

## Five Tips for Writing National Science Foundation Proposals

By Kerry Nenn

The mission of the National Science Foundation (NSF) is to keep the United States on the forefront of science. “Important components of this mission are to get scientific knowledge out of the universities and into the world, generate interest in scientific issues and bring more people into the quest for knowledge,” explains Susan Finger, professor of civil and environmental engineering, Carnegie Mellon University (Pittsburg, PA.) “The desire is broader impact. If you do a good job covering this, you will have a competitive proposal.”

With this broader impact focus in mind, Finger offers the following tips:

1. **Field it first in your field.** “First, be sure you know the important questions in your discipline. Then get feedback from those in the know. Have people in your field read your proposal. Be sure to choose those who are not potential reviewers. Fields vary greatly in goals and methods. Only someone in your field can tell you if your idea is interesting and important,” notes Finger.
2. **Prove your plan.** Clearly show you have a research and data management plan in place. Finger advises, “You want to demonstrate that you have a really good question, explain how you will attack that question, show you have a feasible plan and describe how you will know when you have reached your goal. The overarching question should be: How will you get what you do to the rest of the world?”
3. **Watch the winners.** Look at abstracts from funded projects in the area to which you are applying. “But don’t just imitate what has already been funded because those have already been done. Try to see what the larger pattern is to get a sense of what direction you should go,” recommends Finger.
4. **Learn by doing.** Volunteer to be on a review panel. Finger notes, “Program officers often like to get fresh faces for reviews. You will get to see a broad range of proposals and gain insight into how proposals are reviewed.”
5. **Pick your battles.** More and more people are submitting proposals. The result is more competition for funding. “The fallout from this is people submit more in hopes they will get a hit on one of them,” Finger states. “This is not a good method. Instead, have a clear focus of your goals. Before submitting, consider if this is central to what you want to do. Only submit to those that are a good fit and when you think you have a reasonably good shot.”

For detailed information, see [www.cs.cmu.edu/~sfinger/advice/advice.html](http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~sfinger/advice/advice.html).

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## Make Major Gifts the Focus of Your Retreat

Board member retreats can be a very productive avenue for educating your board about the need for major gifts fundraising and creating the momentum for a successful campaign.

“It seems most nonprofit organizations fit into two categories,” says Robin Fowler, senior counsel of The Offord Group, a fundraising consultancy in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. “They either have neglected to schedule a board retreat for years, or they hold annual retreats but only focus on strategic planning and neglect fundraising, and the truth is the board retreat is the perfect opportunity to concentrate on major gift fundraising.”

According to Fowler, an active and operative board retreat can accomplish a great deal by:

- Helping board members to rediscover their vision for the organization and their role in perpetuating and sustaining the mission.
- Honing the fundraising skills of both staff members and volunteer board members.
- Building a strong consensus among both board and staff toward common goals.
- Recommitting to the strategic goals and priorities of the organization and building the connected understanding of the need for fundraising and major gifts.

“A board retreat is a very effective component in embarking on a fundraising campaign that will involve the solicitation of major gifts,” says Fowler. “When board members are energized and fired up about the real change they can make in the world, they are much more willing to embrace fundraising and ask for major gifts.”

Fowler believes nonprofit board members are sometimes reluctant to volunteer for fundraising solicitation tasks for several critical reasons:

1. Many board members lack experience and confidence in their ability to carry out the step-by-step process involved in making a major gifts ask.
2. Others believe themselves to be unqualified to represent or speak for the organization and lack the education and training required for doing so with assertiveness and passion.
3. Still other board members would be willing to become involved in many of the fundraising roles that are critical and supportive if only asked (e.g., follow-up phone calls, letter-writing efforts, campaign organization, etc.).

“The blunt truth is a nonprofit institution cannot operate a major gifts campaign without the commitment, connections and clout that comes from board members,” says Fowler. “And a well-structured board retreat is a great way to harness the board commitment and energy.”

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