

# How to Engage Funders and Get Money: the 10 Rs You Need to Know

Tips from a foundation insider for researchers and nurse leaders.

As a nurse leader, you are likely to find yourself in a position of needing to seek funds, either for yourself or for your organization. You may need to request money for your research, or as a leader of an organization that needs donors and grant money to survive, or as a board or committee member. It is also likely that you never took a course in fundraising and no one ever taught you how to fundraise effectively. The landmark Institute of Medicine (IOM) report, *The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health*, called for more nurses to assume leadership roles to advance health.<sup>1</sup> The Nurses on Boards Coalition (<http://nursesonboardscoalition.org>), a group of 25 major nursing organizations plus the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and AARP, formed in response to the IOM report, set a goal of improving the health of communities by placing 10,000 nurses on boards by 2020.

As more nurses assume leadership roles on committees and boards and serve as executive directors, fundraising will become a skill you will need as part of your repertoire. One of the major responsibilities of a board member is to raise funds and support the development of the organization. Board members need to engage with donors, and prospective donors and are often responsible for leading and supporting fundraising campaigns and events. Funders include individuals and organizations that distribute money to support worthy endeavors.

When I joined the RWJF, the nation's largest health and health care philanthropy, in 1997, I had little direct experience with fundraising. Over the course of nearly 20 years, I've had the privilege of reviewing thousands of proposals that hopeful applicants have submitted. I've also had to regularly make the case to foundation leadership and colleagues that the programs I oversee justify being funded or receiving continued funding. I have gained experience from helping the 51 action coalitions that constitute the Future of Nursing: Campaign for Action with their fundraising and sustainability plans; serving as the fund development cochair for the American Red



Photo © SelectStock

Cross in New Jersey; and seeking funding partners for the RWJF Future of Nursing Scholars program (<http://futureofnursingscholars.org>), a national initiative to create a diverse cadre of PhD-prepared nurses, for which I am the codirector.

**Here are 10 required Rs of fundraising that I have found invaluable:**

**1. Research.** Before approaching any organization for funds, you must know exactly what its mission, goals, and priorities are and how it awards grants. You are more likely to be awarded funding when there is an exact alignment of your goals with those of the funder. Be sure to pay attention to specific language and criteria called for in a grant and incorporate those words and concepts into your proposal. Funders want to see that you have paid attention to precisely what they are seeking.

On occasion, you may consider applying for a grant that diverges somewhat from your core work if the benefits of being funded and doing work that meets the funder's mission outweigh the inconvenience of engaging in work outside your main area of expertise. For example, your primary area of research may be toxic stress in low-income families, and you may receive a call for proposals on building community resilience through after-school programs. You could



find creative ways to connect your research area to the call for proposals. As an added benefit, you would expand your work and develop an important funding relationship.

**2. Relationships.** Both foundations and individual donors want to *know* their potential recipients. That is why networking is so important. You may not know someone at an organization where you hope to inquire about funding, but someone in your network might. See if she or he can make an introduction for you. Many funders, including the RWJF, host functions and offer online and in-person networks. Be sure to take advantage of them. Don't hesitate to schedule a meeting with a program officer who oversees work in the area for which you are seeking funding. Use the opportunity to talk broadly about your shared passion and excitement for the issue at hand, and always ask potential funders their thoughts and ideas about your project. This is your best way to get early feedback on the likelihood of your idea being funded and advice on how to construct the proposal—and it will go a long way toward funder engagement. Always think of funders as advisers first and funders second. Tapping into a funder's expertise can help to build a relationship. For example, funders can be engaged as advisers or speakers for important events. Inviting funders to your events will also give your research more positive exposure.

If you do receive funding, be sure to thank the organization or individual. Funders appreciate gratitude. Be sure to stay in touch during the funding period and after the grant period ends. E-mail the funders short notes about your recent successes or other pertinent items you know will be useful to them. If you don't receive funding the first time you apply, try again. Funders often turn away many qualified applicants, but they may be open to funding your work in the future. You might try speaking with the funder to gain insight on why you weren't funded, although many funders have policies against providing such feedback.

**3. Relevance.** The purpose of a funder is to think strategically about potential solutions first and award money for solid, sustainable ideas second. Your job is to convince the funder that your work is valuable and that the funding organization's mission will benefit from funding you. Funders focus on widely varying issues; be sure to seek funding from organizations that are interested in your area of expertise. The RWJF, for example, now exclusively funds research and projects that support a collaborative framework called a Culture of Health ([www.cultureofhealth.org](http://www.cultureofhealth.org)), designed to enable each person to live the healthiest life possible. That means that all successful RWJF proposals must make the case for how the research or project helps in concrete ways to support this goal.

All funders have a specific mission and vision, from reducing domestic violence to promoting exceptional end-of-life care. Always tailor your application to that mission. As noted above, repeat phrases back to a funder that you know align with its mission and strategies. A funder may focus on making communities healthier, while you may want the funder to support your academic progression program. Instead of zeroing in on academic progression immediately, first discuss the importance of healthier communities and how a well-educated nursing workforce can help to keep people healthy. This will make clear the relevance of the academic progression program to the funder's mission. In all proposals sent to this funder, keep the higher goal of health and healthy communities at the forefront.

You should also get a sense of *who* the organization funds. Some organizations may be more inclined to support people who are early on in their careers, while others prefer more seasoned individuals. Some funders will support those without other grants, while others will be looking to see who else has funded you. It may be easier to secure initial funding from local or regional foundations in your area; the Forum of Regional Associations of Grantmakers ([www.givingforum.org](http://www.givingforum.org)) keeps an active list. You may also find funders on the Future of Nursing: Campaign for Action Web site: <http://campaignforaction.org/resource/looking-funding>.

**4. Riveting.** Funders want their work to matter and they want to support work that positively affects people. They understand the often intractable problems in society, and they are searching for the next big solution. Your job is to be both inspirational and evidence based. You should explain how your work differs from that in other proposals. Sharing compelling data or stories can give potential funders a vivid impression of what your work is about and why it matters. A great example is the primary care physician Jeffrey Brenner, who created a model using insurance claims data to improve care and reduce costs for complex patients who are "superutilizers" of the health care system in Camden, New Jersey, as described in a 2011 *New Yorker* article by Atul Gawande.<sup>2</sup> After using the data to identify this subset of patients, teams from his organization, called the Camden Coalition, offer personalized care management to reduce ED visits and hospitalizations. Brenner made a presentation to RWJF staff using both compelling data and stories, which led to eventual RWJF funding for his Camden Coalition.

**5. Reasonable.** Your approach must be pragmatic and logical. Be sure to use facts and evidence that support your work and place it in the field's broader context. For example, an applicant seeking funding for a



school nutrition program should explain that children who come to school hungry have difficulty learning, resulting in fewer children who are prepared for college and thus able to contribute to our country's economic health. You might consider using visuals to help a funder understand your goal and research or program design. Making sure your application is easy to understand and free of jargon will enable a funder to focus on other important aspects of your proposal, including funding amount. It might be helpful to have someone outside your field read it to make sure she or he can understand it.

**6. Replicability.** Funders will want to learn from their investment and possibly replicate your work in some manner. With constrained resources, funders are limited by the number of grants they can award for a certain solution. Their hope is that by identifying approaches that lead to successful outcomes, their investment might be multiplied on a broader scale. Funders may invest in one or a few people or organizations to pilot an idea or program, with the expectation that the grant recipients will help to explain the results and suggest ways to make the program available to a broader audience. Some grantees might even be asked to serve as mentors or technical assistants to a next generation of programs. If a grant program is substantive and important enough, the funder may invest in an evaluation of the pilot to help identify how to support the program's adoption on a larger scale.

**7. Rigorous.** The funder wants to be convinced that your findings are valid and reliable and that your research methods are sound and well executed. Accuracy will affect you and your organization's credibility and brand, as well as the funder's. At the RWJF, we often seek projects that have the potential to be applied on a national scale, but first we must be convinced that the data and evidence support your work. Your project should be designed in a manner that will generate clear and rigorous results.

**8. Return.** Funders want to be able to show how your work adds to the knowledge base of the issue they care deeply about. In other words, funding your work should help to advance their mission. Let the funder know specifically what it can expect in return for its investment. You should explain how you will make your findings visible to a broader policy community or audience beyond academic circles. Offer specific deliverables, such as policy papers, op-ed pieces, journal articles, books, presentations, and Webinars. Be sure to include a list of people and organizations you plan to contact with the main findings of your work, and take advantage of social media. Funders are interested in reaching as many people as possible.

ajn@wolterskluwer.com

**9. Reliability.** The funder will want to know that you can complete your work within the allotted time frame and for a fair amount of money. Funders understand that goals, especially lofty ones, will take time to achieve. Try to avoid the common mistake of underestimating or overestimating a timeline. If possible, seek the guidance of more experienced people in your content area to determine feasibility. Once you receive approval, you may enter into budget and timeline negotiations during which, even though you believe your timeline and budget are realistic, the funder will ask for adjustments. Funders may want projects earlier, for example, or ask for a more streamlined budget, or alternatively they may want you to add more dollars to support dissemination. In the end, working closely with the funder and expressing honest concerns and goals on both sides will go a long way toward completing the project to everyone's satisfaction.

Don't be afraid to apply for funding from the same organization again after your grant is approved. Once the funder knows you and the quality of your work, it may be more likely to fund you a subsequent time.

**10. Recognition.** Be sure to acknowledge your funder's support in all public presentations and publications. Try to publicize your work in the media, including social media. Foundations want to achieve their mission, and they want to be associated with successful people and results. Always let foundations know when you or your work has appeared in the media, regardless of whether you have received a grant. If you do have a grant, it is even more important to provide the foundation with feedback on the grant's results, including awards and letters of commendation. Always be clear how its funding helped to achieve an important goal. Funders and their board members love "good news" stories.

Fundraising is a skill, and it gets easier with time and practice. Following this advice should help nurses to meet with potential donors and to effectively raise funds for their research or organization. ▼

---

*Susan B. Hassmiller is director of the Future of Nursing: Campaign for Action and senior adviser for nursing at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Princeton, NJ. Contact author: shassmi@rwjf.org. The author has disclosed no potential conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise.*

## REFERENCES

1. Committee on the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Initiative on the Future of Nursing, at the Institute of Medicine. *The future of nursing: leading change, advancing health*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press; 2011. <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/12956/the-future-of-nursing-leading-change-advancing-health>.
2. Gawande A. The hot spotters. *The New Yorker* 2011 Jan 24. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/01/24/the-hot-spotters>.