BENCHMARKING
Program Officer
Roles and Responsibilities

PROJECT TEAM
Ellie Buteau, Ph.D., Jennifer Glickman, Matthew Leiwant,
Temitayo Ilegbusi, and Zachary Alexander

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT
Ellie Buteau, Ph.D.
Vice President—Research
617-492-0800 ext. 213
ellieb@effectivephilanthropy.org

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR EFFECTIVE PHILANTHROPY
The mission of the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) is to provide data and
create insight so philanthropic funders can better define, assess, and improve
their effectiveness—and, as a result, their intended impact.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
We are very appreciative of the support that made this work possible. Special
thanks are due to the Rita Allen Foundation and the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation,
each of which provided significant funding for this research.

We are grateful to Amy Berman, Thomas Brewer, Arelis Diaz, Barbara Kibbe,
Justin Laing, and Caroline Altman Smith for providing feedback on a draft of the
survey used for this research. Finally, the project team would like to thank CEP’s
president, Phil Buchanan, for his contributions to this research, as well as CEP’s art
director, Sara Dubois, for her design of the report.

This research is based on CEP’s independent data analyses, and CEP is solely
responsible for its content. The report does not necessarily reflect the individual
views of the funders, advisers, or others listed throughout this report.

For more information on CEP, please visit www.cep.org.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND License.
© 2017. The Center for Effective Philanthropy, Inc. All rights reserved.
The role of the program officer at foundations is one of great importance. This is not news to the thousands of nonprofit organizations relying on program officers for crucial information, guidance, and funding. Yet, we know relatively little about the role that program officers play at foundations and with nonprofits. What are the backgrounds and experiences of program officers? What are the job responsibilities on which they spend the most time? How do they view their relationships with grantees?

In the following pages, we share the results of a survey we conducted, in mid-2016, to gain a better understanding of the role of the program officer. We sent surveys to over 300 program officers who we randomly selected from foundations that give at least $5 million annually. We received responses from 150 individuals for a response rate of 48 percent.

We hope this data will be useful to foundation leaders as they consider the role that program officers play at their foundations, as well as to program officers reflecting on their own jobs.

Sincerely,

Ellie Buteau, Ph.D. 
Vice President—Research

Jen Glickman 
Manager—Research
Respondent Demographics

Percentage of respondents who have previously been employed at the following types of organizations:

- **79%** nonprofit organization
- **37%** government organization
- **36%** corporate or for-profit organization
- **28%** other foundations

71% of respondents who have previously worked at a nonprofit organization were involved in raising money from foundations.

**ONE-THIRD** of respondents who have previously worked at a nonprofit organization interacted with foundation staff often or very often as part of their work.

---

1 Respondents were instructed to select all types of organizations that applied to their past employment.
EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

Highest level of education reported by respondents

- **59%** master’s degree
- **26%** bachelor’s degree
- **11%** doctoral degree
- **3%** professional degree (MD, JD, etc.)
- **1%** other

TENURE IN CURRENT ROLE

- **13%** Less than 1 year
- **37%** At least 1 year but fewer than 3 years
- **21%** At least 3 years but fewer than 6 years
- **15%** At least 6 years but fewer than 10 years
- **14%** 10 years or more
Gender identity of respondents

- 74% female
- 23% male
- 3% preferred not to say

Race/ethnicity of respondents

- 63% White
- 10% African American/Black
- 8% Hispanic
- 7% Multi-racial
- 5% Asian
- 1% American Indian
- 1% Pacific Islander

3 Five percent of respondents indicated that their race/ethnicity did not fall into any of the listed categories or preferred not to say. Respondents who selected more than one race/ethnicity were categorized as multi-racial.
**ISSUE AREAS**

Percentage of respondents whose work focuses on the following number of issue areas:

- **52%** multiple issue areas that are **interrelated**
- **34%** multiple issue areas that are **not necessarily related**
- **9%** a **single** issue area
- **5%** does not focus on issue areas

Most frequently mentioned program areas in which respondents work:

- **55%** education
- **45%** community and economic development
- **44%** human services
- **41%** health
- **39%** arts and culture

61% of respondents worked in the **same issue areas** in their previous jobs as they do in their current roles.
GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS

Percentage of respondents whose work focuses on the following number of geographic areas:

- **50%** one geographic area
- **44%** multiple geographic areas
- **6%** does not focus on a geographic area

Primary geographic focus reported by respondents:

- **50%** local
- **35%** regional
- **10%** national
- **5%** international
Funder-Grantee Dynamic

GRANTEE RELATIONSHIPS

Percentage of respondents who agree with the following statements:

- **98%**: Having strong relationships with grantees is important for achieving my foundation’s goals.
- **95%**: Learning from the grantees I work with is an integral part of my professional development.
- **88%**: I believe the grantees I work with feel comfortable approaching me if a problem arises.
- **85%**: I am aware of the challenges the grantees I work with face in achieving their goals.
- **53%**: I have the knowledge necessary to help the grantees I work with assess the results of their work.

- **63%**: Of respondents typically respond to grantees either the same day they are contacted or by the following day.
In general, nonprofit organizations maximize their impact given the resources they have. **73%**

In general, nonprofit organizations are well-run. **54%**

In general, nonprofit organizations have the knowledge necessary to assess the results of their work. **39%**

In general, nonprofit organizations have the resources necessary to assess the results of their work. **9%**

Percentage of respondents who agree with the following statements

### UNDERSTANDING

Percentage of respondents who rate themselves as having a considerable or thorough understanding of the following

- **77%** the social, cultural, or socioeconomic factors that affect grantees’ work
- **75%** the fields in which grantees work
- **74%** the communities in which grantees work
- **72%** the needs of grantees’ intended beneficiaries
- **70%** grantees’ goals and strategies
When asked, “If you had more time to spend with your grantees, how would you spend that time,” 60 percent of respondents say they would spend their time learning more about and/or developing relationships with the grantees they support.

Many fewer respondents, only 28 percent, say they would spend that additional time helping grantees in technical or procedural areas, such as strategy, evaluation, and/or capacity building.
PERCEPTIONS OF ROLE

Respondent level of satisfaction with their current job

- 23% Somewhat
- 44% Very
- 29% Extremely

A little

Percentage of respondents who agree with the following statements

- My job makes good use of my skills and abilities: 82%
- My job requirements are clear: 75%
- I have an appropriate amount of autonomy in my role at my foundation: 71%
- I have a clear path for career advancement at my foundation: 16%

MEANINGFULNESS AND IMPACT OF WORK

Percentage of respondents who agree with the following statements

- My foundation has a positive impact on the issue(s) or geographic area(s) in which I work: 96%
- My career is meaningful: 94%
- My work contributes to my personal growth: 92%
- A primary reason I work at my foundation is because I believe in its mission: 92%

---

4 There is no relationship between the extent to which respondents believe they have a clear path for advancement and the size of their foundations.
### WORKPLACE DYNAMICS

Percentage of respondents who agree with the following statements

- **77%** Learning from my colleagues at my foundation is an integral part of my professional development.
- **74%** I admire the leadership of my foundation’s CEO.
- **71%** My foundation is respectful of staff of different backgrounds, races, and genders.
- **71%** I feel comfortable expressing my views with others at my foundation.

Percentage of respondents who very much or completely believe they are working toward the same goals as the following parties at their foundations

- **52%** Board members
- **71%** President/CEO
- **84%** VP of programs

### PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

Percentage of respondents who agree with the following statements

- **48%** plan to stay in philanthropy for the remainder of their careers
- **14%** do not plan to stay in philanthropy for the remainder of their careers
- **38%** don’t know if they will stay in philanthropy for the remainder of their careers
Job Responsibilities

WORKLOAD

HOURS

About half of respondents work 45 hours or more in an average week.

Active Grants

ACTIVE GRANTS

About half of respondents have 40 or more active grants currently open.

About one-quarter of respondents work 40 or fewer hours in an average week.

About one-quarter of respondents work 50 or more hours in an average week.

About one-quarter of respondents have 20 or fewer active grants currently open.

About one-quarter of respondents have 70 or more active grants currently open.
### Level of Involvement in Processes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents Who Are Very or Extremely Involved</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents Who Would Prefer to Be More Involved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Developing strategies used to achieve programmatic goals</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing programmatic goals</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deciding if a grant gets awarded</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deciding the size of a grant awarded to a grantee</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deciding the length of a grant awarded to a grantee (e.g., one-year grant, two-year grant, etc.)</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessing progress toward programmatic goals</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using information from assessments of progress to make improvements</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deciding the type of support to award a grantee (e.g., general operating support, program support, etc.)</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing measures used to assess progress against programmatic goals</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
HOW TO SPEND TIME TO BE MOST EFFECTIVE

We asked respondents to list the three job responsibilities that:

- Currently do take up the greatest amount of their time
- Should take up the greatest amount of their time in order to be most effective in their role
- Should take up less time in order to be most effective in their role

The job responsibilities below were mentioned by the following percentages of respondents.

**Internal administration**

- 62% (Current)
- 21% (Should)
- 75% (Should take up less)

**Grant-related processes**

- 57% (Current)
- 55% (Should)
- 36% (Should take up less)

**Developing and maintaining relationships**

- 36% (Current)
- 53% (Should)
- 13% (Should take up less)

**Understanding grantees’ work and context**

- 13% (Current)
- 30% (Should)
- 0% (Should take up less)

---

5 This question was only asked of respondents who selected “Yes” to a survey question asking if there are job responsibilities on which they believe they should be spending less time in order to be most effective in their role. Two-thirds of respondents answered “Yes” to this question.

SELECTING GRANTEES TO FUND

90% say their foundation’s leadership accepts their funding recommendations often or very often.

28% feel they can take quite a bit or a lot of risk when choosing which grantees to fund.
### Professional Growth and Development

Percentage of respondents who **have participated** in the following professional development opportunities in the past year:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opportunity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>conferences or seminars</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>activities or events offered by relevant affinity groups</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>job-specific training through a third party (e.g., Nonprofit Finance Fund, Council on Foundations, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations)</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>job-specific training by foundation staff</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leadership/management coaching through a third party</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Percentage of respondents who want further professional development in the following areas:

- **$25%** finance or accounting
- **17%** leadership skills
- **24%** general philanthropy knowledge
- **16%** evaluation

**CHALLENGES**

When asked what the biggest challenges are that they face in their role, **84 percent** of respondents mentioned internal challenges at their own foundations, such as:

- Having limited resources or capacity
- Lacking independence or room for growth in their role
- Managing a disconnect between their perceived priorities and the priorities of leadership at their foundation

Only **15 percent** of respondents mentioned challenges external to their foundations.

---

6 The areas cited came from responses to the open-ended question, “In what skill set or knowledge area do you believe you could benefit the most from further professional development?”

7 Four percent of respondents say they have not yet discussed their job performance with their supervisor.

8 Some respondents who mentioned an external challenge also mentioned an internal challenge, and vice versa. An additional nine percent of respondents mentioned challenges that were not specific to either an internal or external challenge.
SAMPLE

Data discussed in this report were gathered through a confidential survey administered to foundation program officers. Specific criteria were used to determine whether program officers were eligible to be randomly selected for the research study. Foundations were considered for inclusion in the sample if they:

- were based in the United States;
- were an independent foundation, including health conversion foundations, or a community foundation, as categorized by Foundation Directory Online; and
- provided $5 million or more in annual giving, according to information provided to CEP from Foundation Center in September 2015.

Individuals working at eligible foundations were considered for inclusion in the sample if they:

- had a title of program officer, or had a title of program manager or equivalent at foundations with no listed program officers, as identified through the foundation’s website; and
- had an e-mail address that could be accessed through the foundation’s website or CEP’s internal contact management software.  

One eligible individual was selected at random from each eligible foundation, resulting in a sample of 319 individuals.

In July 2016, the 319 individuals selected were sent an invitation to complete the survey. Later, 15 individuals were removed from the sample because it became apparent they did not meet the inclusion criteria. Seven of these individuals were replaced with staff from their foundation who better met the criteria. Completed surveys, defined as having at least 80 percent of questions answered, were received from 149 participants, and a partially completed survey, defined as having at least 50 percent of questions answered, was received from one participant. Thus, 150 of the 311 eligible individuals completed the survey, for a response rate of 48 percent.

---

Methodology
BENCHMARKING PROGRAM OFFICER ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

METHOD

The survey was fielded online during a three-and-a-half-week period in July 2016. Program officers were sent a brief e-mail, including a description of the purpose of the survey, a statement of confidentiality, and a link to the survey. Program officers were sent up to seven reminder e-mails.

The survey consisted of 46 items, some of which contained several sub-items. Program officers were asked about a variety of topics related to their work, including their professional background and experience, role at their foundation, job responsibilities, professional growth and development, grantee relationships, thoughts about the future, and demographic information.

RESPONSE BIAS

Foundations with program officers who responded to this survey did not differ from foundations whose program officers did not respond by annual asset size, annual giving amount, geographic location, or foundation type (i.e., whether the foundation was an independent or community foundation).

Respondents with titles of either “Program Officer” or “Senior Program Officer” were slightly more likely to respond to the survey than respondents with titles of “Manager” or “Director.”

Program officers of foundations that have used CEP’s assessments were slightly more likely to respond to the survey than program officers of foundations that have not used a CEP assessment.

SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS

Of the foundations in our final sample of respondents, 72 percent were independent foundations and 28 percent were community foundations. Health conversion foundations accounted for 10 percent of the independent foundations. The median asset size for foundations in the sample was $298.5 million and the median annual giving level was $14.9 million. The median foundation in this study was established 50 years ago.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foundation Characteristics</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Median Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>&lt;10 years to &gt;100 years</td>
<td>50 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assets</td>
<td>&lt;$2 million to &gt;$10 billion</td>
<td>$298.5 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving</td>
<td>&lt;$6 million to &gt;$500 million</td>
<td>$14.9 million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

To analyze the quantitative survey data from foundation program officers, descriptive statistics were examined. Only descriptive information, including means and percentages, are shared in this report.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Thematic and content analyses were conducted on the responses to the following open-ended survey items:

- In order to be most effective in your role, what three job responsibilities do you believe should take up the greatest amount of your time?
- What three job responsibilities currently do take up the greatest amount of your time?
- On what responsibilities do you believe you should be spending less time in order to be most effective in your role?
- What are the biggest challenges you face in your role?
- In what skill set or knowledge area do you believe you could benefit the most from further professional development?

10 A chi-square analysis was conducted between whether or not foundation program officers responded to our survey and whether those program officers had titles equivalent to “Program Officer,” “Senior Program Officer,” or “Manager”/“Director.” A statistical difference of a small effect size was found (0.19).

11 A chi-square analysis was conducted between whether or not foundation program officers responded to our survey and whether or not those foundations have used a CEP assessment. A statistical difference of a small effect size was found (0.14).

12 Only respondents who answered “Yes” to the question, “Are there responsibilities on which you believe you should be spending less time in order to be most effective in your role?” were shown this open-ended item.
• If you had more time to spend with your grantees, how would you spend that time?

A coding scheme was developed for each open-ended item by reading through all responses to recognize recurring ideas, creating categories, and then coding each respondent’s ideas according to the categories.

A codebook was created to ensure that different coders would be coding for the same concepts, rather than their individual interpretations of the concepts. One coder coded all responses to the question and a second coder coded 15 percent of those responses. For each open-ended item, an inter-rater agreement of at least 80 percent was achieved for each code.
$500,000 OR MORE
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

$200,000 to $499,999
Ford Foundation
Fund for Shared Insight
S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation

$100,000 to $199,999
Barr Foundation
The David and Lucile Packard Foundation
Rockefeller Brothers Fund
The Rockefeller Foundation
Texas Children’s Hospital Foundation

$50,000 to $99,999
Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation
The Kresge Foundation
Rita Allen Foundation

$20,000 to $49,999
The Duke Endowment
John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
Lumina Foundation
Oak Foundation
Surdna Foundation

Up to $19,999
The Assisi Foundation of Memphis
California HealthCare Foundation
The Colorado Health Foundation
Delaware Community Foundation
Doris Duke Charitable Foundation
Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund
The Heinz Endowments
Henry Luce Foundation
Houston Endowment
Kansas Health Foundation
The Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust
Longwood Foundation
The McKnight Foundation
New Hampshire Charitable Foundation
Public Welfare Foundation
Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation
Saint Luke’s Foundation
Sobrato Family Foundation
Teagle Foundation
Weingart Foundation
Tailored Foundation

Individual Contributors
Michael Bailin
Paul Beaudet
Kevin Bolduc
Phil Buchanan
Alexa Culwell
Alyse d’Amico
Phil Giudice
Tiffany Cooper Gueye
Crystal Hayling
Bob Hughes
Barbara Kibbe
Latia King
Patricia Kozu
Jean McCall
Debra Natenshon
Grace Nicolette
Richard Ober
Alex Ocasio
Grant Oliphant
Hilary Pennington
Christy Pichel
Nadya K. Shmavonian
Vincent Stehle
Valerie Threlfall
Fay Twersky
Jen Vorse Wilka
Lynn Perry Wooten