

ORDE “KNOW YOUR AGENCY” SERIES: SPENCER FOUNDATION

Agency Site: <http://www.spencer.org>

OVERVIEW

The Spencer Foundation, located in Chicago, Illinois, was founded in 1962 by Lyle M. Spencer, a sociologist. Mr. Spencer was a life-long advocate of quality education, having started Science Research Associates (SRA) in 1938. SRA was best known for its SRA Reading Laboratory Kit found in most elementary and secondary classrooms in 1957 and after. Following Mr. Spencer’s death in 1968, the Foundation received its initial endowment, and agency personnel spent the next three years charting the Foundation’s vision and mission based on their Founder’s wishes concerning support of educational research. The first grants were made in 1971, and to date the Foundation has provided over \$500 million in research funding.

Approach

The Spencer Foundation takes a broad approach to the subject of education, and funds projects worldwide. Educational improvement through research is the overall Foundation mission, and research efforts within a variety of disciplines have been supported including education, anthropology, economics, history, human development, literacy, psychology, public policy, sociology, and statistics. Investigators are expected to make a strong case for the importance of the proposed project in terms of educational improvement as well as Foundation needs and interests.

Specific Interests

Grant awards made by Spencer reflect a wide variety of topics within education including achievement, leadership, assessment, civic engagement, cognition, diversity, early childhood, higher education, human development, language, math and science education, organizational theory, race/ethnicity, literacy, special education, teacher education, and teaching with technology.

AGENCY ORGANIZATION

The Foundation is led by a President and Board of Directors. Current Board membership consists of six educators, primarily within higher education, and two

members from the business community. The current President, Na’ilah Suad Nasir, was selected in 2017, and is working with the Board toward evolution of the Foundation’s grants programs to ensure supported research efforts translate into educational practice more effectively among other priorities. At this time, a number of previously established funding priorities have been suspended.

AGENCY GRANTS PROCESS

The two largest grant programs offered by the Foundation are:

- The Lyle M. Spencer Awards – designed to support large-scale research efforts with budgets between \$100,000 and \$1 million; the Foundation offers this grant competition once per year, and typically funds up to 10 awards
- Small Grants – designed to support smaller-scale and/or pilot projects with budgets of \$50,000 or less; there are four deadlines a year for this program

Last year the Foundation hosted informational webinars for both of these programs to outline expectations. Note that principal investigators (PIs) are limited to one active Spencer Foundation research award at a time; current PIs may submit another grant application set to start after their current grant project ends.

FY 2017 Awards/Success Rates

The Foundation provided 186 awards in 2017 including Conference Grants, Lyle Spencer Research Awards and Small Grants. Specific to the Small Grants Program, through which the Foundation makes the majority of its awards, they generally receive over 1000 proposals and are able to fund up to 10%. (Source: Small Grants Eligibility and Process web page)

Additional Funding Mechanisms

The Spencer Foundation also offers Doctoral Dissertation and Postdoctoral Fellowships, both administered through the National Academy of Education. The Postdoctoral Fellowship Program is open to early career faculty.

Contact with Program Staff:

Program staff play an important role in the overall review process, selecting proposals to go forward for external review and making funding recommendations based on reviewer comments. However, they typically do not work with individual investigators prior to proposal submission. Questions about proposal fit in terms of Foundation priorities may be emailed to the Grant Manager at the Foundation.

Typical Spencer Foundation Proposal Process:

- 1) PI determines suitability of proposed project to Foundation priorities
- 2) PI may send brief email to Grants Manager to ascertain if proposed project is a good fit
- 3) The proposal process differs for the two major award programs as follows:
 - a. For Lyle M. Spencer Research Awards, the initial step is a required letter of intent; based on letter of intent reviews, a limited number of PIs receive invitations to submit detailed essays and full proposals
 - b. For Small Grants, there is no letter of intent requirement
- 4) The PI completes proposal
- 5) Proposal is submitted via the Spencer Foundation's electronic proposal system
- 6) The review process consists of both internal staff review as well as use of external reviewers
- 7) After analyzing reviewers' comments and taking into consideration staff recommendations, final funding decisions are made by the Board of Directors
- 8) Successful PI/institution receives award notice

Proposal Review Process

Proposals for the Lyle M. Spencer Research Awards go through a two-step submission process, starting with mandatory letters of intent followed by invitations for a limited number of full proposals. External reviewers are selected each year for this program, and are listed on the Foundation website. The proposal process for the Small Grants Program is less clear in terms of external reviewer selection, but all proposals receive initial review from program staff who make recommendations on proposals to be forwarded to external reviewers.



What Happens Next?

Successful PIs receive email notifications of their award selections. For the Small Grants Program, these notifications are generally received within five months of the proposal deadline. Investigators submitting letters of intent for the Lyle M. Spencer Research Awards should expect to hear back about their full proposal invitation status within three months.

Characteristic of all Spencer funding programs, those not selected to receive awards are encouraged to submit future proposals for Foundation programs. However, resubmissions are atypical – while the Foundation has no policy prohibiting resubmissions, generally if the Foundation wants to see a resubmission of a specific proposal, they will invite the PI to resubmit. Otherwise, it would behoove the PI to make major changes based on Foundation feedback before resubmitting.