

# Designing Program Officer Competencies for Strategic Grantmaking

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The profession of program officer is becoming more complex as investment approaches are increasingly specialized and information technology requires ongoing, rapid analysis of new information. As foundations embrace specialized approaches of social investing such as strategic grantmaking, venture philanthropy, and for-profit investments to improve the public good, it is important to consider the implications for the organizational design and capacity of the foundations themselves. One of the most important areas to consider is designing the role and competencies of program officers to reflect the specific grantmaking approach.

Certainly, all program officers are asked to draw on different sets of knowledge from their direct experience, their education, their co-workers, peers, and consultants. Yet, as we look at specialized investment approaches, it is clear that deeper skills and knowledge requirements vary. For example, the techniques used by venture philanthropists call for strong business and organizational development skills to support their investment partners during periods of rapid growth. In comparison, strategic grantmakers often draw on leadership and facilitative expertise in guiding well-developed organizations to address new forces, allies, and opportunities. Foundations have tended to assume that program officers will develop the skills they need to effectively respond to complex sets of relationships and decision-making. However, given the significance of the role of philanthropy in bringing about social improvements, it is critical that we become more intentional about building the human capital available to our efforts.

This paper outlines a range of competencies necessary for strategic grantmakers to develop their skills. The following program officer competencies reflect the wide range of roles a program officer plays internally in the foundation, directly with grantees, and in the larger philanthropic and program area fields.

## COMPETENCIES

Navigation Skills within the Foundation

Grantmaking Skills

Managing Initiatives

Strategy Development

Building and Managing Relationships that Enable Change

Designing Strategies for High Impact, Influence, and Leverage

Accessing, Developing, and Sharing Knowledge

These are by no means definitive, but rather a starting place for discussions for program officers and their supervisors. They should be adapted to reflect:

- > The grantmaking approach
- > The intensity of the relationship between foundation and communities such as national, place-based, and local
- > The expected degree of focus on addressing equity, diversity, and discrimination
- > The desired relationship of the foundation with its grantees
- > The characteristics of the specific program areas
- > Values and guiding principles of the foundation
- > Expectations for collaboration internally and across foundations

We are deeply interested in your experiences in designing human resources to reflect your foundation's approach as well as in using these competencies. We have made this paper widely available because philanthropy plays a vital role in successfully strengthening our communities in the U.S. and across the globe. Thus, it is crucial that we ensure foundations and their staff are able to do the very best job they can. Please feel free to contact Chris Sturgis at [chris@metisnet.net](mailto:chris@metisnet.net) with your comments and suggestions so that together we can continue to improve our understanding of required program officer competencies.

## COMPETENCIES

### Navigation Skills within the Foundation

#### CORE

- > Understand mission and vision of the foundation overall and specific division or program area
- > Understand timeline and decision-making process
- > Understand grantmaking process
- > Communicate effectively within the foundation—writing/speech
  - ~ Respond effectively to changing discourse—short-term decision-making; medium-term problem-solving; longer-term strategy development/organizational design

#### INTERMEDIATE

- > Collaborate with teammates on design and management of a grant or initiative
- > Participate in effective task force within foundation
- > Present to trustees
- > Work with consultants effectively to add value to the foundation's efforts
- > Contribute to organizational learning of the foundation
- > Work effectively across departments within the foundation



## **ADVANCED**

- > Design trustee site visits
- > Design and approve of exceptional or risky grant
- > Mentor new program officer
- > Represent the entire foundation — not just the program area — to the public

# Grantmaking Skills

## **CORE**

- > Understand basic principles of grantmaking as defined by the foundation
- > Understand basic process of grantmaking as defined by the foundation
- > Understand differences between general support and project grants

## **INTERMEDIATE**

- > Develop and manage different types of grants
  - ~ Organizing and advocacy
  - ~ Communication
  - ~ Research and evaluation
  - ~ Design, pilot, and demonstration
  - ~ Replication and dissemination
  - ~ Training and technical assistance
  - ~ Policy development
  - ~ Field building
- > Understand and apply knowledge of how organizations grow and change
  - ~ Understand stages of organizational development
  - ~ Understand ways to determine organizational health
    - Board
    - Leadership
    - Financials
    - Human resources
    - Diversity
    - Technology
    - Development
    - Operations
  - ~ Demonstrate grantmaking techniques for shaping investments to strengthen organizations
- > Understand types of grantmaking approaches
  - ~ Responsive
  - ~ Charitable
  - ~ Venture philanthropy
  - ~ Strategic
  - ~ Crisis

### **ADVANCED**

- > Place-based grantmaking
- > Program Related Investments (PRI)
- > Pooled/coordinated funds with other foundations
- > Request for Proposal (RFP)
- > Issues shaping philanthropy and grantmaking

## Managing Initiatives

*Set of related grants*

### **CORE**

- > Design and make grants as a set of related projects
- > Design a useful convening for grantees and others
- > Manage communications effort on overall initiative
- > Develop evaluation of an initiative

### **INTERMEDIATE**

- > Design an initiative using an intermediary as a pass-through, knowledge developer, coordinator, etc.
- > Use the leadership potential of the program officer position to assist an initiative

### **ADVANCED**

- > Influence organizations/field beyond a set of grants
  - ~ Understand strengths and weaknesses of the field and its infrastructure
- > Manage an initiative to act as a partner in which the foundation and grantees are able to improve, address problems, and/or develop next step of initiative together

## Strategy Development

*Set of related grants, initiatives and leadership activities with far-reaching outcomes*

### **CORE**

- > Develop a budget and plan for one to two years of investments, taking into account renewals
- > Identify benchmarks or quality indicators that are realistic in terms of budget
- > Familiarity with results-based grantmaking (or other approaches promoted by the foundation)

### **INTERMEDIATE**

- > Develop an evaluation plan of grantees and/or strategy
- > Design a strategy that leverages other foundations' grantmaking
- > Outline a three to five year strategy within the context of the foundation's interests
- > Shape strategies with different targets of change (individual, direct staff, public manager, institution, policymaker, public manager, city/county/district, state, national)

## ADVANCED

- > Outline a five to ten year strategy within the context of the foundation's interests with benchmarks, indicators, and evaluation
- > Shape high leverage investments that shape public or private funding streams
- > Design strategy by taking into account different perspectives
  - ~ Different theories of underlying causes and change
    - Market analysis
    - Power analysis
    - Diversity, discrimination, and equity
    - Social capital and networks
  - ~ Different levels of the community
    - Neighborhoods
    - Ethnic/racial groups
    - Community leaders
    - CBOs
    - Public sector
    - Business
    - Elites
  - ~ Different patterns and dynamics of social change
    - Grassroots/community organizing/movement
    - Federal/national top-down
    - Insider/elite
    - Demonstration

## Building and Managing Relationships to Enable Change

### CORE

- > Know well the general field and sub-field within geographic parameters identified by foundation
  - ~ How organizations and leaders relate to one another
  - ~ How the field/organizations have developed and what influences them
- > Build effective relationships with potential grantees and other organizations
  - ~ Understand and manage power dynamics
  - ~ Respond effectively to concept papers and proposals
  - ~ Refer organizations to other supports, funders
  - ~ Provide feedback that inspires and supports innovation and continuous improvement

## **INTERMEDIATE**

- > Act as a critical friend to grantees
  - ~ Work with grantee to improve or address substantial issue
- > Identify and develop leaders as needed
- > Strategically strengthen networks and broker relationships
- > Build effective relationships with potential co-funders
- > Build effective relationships with leaders in the field
- > Act as convener or broker of collaborations that leverage efforts

## **ADVANCED**

- > Build effective relationships with highly influential leaders and decision-makers
- > Encourage and manage innovation
  - ~ Understand dynamics and stages of innovation
  - ~ Engage current grantees to push for next stage of continuous improvement and innovation
- > Manage high risk grants
  - ~ Grants that are risky given the foundation's culture/experience
  - ~ Grants that are risky in their design

# Designing Grants, Initiatives, and Strategies for High Impact, Influence, Leverage, and Social Change

## **CORE**

- > Understand different reform approaches and implementation issues
  - ~ Inside, outside, and systemic reforms
  - ~ Pilot, demonstration, evaluation, dissemination, and integration into policy
  - ~ Movement building
  - ~ Changing incentives for individuals, organizations
- > Understand local (regional funder) or overall (national funder) infrastructure and landscape, specifically underlying assumptions, goals, and theories of change

## **INTERMEDIATE**

- > Understand the systems and policies shaping the target area
  - ~ National
  - ~ State
  - ~ Local
  - ~ Intergovernmental
- > Coordinate with other funders to design comprehensive change strategies
- > Understand the interplay between targeted area and other systems or forces

### **ADVANCED**

- > Establish relationships with key players to co-design higher leverage investments
- > Understand and have relationships with major political forces shaping target issue
- > Manage high influence communication effort

## Accessing, Developing, and Sharing Knowledge

### **CORE**

- > Be familiar with history and primary research on subject
- > Be familiar and up to date with key journals and websites
- > Develop relationships with three to five key people as advisors (formally or informally)

### **INTERMEDIATE**

- > Be familiar with two to three areas of knowledge that are related to core grantmaking area
- > Establish relationships with five to ten experts in core area that reflect vertical knowledge (academic expert, federal manager, state director, city manager, CBO director, direct staff)
- > Develop effective joint site visits with colleagues or grantee organizations

### **ADVANCED**

- > Understand how issues/policies vary across states
- > Ability to teach courses or mentor other program staff on specific areas
- > Network from other disciplines to engage in reflection, brainstorming on key issues, and create approaches that go “beyond the box”