



PHILANTHROPISTS: GENERAL PHILANTHROPY

Exciting Submissions for MacArthur Foundation \$100-Million Contest

02.23.17 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD



Early last summer, we reported in [“The MacArthur \\$100-Million Grant Contest,”](#) that the prestigious MacArthur Foundation had launched an audacious competition under the slogan: “Big problems require bold solutions.”

According to the terms of the [“100&Change”](#) competition announced on June 2, 2016, there is to be a \$100-million award for a “single proposal that will make measurable progress toward solving a significant problem.”

“Solving society’s biggest challenges isn’t easy, but it can be done.” The concept behind this massive infusion of a huge amount of money into one promising project is that “the challenge will inspire more creative thinking around problem-solving and shine a light on ideas deserving of resources.

In order to attract the most innovative ideas, the competition invited “proposals from any sector” with no preferred “single field or problem.” The sole parameter is that the proposal must “have a charitable purpose” and be focused on a present-day “critical issue.”

Applicants may not be individuals or government entities; otherwise, eligible organizations may be of any type, for-profit, nonprofit, or other, from anywhere in the world. Each must show the capacity to manage and deliver on the proposed solution.

Early Skepticism



There have been doubters and critics. Many observers are skeptical of concentrating attempts to define philanthropic goals to just a few people or organizations with enormous wealth, worried about undue influence and tunnel vision. More specifically, some observers express concerns that the \$100-million figure is too much money for a single project, and will be too easy to waste. Other experts worry that it's not enough money – considering the scope of many critical problems – to make a dent. There are also concerns that the competition will favor innovative, new ideas to the exclusion of previously floated project ideas that faded away for lack of financial support.

Outpouring of Applications

Considering the importance of this contest, there was a relatively brief window – just four months – to devise and submit an application.

Requirements for each application included a showing of “strong evidence that” the target problem is, indeed, “solvable” either through a “one-time infusion of cash” or the use of the money as a “launching point to entice other investors.”

The widespread interest and praise has been merited by the avalanche of exciting proposals that were received by the October 3, 2016 cut-off. Over 1900 applications “for an incredibly diverse range of creative, thoughtful, and potentially effective projects” were received. Foundation officials were “inspired by the number of people and teams who had taken the time and energy to participate, and who shared [...the...] belief that solutions are possible for even the most daunting global problems.”

By mid-December 2016, the contest evaluating team had winnowed out proposals that did not meet contest criteria. There remain some 800 eligible proposals in active competition.

A Sample of Submissions

A requirement of each submission was inclusion of a 90-second video summarizing the proposal. Many have been posted online via YouTube; they are quick and easy peeks into the exciting proposals under consideration for this prestigious prize.

This video clip includes a provocative selection of exciting, remarkably creative projects:

<https://www.macfound.org/press/perspectives/look-100-change-through-video/>

Conclusion

Finalists will be announced in Summer 2017, and in a live event during the fall of 2017, a group of finalists will present their submissions. The winning group will have presented “the most measurable and attainable plan to tackle any critical problem facing people, places or the environment.” The MacArthur Board of Directors will select the sole winner.

“We believe there are solutions to problems out there that \$100 million might be able to make significant headway or unlock resources, and we want to hear what those are,” according to Cecilia Conrad, MacArthur’s managing director leading the 100&Change competition. “By focusing on solutions, we can inspire people to focus on problems that can be solved, and we just have to roll



up our sleeves and get to it.”

This contest is turning into a remarkable showcase of innovative ideas and solutions for seemingly intractable societal challenges.

[**Update 2/23/17:** The MacArthur Foundation has just announced selection of eight semi-finalists. We'll discuss those entries in a later blog post.]

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