

Respondent: Beth Akers, American Enterprise Institute

What external organizations have funded your work?

Lumina Foundation, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Arnold Foundation, Smith Richardson Foundation, among others.

Why do you apply for external funding? What do you use the money for?

At a non-profit think tank, any external funding you bring in goes to cover the cost of running the organization. That includes my time (i.e. salary and benefits) as well as the resources I use, including staff time.

When you were first beginning to apply for funding, how did you discover organizations that might be interested in your work?

I was fortunate to benefit from an existing network of funders that had relationships with my employer at the time (Brookings Institution). While working towards my PhD, I also relied a bit on my personal network from my short tenure on the Council of Economic Advisors. Talking with others who work in my area (higher education policy) uncovered opportunities for funding.

What were the biggest mistakes you made, in your early applications?

Not learning about the foundation first before reaching out to foundation staff. You should read their strategic plans, look at their funding databases, read staff bios, and check out the acknowledgement section of papers/resources that they like. But remember, don't just quote the foundation's strategic plans back to them when applying. Funders notice when you bend the meaning around your own priorities.

Not talking to colleagues in my academic discipline that have experience with funders. Now, I connect with those who I am most interested in first, then reach out to foundation staff. Many funders in the space have little patience for people who reach out cold and haven't done this leg work in advance, which can hurt chances for funding down the line.

Not understanding that standing out is key for funding. Staffers in philanthropy are often busy with many people asking for their time, attention, and feedback. People that research and make friendly connections first stand out, which helps funders cut through the noise.

Are there other ways in which your process for applying for funding and writing proposals has changed over time?

I make sure that my deliverables speak to the foundation's audience (policymakers, general media, etc).

It can be great to propose something with a group that has an existing relationship with the funder and/or to ask the group/organization to weave in a subgrant or subcontract into their proposal.

Form relationships outside your particular field to propose a cross-disciplinary project. Funders love to help cut new ground and cross-disciplinary work is all too rare.

What surprised you the most about how the funding process works?

That asking for a smaller amount of money doesn't make it more likely to get funded. In fact, sometimes that works against you. Small amounts of grant money are best when applying for sponsorship of events, which can be a nice 'get to know you' funding opportunity.

Many foundations have a 'submit proposal here' link, but it's often not a great way to get funding if it's not a part of a specific RFP. It's a much better use of time to leverage program staff to invite a proposal.

What advice would you give to scholars who are struggling to find funding for their work?

Learn about the multitude of discussions taking place in the policy universe so that you can speak fluently about how your work will contribute. Twitter is a great tool for this, plus it shows relationships among people both inside and outside of your network.

When applying, get a copy edit from someone outside your field to ensure that there's no jargon.

Get connected (through a mutual friend/colleague) with program officers so you know what their priorities are. If you're still in a PhD program, I highly recommend seeking out internships with Lumina, SHEEO, and other think tanks in D.C., which can set you up to make connections and see how the grant process actually works.

Try to buck the trend of cold calls and remember that the program officer is a human being. Be friendly first and avoid pitching early on.

In a proposal or verbal pitch, make it abundantly clear how your work fits what they are trying to accomplish. If you can get insights from others on how to present that, even better.

It's important to remember that funders aren't just looking for you to describe the problem; they're looking for solutions and new information to enable those solutions.