

# Building Community Foundations

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## Grantmaking Consulting Program

Sponsored by the Philanthropic Ventures Foundation  
Bill Somerville, President

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## Getting the Job Done Better

What is available to help foundation personnel improve themselves professionally? The following is a partial list of ideas:

- Invite experienced colleagues to visit your foundation to appraise your work. There is a variety of such people available, those who have been trained by the Council on Foundations for On-Site Consulting and Organizational Development work; past community foundation executive directors such as Helen Monroe (619-631-7200), Mal Salter (813-955-3000), and Eugene Struckhoff (301-560-1327); foundation personnel whom you admire. There is extensive cooperation in the field and people are flattered to be asked for advice.
- Use programs designed to give technical assistance to you. These include the Grantmaking Consulting Program and the Council's Organizational Development Assistance Program.
- Call colleagues with questions. This writer gets calls from executive directors, board members, administrative personnel. It costs you nothing and you can get the answers to your questions right away.
- Visit other foundations to see how they work. Stay a day or two, focus on the issues of concern to you but leave time to observe the host foundation in general and visit with various personnel, both program and administrative. Ask lots of questions and take notes. This is a resource available to foundation staff persons which appears to be little used. People seem shy to ask but almost always there is a positive response if they ask to visit.
- Get on the mailing list of agencies that do extensive work with community foundations, such as Rainbow Research (612-824-0724), in order to be aware of the publications available to you.

- Although she is not recognized as an expert on community foundations, Suzanne Feurt of the Mott Foundation is possibly one of the most experienced observers of community foundations there is. She has made as many on-site visits as anyone in the field; she has managed funding programs to help staff community foundations as well as given funds for programmatic work by community foundations; she has given oversight to the Council's On-Site Consulting and Organizational Development Assistance Programs. She is an astute observer of the workings of community foundations--their weaknesses and strengths (313-238-5651).

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## **To Focus Or Not To Focus What Is Best For Grantmaking?**

Community foundation boards want to have as much impact as possible with limited grantmaking funds. As a result, boards often consider focusing on a particular issue. A concomitant concern is whether to give larger grants to a smaller group of applicants vs. many grants.

Both of these concerns raise various questions. Focusing on an issue isn't easy. For example youth is an issue but it is so broad that it doesn't really fulfill the reason for focusing. Under youth comes infants (childcare, nutrition, parenting); pre-teen (latchkey care, drug use, sexual behavior); teens (jobs, pregnancy, school dropout; young adults (one private foundation with youth as a focus increased the age limit to 30).

If a community foundation board does micro-focusing, the price it will pay is the antagonism of all those who feel excluded. Another concern with focusing on one issue is that the community foundation becomes known as a one-issue foundation and it is hard to change this perception.

With regard to the size of grants and the hope that a bigger grant will have more impact, bigness is a relative factor. For smaller community foundations, bigger is going from \$1,000 to \$5,000. Some smaller community foundations have given grants up to \$25,000 thus using up most of their resources.

One needs to see this in perspective. A donor of a large private foundation, when speaking of large grants, means \$20 million and up for such a grant. It isn't the size of the grant alone that has the impact; it is the thoughtfulness with which the grant is made. It's what you do with what you've got, not how much you have.

Good timing in making a grant, finding outstanding professionals to support, negotiating exactly where your grant will go: these are the factors of impact, not just the size of your grant.

Something related to size of a grant is multiple year grants. Some smaller community foundations have made multiple year commitments but it appears that most community foundations shy away from this. A compromise is to tell the grantee that after one year the foundation would be willing to review the progress of its grant to see if a second year of funding would be possible, but not to commit itself to a multi-year grant.

### Other Considerations

A number of community foundations are undertaking "theme" funding in which they select an area of interest that is broad but still has an aspect of focus to it. Examples include neighborhood revitalization, improving life of families, interracial cooperation and understanding.

This seems to represent a compromise wherein a foundation board feels a sense of purposefulness with such a theme, but still the foundation has broad latitude in making grants within the theme's parameters.

Both the Mott and Ford Foundations give money to community foundations for focusing on particular themes such as neighborhood organizing. The Irvine Foundation in California has given money in the past to community foundations for rural arts; the Packard Foundation has given funds to a community foundation for neighborhood revitalization; the Kellogg Foundation has given Michigan Community Foundations \$1 million apiece to focus on youth.

### Conclusion

Focusing the grantmaking of a foundation is coming up for discussion before an increasing number of boards of directors. The hope by focusing is to have more impact with limited funds.

As community foundations grow in size, they often consider theme funding, which amounts to a focus of a broad nature.

The downside of focusing is that the foundation comes to be known as a one-issue foundation and people not included in the focus feel left out.

One also has to consider what makes for impact in grantmaking. Size of grants is relative in that what is giant to a new community foundation is infinitesimal to a large foundation. It is the thoughtfulness and thoroughness with which the grant is made that counts.

Good grantmaking is based on awareness of one's community, what is going on, and what are the critical intervention points one can use to make grants with limited funds. The smaller the grant, the more thoughtfully it needs to be given out because all grants should have impact.

## News From the Field

The Packard Foundation has expanded its efforts to assist in the development of community foundations. Specifically focusing on northern California, the Foundation has contacted 15 community foundations and offered funds for planning to be followed by funds to staff technical assistance efforts. Such efforts could include developing a funding resource library for use by non-profits, management seminars for non-profit personnel, rosters of names of consultants who can help non-profits.

Other community foundation funding by the Packard Foundation includes money to hire a search firm for a new executive director; funds to a community foundation to help start endowments for the arts and the environment; funds to a community foundation both for staffing and for grantmaking regarding neighborhood revitalization (given to complement a prior Mott grant to this foundation for the same purpose).

Colburn Wilbur, Executive Director of the Packard Foundation, states that foundation assistance to community foundations is "...evolving. We are trying to increase the amount of philanthropy in a given area through working with the community foundation."

### Comments On Grantmaking Consulting

"Bill Somerville is a high-energy presenter with a wealth of information. He spoke to a number of community foundation groups and even though he went over some of the same information, his remarks were not canned. He was particularly helpful to me as the new executive director in problem-solving and providing suggestions on our new directions. Bill's fast pace keeps the discussion interesting and the audience involved."

Elizabeth Bremner, Executive Director  
The Santa Fe Community Foundation

"When you joined us last spring, your parting comments were that you would feel satisfied if indeed your visit prompted change. Please feel satisfied and again accept our gratitude for your guidance. My favorite quote is Henry David Thoreau's, 'Our life is frittered away by detail...simplify, simplify.' With this as my motto and a few of your specific recommendations, we were able to process our grant requests in HALF of the time of years past....I am feeling a great deal of confidence regarding grantmaking."

Jan Ulferts Stewart, Acting Executive Director  
Fargo-Moorhead Area Foundation, No. Dakota

Philanthropic Ventures Foundation  
1212 Preservation Park Way  
Oakland, CA 94612  
TEL: (510) 645-1890  
FAX: (510) 645-1892

#### Advisory Committee:

Bill Bondurant  
Tullia Hamilton  
Helen Monroe  
Peter Pennekamp  
Janice Windle

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