



Tips for Applying to Private Foundations for Grant Money

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Lack of adequate funding is the nemesis of today's scientific research. As money gets tighter, many scientists who have relied entirely on the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, and other government agencies for research support now find it necessary to look elsewhere for funding. Although corporations are slowly entering the research support scene, private foundations remain the predominant source of nongovernment grant awards.

● Amounts Vary

Foundations provide moneys as small as \$100 and as large as \$1 million and more. In 1989, for example, according to the New York-based Foundation Center, publishers of the Foundation Grants Index, the Duke Endowment of Durham, N.C. gave \$5,016 to a hospital for operating support to be used toward charity care. In the same year, the Rockefeller Foundation of New York gave \$1.16 million to a Canadian university for an epidemiology training program.

In the past, some scientists have avoided private funding sources because they tend to grant smaller sums of money than do government agencies. Because writing any grant application well takes a lot of time and energy, the tendency--especially among senior investigators--has been to go for the big government

grants that will cover all their research needs. Yet many of the private funding sources provide respectable sums of money for one to three years. Such funds can tide a scientist over during an otherwise lean period, keep work going while a principal investigator applies for government funds, or support a pilot project for a newly formulated research program not yet ready for more major funding.

The basic information sought in any grant application is similar. However, the particulars of the application and review processes at NIH can be quite different from those at private foundations, and also differ widely from foundation to foundation. Nonetheless, if you can write a good NIH application and can follow instructions meticulously, you should have no trouble with an application to any private foundation.

Preliminary Information

Before submitting any grant application, it's important to find out the mandate of the organization to which you are applying and where your project fits into its program in terms of relevance priority. Preliminary information about the interests of the foundation can usually be obtained from a printed mission statement (often an annual report) provided by the organization and from research reports of past and current grantees (usually listed in the annual report). In addition, calling the appropriate program director at organizations that seem likely to fund your research to assess the foundation's level of interest in and enthusiasm for your project is time well spent and can save you much unnecessary work. Subtle funding preferences of the organization, not made explicit in its printed materials, can often be clarified during such verbal exchanges. To determine whether your efforts in preparing a proposal--or even a letter of inquiry--will be worth the possible financial return, it is also advisable at this time to ask how many applications the foundations receives, how many grants it awards annually, how much support it provides per project, and for how long. Getting a grant that does not provide enough funds to allow you to carry out your research in a reasonable way may be more frustrating than not doing the project at all. Also, you should determine, before beginning the application process, whether the foundation pays overhead money (indirect costs) and, if not, whether your institution will accept grants that do not provide adequate funding of overhead. Having determined that an organization is interested in your program and that you are interested in what they have to offer, you should begin formal negotiations in writing. Although submission of a full proposal is permissible at some organizations, a wiser way to start a relationship with a private foundation is via a letter of inquiry.

The Letter of Inquiry

Some private foundations request that applicants not submit full proposals until invited to do so in response to a letter of inquiry. Your letter should convince that foundation of your credibility but should not provide details that are beyond the comprehension or the interest of the individuals who are likely to read it. Some organizations have a specific set of instructions about the maximum length and

content of a letter of inquiry. When instructions are not provided, keep the letter short (three to five pages). Give the following information: description of the project/problem to be addressed (including the major objective and expected outcome); methods to be used to carry out the project; amount of funding requested from the foundation and support available from other sources; tentative schedule for the project; criteria to be used to evaluate the outcome and means to be used to disseminate results; plans to sustain the project after the requested funds expire; qualifications of the principal investigator and the grantee organization; and the relevant contact person at your institution. A budget and the curriculum vitae of key personnel can be appended to this letter. It's especially important to discuss the relevance of your project to the mandate of the funding source, and explain how your project differs from other projects that address the same problem.

The Proposal

If a foundation is interested in a project as described in the letter of inquiry, you will usually be asked to submit a full proposal. Whereas government funding agencies generally provide a set of forms with specific instructions, private foundations vary greatly in this respect. Some supply forms; others send only guidelines about what they wish included in the proposal. When the guidelines provided are particularly sketchy, it is wise to use as a model more specific instructions from some other appropriate foundation, or guidelines given in one of the myriad of "how-to" books and articles available in the library on the subject of writing foundation proposals. On the whole, the information required in proposals to many private foundations is similar to that required by the government agencies: introduction; problem statement (description of your broad, long-term objectives--this is equivalent to "goals" in foundation parlance); specific aims (what you intend to do in order to accomplish your long-term goals; this is generally referred to as "objectives" in foundation terminology); methods; evaluation (how you will analyze and interpret the data); other and future funding ("Other Support" in an NIH application); budget; and budget justification (this may not always be explicitly requested but should always be included, unless there are instructions to the contrary). Where NIH has a specific form for "Biographical Sketch," many private foundations simply ask for resumes of key staff members of the project. Information to be included may be specified or not. In either case, good form dictates that all resumes be presented in the same format. Some other items familiar to NIH grantees may not appear to be requested in some private foundation proposals--at least not by the same names. Nonetheless, the information must be provided. For example, foundation proposal guidelines may not have a subsection entitled "Preliminary Studies," as does an NIH application. But equivalent information should be provided under "Background" or in the section describing the qualifications of the grantee institution and the principal personnel.

A statement about the importance of the research (requested in the "Background

and Significance" section of an NIH application) is especially critical in a foundation proposal. Because the proposal may not be read by fellow scientists, it is to the advantage of the grantee to explain the importance and potential impact of the work in terms that the reviewers can easily understand. Finally, there may be an appendix. In an NIH proposal, the appendix is intended primarily for reprints of research papers and other items related to the research plan (such as oversized documents and materials that do not photocopy well). In a private foundation proposal, the appendix may include items such as a letter from the Internal Revenue Service (to the effect that your institution is exempt from federal corporate income tax) or proof of nonprofit status (from the state in which the organization was chartered); a diagram of the organizational structure of your institution; a summary of major activities; a list of the board of directors, if applicable; the current and projected organizational budget; the indirect-costs rate; resumes of key staff members who will work on the proposed project if this information is not provided elsewhere; job descriptions for positions to be filled if the project is funded; and letters of endorsement from significant people in your field or your community. Some funding sources may stipulate other materials to be included in the appendix. Others do not allow submission of an appendix. Always follow the guidelines.

In contrast to NIH and certain other government agencies, which may fund ongoing meritorious projects for many years and over several renewal cycles, private foundations are less likely to want to "adopt" a grantee for life and more inclined to help a project get off the ground. In addition, private foundations often like to see a tangible commitment to you and your project by your organization-- for instance, by a promise of matching funds.

Personal Interaction

Perhaps the biggest way in which an application to a private foundation differs from an application to most government agencies is in the amount of personal interaction that may be involved between the grantee and the foundation personnel. At some private foundations the proposal is, in essence, developed jointly by the grantee and the relevant staff at the foundation. Certain branches of the Department of Defense and NSF are also increasingly using the preproposal mechanism and providing considerable feedback from the agency staff to the grantee. If you are fortunate enough to be involved in such an interactive process, you should take full advantage of it by getting as much guidance for each subsequent stage of the project as the organization is willing to give.

Site visits are a possibility with both NIH and private foundations. But most nongovernment funding sources probably think twice before scheduling a costly site visit. Occasionally, a private foundation will request a "reverse site visit," inviting the grantee to visit the foundation.

The Review Process

Although the review process for some private foundation proposals may be similar to that at NIH, the procedure at other foundations may be quite different. NIH has a formalized, well-codified dual review system that begins with an evaluation of the scientific merit of submitted proposals by a panel of 14 to 20 people (an Initial Review Group, usually referred to as the study section). They provide applicants with formal summary statements ("pink sheets") containing priority scores and one to five pages of critique about the proposals. NIH publishes a plethora of information about its peer review system, including the names and affiliations of members of review boards. Private foundations, by contrast, vary widely in their proposal review processes. Some use a system not unlike that of NIH, with a sizable panel of reviewers that meets periodically, whereas others have a much less formal review system with an ad hoc, perhaps in-house, review board that may consist of several people, or only a single staff member of the foundation. Mail or telephone reviews may supplement--or substitute for--a panel meeting. Information about the review process at private foundations is generally not codified and is not readily available. Whereas the review board at NIH has essentially no relation to a project once it has reviewed the proposal for scientific merit, the review board at a private foundation may become the advisory committee for a funded project. Because there is sometimes a great deal of interaction between foundation staff and the grantee in the course of preparing a proposal for a foundation, the review process may be based much more on the merits of the project itself than on the written proposal. As is the case at NIH and other government agencies, foundations may also rely, to some extent, on outside reviews from one or more experts in the field of the proposal. At NIH, final funding is approved by the staff of the funding institute (the study section and council are only advisory). Likewise, the board of directors at a private foundation, which may be composed entirely of businesspeople, must approve a proposal before it is funded. Feedback about the merits and shortcomings of a proposal submitted to a foundation may be provided in the letter of approval or rejection that is sent to the grantee at the end of the review process. But some private foundations give no feedback to applicants. NIH has specific deadlines for proposal submission that must be met for the proposal to be reviewed during a scheduled meeting. By contrast, many foundations have not set deadlines but rather a "rolling" acceptance of proposals. This, however, can be deceiving. Grants at private foundations must usually be approved at board meetings, which may take place only four (or fewer) times a year. If you unknowingly submit an application the week after a board meeting, you are depriving yourself of the chance to update the proposal concerning important, last-minute developments in your field. It is wise to telephone and find out the most opportune time to submit your proposal so that it gets reviewed in time to be considered at the next board meeting. It is also important for you to know how long the review process takes at a given foundation, and to apply sufficiently ahead of time so that your funding begins when you want to start work on your project. The review process at NIH takes approximately nine months. At private foundations the time it takes a research proposal to be reviewed is three to six months and may, on occasion, be less.

Although programming is narrowly targeted at private foundations, some of these organizations welcome inquiries about projects, that may not fit into any other defined program areas but may further the broad goals of the organization. In any case, preference tends to be given to projects that have promise of finding innovative solutions to clearly defined problems and are likely to create models for situations for solving problems. Another important factor to keep in mind is that, in applying to government agencies, funding mandates ultimately derive from the administration in power, private foundations have no such control and are thus free to maintain projects over a long period or to change whenever the organization's officials see fit. Thus, it is always important for potential grantees to be up to date with changes in program priorities at foundations to which they intend to apply for funds.

