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Ten Commandments of Private Foundation Grant Proposals

Vid Mohan-Ram  
 United States  
 10 March 2000

OTHER GRANT WRITING ARTICLES

**WASHINGTON, D.C.**--The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), publisher of *Science* magazine and *Science's* Next Wave, held a series of career development activities at their annual meeting 17 to 22 February 2000. One of those workshops--"Research Grants: Trolling for Research Dollars"--described "various aspects of the quest for research money." Panelist John Hurley, associate vice president for the MacArthur Foundation, explained to the audience of graduate students, postdocs, and administrators the benefits of applying to private organizations for research funds.

10 Commandments of Private Foundation Grant Proposals

The majority of young researchers and postdocs look to the federal government when searching for fellowships and funds. While federal grants are a main source of financial aid, they remain the most competitive of almost all funding systems. Private agencies however, offer an alternative to such opportunities. It's still a competitive market, but learning how to address the concerns of private funders may improve your chances when applying for foundation grants.

"Foundations can take a long-term view of grants" and therefore are more willing to take "some risks," Hurley says. "Decisions can be made quickly, we're not stuck in a fixed schedule and there's less bureaucracy," he believes. Even though foundations often require a "letter" of inquiry that summarizes the would-be application, grant-writing mistakes *still* crop up in these propositions.

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Hurley, who called his presentation "Fishing in Foundation Waters," gave his personal observations of good grantsmanship in the form of his very own "10 Commandments"--applicable, he says, to all sources of research grants, not *only* private foundations.

**1. "Cast Your Line In Likely Waters": Be Realistic**

"We really see some nimble stretches of the mind," reveals Hurley. If you have to stretch your project that much to make it appear related to the agency, then submitting "isn't really worth it," he says.

**2. "Use the Right Bait": Follow Instructions**

"Please use the format that is requested," sighs Hurley. The VP goes on to say that applications that do not comply to the instructions, typed in condensed font size and cramped layout, are often rejected. "Program officers can feel bad rejecting such applications," because flouting the instructions is just a waste of everybody's time. Hurley relates another goof: Applicants send in letters of inquiry and research plans to his foundation--that have also been submitted elsewhere--but **fail to change the name of the agency**. "We read proposals that have *another* agency's name throughout!"

**3. "Don't Scare the Fish Away": Avoid Overfamiliarity**

"Don't be too boistrous," Hurley advises. "Program officers often wince when people call up and say 'Hi, we'll be in your city next week and will swing by and see you about our research.'" Even a lunch or a more formal meeting is not productive use of anyone's time, Hurley says. Program officers do not want their own judgement of an application influenced or swayed by the researchers themselves.

**4. "Lure the Fish to Your Fishing Hole": Engage Key Officials**

While steering clear of imposing yourself upon foundation staff, Hurley does recommend investing some time getting to know key personnel. "You might want to invite them to be speakers or be on an advisory committee or contribute to a manuscript," he says. "Learn to see if there are 'can't say no' colleagues," says Hurley, who suggests using friends and connections in foundations to improve your application's status. "Isn't that cronyism?"-- appointment to office without regard to qualifications--a member of the audience asked. Hurley explains that if a friend of 20 years approached him about a recently submitted application, he would tell them their application would be dealt with appropriately. Some could interpret that as meaning if you are personally known by officers at a funding agency, your chances of receiving a favorable review are that much better. Federal officials however shun that approach.

**5. "Use a Line That's Strong Enough": Ensure You and Your Project Are Well-Rounded**

"Be succinct. Explain how your approach is different" to other similar projects out there, suggests Hurley. You could also please foundation reviewers by including a rough estimate of financial reports and budgets in your letters of inquiry. "Sometimes we have no idea of the request of the scale of resources needed," Hurley discloses.

**6. "Don't Be Discouraged if Your Line Breaks": Keep Trying**

Sometimes excellent proposals are rejected or turned down because of factors outside of the quality of the grantsmanship or science. Sometimes the project does not fall into the scope of foundation's mission or perhaps the institution has already funded many other similar projects and now wants to diversify their interests. Your science might be great and well presented, but your timing just may have missed the mark.

**7. "Many Small Fish May Make a Better Meal Than One Big Fish": Don't Be Overambitious**

Reviewers tend to scrutinize "large" grant applications more than those that request relatively smaller budgets, Hurley says. And applicants of larger grants may also be too ambitious in what they hope to accomplish, which doesn't help their funding chances either.

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## Collaborations

"Collaborate!" exclaims Hurley. Of course, joining forces with other groups or investigators isn't entirely necessary, but sometimes including individuals who possess expertise in a certain research area can be helpful. Letters from potential collaborators or fellow scientists stating their willingness to share equipment, expertise, or resources can be very beneficial to an application.

### 9. "Keep Steady Pressure On the Line When the Fish Takes the Bait": Fulfill All Awardee Obligations

"Provide progress reports as requested," says Hurley, who informed the audience that many awardees simply do not provide these updates. "This is not a good way to impress the program officer--so make the reports!" he says. The MacArthur Foundation staff--as well as those from essentially all other funding agencies--are quite interested to know how your research is progressing. You could also try making "informative phone calls" to program staff and also submit to them recent publications of research generated from their funds. If you're going to present your research at a national meeting or even within your department, consider inviting one or two foundation officials to sit in.

### 10. "Study the Ways of Fish Dilligently": Do Your Homework!

"Big foundations behave differently [than] small foundations. Young agencies differ to older, more established agencies. And there are funding differences between corporate institutions and private organizations," explains Hurley, who urges applicants to research the specifics and nature of a funding agency well before submitting a letter of inquiry or the application itself.

Putting things in context, Hurley says that "applying for grants is not as sophisticated as your actual research." Simply do your homework and follow the instructions and you stand a good chance of winning those awards. "One final thought," says Hurley, "share your experiences with your younger colleagues," so that they become familiar with different funding sources early on. "The ocean of foundations is expanding fast!"


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