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Upfront

Elusive Blue Ribbons: Why winning foundations' special awards is difficult, and how it can be made easier. By Ellen Benjamin, DePaul University.

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dampen the expression of doubt, although researchers have not yet identified when each process takes place.

Until they do, how can nonprofit boards avoid pluralistic ignorance? Westphal offers two techniques. “Raise awareness about pluralistic ignorance,”

he first suggests. “If educated [about pluralistic ignorance], people are less likely to fall prey to it,” he says. Second, “use group decision-making aids such as devil’s advocates, who are there to voice contrary opinions. Or have individuals anonymously write down the

pros and cons of a particular strategy. A group leader then reads those concerns to the group,” says Westphal.

“The underpinning of this whole bias is that there are some reservations about expressing the minority opinion,” he adds. —*Jennifer Holloway*

Elusive Blue Ribbons

Why winning foundations’ special awards is difficult, and how it can be made easier

Foundations are increasingly granting well-publicized and generous special awards in the areas they want to promote. Yet few nonprofits bother to apply for these awards. And among the applicants, far fewer succeed.

My recent survey of 153 Chicago-based nonprofit organizations that have applied to special awards programs uncovered several obstacles in the pursuit of foundations’ prizes. First, nonprofits have difficulty finding out about the awards in the first place. Fundraising databases and directories either do not contain information about special awards programs or do not describe the programs clearly. In lieu of these links, nonprofits must directly rely on the award-sponsoring foundations to notify them, or on word of mouth.

Once in the know, nonprofits then face an idiosyncratic and arduous process. While most of organized philanthropy gives grants in response to letters and proposals drafted according to the preferences and skills of its potential beneficiaries, special awards require that the nonprofit (or a nominator) complete

an application designed by the foundation. My survey showed that winners and nonwinners alike often found the questions on the application to be irrelevant and unclear.

Completing special awards applications is also time-intensive. Nonprofits are likely to spend at least five to 10 hours completing the application. And not even all winners report that it was very worthwhile to spend the time and effort applying for their award.

Finally, many nonprofits perceive that the selection process is not quite fair. Some respondents say that the granting of awards is “more political than cultural,” that the process is “too time-consuming, with no objective criteria,” or that awards tend to focus on well-established nonprofits rather than on organizations more needy of attention and funding – in other words, glory goes to the glamorous. In addition, the finding that

winners are far more likely than nonwinners to learn about an award through a conversation with the sponsoring foundation suggests why losers may cry foul.

Foundations have a lot to gain by sponsoring awards programs, including raising awareness about an issue, supporting narrow programs with measurable outcomes, and drawing media and sector attention to the organization. My results suggest a few ways that special awards programs could be improved: (1) Actively solicit applications from an eclectic and encompassing population of organizations; (2) provide relevant, sufficient, and clear questions on the application form; (3) publish a list of the top runners-up, so that more than just winners receive publicity; and (4) tell applicants why the winner won, so that they may emulate its excellent qualities.

In the end, nonprofits expect the awards process to be educational as well as celebratory, with hopes that it will include opportunities not just for accolades, but also for the strengthening of winners and nonwinners alike. Foundations would be wise to meet those expectations.

—*Ellen Benjamin, DePaul University*

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