

Respondent: Manisha Shah, UCLA

What external organizations have funded your work?

My work has been funded by federal agencies like the NSF and NIH as well as foundations like Gates, Hewlett, etc. and other organizations like JPAL.

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

I am a development economist so many of my funding requests are related to data collection and field experiments. However, I have also applied for funding to purchase data, hire research assistants, and occasionally to pay for summer salary and/or course buyouts.

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

Early in my career I definitely relied on the advice of more senior people in terms of which organizations to target for funding, as different organizations tend to fund different things. In the same way you might ask a senior colleague about which journal to target for x paper, you should start doing the same for grant proposals.

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

There are so many mistakes I have made in my early applications, and I still make some! Here are a few that come to mind:

1. Not asking current and past grantees to look at their successfully funded grant proposals prior to submission to get an idea of what a “successful proposal” looks like.
2. Not asking colleagues to review proposals and give me feedback prior to submission—this also means you actually have to write the proposal early/not at the last minute!
3. Not getting in touch with program officers to check if my proposal is a good fit for the call.
4. Not applying in a team--don't be afraid to apply in a team. I have not been terribly successful at solo NIH grants but have been funded by them many times as part of a larger team. Different funders look for different things so learn about these constraints! You also learn a lot from others when you apply in a team, especially as the more junior person on a team.
5. Not investing in relationships with program officers, especially at foundations. These relationships can matter a lot for future funding opportunities

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

I will say that applying for funding gets easier over time, as you become a better grant writer and gain a better understanding of what constitutes a successful proposal. However, even now, I still get a lot of rejection—rejection is a normal part of this process. Don't be afraid to read the

reviews, revise the proposal, and then resubmit again to the same funder or a different one if you really want to carry out the research.

I have also noticed that organizations have become more directive in terms of what they are looking to fund. It is fairly rare to see open calls for pots of money as many foundations and funding organizations have a sense of topic areas they want to fund—and you need to fit your proposal idea into what they want to fund.

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

I think early in my career I would see an RFP, apply, and then get a rejection. I didn't really understand all of the prep work that goes into applying for a grant (like asking for access to successfully funded grants, getting feedback from senior colleagues, iterating over the proposal many times, etc.).

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

It is really difficult to get funded early on in your career, *especially* if you are not based at a top department/university. My advice is don't give up—keep on applying—and be OK with rejection. It is very competitive to get funding these days. Applying for grants is a skill set like any other. The more you do it, the more you learn, the better you get. And don't feel embarrassed about getting in touch with senior people who raise a lot of money and ask them to see their successfully funded grants. I am almost always happy to share my grant proposals with junior folks curious to learn about the funding process. Also, if a more senior person is working on a topic you are interested in, tell her/him you want to work with her/him and apply for future funding together. I have learned so much from my collaborations with senior people both in terms of grant writing and paper writing! Good luck.