LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

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FROM UNDERSTANDING TO IMPACT

Foundations seek to make an impact on some of the most complicated challenges we face – civil rights, renewable energy sources, and wildlife protection, to name just a few. To be effective, they need to develop a deep and nuanced understanding of the fields in which they work.

In the busy lives of foundation staff, it can be difficult to carve out enough time to understand the fields in which they are making grants. What are the best sources for information? How do program officers develop the necessary knowledge to advance their work? What does understanding the field really mean?

We wanted to learn more about how foundations cultivate an understanding of the fields in which they fund. To do that, we interviewed staff from three foundations that had participated in the Center for Effective Philanthropy's Grantee Perception Report® (GPR) and were ranked in the top five percent of more than 200 foundations according to their average grantee ratings on the survey item: "How well does the foundation understand the field in which you operate?"

The three foundations – the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund, the Energy Foundation, and the Wilburforce Foundation – offer very different examples of how an understanding of the field is developed and maintained.

The Haas, Jr. Fund tackles several program areas in its quest to create a more just and caring society. Energy Foundation is a regrantor – it invests the resources of several major donors into solving the world's energy problems – and does its work in the United States and China. Wilburforce focuses on preserving the various environments across western North America. When interviewed, staff at these three foundations spoke of how an understanding of the field has helped them make better decisions and avoid costly mistakes. For example:

- Listening to stakeholders in California led the Haas, Jr. Fund to reshape a communications campaign on immigrant rights so that it took into account important regional differences.
- A deep understanding of Chinese culture helped the Energy Foundation pilot a groundbreaking plan to significantly reduce air pollution, which the Chinese government has instituted nationwide.
- Some extra research helped Wilburforce discover that it needed to cultivate a key constituency group to best protect one of the largest intact rainforests on earth.

While many of the elements and activities the three foundations describe touch on similar themes, the approaches and solutions adopted are unique to each foundation. For example:

» At Haas, Jr., understanding the field means that the foundation seeks to develop the capacity of their staff and grantees to be leaders in their fields.

» At Energy, understanding the field involves staff developing close working relationships with experts in the field and connecting grantees with experts to enable problem-solving.

» At Wilburforce, understanding the field means knowing as much about the people living and working near the areas it seeks to protect as it does the flora and fauna residing on those lands.

Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund

Quick Facts

The Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund seeks to fulfill its founders' vision of a just and caring society where all people are able to live, work, and raise their families with dignity.

Annual Grantmaking: **$32 million**

Office: **San Francisco**

Founded: **1953**

Staff size: **23**

Program areas and initiatives: **Immigrant Rights, Gay and Lesbian Rights, Education, Leadership, and Community Partnerships and Initiatives**

Average active grants per program officer: **35**

In the community that the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund envisions, immigrants, gays, lesbians, and the poor will enjoy equal rights and opportunities. They will be able to build a better life, find a decent job, educate themselves and their children, marry whomever they wish, and raise a family. To achieve these goals, the fund invests in the leadership of its nonprofit partners and supports social movements.

Providing and developing leadership to make this vision a reality has been at the heart of the Haas, Jr. Fund's approach since its inception.

"It starts way back with who our trustees are," says Sylvia Yee, vice president of programs. "They understand the importance of leadership – in our supporting leadership of our grantees and of social movements, but also the leadership we need as a foundation to be a player."

Understanding the Field in Order to Lead

The expectation that it will provide leadership in its areas of work drives the San Francisco–based foundation's focus on understanding the field. Its strategy for building that understanding begins with recruitment of its staff.

In fact, when the foundation's leaders talk about what understanding the field means to them, they describe it in terms of the people they hire. The foundation tends to hire former activists, field directors, and executive directors.

"They are intellectually and substantively very grounded," says Ira Hirschfield, president. "It's not just that they are good advocates, or have run an organization, but also that they are very astute on public policy, knowledgeable about the major substantive issues of the field, and demonstrate a deep respect for the communities we serve."

According to Yee, "Hiring people who are leaders in the field means that they know the landscape. They know the players. They know the history of what has worked and not worked. They're practitioners. They have the trust of key players because they are former colleagues. This kind of knowledge and these relationships are valuable assets that would take years to develop."

Understanding the Diversity of Immigrant Issues

For Cathy Cha, senior program officer, Immigrant Rights and Integration, her understanding of the field starts with personal experience. Her parents immigrated to the United States from Korea shortly before she was born.

"I know what my parents and my relatives have gone through as they tried to integrate into U.S. society," Cha says. "I have many family members who have gone through the citizenship experience, who have struggled with learning English, and who have faced discrimination."

However, Cha doesn't rely solely on her own experience to understand the diversity of the foundation's beneficiaries.

"About once every quarter I get an opportunity to meet with someone whose loved one has been deported or an immigrant housecleaner who is concerned about her kids," she says. "And I get a sense of what life is like for them. As foundation folks, it's important to have that grounding and to keep it real."

Meetings with faith leaders of color have led Cha to build alliances between the African American and immigrant communities. The groups have not traditionally worked together, nor do they know much about one another. But Cha believes that if they collaborated, then they would be stronger and more effective in addressing common issues, such as reducing racial profiling and crime and improving education.

"Understanding the challenges that families and community members face as immigrants in the United States is one angle," continues Cha. "Then I spend a lot of time keeping up with a very rapidly changing policy environment. The third angle is understanding the movement and the different players that are involved, and what role each plays."

That last piece, she says, goes beyond the fund's grantees and extends to other groups that occupy different niches in terms of expertise, including other funders.

Cha recently invested time to lead a group of funders in meetings with local advocacy and organizing groups, elected officials, and labor and civic leaders around California to learn about civic participation in different regions of the state.

"That has helped us figure out how to tailor our approach by region," she says. "So we're not going to do the same thing in the Inland Empire that we're doing in Los Angeles or San Francisco. That knowledge has helped us modify our strategy to be more regionally relevant."

For example, her program used that regional knowledge to craft a statewide strategic communications initiative to promote a more positive image of the states' immigrants.

"We had heard from advocates that they couldn't get anywhere with their policy goals when they were consistently getting bashed in the media," says Cha. "Immigrants were portrayed as criminals, as contributing to the state's budget problems. You name the problem, and somebody's tried to pin it on immigrants."

Cha and her partners at the California Immigrant Policy Center set out to make a plan to communicate the positive contributions that immigrants make to California.

Cha learned from her meetings that a uniform statewide communications campaign might have backfired. That's because the types of contributions that immigrants make in California vary widely by region. For example, the economy of the Central Valley of California is largely agriculture. Much of that economy depends on Latino immigrant workers who pick crops such as tomatoes and strawberries. Messages that convey immigrants' importance to the agriculture industry will resonate in the Central Valley.

> "UNDERSTANDING OF THE FIELD RESTS ON TWO PRINCIPLES. ONE IS THAT WE RECRUIT FOLKS WHO ARE LEADERS. AND THE SECOND PIECE IS HELPING THEM BECOME GRANTMAKERS AND FUNDING STRATEGISTS."

But those same messages won't mean much in Silicon Valley. There, some of the most successful high-tech entrepreneurs, such as Google co-founder Sergey Brin, are immigrants. The Silicon Valley audience needs a different message about the importance of immigrants.

Haas funded a report that described the positive contributions immigrants have made in California. The report was tailored for each of six different regions. A concerted publicity effort garnered a lot of positive press.

"We got headlines like, 'immigrants contribute far more than they take,' and 'San Diego immigrants contribute 25 percent of the local GDP,'" says Cha. "But without these tailored reports for each region, I think we wouldn't be effective in changing people's hearts and minds about immigrants."

Understanding the field in this case led to an effective communications campaign. It can also help Haas when seeking local funding partners, Cha says. That's because Haas can demonstrate that it understands the needs of immigrants in those partners' communities, she says.

Learning with Other Funders

Cha finds that joint learning opportunities – such as the group of funders that focused on regional differences in civic participation – are another effective way to understand the field and then take action.

"It's a lot more effective for funders to learn together and then co-develop a strategy than for me to say, 'Hey, here's what Haas, Jr. Fund thinks will work.' This way we get the benefit of their knowledge and experience," she says.

Furthermore, sharing information through affinity groups and meeting with other funders is another way for her program to help move public policy in a positive direction.

"We continually want to be an influencer, although we don't necessarily feel we need to get the credit for it," says Cha. "But if we can, we hope to help shape other peoples' strategies. For example, I just met with national funders to help them think through their California strategies. We helped our colleagues understand the political and financial importance of the

Census to our state. We're always looking for partners to continually improve what we're doing and seed replication in other places."

Fostering Grantee Leadership

To understand the field, Haas believes it must foster leaders who can represent their communities. One reason that funders sometimes may not understand their grantee's fields well enough is because there are not enough leaders from marginalized groups at the podium explaining the needs and desires of their communities, Cha says.

To help remedy that problem, the foundation's Leadership Program invests in leadership training for nonprofit executives.

Linda Wood, senior director of Leadership and Grantmaking, who is in charge of investing in the leadership of grantee organizations, came to the fund after years of building organizational leadership in both the nonprofit and private sectors. She notes that the corporate sector has invested heavily in leadership development. But little information has existed about how nonprofit agencies could use and benefit from leadership development.

"The private sector spends more than a billion dollars on executive coaching every year," says Wood. "Yet six or seven years ago, that wasn't something that the nonprofit sector tapped into."

People questioned whether executive coaching was too expensive for nonprofits and whether coaching nonprofit leaders would require a specialized skill set.

"And so we supported a pilot of executive coaching that was done with a number of groups," says Wood. "Over time, this led to the Coaching and Philanthropy Project, where we supported research, evaluation, and a toolkit for nonprofit executive directors who want to use coaching. This was very much informed by experimenting with our own grantees, helping them find executive coaches, understanding what worked and didn't in their environment, and then contributing to the field's conversation about best practices for coaching."

Because the most trusted advice often comes from one's peers, Wood and her team produced a series of videos of executive directors candidly sharing their challenges and what they are learning from working with an executive coach. The videos are posted on the fund's website.

Encouraging Professional Development for Foundation Staff

Wood has also taken the lead in helping the foundation's program staff develop professionally. While they come to the foundation already well versed in their field, Haas, Jr. helps them build on that knowledge.

"Understanding of the field rests on two principles," Wood says. "One is that we recruit folks who are leaders. And the second piece is helping them become grantmakers and funding strategists. What does it mean to step out of an activist stance and be more of an enabler or supporter? What does it mean to step up to the 5,000-foot level and be a strategist in a way that is engaging stakeholders?"

To that end, the foundation took steps to become more intentional about its professional development. Program staff meet once a month and cover a menu of topics developed by an internal team. The list includes:

- What is the Fund's approach to diversity and inclusion?
- Should the Fund have exit strategies for its grants?
- What would be the framework for building the capacity of a social movement rather than an organization?

"We develop topics that are important for everyone to dive into," says Wood. "Sometimes we bring in outside people. Right now we're doing a six-month learning agenda on social media."

Haas, Jr. also encourages program staff to pursue outside professional development opportunities. For example, when Cha moved from being a program officer in the fund's Neighborhoods and Strengthening Families Program to her role as senior program officer in charge of the Immigration Rights Program's portfolio, she needed to fill in a few knowledge gaps. In addition to reading and talking with people in the field, she took a 10-week course on lobbying and restrictions for nonprofits.

"We have a culture of curiosity here," she says. "We have generous professional development support to learn. It's an intentional goal of the fund, and it's a given." Her boss concurs.

"Even during this difficult economy, when we were making significant financial cuts, we increased our training and development," says Hirschfield. "We felt it was even more important in these times to strengthen, develop, and enrich the internal talent we have." Hirschfield believes that this kind of investment will strengthen the capacity of the fund to adapt to change and will send a strong message to staff that they are highly valued.

Energy Foundation

Quick Facts

The Energy Foundation is a partnership of major donors interested in solving the world's energy problems. Its mission is to advance energy efficiency and renewable energy – new technologies that are essential components of a clean energy future.

Annual Grantmaking: **$90 million**

Offices: **San Francisco, California and Beijing, China**

Founded: **1991**

Staff size: **61 (39 U.S., 22 China)**

Program areas, U.S.: **Power, Buildings, Transportation, Climate**

Program areas, China: **Low-Carbon Development Paths, Transportation, Renewable Energy, Electric Utilities, Buildings, Industry, Environmental Management, and Sustainable Cities**

Average active grants per program officer: **50**

When the Energy Foundation's work is done – if it ever is done – the United States and China will be much cleaner places. Greenhouse gases will be lower due to widespread adoption of renewable energy technologies, such as wind, geothermal, photovoltaic, and biomass. Buildings and vehicles will be more energy efficient and less costly to own and maintain. In China, industrial development will no longer be a major source of air pollution because it will consume less energy, reducing its carbon emissions by hundreds of millions of tons.

The Energy Foundation, based in San Francisco, was established in 1991 as a partnership of major donors interested in solving the world's energy problems. The original partners were the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur and Rockefeller foundations, as well as the Pew Charitable Trusts. Since then, many other major funders have joined the Energy Foundation.

Understanding the Field at Energy

At the Energy Foundation, understanding of the field is critical because the foundation's leaders believe that the best way to transition to sustainable energy is by influencing public policy.

"There's a lot of evidence that public policy shapes energy markets in a way that guides public and private investment – in particular private investment – toward those clean energy technologies," says Charlotte Pera, vice president/director of U.S. programs. "That means we really have to understand today's energy technologies, what might be developed in the future, what is coming down the learning curve, and what needs help from public policies to become a commercial success."

One of the key approaches that Energy uses to influence public policy – and understand the field – is working with top experts in energy efficiency and renewable energy.

What Success Looks Like in China

In China, this approach spurred a national program, sponsored by the Chinese government, to reduce environmental damage caused by the country's rapid industrial development.

Factories in China account for about 70 percent to 75 percent of energy use – and pollution. Yet industries are also a key economic engine in China. The challenge then is cutting the industrial pollution generated by so much energy use without shutting down factories.

"Without addressing industry energy use, you can't really talk about a clean energy future in China," says Jiang Lin, vice president/director of the China Sustainable Energy Program. "So how do you enable development while minimizing the damage and pollution associated with these factories?"

Taking on such an enormous issue requires a particular understanding of China, he says.

"China is a very challenging environment for an international NGO to work in," Lin says. "It is still a fairly closed system. So any outside influence is always viewed with suspicion, particularly influences from international organizations. They don't quite trust people from outside…. Our staff in China are all energy experts, and they are all Chinese. They understand the political sensitivities and can develop the relationships that can alleviate some of those concerns. If you have been working there for a long time, live there, speak their language, and work in their field, you can gain some trust and build a relationship."

"UNDERSTANDING OF THE FIELD IS CRITICAL BECAUSE THE FOUNDATION'S LEADERS BELIEVE THAT THE BEST WAY TO TRANSITION TO SUSTAINABLE ENERGY IS BY INFLUENCING PUBLIC POLICY."

Energy's China staff brought their knowledge of local politics and industry and combined that with consultations with international experts to identify a way to conserve energy, improve efficiency, and keep factories producing goods and employing people.

After extensive preparation, in 2003, Energy's China team introduced a voluntary agreement on energy efficiency in two steel mills in Shandong Province. The local government selected the steel mills to participate in the pilot program. Steel mills are one of the top energy users in China, Lin says, and so a reduction in energy use among those factories could make a large impact.

"Both steel mills easily met the voluntary target," says Lin. "That then gave them confidence to try something even more ambitious."

The experiment was so successful that the Chinese government adopted it in 2005 as a national program for the 1,000 largest energy users in China. "Every year, that program alone is delivering major energy and greenhouse gas emission savings in real time," says Lin. "It's the single most effective program in the world in terms of reducing energy use and greenhouse gas emission."

Collaborating with Outside Experts

The foundation's understanding of the field requires that program staff know who the experts are in their areas of work – like the ones who helped formulate the voluntary energy agreement for the factories in Shandong.

"We strongly encourage people to develop close ties with the top thinkers in their field," Lin says. "So, if you are an air pollution program officer, you want to know who is the best mind in the field in China. We encourage our staff to develop a close working relationship with experts so they can have periodic consultations to get the best thinking from the field."

Energy's China staff often pair grantees with experts as well. The process supports Energy's goal to help Chinese agencies and experts solve energy challenges for themselves.

"For example, if a grantee wanted to study automobile efficiency issues, we would find a counterpart elsewhere in the world," says Lin. "They get the best practices of the world, and they look at that solution for themselves."

The tactic also makes Energy's work more sustainable.

"You can only be successful in China by fostering local champions. And to do that well, you have to support them and enable them to succeed," Lin says.

Energy Foundation also increases its and its grantees' understanding of the field by sponsoring research on key issues.

"A grantee will say 'we want to promote wind energy. How do we start?'" Lin says. "Oftentimes, the first thing they say is, 'how do America or Germany or Spain or Japan put in wind energy?' This is a research project, to understand, 'oh this part makes sense for us and, no, this part doesn't make sense for us.' That's how you find solutions. To say, 'I want wind energy' doesn't do you any good. What we do is provide how you do it through the research piece."

Getting Honest Information from Grantees

Like other foundations, Energy has to navigate the inherently unequal power dynamic between the foundation and its grantees. Yet staff know that some of their deepest understanding of the field can come from their grantees. Pera says that foundation staff encourages grantees to be open with them through their actions, not just words.

"We try really hard to appear to be sensitive to, for example, times when grantees just need us out of the room or off the phone," Pera says. "I think that's a very important part of being a good funder. And then if you've built a track record with your grantees, and they know that you're not going to play the heavy as a funder, you can get to the point where you have really workmanlike discussions with grantees. They will be perfectly willing to tell you if they think you're completely wrong about something, and they are willing to listen with an appropriately critical ear to your ideas, and that's what you want to get to."

Wilburforce Foundation

Quick Facts

Wilburforce supports efforts to create a network of protected core reserves, corridors, and buffer zones across western North America that will support ecologically effective landscapes and viable wildlife populations.

Annual Grantmaking: **$10 million**

Offices: **Seattle, Washington and Bozeman, Montana**

Founded: **1991**

Staff size: **11**

Program areas: **Priority Regions, Conservation Science, Capacity Building, Conservation Law & Policy**

Average active grants per program team: **40-60**

The lands extending from arctic Alaska into northern Canada and down through the American southwest are home to an enormous array of landscapes, plants, and animals. These lands are what environmental funder Wilburforce Foundation seeks to preserve and protect. Yet for its staff, understanding the field requires more than knowing the science and ecology of the wildlife and areas they seek to protect. It also involves a deep familiarity with issues facing the human communities living and working in and around those special places.

Digging deep into the context of a particular area it wishes to protect has been the guiding principle for Wilburforce's work since the foundation opened in 1991. "We don't make a decision about how we might help protect an area unless we have visited it, talked with the people in local communities, and gained a perspective on all the factors involved," says Tim Greyhavens, executive director.

Creating a Sustainable Difference

Understanding of the field is invaluable in helping the foundation identify areas where it can make an impact.

"First of all," says Greyhavens, "we depend on science in almost everything we do. Biological science gives us a first indicator of where there are important ecosystems that are going to be resilient and provide a refuge as climate change begins to accelerate."

If the biological science shows the area is a place where Wilburforce can make a difference, then the foundation looks at the social science, learning more about the local communities and their economics. It studies the political science, learning the extent of local residents' political involvement in their community and gaining an understanding of elected officials who make local decisions.

"Finally," says Greyhavens, "there's a holistic science in terms of trying to combine all of these and understand how all the different pieces interact…. Part of what we strive for is to help facilitate change coming from the communities themselves. It doesn't do a whole lot of good and, in fact, is sometimes quite a waste of money to go and try to force change in a particular place. Without the support of local communities and the people who will benefit and live in these areas, the change is rarely sustainable."

Achieving an Early Success

The value of taking an all-encompassing approach was crystallized early in the foundation's history. In the mid-1990s, Wilburforce began work to protect one of

the largest intact rainforests on the planet, located on Canada's west coast in British Columbia. "Few such places remained anywhere because many rainforests had already been ravaged for the vast amounts of timber they contain," Greyhavens says.

Initially, the foundation tried to protect the rainforest by carrying out a traditional environmental campaign with wilderness preservation organizations such as the Sierra Club. It soon became apparent, however, that simply approaching this problem on an environmental level would not be enough.

> "HAD WE AND OUR FUNDING PARTNERS JUST APPROACHED THIS AS A TRADITIONAL ADVOCACY CAMPAIGN BY ONLY FUNDING ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS TO DO THE WORK, BOTH THE FOUNDATIONS AND THE FIRST NATIONS MIGHT NOT HAVE COME ANYWHERE NEAR GETTING THE GAINS THAT WERE MADE."

No solution could be advanced without the support of the area's indigenous people, called First Nations, who are highly protective of their lands in the endangered rainforest. Unlike Native American tribes in the United States, many of these First Nations had never signed treaties that surrendered their rights and title to their lands.

Wilburforce staff realized that they could not meet their goal of protecting this land without helping First Nations regain their legal rights to manage their traditional territories. With a grant of $250,000 per year for three years, the foundation funded a program through the David Suzuki Foundation in Vancouver, British Columbia. The program aimed, in part, to strengthen legal standing of the First Nations as they negotiated with the provincial government over management of the lands First Nations people had lived on for thousands of years.

Over time, the Suzuki Foundation and other Wilburforce grantees built trust with the First Nations by starting with their cultural needs. First Nations partnered with the conservation community and took a leadership role in advocating for management practices that protect the rainforests. To further support their efforts, the foundation and its funding partners made additional investments in economic development, science, capacity building, advocacy, and market campaigns.

In 2001, Wilburforce and allied funders – William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, and others – worked with the First Nations and environmentalists on a $56 million capital campaign. This culminated in the signing of historic land-use agreements. The agreements protected more than five million acres of coastal temperate rainforest in British Columbia and assured that millions of acres more would be sustainably managed by the First Nations.

"Had we and our funding partners just approached this as a traditional advocacy campaign by only funding environmental organizations to do the work, both the foundations and the First Nations might not have come anywhere near getting the gains that were made," says Greyhavens. "Certainly, we would not have had a durable win without the leadership of the First Nations in those areas."

Seeking Diverse Perspectives

According to Denise Joines, program officer for the foundation's Northwest/Southwest Program area, understanding the field requires listening to all sides of

an argument. Having the right information, she says, means understanding people who are external to the conservation community.

"The more information from different perspectives and angles that I have, the more well-rounded my understanding of the work is," she says. "I try very hard to understand what people who are engaged in activities that threaten ecosystem resilience are saying. What are their challenges? What cultural issues are they dealing with? We're all in this society together, and unless we understand the full context of our work, we're never going to move forward."

Understanding this context helped protect an area of southern Oregon – now the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument – a landscape rich in biodiversity that was being heavily affected by grazing cattle. Wilburforce, in partnership with its grantees, took a risky approach to the problem. Rather than make use of the government's capacity to terminate the grazing leases, the foundation, in collaboration with other funding partners, instead invested significant monies to buy out the grazing permits. The plan worked. The area is now free of cattle, and its ecosystem is recovering.

"Our grantees thought that putting these ranchers out of business was not a good social outcome," says Joines. "Some of the ranchers were already under deep financial stress. The best outcome was to give them a dignified retirement out of this practice, help the ecosystem with private funds, and then help society by having this really special place protected."

Spending Weeks or Months on the Ground

This holistic approach requires that staff spend a lot of time in the field. In 2007, Wilburforce hired new program associates to ensure that each region was supported by a two-person team. According to Associate Director Paul Beaudet, "That helped increase the capacity of our program teams to go deeper in the particular regions in which they work."

More program staff may seem like a luxury, but Wilburforce's leadership believes that it enables the foundation to go beyond quick snapshots to develop more panoramic views of the regions in which it works. It also helps the foundation shift its grantmaking process from being focused on written applications and reports to being based on relationships.

"Because we have a larger staff and because we work in a very focused area, we can sit down with people and spend more time on the ground trying to get a better understanding of what the issues are," says Greyhavens. "That's not possible for funders that have one person working in multiple areas."

Developing and Maintaining Program Officer Expertise

When hiring potential program staff, Wilburforce focuses on candidates' demonstrated commitment to conservation issues, as well as their understanding of nonprofits' work and challenges. Candidates must also bring a host of other skills to the job. As part of the interview process, candidates participate in a mock proposal review exercise.

"We ask them to critique a strategy that a grantee might propose," says Beaudet. "We are looking at the quality of their thinking around a strategy that's messy but well-intentioned, to learn what a candidate does or doesn't see in the organization's capacity and program work."

And then, says Beaudet, "relationship skills are core to the work that we're doing here. We really look for people who can communicate effectively, listen well, and develop those relationships with our grantee partners."

Wilburforce helps staff members build their expertise by providing them with a professional development

budget as well. For example, Jennifer Miller, who is a program officer, began her tenure at the foundation as a program associate. When she received her promotion, Miller used her professional development funds to develop her leadership skills. She has also attended facilitation training, participated in one-on-one executive coaching, and attends conservation science conferences to stay up-to-date on current research.

The skills she has learned have been particularly useful when helping organizations learn how to collaborate. Miller notes that foundations often ask various groups to work together to be more effective or accomplish larger goals. But she points out that helping collaboration happen is not always easy, particularly among groups that may be competing for funds or have their own agendas.

"Sometimes, we foundations rather blithely suggest that organizations should just collaborate more, without recognizing just how hard that can be to do well. If foundations expect grantees to collaborate effectively, it's important that they provide the capacity and financial resources to do so," says Miller. The training she has done has helped her understand how to anticipate and address potential conflicts before groups get into a room, and how to foster collaborative efforts outside of face-to-face meetings.

While at times she has to decide whether to attend a training session, focus on work at the office, or be on the road, Miller knows the foundation's support for learning is there when she needs it. "We have enough resources and enough latitude in what is defined as relevant to our work because we prioritize understanding of the field so highly," she says. "The foundation does not skimp when it comes to opportunities for staff to learn and stay current in their field."

Creating Information for the Field When It's Not Available

Beaudet notes that staff members are often "drowning in information," and if there are questions they don't have answers to, the foundation will find them.

"Whether it's investing in a scientific report, working on an economic analysis, or helping underwrite a media audit, if we need the data and it's not there, we'll help get it," he says.

Creating needed information is particularly crucial to Greyhavens' work as program officer for the foundation's Conservation Law and Policy program.

"A lot of what we do," he says, "is fund studies, analyses, and background pieces to give advocacy organizations the information they need to make informed and more effective decisions as they lobby for policy change. Much of my work is figuring out what's missing from any given picture – whether it's political analysis, communications messaging analysis, or a case study of a campaign that worked or didn't work."

Just as the foundation's internal knowledge base is all encompassing, so too is the information it creates for the field.

"If we don't know enough about a place in terms of its conservation value and that information doesn't exist, we'll invest in the best and the brightest minds to help us figure that out," says Joines. "Whether it's conservation science, economics, social science, or policy analysis: We seek that knowledge base building as an integral and essential part of our work that not only helps us but helps our grantees and funding partners as well."

Listening to – and Learning from – Others

"OUR GRANTEES ARE ENORMOUSLY KNOWLEDGEABLE. SO MUCH OF MY KNOWLEDGE COMES FROM THEM. AND THAT'S JUST A GIVEN."
– JENNIFER MILLER, PROGRAM OFFICER, THE WILBURFORCE FOUNDATION

CEP research shows that when a funder exhibits a good understanding of its grantees' fields, it is more likely to have a strong relationship with them. Good relationships are usually based on an honest back-and-forth between parties. That two-way street leads to invaluable information sharing. So it makes sense that most of the foundation staff interviewed talked at length about how much they learned from their grantees, and the importance of listening carefully to those involved in the issues they work on.

Denise Joines of the Wilburforce Foundation says that grantees provide much of the information she needs to develop expertise about the places she is working to preserve.

> *I spend a lot of time talking with our grantees in the field, in the places where they work. Apart from reading books and journals about the places that I was less familiar with, my deeper understanding has come directly from our grantees. That has been enormously rewarding for me. Not only does it help me understand the places better, but it also helps me form personal relationships with our grantees that have been the main pillar of my understanding of the field.*

She also notes that, "Attending our grantees' conferences, which happen frequently, has been enormously beneficial to me. Sometimes I'm the only funder at these conferences, which is sad."

Linda Wood of the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund credits her grantees with enabling her to apply her know-how to their problems.

> *As much as I might have come in here knowing about leadership development in the corporate sector, that doesn't have much to do with how we're able to be helpful to grantees on a day-to-day basis. It's not just respecting grantee knowledge, it's being hungry for it, so that you stay up-to-date on what the challenges are on the ground.*

While listening to grantees is important, Wood's colleague Cathy Cha emphasizes that having the right information requires getting the full spectrum of opinion on a given issue. As much as she'd like to just take the opinions of select grantees and run with them, she pushes herself to

make those extra phone calls to round out her knowledge. Take, for example, the controversial new immigration law recently enacted in Arizona.

> *We met with a police chief, a couple of sheriffs, ranchers, and business people. To make an informed decision, you should at least know what the continuum looks like and where you fit into it. It's about knowing the political appetite for policy change that this country has. Whether the issue is gay marriage or immigrant rights, we have to keep in mind the full spectrum of views. We're just always going to be off if we think everybody thinks the way they do in San Francisco.*

And finally, Ira Hirschfield, also at the Haas, Jr. Fund, emphasizes the need for funders to balance their own expertise by opening their ears to others.

> *Today, a tremendous amount of our work – and the degree to which we are successful – depends on a blend of substantive skills and savvy, and the deeply respectful learning relationships we have with our grantee leaders and other foundation collaborators. What would be expertise gone amuck is if you find yourself with people who are doggedly moving an agenda based on their own experience and are not listening actively and learning from grantees, other community leaders, and our philanthropic and government collaborators.*

Conclusion

These three foundations believe that understanding their grantees' fields allows them to be more effective in their grantmaking. For each of these foundations, understanding its field means a substantial investment of its staff's time and financial resources. But the foundations see that investment as crucial to making an impact with their work.

Discussion Questions

1. What were some common approaches to building understanding of the field among the three foundations profiled?
2. What were some of the differences?
3. What activities could be adopted at your own foundation?
4. What wouldn't work, and why?
5. How would you define understanding the field?
6. How does the knowledge of the field that you currently have fit into your foundation's goals and strategy?
7. What are some of the gaps in your understanding of the field?
8. What kind of information and skills would you need to fill those gaps?
9. What are some of the ways that your foundation could be more intentional about professional development opportunities for staff?

About The Center for Effective Philanthropy

CEP's mission is to provide data and create insight so philanthropic funders can better define, assess, and improve their effectiveness and impact. For more information about CEP, including a list of our funders, please visit www.effectivephilanthropy.org.

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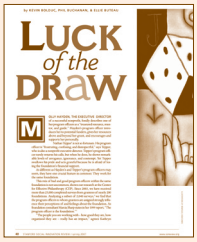

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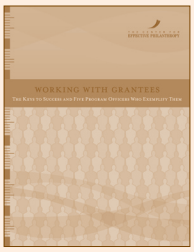

Successful foundation-grantee relationships hinge on the prowess of individual program officers, whose abilities may vary widely within a single foundation. This research explores what grantees value in their relationships with program officers and identifies four keys to success. Five high-performing program officers share their stories.

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Judith A. Ross and Susan Parker
both contributed to the writing of this case study.

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