Approaching the Foundation

A Kellogg Foundation Resource

Approaching the Foundation
by
Robert F. Long, Ph.D., and Joel J. Orosz, Ph.D.

The following document offers a strategy for approaching foundations and a basic framework for the first written presentation of a funding request. An earlier version of this paper was published in Philanthropy, Australian Association of Philanthropy, Inc., Sydney, Australia, 1995.

The purpose of this paper is to demystify the grantmaking process to help organizations in approaching foundations in the United States. Although foundation requirements and procedures vary widely, there are some common elements that are useful to consider when approaching a foundation for funding. Many of the principles may also be useful in developing an approach to foundations in other countries. Project officers from twelve foundations participated in a professional panel review process to develop this recommended approach. They represented a full range of types of foundations, including private, family, community, and corporate organizations. The following document offers a strategy for approaching foundations and a basic framework for the first written presentation of a funding request.

The cost of operating community-based nonprofit organizations is growing, competition for funding is considerable, and government funding is likely to continue to shrink. Although foundation funding is a small portion of the total financial resources in the nonprofit sector, it is one source of new funding for program innovations. Therefore, the competition for foundation funding is very high. The sad truth is that organizations do not automatically obtain grants from foundations simply because they represent a good organization doing good things. In order to secure funding, a lot of homework needs to be done. The key information includes what funders are interested in, how to approach them, and how to present ideas to them.

One of the goals of funding development through grants should be to find a match between your organization's mission and the mission of the foundation. Once the match between missions is found, the challenge is to build a working relationship with the foundation staff.

The first thing to remember is that every foundation is absolutely distinctive. Each one has its own mission, strategies, and funding priorities. Each one has different rules and requirements. The most important thing is to do the homework before approaching any funder. The best place to start is at one of the four Foundation Center libraries around the country (Cleveland, New York City, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C.). [Follow this link to the Foundation Center web site: http://fdncenter.org/]

In addition, there are multiple cooperating libraries in most states and nearly every public library has a copy of the Foundation Directory (which contains detailed information on almost all foundations). Another important resource, particularly for non-U.S. funders, is the European Foundation Centre in Brussels, Belgium. European Foundation Centre The New Europe Conference 51 rue de la Concorde B-1050 Brussels, Belgium Telephone (32) 2 512 89 38 Facsimile (32) 2 512 32 65.

The research should result in a list of foundations which: make grants in areas related to your work; are interested in the type of project and audience in question; and their requirements (i.e., application forms, deadlines, supporting materials needed, address, and phone and fax numbers).

This information sets the stage for a contact with foundations. Call or write to a number of foundations and request additional information to get to know them better and help identify if there is a close match between your project and their missions. Documents that will be useful in this decision-making process include annual reports, informational brochures, and application packets.

Once these materials have been studied and a good potential match has been identified, it is time to begin to help the foundation agree with that decision. The typical foundation receives many more proposals than it can fund each year. The challenge, then, becomes making your proposal stand out from the large number of proposals received by foundations. This is very difficult to do in a proposal addressed "To Whom It May Concern." It is far better to try to make a direct contact with a program staff person at a foundation of interest. This will improve the odds for your proposal by reducing the number or proposals in the competitive review pool from thousands to hundreds. Your task is to identify the most appropriate person to contact. A very simple approach to finding the right person is to ask the secretary who answers your phone call. Simply state the focus of the project and ask for a reference of a program staff person who works with similar projects. This will usually result in the name of a key person who is responsible for project development in the appropriate area. One of the best things you can do is talk with the identified program staff person about your proposed project idea and seek advice and direction about next steps to take. There is a lot of variation among foundations about procedures and the preferred sequence of communications. Finding out the best approach for each foundation is critical, and it is important to "play by their rules."

Do not -- repeat, do not -- send a full proposal to start with. Send a short "preproposal" instead. The key is to be as brief as possible. Program staff read hundreds of proposals every year. Some of them are 100 pages long. If a two- or three-page preproposal is sent, it already has a better chance of getting a thorough review. The brief and concise document can help the program staff person identify if the project idea matches the foundation's mission. If there is agreement on the match, then a full proposal can be developed.

Any number of approaches to a preproposal will surely work just fine with most foundations, so long as it contains the basic information needed to understand the project idea. The

document should not contain a long statement of the problem the proposed project is trying to solve. Program staff have read about the problems hundreds of times, and they do not need to read them again. Many of them were hired because of their background in the assigned topic area. Instead, start the preproposal with a one-sentence statement of the problem, such as "25 percent of the high school students in our community drop out every year, and this number is far too high." Now, comes the important part. What will the proposed project do about it? Present two or three solid paragraphs on how the project plans to solve this problem. Remember, the program staff person knows nothing about your specific project and will need to know exactly how you plan to manage it. It always helps to share a timeline for implementing the project.

Now comes the part of the preproposal that almost no one thinks to write: the continuation plan. Once the project has started, how will it be kept going? Remember that foundations like to start new things, but they generally do not like to fund anything 100 percent, and they never like to fund anything forever. So it is important to tell, in one or two paragraphs, how much of your organization's own money will be invested in the project, and how funds will be raised from other sources to keep it going after foundation funding ends. If there are a couple of paragraphs on this subject, your preproposal will be ahead of 90 percent of the proposals received by foundations. Most organizations are so focused on acquiring the money to get the project started, that they do not even think about how they are going to obtain the money to keep it going. A thoughtful, honest, and clear continuation plan is essential. Program staff generally have a great deal of experience in this area and can easily identify a weak plan.

The next thing the preproposal needs to have is a paragraph or two on how your organization intends to evaluate the results of the project. The evaluation plan should present what the organization wants to learn and how they will use the information to improve and sustain the project. It never hurts to ask a foundation for some money to hire, for example, an expert on the topic area from another location to come in and evaluate the project. This will help both you and the funder to gauge how successful the project has been, and to learn lessons that will improve your work in the future. Again, the majority of people who write proposals never think of this, and it will make a proposal stand out if it is included from the start.

The last part of the preproposal is a simple budget. This budget should have five or six line items, and it should tell the foundation exactly how your organization intends to spend the money being requested. There will probably be a line item for personnel, another line item for supplies and materials, one for travel, another for meetings, and so on. There should be a clear and explicit link between the budget and the proposed activities. This will give the program staff person a general idea of planned expenses and allow a subsequent request for more details if needed.

A very brief preproposal can only outline the bare bones of a project idea. But that is all a program staff person needs to get excited about the plan, and it will be up to him or her to ask for the details necessary to put flesh on the skeleton. The fact of the matter is that if a preproposal can get noticed among the large number that come in every year, you are well-positioned in the grantseeking process.

Once a program staff person starts working with a proposed project, the chances of getting the grant are much better, because now it has a guide to take it through the rest of the process. That process will usually include a request for a full proposal and a site visit by the program staff person. But, since the program staff person will be helping it through these

steps, there is no need to go into those details here. Instead, a checklist that can be used to judge if a preproposal will be effective is provided.

These are the kinds of things that are often looked for in every proposal that is received by foundations. If they are there, foundation staff are more likely to support the proposal than if they are not:

- This is a new approach -- most foundations like to fund new and exciting things, not more of the same. Foundations are increasingly interested in proposed solutions that build on the best available current knowledge, that show awareness of what has been tried, that builds on what works, and that replicates proven or promising ideas. The prevailing perception of innovation among foundations includes improvements in effectiveness of existing program approaches as well as completely new programs.
- The applicant has done the homework about the foundation -- if an applicant has done their homework and can demonstrate a close match between their mission and the mission of the foundation, they are simply more impressive than someone who has just thrown together a proposal.
- The applicant is determined to do the project no matter what -- foundations like to fund people who are committed to what they are doing, not people who will only do it if a funder gives them money to do it.
- The applicants have the know-how to do it -- project staff do not have to be world-famous experts in this area, but they do need to have some relevant experience and enthusiasm. Information about the principle staff members involved in the project will help demonstrate their qualifications to conduct the project.
- This project is being undertaken to improve the lives of people, not to make the organization bigger and richer -- funders care about people and results more than they care about organizations.
- The applicants are working with the people they are trying to help, not doing things to them -- if the applicants are trying to help children, have they involved them in putting together the preproposal? Foundations think it is important that the people who will be helped have some say in the matter. Information about the organization's board of directors and related volunteer committees will help illustrate the range and types of representatives involved in leading and advising the project.
- The applicants are investing their own money in the project -- this tells foundations that your organization is committed to the project, and that it is important to them. It also helps to convince funders that your organization will continue it after their funding ends and commit itself to doing whatever it takes to find other funding.
- The applicants have a comprehensive approach to the problem -- no one can solve a complicated problem with a simple solution, and foundations are looking for people whose answer is at least as sophisticated as the problem they are trying to solve and who link up with other organizations to work more comprehensively.
- The applicants are willing to work collaboratively with anyone who can help -- foundations do not want to fund 18 different projects to help dropouts in one high school. They like to see organizations working together to improve the lives of people.
- The applicants are willing to have impartial evaluators assess their work -- this will help both the applicants and the foundations learn to do a better job.
- The applicants will continue the project after foundation funding ceases -- foundations like to help things get started that are so valuable to people that they will continue to operate even after the funding ends. There is little sense in starting a project that is going to end two or three years later, after foundation funding comes to an end.

This is our best advice on approaching a foundation. Good luck!

About the Authors:
Robert F. Long, Ph.D., is Program Director, Philanthropy and Volunteerism Programming Area, W.K. Kellogg Foundation
Joel J. Orosz, Ph.D., Former Program Director, Philanthropy and Volunteerism and Leadership Programming Areas, W.K. Kellogg Foundation