

Respondent: Mark Steinmeyer, Smith Richardson Foundation

What is your role at your institution?

I am the senior program officer for the Domestic Public Policy Program (DPPP) at the Smith Richardson Foundation. We are leanly staffed, so I am the also the only program officer for the DPPP.

What types of projects does your organization fund? (Including broad topic areas, though I know specific priorities might change over time. Academic research, books, conferences, policy engagement?)

The DPPP supports work in two broad areas: Enhancing Economic Opportunity and Social Mobility and Increasing Economic Growth. In terms of opportunity and mobility, we support work on early childhood education, primary and secondary schooling, post-secondary education/training and labor market access, and income support programs. In terms of economic growth, we support work on tax and fiscal policies, regulation, and a catch-all category called growth opportunities, which includes work on international trade, innovation, and entrepreneurship.

The DPPP makes three types of grants:

- First, we support policy labs. These are initiatives for which a team of scholars is working on a common set of research questions. Successful policy lab grants often have access to large administrative data sets (tax records, restricted-use Census data, state longitudinal student records).
- Second, we support “idea books.” These grants allow scholars who have already undertaken their own empirical work to synthesize those findings (along with those from the field) to write books that we hope will stimulate public debates on important issues.
- Third, we support stand-alone empirical research projects. These are usually submitted by one or two scholars and have well-defined research strategies.

Does your organization offer smaller grants for early-stage projects?

We have made a handful of such grants over the past ten years. We do so when we recognize that more work has to be done before a large-scale project can be launched. For instance, undertaking the work to set up a randomized-controlled trial. These grants cannot exceed \$50,000.

How do you find/identify projects of interest? (Calls for proposals? Invitation?)

Most funded proposals come about through networking. I try my best (pre-COVID) to attend conferences and meetings to learn about new research opportunities. I rely on list serves and Twitter to keep up on new work and junior-level researchers. We do not issue formal calls for proposal.

If some/all proposals are by invitation, how do you learn about projects and scholars you might want to fund?

Our website (www.srf.org) includes a template for a concept paper. Researchers interested in applying can submit a proposal by email through the website or regular mail. We pride ourselves on reading all incoming concept papers and aim to respond to them within six weeks. If there is interest in a full

proposal, applicants will get detailed guidance from the program officer on how to present the material. The website also includes proposal templates, which will give interested researchers a sense of what a full proposal will have to include.

Do you send proposals out for review? If so, how do you choose reviewers?

Full proposals are reviewed by three outside experts. Typically, the reviewers have a mix of backgrounds. For example, they might include one person with deep knowledge of a subject area, one with methodological expertise, and one with a public policy perspective.

Who decides whether to fund a particular proposal?

The staff (program officer and director of programs) will decide whether or not to include a proposal on the slate of projects under consideration at one of the foundation's regular (three-times a year) board meetings. The board reads the proposal, the reviewer comments, and a response from the applicant to the reviewer comments. The board makes the final determination on funding.

If someone does not receive funding based on an initial proposal, what feedback do they receive, if any? Can they submit a revised proposal?

If a grant is not approved by the board, the staff will try to offer feedback to applicants. On occasion, the board will decline to support a project but ask the staff to work with the applicant to see if changes can be made. These might include adding new research questions, increasing sample sizes, or finding additional data sets to use.

Can scholars reach out to you to discuss ideas before submitting a proposal? Is this something you recommend/encourage?

Yes, as noted above, we prefer an initial inquiry to be in the form of a concept paper (less than 5 pages). If a project seems like a promising candidate for a grant, staff will work with the applicant on a full proposal. Also, I accept unsolicited emails from researchers asking about the foundation's priorities.

What are the most common mistakes you see scholars making in their proposals?

Different foundations have different expectations for the format and substance of proposals. For SRF, there are two mistakes that I encounter frequently, and both are related to the foundation's idiosyncrasies.

- First, applicants present their research without drawing connections to the real-world concerns of policymakers. SRF's mission is to inform public policy. That means all proposals are judged based on policy relevance. We often decline to fund well-designed research studies because they have limited relevance to policy. Applicants should always explain in their proposal not how the research would add "the literature," but rather how it would inform policymaking.
- Second, applicants should explain their methods. Those discussions should be detailed but also not overly technical. A proposal reader should be able to understand the basic analytical approach and also understand that the work is time-consuming enough to merit a grant.

If you could give potential applicants one piece of advice that might not be obvious on your website, what would it be?

Be bold. The foundation reviews fair number of applications for projects to make incremental advances on existing knowledge. While we will occasionally support a replication study, we tend to look for opportunities to support policy analysis/program evaluation that would break new ground. Finding innovative policies or programs worthy of evaluation is time consuming, but also critical for advancing policy knowledge.

In economics, organizations like CSWEP have been working to reduce harassment and discrimination in the profession. Does your organization have any safeguards in place to avoid funding individuals who engage in misconduct? How do you handle such cases? (e.g. Do you require applicants to disclose ongoing or past investigations by their employer or a professional organization like the AEA? What happens if a victim reports harassment by a grantee?)

The foundation has been following the developments in economics and other disciplines closely. We have not set up an internal process to review allegations of misconduct by grant applicants. We simply lack the capacity internally to do so. If a victim reported a case of misconduct to the foundation directly, we would include that information in our decision-making process. However, we would have to rely on professional organizations and host institutions to review and adjudicate those cases.