Survival in Today's Tight Funding Climate Depends on Following Agencies' Rules

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Depends On Following Agencies' Rules Securing research support increasingly occupies the time and energy of academic scientists. As a program officer with a private foundation supporting biomedical, behavioral, and educational research, I am experiencing first-hand how the shrinking supply of federal funding dollars is driving more and more investigators to the terre incognito of private foundation funding. Recently, *The Scientist* provided some tips on how to improve the chances of a submission to federal funding agencies (L. Reif-Lehrer, March 4, 1996, page 15). In reality, the "rules" for approaching private funding sources are quite similar-all instructions must be scrupulously followed if a proposal is to receive serious consideration.

Attention to detail is essential; many private foundations operate with small staffs wearing multiple hats. Program officers typically manage several programs, and often they have subject-matter expertise in some, but not all, of the programmatic disciplines. Although officers become adept at reviewing proposals for programs outside their own areas of expertise, it is very likely that they might fail to glean the full merit of a poorly written or badly organized proposal. Even in situations in which the proposals are sent out for expert peer review, they must first pass this in-house scrutiny or they receive no further consideration.

One program for which I am responsible, the McDonnell-Pew Program in Cognitive Neuroscience, accepts proposals in an annual competition widely advertised with application instructions available via standard mail, E-mail, and the foundation's Web site (http://www.jsmf.org). This program is quite competitive, with the average funding rate at about 12 percent.

We have received applications requiring us to retrieve the mailing label out of the trash in an attempt to identify who the proposal was from or try to obtain contact information (although we provide a proposal cover sheet). We have had to contact investigators to clarify whether their proposed budget was for one, two, or three years. Furthermore, I have read through proposals searching for the experimental plan, trying to figure out what it is the researcher intends to do. About 50 percent of the proposals we receive exceed the recommended 5,000-word limit, and almost as many are missing a requested supporting document.

For those applying to private foundations, I advise the following:
1. do your homework;
2. read the instructions carefully; and
3. check that the proposal meets the stated goals of the foundation's program.

No proposal should be submitted before it has had a thorough in-house review by an experienced senior investigator.
Asking a colleague to review the completed proposal, with a copy of the application guidelines attached, will help catch omissions that could cause an otherwise promising proposal to miss the first cut. Prepare an application checklist and make certain all required items, and the correct number of copies of each, are attached.

A common pitfall is having a proposal rejected because it arrives late. Although our program brochures state that proposals must be received in the foundation office on or before a certain date, we always have proposals arriving one or two days late. These are rejected without being read. Check carefully to determine whether published deadlines refer to receipt or posting of applications. Applicants should try putting themselves in the shoes of the program officers and external peer reviewers. We will be reading 50 to 100 proposals, with very tight turn-around schedules. It doesn't take a genius to realize that the well-organized and thoughtful proposals will have a competitive edge.

The only point on which my advice differs from that provided in Reif-Lehrer's article is on "networking" with program officers. There is not a general policy on this issue when it comes to private foundations. Speaking for the programs of the James S. McDonnell

Foundation and the McDonnell-Pew Program in Cognitive Neuroscience, I can say that I do not have time to be "networked." We put a substantial effort into making information available via the guidelines and the Web site, and we encourage investigators to read this information carefully and to decide for themselves if their research program meets the foundation's interests. We willingly clarify items in the program announcements and application brochures, but I cannot listen to or read long descriptions of research plans in order to advise investigators on their chances of success. The 12 percent funding rate should provide all the information an applicant needs as to whether proposals that do not meet the foundation's stated objectives have any chance of being funded.

I also would discourage those investigators who call to let me know that the goals of our program are misguided and that the foundation should be supporting their research area, or investigators who call with questions but have made no attempt to review the foundation's publications. It is also not worthwhile to call and ask questions with obvious answers. (No, the proposal cannot arrive a week late. No, the program supports cognitive neuroscience as it is described in the guidelines; it is unlikely to fund a molecular neurobiology proposal.)

As a former biomedical researcher, I am fully aware of the difficult funding situation. As a program officer, however, I find that nothing is more painful than receiving a promising proposal that arrives late, incomplete, or badly written. Grantsmanship-like it or not-is part of the job for researchers. Survival will depend on your skill at obtaining support from a diverse array of funding sources.

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