

*Applying Successfully to Grants and Fellowships*¹

By Miroslava Chávez-García, Luis Alvarez, and Ernesto Chávez

In 2009, the three of us came together to provide some words of advice on “how to” apply successfully to grants and fellowships. We did so as a result of a recent stint reviewing applications for a national fellowship competition and realizing many applicants struggled with the process. Whether it was composing a personal statement, identifying the significance of the major themes, or highlighting the contributions or intervention of their work in a larger body of scholarship, we knew many lacked the knowledge—often gained through mentorship—to pull together a winning proposal.

We then decided to draw upon our experiences, as applicants and reviewers, to compile a few words of wisdom.² In response, we received warm praise for sharing our insights with junior colleagues. Those insights, however, have become outdated, as we know that the application and review process is not static, especially with the veritable explosion of online resources facilitating—and perhaps overwhelming us with—opportunities to strike it big in our area of study. Here we provide an expanded update to our advice on why, where, and how to apply to grants and fellowships. Specifically, we address how to write personal, research, and proposed project statements as well as how to compose bibliographies. We also suggest what to consider before hitting “submit” and the larger end goal and point of this process..

Why Apply

Applying to grants and fellowship is a necessary skill as well as an expectation in academia. The processes and purposes are somewhat different, however. Grants support specific research activities needed to carry out a larger project. For instance, if you need to travel to a research site to investigate a specific question related to your work, you would apply to a travel or research grant. Those grant applications almost always ask for a detailed budget. In most cases, you will need to contact your institution’s office of research (or equivalent) to have your

¹ Miroslava Chávez-García, Luis Alvarez, and Ernesto Chávez, “Navigating Successfully Grants and Fellowships Applications,” in *The Academic’s Handbook*, 4th ed., revised and expanded, eds. Lori Flores and Jocelyn Olcott (Duke University Press, forthcoming, 2019).

² Miroslava Chávez-García, Luis Alvarez, and Ernesto Chávez, “Preparing a Successful Grant or Fellowship Application,” *Organization of American Historians Newsletter*, Vol. 37 (No. 3) 2009, pp. 7, 14.

budget and proposal approved. While doing so may seem like a hang up or bureaucratic delay, those offices review your proposed submission with an eye towards strengthening the proposal. They often will streamline your budget and prepare it along the lines of what is expected from a particular sponsoring agent. Fellowships, in contrast, allocate funding that allows you to work on your project without having to teach or labor in another way to support yourself. Normally, fellowships are semester- or year-long packages and rarely, if ever, need to include a budget, though you will have to discuss how you will spend your time to achieve your stated goals. Arguably, managing your time wisely is one of the most challenging aspects of fellowships. We say more about this below.

Applying to fellowships and grants not only gives you the opportunity to acquire financial support for your work, but to better recognize and articulate the purpose and significance of your research. Your application can inform your peers that your work is serious and significant to the field and academia more broadly (as reviewers are not always in your area of research but can be so compelled by your proposal that they believe your work merits support). Practically, they allow you the privilege of amassing data or an archive, enabling you to advance the analysis and writing of your findings. Grants and fellowships also bring added recognition in most academic fields and among colleagues and, if on the tenure track, work towards promotion at all levels. A record of successful grants and fellowships contributes to your image as a fully engaged and active scholar which, in turn, will motivate other funding agencies to support you down the road. Many researchers, especially those in the social sciences and STEM fields, apply to large grants (those totaling \$40,000 or more) to work collaboratively with other scholars and/or to support graduate and undergraduate students as well as staff. Grants can enable the mentorship of young investigators; the compensation of underpaid administrative assistants, budget analysts, and grant writers; and exciting interdisciplinary, inter-institutional projects.

Where to Apply

Fortunately, today we have databases that allow you to search among hundreds, if not thousands, of funding possibilities. Among the most comprehensive is Pivot, a search engine of ProQuest, that enables you to look for grants and fellowships as well as scholarships and awards across the globe and to collaborate with other researchers who have subscribed to the

database. Many, if not most, research-based institutions subscribe to Pivot, and users can set up profiles delineating specific areas of interest and research, applicant level, funding type, funding sources, career goals, and other parameters. Many similar but more specialized databases exist such as Graduate and Postdoctoral Educational Support (GRAPES), H-Net Humanities and Social Sciences, the Chronicle of Higher Education, Pathways to Science, Simons Foundation Funding Opportunities in Math, Life Sciences, Physical Sciences, and Autism, and NSF Newsletter subscription for STEM and non-STEM sources. You can also search specific foundations whose mandates include excellence through diversity and diversifying the professoriate. They include the Ford Foundation, American Association of University Women, Woodrow Wilson Foundation, American Council for Learned Societies, Spencer Foundation, and Annie E. Casey Foundation, among others. To find opportunities in your area of research, join professional associations in your field, both nationally and internationally. Remember, many of these have graduate student and assistant professor level memberships, providing specialized funding opportunities. Most importantly, check with your campus's office of research for more opportunities, as they are invested in your success. When you win, they win.³

Before You Begin

Before you begin, try to obtain a previous year's successful application or two. That application does not have to be for the specific funding agency to which you plan to apply, but it should be in a similar field and/or source of support. The sample or samples will help you understand what a winning proposal looks like; zoom in on its language, organization, and structure. While successful applicants make the process look easy, the reality is that strong proposals take time to cultivate and often evolve as the projects develop, contract, and grow in different ways. Give yourself at least a month, if not more, to pull together your submission, assuming that you already have a working proposal or prospectus in hand. If this is a completely new study, give yourself several months to outline and refine the themes, central questions, sources and methodology, preliminary findings, and significance to the field. An underdeveloped proposal will signal to the reviewers that the project is in its infancy and likely not viable in the time frame or approach suggested. As you flesh out your ideas, make the appropriate changes to the proposal, refining the innovative nature of your work, the main themes and arguments,

³ See Appendix for a listing of these sources.

research findings and approaches, theoretical frameworks, and/or timeline for completion. Pay attention to deadlines and requirements as well, as no two grant and fellowship applications are alike. A well thought-out and thorough proposal is a winning proposal.

Getting Started

Once you have identified the grants and fellowships in your area of research and for which you are eligible to apply, read over the application requirements carefully. Use a calendar and work backwards in setting deadlines for yourself. Ideally, you will want to have a draft of the application ready at least two-to-three weeks or more in advance to provide it to those who are writing your letters of recommendation.

Rest assured that each component of the application serves a purpose—the applications were not designed to annoy. Rather, each part has been thought out and likely is meant for you to link your project with the interests of the funding organization and to facilitate the evaluation of your project. Your job is not to challenge or refute the requirements—doing so will likely lead to a rejected proposal. In the process, you need to take advantage of every component of the application to demonstrate the strengths of your project, particularly the innovative nature of the study and ways in which it advances our knowledge in a particular field or area of scholarship. Avoid repetition as well. Spend time addressing each part of the application separately and to treat them independently. Think of the application as a puzzle with each piece offering an opportunity to convey the most significant aspects of your work. The sum of the parts should come together to form a bigger picture of who you are, what your project is about, and why it deserves support.

The Personal Statement and/or Perspective

Grant and fellowship organizations often ask you to provide a personal statement or perspective as part of your application. This is more than a brief autobiography. It is an opportunity for you to inform the funding agency more about yourself and how prepared you are to complete successfully your proposed project. Your task is to show how past experiences have equipped you to carry out the proposed project and contribute to the funding agency or organization. Take this charge seriously! Be sure to address your personal background, professional history, and accomplishments beyond the academy. All can enhance your file and

help make the case that you will be able to execute and complete your study in ways that will intersect with the goals of the funding program. This means connecting the dots between your experience and what you are proposing to do. Be as clear as possible about how your upbringing, previous education, and achievements position you to see your project through and propel the vision of the funding organization. In the world of competitive grants, it is not always enough to be experienced and have a generative proposal. Your chances of being successfully funded are better when you can show how the two are linked.

When writing your personal statement, be true to who you are and your unique perspective. Have confidence that the trajectory of your career has positioned you to make valuable contributions in research and writing in your fields specifically and academia generally. The personal statement is your chance to show that you are the right person to do your project. While being confident in your ability and project is a good and necessary thing, try to refrain from outright boasting about your accomplishments and ability to pull yourself out of difficult circumstances. Likewise, avoid portraying yourself as victim, the “only” one studying a given subject, or someone whose project will “save the world.” Instead, take the time to discuss who or what organizations, programs, philosophies, or individuals supported you along your academic and professional journey. Share with reviewers who or what inspired you to ask the research questions that frame your work. Consider how challenges or obstacles have sharpened and strengthened your approach to your work. Describe how you have come to see the importance of your work. Demonstrate your commitment to diversifying the academy by sharing specific examples—whether positive or not—from your own journey to this point in your career and what you learned or gained. Explain how you plan to continue to engage others and promote the kinds of programs that enabled you to accomplish all that you have. Be mindful and respectful of those who supported you and be a responsible citizen who is cognizant of and grateful for what you have and what you plan to give back. Remember, those reviewing your application may not know anything else about you. Your personal statement is your chance to introduce yourself and help them understand why you should be among those offered a grant or fellowship.

Research Statement

Just like your personal statement, your statement of previous research can showcase how prepared you are to tackle and successfully complete your proposed project or plan of study. Use

this section of your application to discuss the most significant projects you have completed. If you are unsure, ask a trusted mentor, advisor, or peer. Avoid generating long lists of titles, sources you have consulted, or research trips you have taken. What is most important is your research process, findings, and the skillset acquired. This is the place to convince reviewers that you have the experience, ability, and wherewithal to see your project through to the end. Use your past projects to make your case! Discuss the form of your previous projects, including unpublished writings, conference papers, journal articles, and/or books. Highlight your key arguments and the methods, theoretical frameworks, and narrative approaches that informed your finished product. Equally important, consider your past projects as parts of a greater whole that paints a portrait of your approach to scholarship and larger body of work. While many of us conduct projects that do not always directly feed into a larger project, your previous research can underscore skills you have refined and thinking you have done that may provide links, however small, with your newly proposed project.

Just like your proposal itself, your statement of previous research can show reviewers you have what it takes to complete an innovative project. It summarizes your existing body of work, but also demonstrates you know how to produce a finished product and can develop and follow a plan to get there. Depending on the nature of your past work, you might highlight several key ingredients that have made you successful. Emphasize your primary research questions, indicating the central thematic, theoretical, or historical problems you addressed. Convey your main findings by accentuating your most important arguments and answers to the questions you asked. Underline your interventions in existing literatures, taking care to chart how your original contributions moved the field rather than summarize what other scholars have said. Identify the methods and sources you used to complete your projects and, if relevant, include significant archival or ethnographic experience that may shape your new project. If appropriate, do not hesitate to explain how inventive organization or narrative presentation were instrumental to past projects. Statements of previous research tend to lose themselves in detail or be too general. To avoid this, do what you would with any other essay. Be sure your main point is clear and evident throughout. Make an argument about how your previous research has positioned you to produce more innovative scholarship. This is a chance to demonstrate your maturity, investment in your field, and, more importantly, that you will continue to be a productive scholar.

Bibliographies

Some grant and fellowship committees ask you to compile concise bibliographies of the most relevant sources for your project. The reasoning behind this component is that the bibliography will display your awareness of both the literature related to your project and also show the relevant sources that will allow you to complete your study. Thus, the bibliography should be composed of secondary and primary sources, or the data you will use. If you have been asked to present an annotated bibliography, be sure to summarize the individual entries by pinpointing not only the main argument but also how it informs your project and moves, challenges, or reaffirms key debates in a particular field. For the primary sources, the annotation should discuss how it will be utilized in your project and thus make clear that there are indeed sources that are not only accessible, but that you are aware of them, and they will allow you to complete your project.

Proposed Project

In “The Art of Writing Proposals” *, a dated but nevertheless indispensable guide, the Social Science Research Council reminds us that the first sentences are the most important component of an application because they have the ability to capture or lose the reader’s interest. We can attest that after many hours of reading proposals, many of which are unclear and uninspiring, we are left bleary-eyed, bored, and starved for some excitement. Your goal is to develop a first sentence or paragraph that captures the reader in a compelling way. This can be done by opening with a story that encapsulates what your project is about, or, a “bait” statement that shows where your study fits into the literature in the field and how it will advance our knowledge of a given subject. Whether you choose a creative way, or more traditional manner to seize the evaluators’ attention, make sure that your approach is clear, concise, and precise. Also ensure that your proposal is written in essay form and includes an introduction that conveys the project’s importance and a thesis statement (preferably at the end of the first paragraph) that charts out the study’s major contours, your main argument or findings, and, perhaps, suggest your methodological approach and/or other innovations in your work. Many times, after reading an application we had no idea what the project was about. Letters of recommendation often do a better job of explaining the project, especially those of emerging or early career scholars. However, leaving it up to your letter writers to do your job sends a message to the reviewers that

you are not quite sure about what you want to do. More importantly, it conveys that you are not equipped (at the present moment) to carry out the study.

Beyond the first paragraph, the project proposal should provide a significant discussion of the main argument and your study's contribution to the field(s). You should also point out the main themes and questions being asked, the theoretical framework and/or methodology, sources you will utilize, its scholarly contribution, and how the project will be manifested (via chapters or sections). If required, a timeline to completion should also be completed. When crafting this calendar, you want to be realistic and provide a month-to-month projection of the work you will do during the fellowship/grant tenure. If you do not think you will finish in the time required, do not say you will be able to do so because the reader will know—based on the quality of the proposal—whether the project is feasible in the time projected. Address questions such as: What is the significance of the project? What is your contribution to the field and general knowledge? What will we learn that we do not already know? In other words, why is the work important? Do not assume that the reviewers—or anyone else for that matter—know that your project is important. You need to convince them of that fact. One of the more difficult aspects of grant and fellowship applications is that they essentially ask you to convey clearly formed arguments and descriptions about work that you have yet to complete. This is a challenging task, but one that is made immensely easier if you are aware of the constitutive elements that need to be addressed in your proposal. Moreover, it forces you to take a stand on your work.

Before Pressing “Submit”

Before you submit the application, budget the time to send out the completed application to mentors, peers, and other colleagues for feedback. When seeking readers, choose those you trust and know will be honest and offer constructive criticism. If you are unclear about the instructions of the application or any aspects, do not hesitate to call or email the fellowship or grant office and speak to relevant staff. Reach out to scholars you know who have received funding from the source you are applying to and ask, as noted earlier, if you could perhaps view their application packet. Successful proposals are most often those that have been read by several people ahead of time in order to provide comments, suggestions, and clarity in overall presentation. Lastly, proofread using a hard copy that you can write on. Sometimes it helps to read the document backwards so that your mind does not recognize the words in context and can

spot misspellings. Reading it aloud also helps tremendously and allows you to look for inconsistencies in sentences and meaning. Typos and contradictions instantly turn off the reviewers.

Final Bit of Advice

The most important thing to remember is that, while applications for funding are time-consuming, they are part of the academic experience and more than pay for themselves if and when you should get a grant or fellowship. Also, once you write one fellowship or grant proposal it is easier to write another. It only takes one grant or fellowship for you to have the opportunity to continue your research and writing without having to hustle multiple jobs or responsibilities to make ends meet. Receiving support from a competitive source also looks good on your resume and evaluators will take notice. In short, one grant or fellowship begets more grants and/or fellowships. Given all the benefits that will come with receiving a grant or fellowship, submitting an application is time well spent. Lastly, when it comes to seeking grants or fellowships, we encourage you to start early and apply often. Good luck!

APPENDIX

These resources were generously provided by UCSB Graduate Student Resource Center with the help of Noreen Balos, Funding Peer. These are only samples of the resources available. You may contact Miroslava Chavez-Garcia (mchavezgarcia@history.ucsb.edu), Ernesto Chávez (echavez@utep.edu), or Luis Alvarez (luisalvarez@ucsd.edu) for more advice.

FUNDING DATABASES

PIVOT - <http://pivot.cos.com>

UCLA GRAPES – Graduate and Postdoctoral Extramural Support -
<https://grad.ucla.edu/funding/>

Cornell Fellowship Database <https://gradschool.cornell.edu/fellowships>

Duke Research Funding Database <https://researchfunding.duke.edu>

University of Chicago Fellowship Database <http://grad.uchicago.edu/fellowships/fellowship-database>

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Fellowship Database
<https://www.grad.illinois.edu/fellowship/>

The Scholarship Connection UC Berkley <http://scholarships.berkeley.edu>

NSF Funding for Graduate Students <https://www.nsf.gov/funding/index.jsp>

Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education (ORISE) - internships, fellowships, and research experiences <https://orise.orau.gov/stem/internships-fellowships-research-opportunities/index.html>

LISTSERVS FOR FUNDING OR BY FIELD

GRAPES “Grad Fellowships-L List Subscription”: <https://grad.ucla.edu/funding/financial-aid/gradfellowships-l-list-subscription/>

H-Net Humanities and Social Sciences online - <https://networks.h-net.org>

Pathways to Science Funding and Research Opportunities
<http://www.pathwaystoscience.org/index.aspx>

Simons Foundation Funding Opportunities in Math, Life Sciences, Physical Sciences, and Autism <https://www.simonsfoundation.org/funding/funding-opportunities/>

NSF Newsletter Subscription (STEM and non-STEM)
<https://service.govdelivery.com/accounts/USNSF/subscriber/new?qsp=823>

Interdisciplinary Humanities Center Funding Opportunities <http://www.ihc.ucsb.edu/about-research-development/>

American Association of University Women <http://www.aauw.org>

Ford Foundation Fellowship Program

<http://sites.nationalacademies.org/pga/fordfellowships/index.htm>

American Council for Learned Societies, Advancing the Humanities <http://www.acls.org/>

Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation <https://woodrow.org/>

The Annie E. Casey Foundation <http://www.aecf.org/>

Spencer Foundation <https://www.spencer.org/>

SUMMER OPPORTUNITIES

Pathways to Science Summer Research Database Search (STEM and non-STEM) –

IMPORTANT: This database also includes non-STEM opportunities, searchable by theme: social sciences, business, arts & media, or all general programs.

http://www.pathwaystoscience.org/programs.aspx?descriptorhub=SummerResearch_Summer%20Research%%2020Opportunity

National Institute of Health (NIH) Summer Research Opportunities -

<https://www.training.nih.gov/programs/sip>

Brooklyn College Summer Research Opportunities Database -

<http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/web/academics/centers/magner/students/research.php>

Stanford Fellowships, Internships, and Service Programs Database -

<https://haas.stanford.edu/students/cardinal-careers/fisp>

University of Illinois Fellowship Finder - <https://www.grad.illinois.edu/fellowship/>

Rand Corporation Graduate Student Summer Associate Program

http://www.rand.org/about/edu_op/fellowships/gsap.html