Respondent: Stephen Glauser, Russell Sage Foundation

What is your role at your institution?

I'm a program officer at the Russell Sage Foundation, the programs in my portfolio are those that are geared towards early career scholars – that is, our Summer Institutes, our Small Grants, and our Pipeline Grants Competition. However, given that we're relatively small, I also help shepherd LOIs and Proposals through our review process for our regular research grants in all of our program areas, as well as our Visiting Scholars program. That means that for all of our programs, I help do the initial internal review where we decide which projects to send to peer review, as well as help select/match reviewers to projects, and read the external reviews when they come in to help decide which projects continue forward in the process.

What types of projects does your organization fund? (Including broad topic areas, though I know specific priorities might change over time. Academic research, books, conferences, policy engagement?)

RSF mostly funds basic social science research, primarily in the academic sphere. Our main programs are "Social, Political, and Economic Inequality," "Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration," "Future of Work," and "Behavioral Science and Decision Making in Context." While we have RFPs for each of our program areas, they are not meant to be all-encompassing, but to give some ideas of the types of research questions we are interested in. RSF is limited to funding projects that are within the mandate of our founding, stating that we work "for the improvement of social and living conditions in the United States."

Does your organization offer smaller grants for early-stage projects?

Generally, RSF does not support early-stage projects, instead preferring that there be pre-existing pilot data, a pre-tested survey instrument, etc. However, the Pipeline Grants Competition for underrepresented early career scholars does consider projects at an earlier stage. We also occasionally have targeted RFPs to spur research in particular areas or datasets (recent examples include smaller grants looking at the SEDA dataset and the Opportunity Insights data). We have a long-standing small grants program in Behavioral Economics, primarily for doctoral students, post-docs, and early career assistant professors, but we are currently working on plans to expand the small grants program to all of our program areas, and limit it to dissertation funding.

How do you find/identify projects of interest? (Calls for proposals? Invitation?)

All projects are investigator initiated, in response to the RFP's that we release for each of our program areas. Program staff my nudge investigators doing interesting work that we have come across in our readings/conferences/etc. to apply, but there is no separate application stream for such proposals.

If some/all proposals are by invitation, how do you learn about projects and scholars you might want to fund?

Not applicable – as applications are investigator initiated, but that doesn't mean we aren't on the lookout for potential grantees/reviewers. We as a program staff have to stay up to date with the literature in many disciplines, so we read a broad array of journals and attend many different conferences/talks/webinars. When we find an investigator who is working on something of interest who is not currently a grantee, we often try to encourage an application, or solicit a review from them as a way to incorporate them into the RSF ecosystem.

Do you send proposals out for review? If so, how do you choose reviewers?

Yes – for projects that pass our internal review, we rely heavily on external peer review. Reviewers are predominately active academic social scientists, many of which whom are former RSF grantees or fellows. We attempt to match each project with reviewers based on topic or methodology, and often send to interdisciplinary panels. This means that applicants should be aware of the literature on their topic that may be outside of their discipline – for example, avoid the "this is the first study to look at X" when it may just be the first time economics has looked at it, with a rich literature in sociology, political science, psychology, etc. We also "blind-email" reviewers who are not necessarily in our rolodex of former grantees, and we find this group in our general literature reviews, by attending conference sessions, etc. We also ask applicants for reviewer suggestions, and will also look at citations in a proposal to get names of potential reviewers.

Who decides whether to fund a particular proposal?

For projects $50k and below, our President, [Sheldon Danziger], makes the funding decisions, aided primarily by the external reviewers and internal program staff. For projects above $50k, our Board of Trustees make the funding decisions, with one added step – after external review, an Advisory Committee for each program area recommends which projects should be presented to the board for approval. The standing advisory boards for each program area are interdisciplinary, have specialists in quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods, and are leading researchers in their fields. Similarly, our [board of trustees] is also an interdisciplinary group of primarily academic social scientists and active researchers.

If someone does not receive funding based on an initial proposal, what feedback do they receive, if any? Can they submit a revised proposal?

This depends – if the project is filtered out by our internal review ('desk reject') the proposal will not receive feedback. Most projects that are filtered out prior to review are either too preliminary or not a fit for the current foundation priorities. In a sort of "opt-in" option, if your application does not receive feedback, you can reach out to us at programs@rsage.org and try to find out more information about why, and we'll attempt to get back to you in a reasonable amount of time. All projects that are externally reviewed received anonymized feedback, which ranges from just a few sentences per reviewer to occasionally multiple pages – this varies greatly due to each project being reviewed by a custom group of reviewers, not one panel seeing every project. Projects not moving forward are allowed to submit again if they revise their work based on the reviewer comments. We also occasionally encourage resubmissions if we think a project has a good chance of moving forward in a future round.

Can scholars reach out to you to discuss ideas before submitting a proposal? Is this something you recommend/encourage?

Yes! We encourage you reaching out with an abstract or quick description of your work. As long as it is well ahead of a deadline (we get inundated as the due date approaches), we can schedule a phone call or zoom conversation to discuss your work and its fit with the foundation. The general email programs@rsage.org is the best way to do this, but you can also reach out via any method (emailing me directly, finding me or my colleagues on twitter, in person at a conference, etc.)

What are the most common mistakes you see scholars making in their proposals?

We often see applicants dedicating too much of the initial LOI to things that don't help us evaluate the project. With only a few pages to describe your project, the opportunity cost for such wasted space is high. We don't need to see a couple paragraphs of investigator qualifications, we're seeing your CV. We don't need in-depth budget details at the LOI stage, just an amount, and maybe some examples of some of the budget lines – a perfectly acceptable budget section at the LOI stage might consist of one sentence: "We are requesting $XX,XXX to fund PI summer salary, research assistance, participant incentives, and travel for data collection." Similarly, though it is a "letter" of inquiry, LOIs need not be formatted as a formal letter, wasting precious space on things like greetings, letterheads, etc. With the limited amount of space available to you, give us as much information as possible on things like explaining why your data/methodology are appropriate for answering the research question(s) you pose.

If you could give potential applicants one piece of advice that might not be obvious on your website, what would it be?

I'll reiterate that you should reach out to program staff to discuss your project before submitting. But, other than that, submit prior to the deadline! There is no downside. I suspect that many people procrastinate due to a feeling that they can improve the submission up until the last second. In reality, if you think of an edit/change you want to make after submission, just email us and we can update it. Then, there is no risk of missing the deadline, or running into any technical difficulties that arise due to the system being bogged down by 95% of submissions coming in on the deadline day.
Perhaps a more simple suggestion – don't stress about shoe-horning your project into one of our program areas if it sits at the intersection of a couple of them – apply to the program that

you feel your project best fits in, and if we disagree, we'll simply move it over without any issue.

In economics, organization like CSWEP have been working to reduce harassment and discrimination in the profession. Does your organization have any safeguards in place to avoid funding individuals who engage in misconduct? How do you handle such cases? (e.g. Do you require applicants to disclose ongoing or past investigations by their employer or a professional organization like the AEA? What happens if a victim reports harassment by a grantee?)

Since we do not give the grants to the individual researcher, but instead to the institution which disperses it to the researcher, we rely on the anti-harassment/discrimination policies of the institutions we fund. We require the institution to ensure that anyone doing work on the grant follows their policies and acts in accordance with professional norms and ethics. If a researcher is found to be in breach of their institution's policy, the grantee institution would then be in breach of the grant agreement, and the grant could be terminated and funds would be refunded to the foundation. We don't currently have requirement to disclose ongoing or past investigations, and we don't currently have a policy about what happens if a victim reports harassment, as we depend on the policies of the grantee institution.