

Pursuing Funding from Foundations

An Interview with Dr. Mark Fossett, Head of the Department of Sociology and Professor of sociology at Texas A&M University

By Lucy Deckard

Dr. Fossett conducts research in racial and ethnic relations, social inequality, social demography and urban sociology. He has been funded by a variety of foundations, including the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation. He has also been funded multiple times by both NSF and NIH.

Q: What kinds of foundations might fund faculty?

A: Russell Sage, Ford, Rockefeller, Spencer, Social Science Research Council, and the Aspen Institute are all examples of foundations that fund faculty research. They are similar in that they are private and are supported by endowments. They are all long-standing foundations and have websites. However, the most important thing to understand is that they each have their own agenda and it's important to learn about them and their agenda and then determine if there is a good match between your research interests and their agenda. They may accept unsolicited applications, but only send one in if there is a specific invitation on their website to do so.

Q: How do you find foundations that might be interested in funding your research?

A: I use OPD's funding opportunities lists and I also look through various online funding lists like Community of Science and SMARTs. I search on key words related to my research. Web searches are also good, and I look at the literature. Many times funding agencies are acknowledged in articles. You may find foundations without a lot of visible presence, but be careful, because a lot of those turn out to be wired. Also be aware that a lot of the funding opportunities from foundations are geographically restricted.

Q: How do you decide whether to pursue funding from a particular foundation?

A: It's important to learn about the foundation and its mission. There are usually clear clues about a foundation's current mission, and they give a lot of thought about what type of work they want to fund. Look at the programs they have, talk to the Program Officer – this is almost always helpful and it's a way to pick up on things about the foundation that may not be posted on their website or included in mission statements or other written materials. They'll state a particular area of emphasis or issue a call for proposals in a certain area. When their interests match what you do, they can be receptive. For example Rockefeller, Ford and Aspen all had cycles where they were looking for work like the kind of research I do, so I contacted them then.

Also investigate what the foundations have funded in the past. Many foundations may appear from their websites to be open to lots of areas, but, if they haven't funded any projects in your area before, you are going to be a pioneer and must convince the Program Officer that yours is a worthwhile area to fund. People generally have a low success rate with these kinds of situations. For example, if you look at the Gates Foundation website, it looks like they might be

open to all things. I've done work in computer simulation models of urban dynamics, which was enabled by the PC revolution, which I thought they might be interested in supporting. But when I investigated further, it turned out that they had an entirely different agenda.

So it's important to identify the agenda of a foundation. It might be a policy agenda; it might be related to implementation of a program, and it may not be scientific. As researchers, our main product is publications. Make sure the foundation is interested in that product. Some are and some aren't. Some foundations support the generation of new knowledge, or they may have policy goals, or they may want to help people directly. If their goals fit your interest, then it makes sense to look for funding from them. Don't just shop what you're doing if it doesn't fit the foundation's agenda – you have an almost zero chance. Even when the Program Officer is nice, you can pick up that there is no chance. The best strategy is to have a good idea first, then see if a foundation is receptive. Don't generate an idea based on what you think the foundation will fund. If they're not interested, look for another foundation that is.

It's also important to understand that a foundation's mission can change. For example, the Ford Foundation used to focus on rural poverty, but later they began focusing on democracy in Latin America. So there was a time when my research fit their mission, but now it's no longer a fit, and I don't apply to them. So be sure to get up-to-date information. The Program Officer can often have a large influence on what types of projects are funded, and a foundation's culture can change as people change. Private foundations are more nimble than NSF and NIH, and their area of emphasis can change with the wind. A new Program Officer usually will put his/her own stamp on a program. Sometimes it is possible to meet with them at professional meetings; that can be a great opportunity to find out what is interesting them at the moment and where there new directions may be. Occasionally, they will even respond to your ideas and draw on them when thinking about their next initiative.

Q: How do private foundations differ from public funding agencies like NSF and NIH?

A: Compared to NSF and NIH, they can be more particularistic. There are fewer people involved, and a foundation can have a distinct personality. The first time you apply, you may not know the foundation's personality, and you may not know whom to call for advice. You may just have to take a shot. However, if you can find someone who is plugged in to the foundation, that may help you.

The funding amounts from foundations are generally smaller. Some researchers have gotten large awards from foundations, but in general, those large awards tend to go to stars in the field.

Q: Are there advantages to going to foundations for funding?

A: If there is a fit between your interests and the interests of the foundation, it can be nice compared to NSF and NIH because foundations can be more accommodating. They take a short prospectus and will give you feedback. Therefore, you get feedback quickly, and there is less up-front investment of your time in writing a big proposal. The process can go quite quickly, and you don't spend a lot of time developing a proposal that isn't going to be funded.

Foundations are often less bureaucratic than government agencies; they tend to be more flexible in budgeting (they will fund some things that the government agencies won't fund if it's clear that you need it to support your project), they are more nimble, and the project budgets they require are often less complicated. But even in this, different foundations have their own personalities.

Q: What strategies would you recommend for approaching a foundation and determining if it's a good place to apply?

Talk to the Program Officer. Because the Program Officer can be hard to get hold of, it's a good idea to e-mail and ask for a time when you can call to talk. Be persistent, but don't be a nuisance. Be prepared and be able to describe your project well and succinctly. Don't make a fishing call – that's not good. Work to establish a good relationship with the Program Officer.

Try to diagnose early if the Program Officer has established relationships with a stable of favored researchers. Sometimes, foundations have relationships with a particular institution or set of universities, and it may not be easy to crack into that circle. The Program Officer or foundation may have high confidence in those people and feel it is a risk to go outside that circle of researchers. You can find this out; the Program Officer may make it clear when you talk to him/her. You can also ask colleagues in the field who have applied or gotten funded by the foundation. If you know someone who has obtained funding, call and ask them what the procedure was.

Another good way to get information is professional networking. Use professional meetings and short conversations with colleagues. Ask, for example, "What's Russell Sage doing these days? Would someone like me have a chance there?" Larger foundations have Program Officers attending meetings. You can seek them out for face-to-face time – maybe just for a coffee. When you see them in person you can get more clues from body language. However, Program Officers are usually very popular at conferences, so it can be a challenge to connect with them, but just noting who they are talking to can give you clues.

Q: What is the procedure for applying?

A: Often, the Program Officer doesn't want to see a full proposal at first; they want a preliminary proposal which might consist of a detailed abstract with sketches of the budget and timeline. Based on that the Program Officer will give you feedback, which may be as simple as whether or not they are interested. If they are interested, they will encourage you to submit a full-blown proposal. Since you've already made it through the preliminary proposal process, your chances of being successful are a lot better at this point, but you still have to execute and deliver a thoughtful proposal.

Q: What advice would you give about writing the proposal?

A: As I've mentioned before, it's very important to connect your work to the mission of the foundation. Also, make sure that your project clearly fits into one of the foundation's programs. Beyond that, the quality of your ideas and presenting them well are the most important things.

Q: How does the review process typically work at foundations?

The first stage is programmatic, and the response is simple. The second round sometimes yields very detailed reviews, while other times you get almost no feedback. For bigger projects, the foundation may get external reviews, which can be as rigorous as NSF or NIH reviews.

At foundations, you shouldn't resubmit unless there is clear encouragement to resubmit. If they didn't like it the first time, they won't change their minds. If they think they might like to fund your idea, they will let you know.

Q: How important is it to develop a relationship with a foundation?

A: In the best case, the same Program Officer stays at the foundation and the mission of the foundation stays the same. Then you develop a relationship, and this gives you an advantage and more possibility for a personal connection. In the long run, though, the quality of your ideas is the most important thing. A relationship can help your high-quality ideas get a hearing, but if your next idea is of lesser quality, the Program Officer won't fund you. If your next idea is of equal quality, then you might get a hearing faster since you have a track record with the foundation.

What advice would you give new faculty?

Occasionally, foundations have a small grants program that is explicitly for bringing in new people. This is a chance to seek funding without having to compete with people who are established at the foundation. But even if there aren't these kinds of programs, if the foundation is really open to receiving proposals and if your ideas are good, you may have a realistic chance. Some practical tips for new faculty are to collaborate with a more senior researcher, and start with a modest project centered around an interesting idea. If your project has a grand budget, then the program officer is likely to be more cautious. Network at meetings. Set out to become known to the people at the foundation, and, of course, work to establish yourself in the field.