

# Funding Forward: Strategies for Securing Foundation Funding in the Sciences and Engineering

Webinar Session: June 06, 2025

## Key Takeaways

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### Overall Landscape

- Basic research funding has been approximately 15% of total R&D spending in the US; applied research 18% and development spending (applying knowledge from research to new or improved products) about 67% (2021).
- For basic research, federal funding has been declining as a relative source of support at universities and non-profits (more than 75% in the 1960s to approximately 50% in 2021).
- Philanthropic funding for basic research has increased in the same timeframe from 20% to an estimated 40% (2021).

### Types of Foundations

- **Private Philanthropic Foundations:** Funded by individuals/families; typically fund high-risk, long-term basic research, early-stage innovation, and underserved or emerging fields, with an emphasis on impact, innovation, and mission alignment over immediate returns.
- **Corporate Foundations:** Support research aligned with corporate interests (e.g., pharma, tech).
- **Family Foundations:** Reflect donor family's interests and values.
- **Community Foundations:** Composed primarily of permanent funds established by separate donors for the long-term benefit of the residents of a defined geographic area.

### Common Funding Methods

- Request for proposals (RFPs)
- Rolling submissions
- Limited Submissions
- Targeted invitations from funders
- Two stage submissions – beginning with a letter of intent (LOI) followed by a full proposal

### Strategies

#### RFP-based Foundations

- Do not assume that the reader of your proposal is a subject matter expert – write your science in accessible terms.

- Focus on the narrative and the impact of your proposed work (e.g., curiosity-driven research, long-term societal benefit or building scientific capacity).
- Thoroughly research the foundation's priorities, past grantees, and public communications. Websites often have valuable information.
  - Use the language from the RFP in your proposal.
  - Know the landscape – who else is doing exceptional work in this area and could be applying; clearly differentiate your own work as unique.
  - Reach out to individuals who have been funded in the past.

**Tip:** Frame your work as a bold, potentially transformative pursuit—even if this is speculative.

#### Non-Soliciting Foundations

Unlike many government funders, foundations often emphasize relationships and personal connections. About 70% of foundations do not accept unsolicited proposals and cold proposals rarely succeed. Here are some ways to establish a relationship:

- Review the funder's priorities to establish whether your project is a good fit.
- Review previous grants made by the funder for the same reason. Connect with the people on this list, especially Columbia colleagues, and ask whether they can make an introduction.
- Try to connect with the Program Director / Officer to discuss your project.
- Invite them to talks and events that you are organizing. Share your published papers to advance their learning.
- Attend conferences and convenings where foundation representatives are likely to be present. Seek opportunities to speak on panels that attract potential funders to increase visibility and establish credibility.
- Leverage social media to promote your work.
- Ask your university's development office or research support office if they have contacts or history with the foundation.
- Review the Foundation leadership and Board members, explore if they have connections to Columbia.

## What Makes a Strong Proposal?

- **Do Your Homework:** Tailor proposals to the funder's mission and guidelines. Personalized, well-aligned proposals stand out, while generic or scattershot submissions fall flat.
- **Be Clear and Direct:** State the funding request and project's alignment with the funder's goals early. Avoid burying the ask or relying on vague connections.
- **Make the Case:** Explain the urgency, relevance, and unique qualifications of your team. Highlight the window of opportunity and why your project matters now. Discuss a) why this question matters; b) why now; c) why you are the right person/team; d) what the long-term potential is (even if speculative).
- **Set Measurable Goals:** Include timelines, outcomes, and evaluation methods. Clearly define what success looks like and how it will be measured.
- **Illustrate Impact:** Emphasize measurable outcomes, long-term impact, and the broader benefits of your work.
- **Demonstrate Collaboration:** Share key partners and relationships within your field. Funders appreciate cooperative ecosystems.
- **Write Clearly and Concisely:** Avoid jargon and overly technical language. Remember that proposals may be reviewed by Program Officers and foundation Board members, who may come from diverse professional backgrounds.
- **Demonstrate Institutional Commitment:** Show how Columbia is committed to supporting the work. Clearly articulate sustainability beyond the grant term.

## Advice for a Declined Proposal

There are many ways in which you can change a "no" to a future "yes":

- Ask for feedback if possible.
- If feedback is not possible, go back to the basics of establishing a relationship with the program officer – invite them to convenings that you are organizing and send them copies of manuscripts or published research over time.
- Re-apply!

## Timeframe to Funding

Approximately six to nine months for solicited proposals and longer for unsolicited proposals.

## Differences from Submissions to Federal Agencies

- Federal agencies focus on broad public objectives. Private foundations have more specific philanthropic interests.
- Proposals are not always reviewed by subject matter experts. They can be viewed by Program Officers and the Board.
- Federal proposals tend to be graded on a rubric; foundations have more flexible review criteria.
- Foundation reviews are often less technical and more narrative-driven than federal agency reviews. Foundations expect proposers to emphasize the story behind their research—why it matters, whom it could benefit, and how it could transform the field.

## Finding RFPs

- [Foundation Directory Online](#): Accessible through the Columbia Libraries' database collection.
- [Pivot](#): Sign up for an account using your Columbia UNI.
- [Philanthropy News Digest](#): Sign up to receive daily PND alerts.
- [Proposal Central For Research Funding](#): Grant opportunities in health, biomedical, and scientific research.
- [Inside Philanthropy Grant finder](#): Search tool of thousands of profiles of institutional and individual funders.
- [Columbia University Corporate and Foundations Relations funding opportunity database](#).

## Other Resources

Please refer to our **Funding Forward: Strategies for Securing Foundation Funding in the Sciences and Engineering – Presentation Slides** for additional resources, including a list of funders, RFP directories, and Columbia offices that can help guide funding efforts.

Key takeaways from Funding Forward: Strategies for Securing Foundation Funding in the Sciences and Engineering has been brought to you by Dimitra Kousantoni, Executive Director of University Corporate and Foundation Relations and Farhana Mather, Principal Gifts Officer, both from the Office of Alumni Development.