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[November / December 2005](#)

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"The Rules" for finding the right campus-foundation partnership

The author compares the process of finding a good corporate or foundation funder to that of dating. In both, it's important to know when to make the first move, to be yourself, and to not give up after facing rejection.

By [Janet Wasserstein](#)

I believe that a foundation relations officer is much like a marriage broker: They both seek to create a perfect partnership—one that neither side will come to regret. If you're playing matchmaker between campus grantseekers and grantmakers, these six rules—adapted from the dating scene—can help you find the right partner for your campus project.

Put yourself in the other person's shoes. Imagine how it must be to have hordes of suitors asking for your hand, knowing that most only want you for your money. This is the reality for foundation program officers. Although a CFR officer might be expected to play the field and send proposals to a variety of foundations, a program officer's job performance often is measured by his or her ability to find just the right match: a good project for the foundation to support.

Make the first move. Once you have done your research, trust your instincts and pick up the phone or send an e-mail. There is no right or easy way to make the initial contact with a foundation. In many cases you simply look at the staff list, pick someone to contact, and suggest a visit. When possible, find a more creative way to get attention; for instance, look at the foundation's announcements of new staff appointments to see if anything in their bios might interest them in your projects.

If a program officer does not respond to your overtures except to refer you to the organization's Web site, just move on. There are plenty more fish in the sea—specifically, 73,000 U.S. private and community foundations, according to the Foundation Center.

Be yourself. It's a myth that foundations prefer to fund projects from only the most prestigious institutions. A foundation's board might well consider a smaller or less well-known institution a better match for its interests. Also, just as there are millions of available singles, there are many good and worthy projects. Find the ways in which yours is unique.

Go where you're wanted. You cannot be a good broker if one side doesn't want to participate. Some faculty members prefer to make their own foundation contacts. Those who see you as a potential helper in finding funds need to do their part to improve their chances of getting a match, such as by providing you with the basic text of a proposal.

Know when to follow up ... and when to wait. Although an invitation to meet with a program officer can be the workplace equivalent of a Saturday night date, constant calling or nudging will not help your case, frustrating as this might be.

Don't promise the faculty instant results, or they will be disappointed. Remind them that relationships take time, and sometimes it takes years before you get to "I do."

Don't give up. We have to kiss a lot of frogs before we find our prince (or princess). A foundation often will ignore your inquiry, decline your overtures, or turn down proposals. You can spend years cultivating and soliciting one and then get rejected. Other times, you make an instant connection at the right time and place, and a check is on its way to your treasurer's office.

I see my successes as similar to the weddings announced in the Sunday paper: "Project X and Foundation Y made a long-term commitment today." And then I'm off to create the next happy couple.

This article appeared in the November/December 2005 CURRENTS. Read the article it accompanied, "[A Different Beat](#)."

About the Author

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