Finding the Foundation-Fundable "Project" in an Idea

There are two issues under consideration:

1) Whether foundations are the right funding source for you, and

2) Whether or not your work is a “project.”

**Consider the following:**

# Are foundations the right source?

When looking for funding for your work, it is important to match your work with the right funding source. Some projects/research will attract corporate funders. Other projects will fit in well with governmental programs. And some projects will be highly appealing to foundations. Some may be of interest to more than one source.

# What do Foundations Want?

Foundations want to affect social change. They want to be associated with greatness, with being the one that made the difference. Early on, foundations were conceived of as being the laboratories for government; that is, because they are private entities, they have greater risk-taking capacity than government and can test community problem-solving ideas and methods that government can later adapt.

The nationally recognized program HeadStart is an excellent example of this.

Foundations often have a *specific area or areas of interest* in which they want to invest and/or a specific, disadvantaged, population they seek to assist. While there are always exceptions, foundations are less likely to fund general operating support, construction, endowments, or conferences unless these are part of a larger project.

# Is it a Project?

Just as it is difficult to narrow down a topic when writing a book, article, or paper, so it is when conceiving and designing a foundation-fundable project. Be careful of ideas larger than you can possibly manage.

To give you an idea of the difference between a good “idea” and a good “project,” consider these distinctions:

1. Eradicating world hunger is a good idea, but it is not a foundation-fundable “project.”
2. Operating a food bank, a soup kitchen, or a *Meals On Wheels* program are examples of things that are more like a “project.

# Is your project foundation fundable? Ask yourself these screening questions:

* Is it doable?
* Does it have a beginning, middle, and end?
* Does it have a focused goal?
* Can you answer the question, “So what?”
* Can you identify who benefits? Is this an appropriate population to benefit?
* Does it have measurable objectives?
* How will you know when you’ve met your goal?

These are things that will give your project Bonus Points:

* Demonstrated institutional support
* Leverages support from other places
* Community involvement
* Involvement of those most affected
* Novel approach – what sets you apart
* Is Replicable

# Foundation Research Considerations

## Consider the foundation’s history and current frame of mind

* Read historical accounts to understand the basis for the institution’s founding.
* Learn from president and/or executive director’s letters in annual reports; this is often where new directions are indicated.
* Does it have a perpetuity or spend-down mindset?
* Are there distinct political leanings?
* Consider the age of the foundation
* Is the founder still alive?
* How old is the foundation?
* How far removed from its original intent/mission is it?
* How many years has it had staff?

Consider staffing

* Is there any? How many are fulltime professionals?
* What do program officers do?
* Has the head of the foundation always been the same?
* Don’t overlook personal history of prominent staff

Consider the foundation’s grant-making approach

* How does it think problems are best solved? direct service? research? educating policy-makers? advocacy and activism? a mixture?
* Does it run its own programs?
* Does it use RFPs or have an open solicitation policy?
* How many funding rounds a year does it have?
* Is it accessible or tightly controlled?
* Does it make site visits?
* Does it use peer reviews?
* Who makes decisions? program staff? leadership staff? Board? family members?

Consider all sources of information

* Pay attention not to just what they say, but what do they do.

Consider that the foundation may evolve

* Even when you think you know the answers to these questions, it may change soon thereafter!

The WVU Foundation has Corporate and Foundation Relations professionals on staff to assist the leadership, faculty and staff through this assessment process. Please don’t hesitate to contact the following Office of Corporate and Foundation Relations professionals:

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