

**Respondent:** Sara Heller, University of Michigan

**What external organizations have funded your work?**

J-PAL, the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, the JP Morgan Chase Foundation, NIJ, OJJDP, the McCormick Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, the US Department of Labor, and NIH

**Why do you apply for external funding? What do you use the money for?**

I run field experiments. So I need funding to support all parts of that process: project managers and field staff, travel (for planning meetings with partners, site visits, data collection, and presentations), research assistants, data purchases or the time of the analysts at data providers who match their data to our study samples, and sometimes the intervention itself if it's not already being funded by a partner.

**When you were first beginning to apply for funding, how did you discover organizations that might be interested in your work?**

When I was a PhD student, I started by helping my advisers work on grant proposals. This helped me learn how the process worked, including how they thought about the fit between a particular project and a funding organizations or specific funding call. I learned through them which of the local philanthropic organizations might be interested in the kind of work I do, which was a useful complement to keeping an eye out for RFPs at federal agencies or other funders that release national RFPs. I also forged some relationships with people working in research organizations who used to be program officers at foundations. Since they used to work in that world, they had a lot of inside information about the research taste of different philanthropic organizations.

**What were the biggest mistakes you made, in your early applications?**

I think it took me awhile to learn how to write a clear and well-justified proposal. I didn't understand the importance of addressing *exactly* what the RFP asked for, down to using the exact section headers mentioned in an RFP if they were given, and to spell out in concrete detail exactly how my project addressed the goals the funder said they were prioritizing. You want someone who is quickly skimming a lot of proposals at once to be able to easily spot what you're doing, why it's important, and how it fits what they said they were looking for. If a grant officer—who is typically quite well informed but not necessarily an economist, depending on the funding source—has to think really carefully about what you're saying or read between the lines to see what the end result will be, you're likely to lose their attention.

I also underestimated how specific and concrete I needed to be. A proposal really can't take a "trust me" kind of approach, like you might do with an advisor or colleague who already knows that you have the ability to fill in any gaps. It needs to demonstrate in clear and direct language precisely what your plan for every central piece of your project is, as well as provide support

that you can actually accomplish it. Funders really don't want to invest in a good idea that just falls apart later. So provide as much concrete proof of concept as you can, whether it's letters of support from project partners proving they really are on board, data-sharing agreements showing you have access to the data you say you have, preliminary analyses showing that your idea will work in practice, and so forth.

**Are there other ways in which your process for applying for funding and writing proposals has changed over time?**

I think success begets success, because prior awards demonstrate you can actually accomplish what you set out to do. So I started with a number of smaller pilots or projects where I only needed funding to support administrative data matching and analysis. Only once I had successfully implemented a few projects did I feel ready to ask for additional support like funding for full-time staff, qualitative data collection, and other elements that are worthwhile for larger-scale projects.

**What surprised you the most about how the funding process works?**

IDCs! It was quite the shock as a young scholar to learn about indirect costs, which are effectively a kind of tax that universities levy on grant funding that allow them to keep the university running. Especially for federal grants, the IDC rate can be quite high. So if your project needs \$50,000 in funding, you need to look for funding opportunities where the maximum budget is well over \$50,000. Otherwise you won't end up with enough to meet your project's needs.

**What advice would you give to scholars who are struggling to find funding for their work?**

Don't be afraid of program officers; they are there to help you. Program officers are not like academic referees, where it's inappropriate to reach out directly to see what they think. Though the process can vary a bit from funder to funder, it's generally ok (and often encouraged) to reach out ahead of time. You might consider writing a really sharp one-pager on your idea, then asking the program officer if she thinks the project is a good fit for their call. That can save you a lot of time writing a proposal for something that is just not what they are looking for. And you sometimes get advice about how pitch the project, what budget elements to ask for, or what the funder is likely to be worried about that you can use to strengthen your proposal.

Also, for those at academic institutions, reach out to your institutional research/budget office early. There are a ton of rules about how you can and can't budget, and all sorts of costs you might not know about at first. They can help you put together your budget. At most places, you aren't allowed to submit anything yourself anyway. So don't think you can put together a whole application by yourself; work with your research office to make sure everything is in compliance with your institution's rules.