

Guide to Foundation Funding

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Here are ten helpful tips for working with professional foundations – those like Ford and MacArthur that have professional staffs and independent boards:

- **Every foundation is unique**, with its own culture, governance, politics, and mission. Learn what kind of foundation you are approaching, for example, a small private family foundation versus a charitable trust, and understand the foundation’s mission and the grant approval process. It is different for each foundation.
- **Do good work and be visible.** Program officers attend conferences and read newspapers and journal articles to learn about innovative, current research.
- **Pay attention to the program officers and staff.** Foundation administration and staff change, and it is important to keep informed about the individuals you will be contacting. Program officers are increasingly defining what foundations fund and help guide “strategic” grant-making, so the more you interact, the more likely you’ll be in position when new initiatives are released.
- **Develop relationships.** Never send a proposal without speaking to the program officer first. You need to develop a personal relationship with this individual. First, ask for a 10- or 15-minute phone appointment; if encouraged, follow-up with a two-page concept paper. Continue to send short, pithy mailings with updates, and always visit yearly, even if you currently do not have funding from the foundation.
- **Ask for a reasonable amount of resources**, especially on the first grant. Initially, request preliminary funding with achievable project results. It is easier for the foundation to invest in a relatively small-budget project and to invest again after the initial project goals have been met.
- **Foundations do not fund academic research.** They want to fund action-oriented projects that change policy, affect the community, and have defined project indicators of impact. Be strategic.
- **Build relationships across foundations.** They encourage investments from other sources, especially local partners. Having multiple foundation support helps leverage funding from smaller or larger foundations and enhances the funders’ visibility both locally and nationally.
- **Communicate results in many ways.** Publicly present your research outside academia, write policy briefs and newspaper editorials when applicable, and make yourself available to the foundation, for example, for foundation-sponsored conferences and workshops.
- **Meet all reporting deadlines.** If program officers have extra money to support grants, they can offer opportunity awards. If you have a good relationship and meet all your deadlines, you may be offered such funding. A deadbeat grantee doesn’t get a second grant or opportunity funds.
- **Be nice to the staff.** They are the first entrée to the program officers. Respect people at all levels of the foundation.