Project Ideas:

Helping Faculty Differentiate Between the Good and the Fundable

By Michael Preuss and Susan Perri

The ability to articulate concepts concisely, clearly, and precisely is a necessary skill when providing guidance to others. To aid research administrators in achieving this level of communication when discussing project concepts and to fill an existing gap in the literature, the authors have constructed a table which contrasts the elements of a worthy undertaking ("a good idea") with the corresponding characteristics of an approach which might receive funding ("a fundable idea"). The descriptive clauses in Table 1 are intended to illustrate differences between concepts that have general merit and those that would be worth pursuing as the basis of a grant application in the humanities, social sciences, education, and for intervention, outreach, or service projects.

Propositions that people find appealing often include improving upon something or providing someone needed-assistance. However, enabling improvement or helping people is not enough to render a grant concept fundable (Karsh & Fox, 2009). While advancement and assistance are certainly desirable and essential elements of a proposal, one of the critical concerns of a funder is meeting the needs of the population they target (Bauer, 2009). Often, very little creativity is required to transform a good idea that advocates a helpful practice into one that also addresses the funder's target audience. Investigating whether the proposed focus can address a concern

Table 1: A Good versus Fundable Idea

A Good Idea…	A Fundable Idea…
…helps someone, enables improvement	…addresses the funder's target audience/group
…advances an important agenda	…advances the funder's agenda and builds on the funder's giving history or portfolio
…serves a wise/substantial purpose.	…serves a wise/substantial purpose while doing something innovative like answering a question or addressing a problem in a new and unique way, proving a concept, or demonstrating scalability
… aligns with personal/professional interest and experience	…aligns with funder priorities
…creates/maintains something of value	…builds or expands on something of value and has potential for impact beyond a single organization or group of people
…involves learning, growth, or progress	…measures/analyzes/advances learning, growth and movement toward a goal
…can have undefined steps/processes	…has a clear path from A to B to C and has specific, timed, measurable steps
…can be of any scale	…is scaled by prior experience, expertise, and to a defined cost
…can be a unique effort	…should be replicable and sustainable
…can be an untested concept	…has substantiated promise to catalyze positive change
…can be a first time endeavor	…should be in line with the proposer's professional credentials and demonstrated skill-set

with respect to a funder's preferred target population, such as Hispanic students, students at risk of attrition, low-income students, and students in STEM disciplines, is a helpful first step.

Grant-making organizations analyze national or regional issues and trends to identify their funding priorities (Ford, 2011) and consider the impact of their investments based on an agenda they have formulated, rather than a myriad of local contexts and interests (Bauer, 2009; Karsh & Fox, 2009). They wish to see an ever expanding set of outputs and outcomes from their portfolio that cumulatively advance the knowledge-generating, social, humanitarian, or other objectives they have established. Return-on-investment for grant makers equates to building the level of evidence for their specific grant making agenda. When formulating and refining a project concept in hopes of submission to an agency or foundation, it is prudent to consider the funding priorities expressed by and the giving history of each potential funder in an effort to delineate what types of activity each sees as advancing their agenda. It is possible that a concern considered important in one's immediate environment may not, in fact, align with the funders' priorities and preferences.

The authors have frequently heard that there once was a time when a wise and substantial purpose was sufficient to garner funding. If this was ever really the case, that period is long past. Among the many other requirements for a project idea to be fundable is the extension of the wise or substantial purpose construct to include innovation. Innovation, in this sense, can include unique approaches, extension of understanding, application within new contexts, extension of scope or acuity, or combining known and effective methods to increase breadth, depth, or impact.

Perhaps the most obvious pattern found among "good ideas" is that the proposed undertaking aligns with the personal or professional interests and experience of the proponent. While this is certainly an important characteristic to have in place (e.g., this is one of the purposes behind submission of biosketches), it is an inadequate basis for appealing to a sponsor. Agencies and foundations are interested in supporting people with the capability to complete projects and who have demonstrated experience or expertise but they also desire that the projects address a set of priorities they have established (Bauer, 2009; Karsh & Fox, 2009). The professional expertise and demonstrated involvement through the scholarly activity of the Principal Investigator/Project Director (PI/PD) must fall within the expressed preferences of the funder for them to add merit to the proposal.

Humanists and artists often encounter a "value" issue when seeking grants and fellowships. Their focus is on creating something that is beautiful, thought provoking, innovative, or which provides new insights. Accomplishing one or more of these purposes is, in their context, creating something of value. Yet even major funders of the arts have shifted their focus to include extended impact or community involvement emphases (NEA, 2014). As noted in the table, a general principle of a fundable project in the present context is its potential for replication and scale; its ability to build or expand on something of value; and its impact beyond a single organization or group of people.

Apart of the inherent value of the areas of emphasis just noted for humanists and artists—beauty, provocation, innovation, and insight—is their ability to facilitate or even embody learning, growth, and progress. Demonstrating these three characteristics is foundational to a grant application. However, sponsor interest in advancing an agenda through the combined outcomes of the endeavors they fund means grantees must also be able to measure the learning, growth, or progress achieved. Incorporating assessment of impact, rate of change, or degree of advancement in the project plans is necessary to fulfill this interest on the part of the sponsor.

An idea can be a "good idea" without being immediately attainable, having identified steps, or even being time bound. For example, providing all children a safe and effective educational experience, seeing that everyone in the world has reliable access to clean drinking water, and eliminating deaths from curable disease are all good ideas. Yet as just expressed, none of them are immediately attainable, include identified steps, or have time-to-completion estimates. Acharacteristic that sets a potentially fundable idea apart from descriptions of worthy undertakings is having a clear progression through specific, timed, and measurable steps (Bauer, 2009; Karsh & Fox, 2009). Asking questions about sequencing and

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Partnering to Propel Research

$51.8 billion:
U.S. private and community foundation giving in 2012.
This number is projected to hit
$54.7 billion in 2013.

$316.2 billion:
private giving in the U.S.
Of these funds,
16% came from foundations.*

Based on assets, the largest U.S. foundation is
The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
with assets totaling
$37.2 billion.
It is followed by the
Ford Foundation with assets totaling
$11.2 billion.*

86,192:
Total number of foundations in the U.S.*

At **9,890**, New York
has the highest number of foundations in
the U.S. California follows at **7,749**
with Pennsylvania in third place at
7,225.

Of note, Pennsylvania had over a
34% increase in the number of
foundations from 2011 to 2012.
*Data from 2012

Sources:
http://data.foundationcenter.org/#/foundations/all/nationwide/total/list/2012
http://foundationcenter.org/gainknowledge/research/nationaltrends.html
http://nccs.urban.org/statistics/quickfacts.cfm

Want to share numbers?
Email Heather Kubinec at
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Good ◄•••••••► Fundable

intended outcomes early in the project planning will usually result in a simple but sufficient ordering of operational steps, reasonable estimations of the time required for each step, and the desired outcome or output for each part of process.

The list of good ideas in the preceding paragraph are all expressed on a national or international scale illustrating that the scope of what may be considered a good idea can be very broad. Early-career grant applicants often make project scope/scale mistakes. They see the broad potential impact of their proposal but don't understand the sliding-scale nature of sponsored projects. Some of the things that limit the scope possible for a proposal are the prior experience of the investigator(s), the demonstrated expertise of the investigator(s), the project cost, and the funding available. These factors combine to establish a funding ladder. An investigator must have some experience and junior-faculty level expertise to request funding in the $25,000 to $75,000 range. Experience that includes prior grant funding and expertise demonstrated through publications from funded activity are necessary to approach the $100,000 to $200,000 funding range, and so on. Sponsors seek demonstrated experience and expertise as well as evidence of success at the preceding level for each step up the funding ladder.

The final three characteristics on the table are related. Concepts that have appeal can be a one-time or unique undertaking, include untested approaches, and be first time endeavors. But, each of these characteristics is a potential flaw in a grant concept. A unique endeavor, something that will done once without concern for future iterations, does not match funder interest in ability to replicate efficacious practices in other contexts or interest in extended return on investment by establishing a process that can be sustained over time. Untested approaches, unless requested or allowed by the funder, present a challenge to the effectiveness of funder investment. The funding agency intends to catalyze positive change, in an identified arena or discipline, in line with a predetermined set of priorities. Untested approaches do not offer assurance of positive change resulting or successful demonstration of an ability to impact an identified characteristic. There is simply no objectively demonstrable evidence of potential for success. While proof-of-concept funding is available from some organizations, even these proposals should be based, at a minimum, on pilot study data. The experience level of the PI/PD is an important concern in respect to the scale of the project. It is also an important concern in respect to the appropriateness of the proposal. While faculty and staff have many skills and abilities outside those demonstrable through academic credentials, it is the academic credentials and demonstrated skill set (e.g., prior grant leadership experience, experience supervising postdoc researchers, experience leading a project/research team) that marks a request as an appropriate submission from a PI/PD, shows a team member's ability to contribute to the project, or designates a subcontractor as being an appropriate provider of project support or services.

This advice is based on several decades of experience with grants and a familiarity with the literature of research administration. It is offered here as a potential tool for use with institutional faculty and staff when discussions of the difference between a "good idea" and a "fundable idea" arise. N

References

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