

ADVICE FOR CONTACTING THE FUNDER

There are several reasons why you should contact the program officer.

- (1) It will help you assess whether or not your idea aligns with the funding source. A program officer will often tell you the likelihood of your idea being funded or if changes are necessary before your proposal would be acceptable.
- (2) It gives you a chance to introduce yourself and your organization to establish a rapport with the program officer. Sometimes (especially with foundations or for non-profit organizations), a funder will not make an award to an organization that has not contacted them.
- (3) Having some kind of rapport with the program officer will often give you a very competitive edge, especially if the competition is close

These are the kinds of questions that you might want to ask the program officer. This is just a general list, and you may have some additional questions specific to the particular program you are considering.

Before you call the program officer, review the application guidelines for the grant program and prepare a short overview or summary of your project idea. If possible, send the overview to the program officer in advance so he can have a chance to read about your ideas before you meet.

1. Briefly describe your project idea; then ask the program officer if it sounds like the sort of project the agency funds. Ask if any parts of the proposed project look like they might cause trouble -- do they have a potential to keep the proposal from being funded; would the reviewers question any aspects of the proposed project?
2. Ask about common shortcomings/problems the program officer has seen in proposals. What sorts of problems keep proposals from being funded? How can you avoid those problems?
3. Besides looking for problems, ask the program officer if there are particular things you should make sure to include or address in a proposal to help it get funded (i.e., traits of successful proposals). Are there any areas/activities the agency would like to see represented in projects but which have been overlooked by other grantees?
4. If you have read proposal guidelines, sample funded proposals, etc. before the meeting. Be sure to ask about any matters that were unclear or puzzling to you. Confirm the funding priorities and check for any changes.
5. Ask the program officer to describe a "typical" funding cycle and / or the typical project.
 - How many proposals are usually submitted (or were submitted for the last competition)? How many of these were funded? Does the program officer expect about the same number to be funded again next time, or will there be a change? How many continuation projects are funded/what is the percent of continuation projects vs. new projects funded? Are new awards cyclical (i.e., are new awards made every year, or only every three years?)

- Who are the grants typically/usually awarded to -- PhD-granting institutions? Institutes of Higher Education? Partnerships of IHEs? Private educational organizations? Are they located in sites throughout the U.S., or have projects tended to cluster in certain areas of the country (has there been a shortage of projects in this part of the U.S.?)
- What is the funding range of grants, and the average grant amount? What are grant funds usually spent for, and in what ratio (does most of the money go to pay salaries, or travel, or supplies, or student stipends, or what?). Does the grant pay for indirect costs (overhead)? Are there any costs the grant cannot cover (or can the program officer advise you on budget items to avoid)?
- What are some activities usually carried out in projects funded under this program; what are some examples of the diverse types of activities that can be or have been carried out?

6. Ask to read or have copies of the following items:

- Proposals that have been funded
- Lists of funded projects (including title of project, the phone number and address of a contact person, and a summary of the project, if you can get all this information)
- Reports highlighting the results of successful projects (Sometimes these are compiled by the agency and made available to the public. Annual reports of private foundations typically contain this type of information).
- Proposal rating sheets the readers use when they review proposals

7. Ask about the review process:

- Who reviews the proposals? (What kinds of professions are represented? Will the reviewers be experts, or will they be generalists? Will there be a variety of backgrounds and levels of experience represented, or will there be a narrower focus on a particular background and type of experience?)
- How many people review the proposals?
- How many proposals does each reviewer typically read, and how long do they have to read all those proposals?
- How is the review carried out (For example, do teams of reviewers meet together and discuss proposals, or do reviewers read and rate proposals by themselves?) Is there a multi-tier review (for instance, is the proposal first reviewed by a general panel, then reviewed by specialists in the field), or are proposals evaluated only once? What role does the program officer or other agency staff play in the review process?
- How are reviewers chosen? (Can you apply to be a reviewer? What do you need to do?)