

PROJECT-BASED FELLOWSHIP APPLICATIONS: TAKE CUES FROM THOSE WHO KNOW

What Works:

- *The Sooner the Better:* The best time to start thinking about and researching fellowships is during your first summer or the beginning of your second year.
- *Your Fellowship Network:* Identify people who can help you with the application process, including career services/public interest advisors and faculty or alumni who received fellowships and/or served on fellowship selection committees. **Create your own team.**
- *Get to Know the Application:* Read application instructions in detail, and provide *exactly* what is asked for. Fellowship proposals are as much science as they are art.
- *Don't be a stranger:* If you have pre-application questions for the funder, ask them. Your thoughtful questions and concerns can make an impression on the funder.
- *Build Host Relationship:* A relationship with your would-be host is a vital part of the successful fellowship application (and the successful fellowship). It's best to apply with an organization that you have previously worked for. But if that is not possible, it is wise to still propose a project that relates to work you have done, so that you can demonstrate that you have the knowledge, skills, and passion to do the job.
 - A legal services director who has successfully hosted several fellows says, “[I]n all but one instance, our applicants have had experience with us as a summer and/or semester intern.... [W]e can write a more persuasive letter from the host perspective if we know the work of the student ... Having worked with the student as an intern also helps us to more effectively assess how well the student will fit into the organization on a permanent basis.”
- *Host is Key, but You're the Principal:* The fellow should drive the application process. Reviewers can immediately tell when the host is fishing for funding.
- *The Silver Bullet:* Your proposal should identify the problem you will address and make clear why your project is *the* solution to that problem.
- *Demonstrate Your Passion:* It is not enough to declare that you are passionate. Demonstrate how your passion has manifested itself in your work/school experiences!
- *Client Focus:* It's about the clients, not about you and your career goals. Make sure to emphasize how your project makes an impact and who the beneficiaries of your project are. Can you get client input for the proposal?
- *Catchy Title Won't Hurt* – Your application is competing for attention with many others. Can you craft a lead-in sentence that captures the essence of your project?

What to Avoid:

- Do NOT sell yourself short. Yes, it's true that fellowships are sought-after and competition is fierce. But you must throw your hat in the ring. Fellowships are individualized experiences for committed individuals who catch the reviewers' eyes. Your application can do this.
- Do NOT be sloppy in your application, and do not veer too far off the course they set for you.
- Do NOT take yourself out of the proposal driver's seat. A senior program manager at a funding organization notes, "Sometimes when I read an application...it reads like the host organization supervisor thought up a project and then found a fellow to fit the bill rather than a personal passion coming through in the project description." Funders wish to support a specific project driven by a fellow, not a new staff attorney position for the host organization.
- Do NOT give up. Do not be discouraged if you apply for, but don't receive one of the "bigger" fellowships like Skadden or Equal Justice Works. Every year highly qualified candidates with fabulous projects are not successful simply because there is limited funding. Do not take it as a judgment of your qualifications. Get back into PSLawNet and look for the many remaining fellowships with later deadlines, find the ones that are a good fit for you, and start applying!
- Do NOT be too vague and/or unrealistic. Avoid making the project proposal excessively grand, including too many ideas (i.e. the kitchen sink). While the goal is typically for the project to sustain itself after the fellowship term ends, the fellow should still specifically map out realistic objectives to be achieved during their term. (*Note: The opposite can happen too when the application is too narrow and not capable of sustaining itself so that the reader cannot see it lasting two years and beyond*).
- Do NOT underestimate the importance of a project timeline. Reviewers look not just at what you want to do, but *how* you plan to do it. The best project idea goes nowhere if there is not well-conceived plan for implementation.

These fellowship tips were offered by several individuals who play key roles in the fellowship application process, including former fellows, senior staff at fellowship funding organizations, senior staff at fellow host organizations, and law school public interest career counselors who have successfully advised past fellowship applicants.