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THE ROAD TO GRANT FUNDING: The Letter of Inquiry

Once you narrow your grant search to likely funders, how do you approach them? The two main avenues are a letter of inquiry (LOI) and a full proposal. Use the one the grantor specifies (a letter of inquiry is most common).

As opposed to a proposal, a LOI is short, usually two pages, and sets forth your idea. It’s a request to consider the proposal. Thus, it must pique the funder’s interest.

How do you construct it? What do you say to spur interest in your project?

First, study the requirements of the foundation carefully. Heed those on its website over the summary from the Foundation Center since the website will be more recent and authoritative. Grantors commonly specify that you provide a, b, c, d — in that order. Follow its instructions explicitly.

Be sure to orient your letter toward the interests of the grantmaker. If it mainly funds youth violence reduction, emphasize the success of CC! in that area. If it focuses on building character, stress that aspect.

Clarity is essential. LOIs and proposals pour into grantmakers every day. Many won’t bother to read an LOI if it’s opaque.

A clean structure is essential to clarity, so organize the LOI. Give each paragraph a topic sentence that sums it up. You may want to bold or italicize certain sentences for emphasis so the grantmaker can skim the letter and quickly grasp it. Consider using bullets to clarify points.

Use words clearly. Cut not only the repetitive, but the unnecessary. Employ short, direct words where they can replace longer ones. Don’t inflate your language to impress the grantmaker. You’ll likely create the opposite effect.

Below is a sample LOI. Again, be sure your letter follows the grantmaker’s guidelines. Don’t copy this sample. Rather, use it as a guide to your own LOI.

SAMPLE LETTER OF INQUIRY

Dear [Mr. or Ms. X]:

[Name of your organization] requests evaluation of a [dollar amount] proposal to build the character of youth in [number, kind, and location of schools]. We will increase students’ ethical behavior, enhance their commitment to education, and reduce their rate of delinquency through the proven character-development program CHARACTER COUNTS! (CCI).
The nonpartisan 501(c)(3) [name of organization] will implement CC! over [length of time]. After that, it can continue indefinitely. The ultimate per-student cost could be pennies.

**What is CC!?!** Founded by renowned ethicist Michael Josephson, it is the nation’s leading character-education framework, reaching at least 5 million youth in schools and organizations across the country. CC! is also the centerpiece of the CHARACTER COUNTS! Coalition, whose nearly 900 members include the National 4-H, Camp Fire Boys and Girls, the American Federation of Teachers, the NEA, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, Boys and Girls Clubs, Big Brothers Big Sisters, AYSO, United Way of America, Little League Baseball, and the United States Army, Child & Youth Services.

**How does CC! work?** The project operates in two phases. First, educators from the [school or schools] will enroll in a Character Development Seminar (CDS). More than 7,000 people have graduated from these seminars so far. The CDS will train them in the CC! approach and the Six Pillars of Character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship.

Second, these graduates will return to the [school or schools] and implement CC!. They will train other teachers and staff, who will determine how best to merge the Six Pillar values into daily lessons. The program will thus use the insights of on-site personnel to reach students. Teachers and steering committees will also spread CC! to families and the community. As a result, students will absorb the Six Pillar values into their everyday decision making.

**What is the impact of CC!?!** A university-based study in South Dakota—involving more than 8,000 middle and high school students—showed that CC! has powerful effects:

*It cuts violence.* Students who said they had used physical force against someone who insulted them dropped 33 percent over three years of exposure to CC!.

*It cuts other criminal acts.* After CC!, incidents by students who said they had:

- Broken into another’s property dropped 50 percent
- Used a fake ID dropped 56 percent
- Taken something without paying dropped 46 percent
- Defaced or vandalized property dropped 46 percent
- Drunk alcoholic beverages dropped 31 percent
- Taken illegal drugs dropped 32 percent

According to the 2001 Surgeon General’s Report on Youth and Violence, criminality is one of the four most important risk factors for violence in children 12-14.

*It enhances the social climate.* “It’s like night and day,” said Linda Jones when she was overseeing CC! in the Dallas public schools. “The whole emotional atmosphere of the building changes. It becomes a kinder, gentler place.” After CC!, incidents by South Dakota students who said they had:

- Teased someone because of race or ethnicity dropped 45 percent
- Received a detention or suspension dropped 28 percent
It strengthens students’ commitment to school. In South Dakota, CCI led to changes that suggested greater involvement in school. Incidents of students who said they had:

- Cheated on an exam dropped 30 percent
- Missed class without a legitimate excuse dropped 39 percent
- Failed to get schoolwork done on time dropped 24 percent
- Lied to a teacher dropped 35 percent

[Name of organization] will scientifically measure the success of the program. It will use student self-reports of their own behavior, teacher observations, grade records, school discipline records, and local crime rates.

Improved character can last a lifetime and bestow crucial benefits. Good behavior breeds self-sufficiency, since character requires reliance on one’s internalized values. It enhances the quality of education by reducing time that teachers spend on discipline and brightening the social atmosphere. It strengthens families as members learn to show more respect and thoughtfulness for each other. It reduces the chance of high-risk behaviors. Ultimately, it enables children to attain the potential that lies within them.

We would welcome the opportunity to partner with [name of organization] in improving the character of [name of area] youth. Thank you for considering this letter of inquiry. I look forward to hearing from you.

Best regards,

[Your Name]