Though there are over 40,000 foundations in the United States, fewer than 20% have assets of $2 million or more, or give $200,000 in grants annually. What is the best way to approach these grantmaking organizations? And how can you get a share of foundation resources in an increasingly competitive environment? While each foundation has a unique way of operating, there are specific steps to take in approaching them all.

I would suggest that the very first step and one that is important prior to writing anything, is doing your research on the foundation you wish to approach. The buzzword is HOMEWORK. Do it well and thoroughly. It is more efficient and in the end more beneficial to send appropriate requests to fewer organizations than to send a shower of appeals in the hopes that one may land in the right place. While you may not receive an approval or even a hearing on the first attempt, if the appeal has been well thought out and is indeed within the guidelines of the foundation, the impression left is a positive one and the next time you try you may be more successful. Obviously, there are no guarantees, and since there are always many more appeals than resources to fill the need, a majority are turned down.

Once you have determined that you are sending your appeal to an interested party, make sure that the form of your approach is correct. Many foundations prefer a phone call or a letter of inquiry as the first step. Others want a full proposal with all the required documentation. However, all proposals should be accompanied by a COVER LETTER. The letter should be addressed to an appropriate person. If for some reason in doing your research you are unable to find a contact name, call and ask.

The COVER LETTER should be just that—a brief, to the point, summary of what we can expect to read in the proposal. For instance it might read: Dear Appropriate Person, Our organization does such and such. We are in need of X amount of dollars for—name of project or general support. We are attaching—and then list the documents appended. Again, if you have researched the foundation thoroughly, you will know what is required.

I believe there are three important qualities that are vital to all well written proposals: clarity, brevity, and specificity of purpose (even if you are requesting general support.)

The factual information should include: WHO YOU ARE—a small, liberal arts coeducational college with an enrollment of 700 students from around the country. WHAT YOU DO—in the case of schools, that is implicit in the nature of the organization. However, you may have a heavy emphasis on preparing teachers, or computer programmers. Let us know. And of course, the NATURE OF THE NEED, including a budget. The is information should be stated up front. Within the nature of the need, the reader should learn the goals of the project: what is expected to be accomplished and how long will it take to accomplish it? Who is the population being served and how will your program affect that population? If the request is being submitted to more than one foundation, how will our funding be used to avoid duplication of effort? Explain clearly the specific uses of funds already received as well as those anticipated.
Your appeal does not necessarily have to present a unique idea. New ideas are hard to come by
and probably harder to bring to fruition. What is important is a clear statement of HOW THE
PROJECT IS TO BE CARRIED OUT. If it is based on already successful results done elsewhere,
let us know. If it is a new project—are there any previously tested techniques similar to what your
are planning? If you are being innovative, what kind of evaluation piece is built into the project? If
you are asking for funds to purchase a specific piece of equipment, the same thoroughness of
purpose, use and evaluation should be stated.

A listing of personnel involved with the program should be included indicating their qualifications.
A detailed budget showing overall cost is vital. If it is an ongoing program, indicate monies
received, monies anticipated, and the sources of these funds. And once again, depending upon
the recipient of the appeal, make sure you send the correct IRS information, audited financials,
and most of us want a listing of board members.

Your HOMEWORK will tell you if there is anything else required: letters of endorsement,
newspaper clippings of other publicity given to your program. My feeling is that if such
supplementary material is not specifically asked for, don’t send it. If the project is expected to run
over a period of years, a projected budget for each year should be submitted. Many foundations
provide funding on a yearly basis only. Others will provide funding for multiple years. Your
research will tell you on what basis to make the approach.

Now having said all of this, it more than likely that most of your appeals will be turned down.
There are many fine programs and projects being declined. The choices grantmakers must make
are difficult. We are usually presented with a plate of delectable items, all looking appetizing and
appealing. We cannot choose them all.

At the risk of repeating myself: homework, groundwork, research. Whatever you wish to call it,
do it. It saves time and paperwork and ultimately will produce more positive than negative results.
Remember the proposal is the first impression the foundation gets of your organization. Make it a
good one.

The relationship between grantee and grantor is mutual. It should be and I hope is, more often
than not, a relationship of respect and responsibility. It is our responsibility to read and review
requests with an open mind, making fair judgments without being judgmental. On your part, the
responsibility is to have done the research and presented a thoughtfully written appeal.

We are all concerned about the well-being of society and its citizens. The more we share our
thoughts, ideas and dreams, the more hopeful we can be about the future.