Uganda. We have a really clear understanding of what's involved in producing electricity and what's involved in the waste sector. But the big question mark for us in December of 2012 is what the heck do you do with all of that effluent or fertilizer that you generate as part of this process?

Every day, if we're bringing in several tons of municipal solid waste, we're also generating several tons of effluent or fertilizer, and how do you manage that amount of effluent? What do you do with it?

And so this application in December is really focused on what you do with that effluent, how you develop a clear market for using that product productively, instead of wasting it or having it contaminate a watershed. So that's really the evolution of our thinking in the business, and I think the grants coincide with that evolution very nicely.

So why did our first two attempts not get funded? Because we had to go through this process anyway. We did all the things that we said in this grant. Well, we didn't necessarily do them, but we went through the process of doing this feasibility study and discovered which ideas were viable and which ideas were not, even without the USAID funding. So why is it that USAID turned down our first two grants on LPG and the proof of concept system, but decided to fund the third application?

Well, I think the easiest answer is that the first two grant applications were for a feasibility study, and that was not appropriate for this granting agency. USAID this particular program, development innovation ventures, did not want to support feasibility studies. And I think there was a failure on our part to recognize what kinds of projects this funding opportunity was looking to support. Feasibility studies were not among them.

The way that DIV is structured, I should mention, is a three stage process. There's Stage 1 funding, which is up to $100,000. That's what we've received. There's Stage 2 funding, which you can apply for after receiving Stage 1 funding, and that goes up to, I think, $500,000 or so, and then Stage 3 funding, for people who successfully complete Stage 2 funding is in excess of a

million dollars. It's a staged granting opportunity and this is a very common design, where you're moving from a small grant $100,000 or less up to these very large grants, multimillion dollar grants. And even though in many cases, small grants are designed to support this kind of proof of concept or feasibility study type of work, in the case of DIV, they really wanted to see an action ready business plan that they could support and scale very rapidly. So there wasn't a lot of interest in doing the feasibility study. The granting agency assumes this organization has already done the feasibility study. And as a result, I think these first two applications were simply not competitive, because we didn't understand that the granting agency wanted something that was on the ground and that was already running, and they wanted to provide funding for a very small part of business development to accelerate the development of the project. And in the case of these first two grants that we submitted, the "LPG" and the "Proof of Concept" we were really asking for funds to answer these very broad questions, and the results were not going to be clear, and there was a good possibility at the end of the day that we would use this $100,000 to do the feasibility study and then discover that it wasn't feasible and that would be the end of it. And that's not what USAID was looking for with this particular grant.

Now, I will mention, there are other granting opportunities that are completely directed at doing a feasibility study, and so it just really depends on what grant you're applying for whether or not your project is an appropriate fit. We did ultimately get funding from other sources that enabled us to do the feasibility study that we needed to do, to get to the point where we could develop this "Woman Entrepreneur" grant proposal in December, but those funds did not come from USAID. They ended up coming from other agencies that had granting programs which were specifically targeted at feasibility studies.

In addition to the fact these first two applications focused on a feasibility study when the granting agency really wanted a ready to implement project, I think there were some other shortcomings that some of the reviewers picked up on, and I think some went unsaid but I believe were important.

For the "LPG" proposal in particular, I don't think that our budget was very well articulated, or made a lot of sense for what it was we were trying to do. And nobody commented on this in the reviewer comments, but I think that the budget revealed a level of amateurism that overshadowed the rest of the application. We had a lot of money in here for things that I don't

think USAID wanted to provide funds for. For example, our largest proposed expenditure was actually purchasing land [LAUGHING] and I don't think that USAID really wanted to support the purchase of property in Uganda. Now that's a kind of asset some organizations, that's all they do, right? Conservation organizations, they purchase land and that's fine, and granting agencies understand that. In our case, I think the idea of supporting a private business to acquire private property is a little dubious. I mean, what are these people going to do with this property after the end of this project, right? We could do anything with this property. We could do industrial agriculture, we could do strip mining. I don't think that the agency really wants to support an investment in that type of capital asset. So that was a really amateur mistake. I will mention that we were able to get funds to purchase land in another way that was more appropriate.

The other thing that's really missing from this budget is personnel. We have a piddly $500 allocated to each team member as a stipend. And for the amount of work that is listed in this application, I think that just screams of amateur planning. This is an amazing amount of work and at the time we didn't have any other leverage, any other cost sharing that we could include in here, so we did include our time as a cost sharing, so the in kind contribution of our time, we estimated to be worth about $72,000, and we were going to donate our time as a contribution to the project. I think that's kind of not the type of cost sharing that these agencies like to see. In our case, we didn't have another option, because at this time, we actually had zero funding for this project. You'll notice by that time we submitted the application in December, we had already secured a number of other grants, and I think the fact that we had these other successes, the fact that other granting agencies believed in us and thought that we were a legitimate organization legitimate enough to support, anyway I think that really inspired USAID to jump on board. Nobody likes to be part of a sinking ship. Everybody wants to be part of a winning project, and so those early successes with other small grants, I think, enabled us to secure this grant ultimately at the end of the year. But at the time that we submitted the "LPG" grant at the beginning of the year, we had not secured any other funding, and so, I think that really hurt our application.

If you look at the reviewer comments on all three of these drafts, you'll see that the one thing that stands out each and every time in terms of our strengths, in terms of what the granting agency liked about our proposal, was the fact that we had developed these collaborations among

multiple agencies: Among universities in Uganda, University here in Wisconsin, among stakeholders in governments, local stakeholders. And I think this vibrant community of supporters for this project is something that was looked upon favorably, even in the earlier drafts that were rejected. And I think it's probably the reason that we ultimately secured this grant in December of 2012.

Developing those collaborations was a huge amount of work. I think if you go back and look at these applications in a little more detail, and you look at the sections where we're describing our existing collaborations, you can see these networks of people growing over the course of the year. And that was an incredible amount of work to put together all of those different kinds of supporters. And it was an incredible amount of work to do without any funding, essentially, because we didn't get this grant until December. So for a long time, we were operating on a very limited budget and really scraping by. I don't know if this will be the case for many of you in this course because I don't know how many of you are working with startups. Our case is a little bit special because we're a startup organization, so there wasn't an operating budget in place. We had to basically scrape together every little penny we could, pulling from a variety of different resources of small pots of money, of personal grant awards, and such things, in order to cobble together this coalition of supporters, but once we were able to get all these people in the same room these universities, our supporters here in Madison, our supporters in Uganda at Makerere University, our supporters within government I think that's when we really saw the tides change and we became more competitive for a lot of these funding opportunities.

Basically, as a small organization, we had to leverage the reputations of other organizations in order to present some kind of legitimacy. Because nobody wants to just give $100,000 to four graduate students, right? People want to see that this is a project that has institutional support from somewhere, and legitimately so, we needed that institutional support.

And I think the lesson here from this process for us…there was a couple of lessons. One of the lessons is that you can't allow your funding success or failure to dictate the progress of your project. Even though we were a startup organization, even though we had really limited funds, even though we had to do an enormous amount of legwork to piece together 1,000, 2,000 to 5,000 dollar pots of money, and ask people for support to enable us to do some of this early work, we couldn't just sit and wait for $100,000 to drop into our laps. We had to keep moving,

we had to keep evolving, we had to keep learning. So when we submitted this first application and it was rejected, we couldn't just sit back and resubmit, and hope that next time something was going to change. We had to keep developing the idea, and keep researching so that we could submit a more well thought out and better researched proposal.

Between January of 2012 and August of 2012, we learned a lot about the sector that we didn't know before, and that was from work that we did in the field. And this was incredibly challenging, as I mentioned, because we didn't have an operating budget. It was really hard to get that work done, but we managed somehow. And I think the lesson here in grant writing is if you have a good idea, you can't wait until you get a grant to implement it. You have to just really push and keep moving. I think granting agencies like to support projects that are already ongoing. They like to see grit and determination in the applicants. They like to see that even without their support, you've been able to push things along. You haven't stagnated. You haven't stayed in the same place. They like to see that sort of development. You have to find a way. Obviously it would be a lot easier if you had the resources, because you wouldn't be applying for these resources in the first place if you really didn't need them. But you have to find a way, in the absence of those resources, to keep pushing your ideas forward. That was the first lesson I think we learned.

The second lesson I think we learned from this experience was the importance of really reading the instructions for the grant, and really listening to what it is the funder wants to support; making an appropriate match between the granting agency's goals and your goals, and ensuring that there's a close alignment. If there's not a close alignment, it may not be a good fit for you or for your organization or your project.

In our case, the USAID DIV program is ideally suited for startups. They like startups. They like private business. They want to see these kinds of projects succeed, and so it was really a good fit. But at first at least, we weren't really communicating to the agency what a good fit we were. By focusing on this feasibility study instead of focusing on clear, well-articulated project activities, we looked more like a research study than we did a business with an operational model. And the truth of the matter was that there was a lot of research that had to be done, and we weren't actually an operational business with an operational model. There would have been a way to explain that. But if we had taken the time to include some project activities that we didn't

describe as a feasibility study, but we described as a program or as an expansion of our ongoing operations, I think we would have been a little more competitive with these first two grants.

At the end of the day, to be honest with you, I don't know that we were at a stage at the time in January and August of 2012 to be competitive for these grants no matter what we did, because the truth of the matter was we didn't have anything up and running until probably September October of 2012, and so no matter what we had done for these grants, we probably wouldn't have been competitive, to be honest, just because of the stage we were at as a startup.

The second lesson, I think, we learned as a team from this experience is reapply, reapply, reapply. Listen to the granting agency. Listen to the key words that they're using when they're giving you feedback, and rewrite and rethink and revise your application. And it doesn't matter how many times you submit an application. What matters is that it gets funded in the end, right? Sarah Stefanos, who's one of my business partners in this organization, for her personal research has applied for a Fulbright grant, not once, not twice, not three times, not four times… five times before she was awarded the Fulbright. Five times!

If you're put off by rejection, you're going to have a really hard time finding your footing when it comes to preparing grant applications. Our organization, for example, submitted somewhere in the neighborhood of thirty grant applications in the year 2012. We ultimately ended up getting about five or six of those, so there's a lot of rejection. Especially for a young organization, especially when you're a young person and this is your first time grant writing, which it was for everyone on our team. No one had ever given us any formal training in grant writing, and so we were sort of just poking along in the dark and seeing what stuck. So, it was really important that we take the criticism to heart that we received. Thank god that USAID provided us with this feedback. I will mention we had to ask for it.

If you have a grant application that is rejected, you should follow up, and you should ask for feedback, whether that be verbal on the phone, or whether that be an email, or a more formal process. You should always ask for feedback. Why was my application not competitive? What can I do to make my application more competitive? Do you think our organization or project is a good fit for this granting opportunity, or are we barking up the wrong tree? These are really

important questions to ask, and it's really important to listen to the response that you get. We would have not had this feedback if we hadn't asked for it explicitly.

I think the third lesson we learned is that grant writing really gets easier and easier with every grant application. The hardest part about putting your ideas together is the first time you try to write them down. And once you've got something on paper, we found it a lot easier to edit. So you can kind of see even some of the language from our original application in January, the "LPG" application, ultimately did end up in the successful December application on the woman entrepreneurship. Once we found a really clear, compelling, articulate way to explain something, it sort of became embedded in this body of literature that we would use to explain our project to different granting agencies and to different audiences. But it took a year to really get that language down and to really tighten that language. But now when we apply for grants, it's a lot easier to cut and paste and make minor edits because we have these major sections of the grant already completed.

So again, don't be afraid of rejection. Don't be afraid of making mistakes. Don't think that your first grant application is going to be successful or even going to make sense. I think this is a really iterative process. Writing is an iterative process. Grant writing is an iterative process. Project development is an iterative process. The only way that you're ever going to get good at grant writing is just by doing it over and over again, and really being self aware and being able to step back and assess yourself, and your writing, and your project, to figure out what's working and what's not. And it definitely gets easier.

And I think the fourth lesson that we learned from this process was the importance, in conservation or NGO nonprofit fundraising in particular, of developing a strong network of collaborations. I think this is something that sets nonprofit grant writing apart from academic grant writing. In academic grant writing, especially for graduate students, especially for very early career academics, collaborations are great, but maybe you're working with one other scientist, and you're really able to put together an application as a single individual, or as a single lab group, and you're able to control all pieces of that grant application. Where are you going to do the research? How are you going to do the research? What methods you're going to use, where the research is going to be conducted. It's very easy to consolidate all those things into one person and one lab. When you're doing nonprofit work especially conservation work there's a lot

of stakeholders involved, and bringing those stakeholders together takes a lot of time and takes a lot of patience and takes a good number of resources. But in the end, I think it makes your project more successful, and it makes your project more viable in the long term. And because we reached out to so many organizations in Uganda as well as in Wisconsin, because we weren't afraid to engage with other businesses, with environmental agencies, with universities, with a variety of different types of partners on this project, our project was not only more viable, but our applications were stronger, as well. That partnership was a really essential part of the project, and a really essential part of getting funding for the project. So that's something we're really focusing on in this class.

I guess just in conclusion here, I think I told you the four things that we really learned from this experience were, again, number 1: You have to find a way to keep moving forward with your project. If it's a project you believe in, if it's something that needs to be done, even if you don't receive the kind of funding that you were hoping for, the kind of support you need to really do the project in a thorough way, you have to find a way to keep moving forward despite your lack of success with fund raising, because people like to support projects that have momentum and that are moving. Even if you are rejected, if you have a good idea, keep going somehow. Second lesson: Reapply, reapply, reapply, and listen to your granting agency, then listen to the feedback that you get. And ask for feedback. Number 3: I guarantee you that it gets easier with every grant application that you write, and the more that you write, and the more that you write about the specific project, the clearer and more compelling your writing will become, and the easier it will become to articulate your goals. And number 4: You need to involve partners when it comes to conservation projects. You have to identify stakeholders, you have to identify the right stakeholders. And you need to involve them in project development at every step of the process. Those are the four things that we learned.

And I want to emphasize again that prior to this time, I personally had no experience in grant writing, so if this is a skill that I could learn in the course of 2 or 3 years, I have no doubt that everyone in this course can also learn how to do this in 2 or 3 years. This course is a great opportunity for you to try your hand at this for the first time, and my advice to you is just not to become discouraged, because rejection is a huge part of this process and it shouldn't stop you from moving forward with your great ideas.

I'm happy to answer, if you guys have any specific questions about any of these proposals, or this process of revising the proposals over the course of the year and resubmitting them, I'd be happy to answer those questions. You can go ahead and submit those questions to me on the discussion board.

Later on, in some of the modules, we're going to take a closer look at the budgets that were in these applications as examples of what to do and what not to do, and we're also going to use this USAID, DIV granting opportunity as an example of how to manage grants. So, this will be the case study that we use for our budgeting and for our budget management modules later in this course. I should mention that this is an active grant for W2E and we are still actively managing the funds that we ultimately received from this granting opportunity.

Well, thanks again, everyone, for tuning in, and for taking the time to read these, and I hope you found these grant applications useful.