Apereo Foundation OSS Grant Funding
Prioritization Framework

Version 1.0

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Introduction

This Guide helps open source software projects strategically pursue grant funding opportunities. It ensures project maintainers use their already limited time and resources effectively and increases the chances of successfully securing funding.

If you are new to the world of grant funding, you may be surprised to learn that most grant proposals go un-funded. In 2024, the US National Science Foundation (NSF) received around [40k proposals but only funded about 25% of them](). Given most federal grant proposals require a team of people working over 3 - 6 months to develop, including navigating through complex governmental processes, it is essential to strategically evaluate funding opportunities so that you focus on those opportunities with the greatest potential to get funded.

Understanding and assessing the *alignment* between an OSS project's needs and the funder is critical. How does your OSS software, project needs, and proposal *align* with the unique funding requirements and the funder's overall strategy and focus? It is

also essential to assess your *capacity* before pursuing funding. Even if you have a strong proposal concept that aligns well with the funding request, the grant may not be worth pursuing if you cannot fulfill all of the submission requirements in a timely and quality manner. Finally, you also must consider your *capability* to successfully execute, if funded, as your ability to seek future funding often depends on your prior track record with the funder.

The *Apereo Foundation OSS Grant Funding Prioritization Framework* is designed to provide a practical set of guidelines for assessing OSS project funding opportunities across these three dimensions of alignment, capacity, and capability.

Grant Funding 101: Public vs. Private Funders

If you are new to pursuing grant funding, it is important to understand how public and private funding organizations operate differently, as this drives much of your initial work to assess and potentially pursue the funding opportunity. While specifics can vary across different organizations, countries, and regions, the following primer provides an overview of these key differences and recommendations on best engaging public and private funders.

Public and Government Agency Funding

In many places around the world, governments and/or public agencies and organizations often provide grants, funded by tax dollars, to support a broad range of initiatives. While this varies from country to country, in most cases, these funding opportunities have the following characteristics:

- **Public Requests for Proposals (RFPs)** - RFPs, sometimes called "solicitations" or "calls for proposals," are made publicly available far in advance of submission deadlines, and anyone who meets basic criteria is eligible to submit.
- **Complex Submission Requirements and Systems** - Requirements for your grant proposal submission can be very detailed and complex, often requiring expertise and prior experience to fully assess the effort that will be required. The submission

process itself can rely on web-based systems that are complex and laborious to use, often requiring accounts to be established far in advance of submissions.

- **Limited Direct Feedback from Granting Organizations** - Because of the public nature of these proposals and the need to avoid favoring any one person or organization, the granting organizations often limit how much direct feedback on draft proposals can be provided in advance of your submission, resulting in more uncertainty around it being funded.
- **Formal Grant Review Process** - In most cases, grant proposals are reviewed by an independent group or committee over which the government or public agency has little or no influence.

Private Foundation and Corporate Funding

While this also varies globally, in many cases, grant funding is also provided by private organizations, which could be non-profits or for-profits, which tend to follow different approaches than their public counterparts. These include:

- **Invite Only Request for Proposals (RFPs)** - Most private funders will invite select individuals or organizations to submit grant proposals (although they occasionally issue public RFPs). This can often require building relationships with the "Program Officers", who are responsible for distributing funding over time so that you are aware of "invite only" RFPs.
- **Streamlined Proposal Process** - While the length and details of proposals to private funders can vary based on the complexity of the project and the level of funding being requested, they generally require shorter proposals and have more streamlined submission procedures than public funders. Thus, while it may take more time to develop the necessary relationships with private funders to be invited to submit, the time and effort required for private funder proposals is often significantly lower than for public grants.
- **Feedback is Routinely Provided on Draft Proposals** - Private funders generally allow, and even recommend or require, feedback on draft proposals, sometimes referred to as "concept notes", prior to final submission. It can be helpful to plan for several rounds of feedback, starting with a very high-level proposal overview so that you can adjust details in future versions.
- **Informal Grant Review Process** - While this can vary a lot between private funders, most will have internal review teams (rather than using external reviewers as public funders do) who review proposals and recommend who to fund. In some

cases, final funding decisions are left to a few senior staff members, their boards, or, in the case of family foundations, the founders themselves. In many cases, Program Officers also have a threshold under which they can fund proposals without any review.

Funding Prioritization Framework Overview

The OSS Grant Funding Prioritization Framework guides OSS projects in evaluating funding opportunities, particularly grants, to help prioritize the best use of limited time and resources for pursuing funding. The following are the three primary recommended evaluation criteria with use cases that provide practical examples of how they may be applied. Additional evaluation questions and guidelines are provided in subsequent sections of the guide.

1. ***Alignment*** **with Funding Opportunity** - To what degree does the project's software, community, and current funding needs align with the funding organization's funding requirements **and** their overall funding priorities and strategy?
   a. *Example Use Case:* A funder releases a Request for Proposals that is focused on addressing OSS security vulnerabilities, which is a key strategic need for your OSS project, but the funder's priority is on science-focused research software, and your OSS supports math education. Even though your need aligns well with the funding focus, it is not a good match with the funder's strategy and, thus, is not likely something worth pursuing.
2. ***Capacity*** **to Pursue Funding** - Based on an assessment of the proposal requirements, does your OSS project have the resources and time needed, or the ability to get additional support, to develop a competitive proposal?
   a. *Example Use Case*: You learn of a funding opportunity focused on addressing OSS security vulnerabilities in products that support math education, which is an ideal match with your OSS project needs and work. The proposal is due in 3 weeks and requires the submission of a complex budget document that is beyond your expertise to complete. It is likely best not to pursue unless you can find someone with the right expertise who can assist you quickly.
3. ***Capability*** **to Execute on Funding** - If funded, will your OSS project have the resources, expertise, as well as opportunities to successfully execute on the proposed activities?

a. *Example Use Case*: You identify a funding opportunity for your OSS math education project that is well aligned with your mission and can be used to fund critical development work, including addressing security vulnerabilities. The funder's maximum allowed budget is less than would be required to complete the work in the 12-month grant period, so it is likely best not to pursue this funding unless you can accelerate the work through other means.

Funding Prioritization Decision Matrix

Evaluating funding opportunities is an iterative process that generally requires an initial assessment followed by more research and re-evaluation before a final conclusion is reached as to whether or not to pursue the funding. We recommend conducting a preliminary assessment across the three dimensions of **Alignment**, **Capacity,** and **Capability** (see above). As outlined in the Prioritization Decision Matrix below (see next page), if you assess any of the three dimensions as a "No", you should deprioritize the funding opportunity and consider not investing time in a proposal submission. If you determine that all three are "Yes", that would indicate a high-priority funding opportunity and one in which you should likely invest time. This noted, the most likely outcome at this stage is one or more of them is a "Maybe", which indicates more research is needed, which you should continue until a final "Yes or No" determination is made.

	If any "No's" then *Do Not Pursue*	If one or more are "Maybe" *Continue Researching*	If all "Yes's" then *Pursue Funding*
Alignment *To what degree do the funding agency's focus and funding requirements align with your project's focus and needs?*	**No**	**Maybe** *Engage with the funding agency and/or prior grantees to assess alignment in more detail.*	**Yes**
Capacity *Does your project have, or can you find, the staffing, knowledge, and resources to develop a competitive proposal within the defined time constraints?*	**No**	**Maybe** *Seek partners from within your project community, institution, or other organizations with grant writing experience.*	**Yes**
Capability *If funding is received, will you be capable of successfully executing activities and deliverables within the defined budget and timelines?*	**No**	**Maybe** *Consider if changes to your proposal concept or additional funding sources address capability challenges.*	**Yes**

Conducting a Preliminary Funding Opportunity Assessment

While the overarching assessment criteria are the same for both public and private funding opportunities, how you conduct the assessment can vary significantly due to the differences in how these funders operate. The following sections provide funder-specific recommendations for conducting initial assessments.

Assessing Public Funding Opportunities

While steps will vary based on the specific public funder and RFP, the following are general guidelines to follow to conduct your initial assessment of the funding opportunity:

> **For Apereo Members: Funding Research Support**
> If you, your project or organization is a formal member of the Apereo Foundation you can request a funding consultation with our Development Officer who can provide feedback on your preliminary assessment as well as recommendations for additional research that is specific to your funding opportunity.

- **Conduct a Detailed Review and Analysis of RFP** - Funders work hard to send signals, both directly and indirectly, in their RFP as to what they will fund, as well as document requirements that must be met to be considered. Thus, it is vital to start the assessment process with a very detailed and careful read of the RFP, which should include reviewing:
  - *Eligibility Requirements* - You, your project, and the organization must meet certain criteria to be eligible for consideration. For example, some funders will require organizations they fund to be non-profits or only fund citizens of a particular country. If you submit a proposal and do not meet the eligibility criteria, the proposal will likely not even be reviewed, wasting considerable time and effort.
  - *Budget Requirements* - Funders often restrict how funds can be used as well as requirements for regular budget reporting and, in some cases, audits. If the proposal you are interested in submitting cannot be implemented, given these restrictions, you will likely not want to invest time into the proposal.
  - *Project Requirements* - Public funders will generally state what the funding is intended to support and why they are providing the funding, which you will want to ensure aligns with your project and proposal idea.

- ○ *Submission Process and Timeline* - Given the often complex submission process for public funding, assessing the time and effort that will be required, and whether you can conduct the work under the required timeline is critical. If you don't have prior experience with the funder, it can be very helpful to talk with those who do, such as institutional grant administrators or those who have previously received funding.
- ○ *Proposal Evaluation Criteria* - Most public funders will provide details on the evaluation criteria that their review panels will use to assess and score each proposal submission. In addition to ensuring that your proposal addresses all of the criteria effectively, you will also want to work to make sure that its alignment with these criteria are clear and easy to identify, given that many reviewers will not take time to analyze your proposal deeply.
- ○ *Reporting Requirements and Timeline Flexibility* - Many funders will have reporting requirements, including updates on how budgets have been spent at the midpoint and endpoint of the grant period. You will want to assess your ability to meet these reporting requirements, as failing to do so can result in early termination of your funding. Most funders also allow for "no cost extensions", providing you with more time to complete the project or reports but not providing more funding.
- ○ *Funder Strategy and Focus* - Assessing this is a bit more of an art than a science. While some aspects of the funder's strategy and focus will be stated in the RFP, it can often be intentionally vague (in order to increase submissions) or can be interpreted in different ways. It is important to do some research on the funding organization and prior grants they have provided, as this will often tell you more about their overall strategy.
- **Recommendations for Additional Research** - Based on your preliminary assessment, you should document key questions, areas that require clarification, and/or additional resources you may need. Use the following tactics as a means to do additional research to inform additional prioritization assessments.
  - ○ *Attend Information Webinars* - Many public funding opportunities, particularly those with larger budgets (over $500k) will offer information webinars in which they will review funding requirements and often answer questions from attendees. In addition to providing valuable information, attending these meetings prior to engaging with program

officers (see below) is advisable as they tend to prefer one-on-one meetings to discuss more nuanced issues or questions not addressed in the informational webinars.

- ○ ***Engage with Program Officer (if possible)*** - Program Officers (POs) who lead funding initiatives and strategies at public funders will, in general, schedule one-on-one meetings with those who are considering a proposal submission. While they will not generally give you specific and direct feedback on proposal concepts or draft materials, they will provide general guidance on specific topics or questions you bring forward. While it requires "reading the tea leaves" carefully, they will often provide signals as to major issues you would want to address if you submit. Program Officers tend to be very busy and receive a lot of emails so you also often need to be persistent (but polite) in working to schedule a meeting.

- ○ ***Connect with Prior Grantees*** - Most public funders will publicly list prior grantees and summaries of the work that was funded on their websites. Reaching out to prior grantees can be very productive as they will provide more direct feedback and input than the typical PO would feel comfortable doing. This said, you should keep in mind that they do not have the same level of knowledge or insights as POs, and their knowledge can also be outdated.

- ○ ***Leverage Internal Resources and Expertis****e* - Many institutions have Grants Offices that are staffed with people with experience with both grant writing and grant strategy. In addition to providing a lot of support for both your assessment of the funding opportunity and, if you decide to proceed with your grant proposal, they can help ensure that you are following internal policies regarding grant submissions. Not adhering to internal policies and practices can often result in not receiving approval from your organization to submit your proposal.

Assessing Private Funding Opportunities

Differences in how private and public funders operate drives the need for different approaches to how you conduct a preliminary assessment as well as deeper research on private funding opportunities. The following are suggested approaches for assessing private funding:

- **Research the Funder's Focus and Strategy** - Most private funders will have a specific focus and strategy around what they fund and how they fund it. Thus, once you hear of a potential funding opportunity, it is important to invest time in initial research on the funder's website and any press releases or publications it has released. In some cases, their focus and strategy will be very directly stated while in others, it may take more analysis to identify.
- **Review Prior Grants** - What private funders funded in the past can provide important clues to their overall funding strategy as well as what levels of funding they typically provide. For example, many funders have different policies associated with different levels of funding, such as having a maximum amount allowable to support workshops or conferences. By reviewing prior grants for these types of events, you can get a sense of what level of funding would be reasonable to propose.
  - ***Connect with Prior Grantees*** - As with public funders, reaching out to prior grant recipients (which are often, but not always listed on their websites) can provide additional information on their funder's strategy. Since most private funders issue "invite only" requests for proposals, engaging with prior grantees has the added benefit of leading to building a relationship with the funder and receiving a future invite.
- **Attend Funder Presentations at Conferences** - Private funders, unlike public funders, will attend conferences and either present themselves or support grantees who are presenting. It is a good idea to review agendas for conferences you or your colleagues attend for these types of presentations. In addition to learning more about the funder's strategy from the presentations, they also present unique opportunities to connect and chat with Program Officers and begin to build relationships with them. Since many private funders do not publicly provide their contact information, meeting in person and getting their business cards or contact details is very helpful.

- **Identify other Funder Connection Opportunities** - It can be helpful to review your LinkedIn and other social networks, and those of your colleagues, to identify potential connections or introductions you could facilitate. You can also work to connect directly with Program Officers on places like LinkedIn.
- **Try and Schedule Time with the Program Officer** - Program Officers at private funding organizations tend to limit the amount of time they spend talking with potential grantees with whom they do not already have an established relationship. This is why building a relationship with them, as recommended above, should be an initial priority. If you can schedule a meeting, you will want to be prepared with a brief (5-10 minute) "pitch" presentation that provides a concise overview of your funding concept, how it aligns with their funding strategy, and a general budget range. If they are interested, the funder will likely provide feedback and encourage you to submit a draft proposal, on which they will provide more direct feedback. If they are not interested, they will likely not continue to engage with you; thus, you will want to make sure the concept you pitch is well aligned with their strategy and that you are well prepared to go into the meeting.

Want to Learn More?

If you found this resource helpful or want to provide feedback on it, consider joining the Apereo Foundation's **FOSS Funding Forum.** This forum brings together higher education open source communities from around the world to learn and support each other's sustainability efforts.
To "subscribe" to the forum, email FOSSFundingForum+subscribe@apereo.org and follow the instructions you receive. You can also email the Apereo staff directly for assistance at community@apereo.org