Getting a Grant:

Don't Propose Before You Write the Letter

L et's say you have a great idea for a research or community service project, and you need some grant money to make it happen. But you don't have a relationship with any of the right funding agencies. What should you do? Write a full proposal describing your project in all its glory, along with a detailed budget? Wrong.

If you don't already have a relationship with a foundation and are not responding to a published request for proposals, start with a letter proposal, advises Regina Smith, associate vice president for research at the University of Georgia. Summarize your project and your needs in a letter, usually no more than two pages, and use it to query a foundation. Generally, if the foundation is interested, it will invite you to submit a proposal. If not, you've saved a lot of time by not writing that full 20- to 50-page proposal.

Choosing the Right Foundation

Just as in writing a full proposal, doing your homework is the only way you will be able to demonstrate in your letter proposal that your project and the foundation you're approaching are a good fit. In general, foundations are more interested in funding projects in the behavioral or social sciences and in the humanities than hard scientific research. Roughly 7,000 foundations in the United States have assets of at least a million dollars and give away at least $100,000 per year. These are generally the ones worth targeting.

Corporate foundations tend to fund projects related to their core businesses – e.g., IBM likes to donate classroom computers; Shell Oil often funds geologic research – and are likely to give in geographic regions where they have corporate offices. Private foundations tend to be more national in their giving and broader in their interests, but may have particular social issues on which they like to focus.

Combining Resources

Find out what size grants a foundation generally awards. If your project will cost more than the foundation you're approaching is likely to grant, describe the entire project in your letter, but ask the foundation to fund only a piece of the project. Explain that you are approaching other organizations to fund the remaining parts. Or, break your

idea into smaller sub-projects and seek funding for one. After you've successfully completed a smaller project, you will have more credibility when you approach an organization to ask for more money.

If you don't possess the laboratory or equipment you need, ask permission to use your advisor's lab. Let the foundation know that you have the backing of your advisor, which will increase your credibility. Or, for even more credibility, ask your advisor to sign off as the actual submitter of the letter proposal.

Sending Out the Letter

Never send the same letter to more than three foundations at once. Always be honest with funders about who else you have approached and any other organization that has already committed money to your project. Foundation boards are made up of members who often share business and social circles and may discuss the proposals before each other's boards; you will look foolish if a board member finds that you have misrepresented yourself. Besides, it may work to your advantage if a large, credible organization has already agreed to collaborate with you or partially fund your project. If you identify more than three potential foundations you would like to approach, first send your letter to the top three. If and when a funder lets you know it is not interested, send the letter to your fourth candidate, and so forth.

Foundations' response times will vary widely, depending on whether their boards meet monthly, quarterly or bi-yearly to consider proposals. Look for guidelines on a foundation's Web site regarding when you must submit to be considered at which board meeting.

Finally, before you submit a letter to any organization, touch bases with the Arch Foundation for the University of Georgia, which acts a central repository for who at the University has approached what potential funders and with what results, so that fundraisers can avoid faux pas (such as not knowing what a foundation has already given to a University project) when approaching potential givers.

Anatomy of a Letter Proposal: Perfection in Six Paragraphs

Successful letter proposals are remarkably similar, even when they deal with very different projects. Generally, a letter proposal should include six paragraphs, each based on one of the six basic sections of a typical full proposal.

Introductory Paragraph: First, identify your correspondence as a letter proposal to make it easier for the person opening the foundation's mail to route it to the correct person. Follow with a statement of the project's title and, if the title does not make clear what the project is about, add a descriptive phrase or sentence. Get your reader's attention with a short but compelling statement about the uniqueness or importance of your project. Finally, tell the reader that you are approaching him or her because you are aware of the foundation's interest in funding similar projects, which shows that you have done your homework. Never mention money in the first paragraph.

Second Paragraph (Problem Statement): Identify the problem your project will address. Be explicit and provide evidence, including numbers and data if you have them, to communicate the need of your target population that is not being met because your program does not yet exist. Describe the tangible benefits to the population if yours is a social program; explain the potential applications of the knowledge you hope to gather if it is a research project. Present the needs of the population that your project addresses, not the funding needs of your institution.

Third Paragraph (Methodology): Succinctly state who will do what, when, where and why as you implement the program. Avoid jargon and save the details for your full proposal.

Fourth Paragraph (Evaluation): This is often the hardest section for the proposal writer to craft, but it is so important that doing it poorly can dash your chances of securing funding. Explain to the funder how you plan to let them know what you accomplish with their money. Your evaluation tools can be quantitative, such as administering pre- and post-tests to participants. Or, evaluation can be process-based, meaning that you will gather qualitative, descriptive information at every stage of the process. If possible, use a combination of internal and external (i.e., performed by someone not directly involved in the project) evaluation methods. This is also the paragraph in which to present information about the credibility of the personnel involved in the project.

Fifth Paragraph (Budget/Future Funding): Include three figures in this paragraph: the total cost of the project, the amount contributed by your organization and other partners, and the balance you need to ensure the project's success. Always ask for a precise amount; never leave it up to a funder to decide how much to give. Also, foundations do not like to feel as though they are picking up the entire tab. This is why you include what your other partners and your organization are contributing. The UGA Office for Sponsored Programs (http://www.ovpr.uga.edu/sponprog/) can help you calculate the value of the overhead – lighting, facilities, computer equipment, portion of your salary, etc. – that you should include as the University's contribution.

Sixth Paragraph (Conclusion): Start with a simple closing statement or two about your project. Tell the foundation how it can contact you for more information. Express your willingness to submit a full proposal, should the foundation be interested in your project. Finally, this is the place to let the foundation know if you are submitting the same proposal to other institutions. Frame this information in a statement such as, "Because Foundation X has similar/ compatible interests, I have also addressed a letter of inquiry to it." ■