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Researcher's Guide to Foundation Funding

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Starting your funding search can be a daunting task. We are here to help! [RFDS](#) works closely with the [OHSU Foundation](#); together we aim to help researchers find funding for their projects by providing resources, training, and guidance.

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Researcher's Guide to Foundation Funding

What is a foundation?

Foundations are nonprofit corporations or charitable trusts that make gifts/grants to organizations, institutions or individuals for charitable purposes, including scientific research, public health promotion, and education.

Some foundations, such as the American Heart Association, operate much like the NIH - there are no limits to the number of submissions and applications accepted and proposals are reviewed by scientific experts. However, many foundations are distinctly different from public funding sources, and different from one another. It's important to understand how foundations fund programs, research, and other interest areas.

What are the differences between foundation funding and government/NIH funding?

Please see [Resources for Securing Grants from Private Foundations](#) for additional information about preparing a strong grant proposal.

- **Most research grants are funded by a single source** (NIH, American Heart Association, American Cancer Society, etc.). In contrast, most foundations do NOT like to be the sole source of support for a project and prefer projects to be funded from multiple sources.
- **Foundations generally do not want to pay for indirect or operating costs.** They want to fund programs and projects that have a defined end, and they want applicants to have strong sustainability plans. Thus, foundation funding is good for initiating a new program or for expanding capacity, but it is a poor choice if you are looking to fund a project previously supported by your department but is no longer carrying the budget to do so. For example, if you lose a program coordinator position due to budget constraints, a foundation will generally not want to pay for that position. If, however, you create a new program that happens to need a program coordinator, a foundation might support a portion of the salary for that position. Nearly all foundations would want to see a plan for sustaining the project or position over time, and that plan should not rely heavily on indefinite grant support.

- **Foundations are very interested in the impact a program will have.** It is important to explicitly state the difference your project will make over the long term.
- **Tangible results are also very important.** You will need to show evidence of the impact of your proposed project. While the government and NIH also care about the results of your research, foundations are more program- or project-oriented when evaluating results of proposed project.
- **Foundations fund their own priorities.** While the NIH offers investigator-initiated research support, foundations tend to have set standards for funding programs within their particular interest areas. Typically, investigators respond to a request for proposal from a foundation, meaning the foundation is looking to fund programs that meet specific criteria. You might have a comprehensive research plan to study a certain molecule, but a foundation may only have interest in one aspect of your research. Therefore, it is not uncommon for one project to be funded through many sources - the foundation funds the aspect of your project that is of interest to it.
- **Relationships.** Foundation funding decisions are usually directed by a group of family members or a designated review board. Personal relationships with board members and program officers tend to weigh heavily on funding decisions. It is often recommended to make contact with a foundation prior to submitting a letter of inquiry or proposal to ensure your project aligns with its funding interests. This also helps you to establish a relationship with the foundation. Relationship-building with foundations is one reason OHSU has processes in place around applying to private foundations for funding. Receiving clearance from the [OHSU Foundation](#) to approach a funder is necessary because not all foundations want multiple people from the same institution contacting them.

What are some of the similarities between foundation funding and government/NIH funding?

- **Evaluate your program.** A program evaluation piece is nearly always a part of a foundation and government/NIH proposal - you will need to be able to measure the results of your work.

- **Make your case clear.** Both foundations and federal funders alike want to read proposals that are clearly written. Consider the reviewers point of view. Reviewers are also busy people that have lives, families, etc. They must read many proposals quickly so make sure your proposal flows well and is easy to understand. Avoid using jargon and terms only known to specialists in your field.

Are there other things I should consider when researching foundation funding?

- **Timing is key when submitting a request for funding to a private foundation.** It is important to follow the stated deadlines for letters of inquiry and full proposals. Additionally, each foundation has its own time line for responding to funding requests: some make awards within one month of receiving proposals, while others may take up to nine months to respond. Please be patient when seeking funding from private foundations, as the review process typically takes several months.
- **Good relationships are essential.** The first thing you should consider is the purpose of an award from a foundation-not what you intend, but what they want you to use the money for-whether your proposal falls within their areas of interest, or whether they fund programs, research, equipment, or capital projects. When considering submitting to a foundation, focus on the foundations interests and understand the objective the foundation is trying to achieve through its request for proposals. Be sure your project falls within the foundation's areas of interest and determine what types of projects the foundation typically funds. A reason many proposals are declined by foundations is that they do not appeal to foundation's areas of interest or that there is not a clear link in the proposal demonstrating how the project fits within the interest areas of the foundation. It is also important to pay attention to eligibility criteria and deadlines when preparing a proposal. You may want to consider ways to appropriately acknowledge the foundation for its gifts, as foundations are typically receptive to public recognition of its award.

Elements of a Letter of Inquiry

Many foundations prefer that funding requests be submitted first in letter format instead of a full proposal. Others use preliminary letters of inquiry to determine if they have an interest in a project before accepting a full proposal. In either instance, it is important to recognize that a well-written letter of inquiry is crucial to securing funding for your project. The letter of inquiry should be brief, no more than three pages, and must be a succinct but thorough presentation of the need or problem you have identified, the proposed solution, and your qualifications for implementing that solution.

If a foundation provides guidelines for a letter of inquiry, it is important to follow the requested format as closely as possible. A typical letter of inquiry contains the following elements:

Introduction

The introduction serves as the executive summary for the letter of inquiry and includes the name of your organization/department, the amount needed or requested, and a brief description of the project. This should not exceed one paragraph.

Description of Organization/Qualifications

The organization/department description should be concise and focus on the ability of your organization to meet the stated need. Provide a very brief history and description of your current programs while demonstrating a direct connection between what is currently being done and what you wish to accomplish with the requested funding.

Statement of Need

The statement of need is an essential element of the letter of inquiry and must convince the reader that there is an important need that can be met by your proposed project. The statement of need includes a description of the target population and geographical area, appropriate statistical data in abbreviated form and several concrete examples. The proposal will be stronger if the letter states that the funds for the project will provide a solution to an issue and not that the problem exists because of a lack of funds. Describe the issue in terms of the community/population to be served and how the grant funds will affect the community/population at the local, state, national or international level.

Project Description/Methodology

The project description/methodology should be appropriate to your statement of need and present a clear, logical and achievable solution to the stated need. Describe the project briefly, including major activities, names and titles of key project staff and your desired objectives. The goals and objectives of the project should be clear and measurable.

Budget

The budget section should include any sources of secured and planned funding, in-kind contributions as well as list of project expenses.

Summary/Conclusion

The final summary restates the intent of the project, affirms your readiness to answer further questions and thanks the potential funder for its consideration.