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What external organizations have funded your work?

I have been fortunate to receive financial support for my work from the William T. Grant Foundation, National Academy of Education/Spencer Foundation, and Institute of Education Sciences.

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

I apply for funding when I have research projects that could not otherwise happen. Some funding sources are within my university, and others are outside of it. The external funding sources often not only bring monetary resources but they are also often accompanied by other non-pecuniary benefits such as spaces to share your work and ideas (in addition to learning from others) and increased networks of people who become trusted colleagues, collaborators, and friends.

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

I looked at the CVs of scholars whose work I respected and who did work similar to mine. I joined associations that were relevant to the work I was interested in and read their newsletters and other announcements through social media. Sometimes at conferences, funding organizations will have tables set up, which is also an opportunity to talk with someone from the agency and learn more.

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

I would often write them as I would write an academic paper. I did not articulate “if this is successful, this is what would happen”

I did not know that you are often supposed to speak with a program officer before going through the application process. I was so concerned with imposing or taking up their time that I would miss out on an expected part of the process!

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

I am more likely to ask others for help, to bounce ideas off of, read drafts, collaborate. Even if funding cycles have passed or are not for a while, I keep these opportunities in mind for the future.

I think back to some of the applications that got rejected, and while the ideas are still projects that excite me, I realize that I could have improved the exposition or explained how they expanded our knowledge or contribution to the larger world more clearly.

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

It can be a very arbitrary process, subject to the tastes and interests of the reviewers.

Every agency is different, but in many cases, you are supposed to work with the program officer ahead of time. They also want to make sure that it's a good fit on both sides, and they can often provide valuable feedback about the proposal ahead of time that can help improve not only the chances of it being accepted but much more often than not will improve the project itself.

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

Start early. Write and rewrite your ideas down. Have others read your proposals. It is useful to get another set of eyes on your work, especially to ensure that you are being clear. Many universities have a grant office with professionals who can help with different aspects of the grant.

Look broadly for opportunities. Different agencies have different scopes; some are focused on funding within a discipline, others when a topic area, others within geographic regions, and more. Projects typically have multiple dimensions, and those different dimensions can help point you to multiple kinds of funding organizations.

If you get turned down for a funding opportunity, keep trying. Similar to the publication process, there is a lot of noise in this process. The process is often not consistent, with changes across reviewers and even funding organization priorities. If a rejection is accompanied by feedback, consider it seriously. The reviewers are typically very thoughtful and may see aspects of your project that you might not otherwise see. It's common to be rejected.

Because different agencies have different priorities and are composed of different kinds of reviewers, it is important to tailor your proposal to that specific audience.

Be sure to make clear what value your work is adding to the literature, the field, or the world.

Make sure you appreciate the immense help of any administrators who aid you. There is a lot of work that is done behind the scenes, and the indirect funds help to pay for it. But also, the people who make it happen are typically doing an underappreciated job. Say thank you again and again and again.