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THE ROAD TO GRANT FUNDING: Finding the Right Grantmaker

A grant is a match between you and an organization that backs you. So at the outset you must draw up a list of potentially receptive grantmakers. The task is obviously critical. Approach the wrong people and your request is doomed, no matter how worthy. So how do you proceed?

A good first step is to visit the website of the Foundation Center at www.fdncenter.org and check its vast directory of listings. You have to pay a monthly fee for access, but the reward can dwarf it.

Once you have access, bring up the search screen. It offers numerous ways to hunt down likely grantmakers. The most effective is “Text Search” at the bottom, which checks entire listings. Productive key words include: “character,” “character education,” “youth violence,” “youth services,” “youth development,” and “child development.”

After the search brings up a list of candidate funders, sieve through them to find good matches. The process takes time. It can also be vexing, since sometimes a funder will seem ideal until you spot a lethal phrase in the fine print.

If the grantmaker looks promising, visit its website. Information there will be more up-to-date, precise, and extensive than in the Foundation Directory, though the directory commonly offers a useful summary. The listing will give you the URL.

With the grantmaker’s website before you, look for these critical facts:

1. Openness to applications. Make sure the funder is still accepting letters of inquiry and proposals from unfamiliar applicants. In the last few years, some have limited their giving solely to applicants they know. You can usually resolve this matter at the site’s proposal guidelines.
2. Subject area. Does the grantmaker fund programs related to character? This question can be surprisingly tricky to answer. A few grantmakers refer directly to improving character, but more often they speak generally in terms of “enhancing the community,” “creating a healthier atmosphere for people to live and work in,” “bettering education for all,” etc. In such cases, the grantmaker is usually leaving the door open, and you may — or may not — be able to sway it with a good proposal. Also consider grantmakers interested in reducing youth crime, drug abuse, or violence. One organization that explicitly funds character education is The John Templeton Foundation (www.templeton.org/grants.asp).
3. Geographic area. Does the grantmaker fund programs in your region? Most of them channel funds to a narrow area. Determine where the agency allots its grants and pay attention to it. If it focuses on Chicago and you’re in Miami, don’t bother.

4. Type of financial need. Will the grant cover your need? Grantmakers can be very specific about how you spend their money. For instance, they may require you to use it as seed money or for capital expenditures. You probably want a project grant. If you're lucky enough, you may get an operating grant that will fund the underlying expenses of your organization such as rent.
5. Dollar range. Some agencies offer huge grants (between \$100,000 and \$500,000). Your request may well be far smaller, the kind of proposal this agency doesn't consider. So identify how much money you need and seek grantmakers who offer that amount. Don't be misled by the average size of an agency's grants. Look to see if your request falls within its typical range. For instance, an average grant may be \$100,000, but the range could be \$10,000 to \$150,000.

The five criteria above are all crucial. Cheryl Clarke in her useful book *Storytelling for Grantseekers* suggests a nonessential one: contacts. Here, as elsewhere, it can help if someone in your organization knows someone in the granting organization. To find out if anyone does, make a list of the grantmaker's officers and directors and circulate it among the people associated with your CC! group. We live in a networked world and contacts between people are surprisingly common. On the other hand, understand that you don't necessarily need contacts to get a grant.