

# TIPS ON BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH FOUNDATIONS

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- 1) All foundations are different and require a customized approach.
  - a. Different types (e.g., corporate, private, community, family) make decisions differently, have different cultures, different priorities/restrictions.
  - b. Frame your value-add differently to different audiences.
  - c. Foundations with a long-term commitment to your state are likely the best bet.
  - d. Remember: program officers (POs) are not necessarily academics, so you need to use jargon-free language. In concept papers/proposals, where it makes sense to do so, mirror some of the language foundations use on their websites to describe their priorities to talk about *your* work.
  - e. If you need the basics: there are lots of fundraising 101 classes out there (e.g., The Fundraising School at Indiana University, Foundation Center webinars, etc.).
  
- 2) Personal introduction is often the best way to get on the radar.
  - a. Many foundations say on their websites that they don't accept unsolicited proposals, often because they don't have the bandwidth to manage a high volume of inquiries—but there is often a personal work-around if you can find someone to help open the door for a call or to review a concept paper.
  - b. Ask your current funders: what other funding sources should I be talking to? Can you introduce me?
  
- 3) Sincerely seek foundations' input where it is appropriate/useful.
  - a. Consider including foundations in your Advisory Council—foundations benefit from the macro view and may have a valuable perspective to bring, as well as new networks to tap for ideas/resources.
  - b. Invite them to attend/present at your summits.
  - c. Invite them to offer reactions to your strategic plans.
  
- 4) Positioning the Centers:
  - a. A compelling pitch: “invest in us to help create the partner you need to achieve your strategic goals.”
  - b. Intermediary funding is (unfortunately) not sexy—you're more likely to be successful requesting project support for conference sponsorships, research, or other discrete efforts.

- c. Ideally Centers are working toward (or already have) a sustainable way to cover their core needs (i.e., salaries and keeping the lights on) via state funding or contribution from colleges. That's a very solid position from which to fundraise for programs.
- 5) Highlight the non-academic elements of your work.
  - a. Remember that those attending community colleges are people and not just students. It might help open doors to foundations not specifically focused on education, but interested in helping improve opportunities more generally for people with low incomes.
  - b. Thanks in part to recent research, housing and food insecurity among community college students is much more top of mind for foundations.
  - c. Demonstrate meaningful community connections via Advisory Board, projects, programming, etc.
- 6) Pay attention to current hot philanthropy narratives.
  - a. More attention is being paid to rural areas and people (at least lip service, not sure about actual money/yet).
  - b. Widening income inequality—community colleges as gateway to middle class, a well-rounded education as insurance against automation and unpredictable future of work.
- 7) Ongoing relationship management with the foundation:
  - a. Check in on a regular basis—quick pings with good news, scheduled calls.
  - b. Ask to be featured in the foundation's communications.
  - c. Send your PO your e-newsletter or important communications.
  - d. Invite your PO to events and site visits.
  - e. Do what you say you're going to do.
  - f. Program officers get a lot of emails and calls, often travel heavily, and manage large portfolios of grants. It's very helpful to take a moment to provide context during phone calls and emails, and make decision points clear. (I appreciate it when people start calls with "shall I take just a minute to remind you of the basics/background before we dive in?")
- 8) Reporting:
  - a. Ask about norms—what should the length be? Does anyone read them?
  - b. Don't overdeliver and send a million documents in different formats—too much to absorb.
  - c. Submit on time or ask for an extension—usually not a problem.
  - d. Reports are an important part of the permanent record, in addition to the proposal and the program officer's write-up, and are often referenced in renewal deliberations.
- 9) When asking for renewal support:
  - a. Make a case about the transformative nature of the foundation's support, and how this next phase will take the work to a new level.

- b. Status quo is not usually compelling (“Please keep funding me to do the same thing and I will keep getting the same results”).
  - c. Be frank about sustainability challenges and opportunities—providing you with funding to help you transition to a more diversified funding model can be a compelling pitch.
- 10) If you request funds and the answer is no, don’t give up.
- a. Staff members change: Program officers, foundation presidents, board.
  - b. Grantmaking and geographic strategies change.
  - c. It’s fair (and expected) that you will ask for feedback if your proposal is declined.
  - d. Stay on the foundation’s radar—ask if you can add your program officer to your communications, float ideas by them, try to touch base 1x/year.

GOOD LUCK!