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Case Study: Leveraging Emerging Trends to Align Grant Funding with Mission-Driven Youth Empowerment at the Global Co Lab Network

Susan McClellan, MLS

Global Co Lab Network, Arlington, VA;
Comparative and International Education Society

GPCI Competencies

Competency #1: Knowledge of how to research, identify, and match funding resources to meet specific grant needs.

Competency #4: Crafting, constructing, and submitting an effective grant application.

Abstract

Navigating today's increasingly intricate funding environment is essential for the long-term viability of nonprofit organizations. This case study explores how the Global Co Lab Network—a nonprofit focused on youth engagement and aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—adopts creative research methods to explore public grant opportunities. It delves into patterns in the funding landscape, the motivations of grant makers, and the growing role of digital tools in identifying funding prospects. By emphasizing the importance of mission alignment and understanding the goals of funders, this paper illustrates how organizations can strategically position themselves for sustainable growth. The case demonstrates how informed and intentional grant-seeking efforts can amplify youth-driven initiatives and support broader social impact.

Introduction

Starting in 2015 with the Teens Dream video contest, a project inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, our organization has offered young people a chance to share their visions for achieving the U.N.'s Sustainable Development Goals. What began as casual living room gatherings quickly evolved into structured salons, and later into virtual SDG Hubs addressing issues such as climate action, plastic waste reduction, and youth empowerment. The Global Co Lab Network (Co Lab), an Arlington-based nonprofit, empowers teens worldwide to become changemakers by connecting them through digital platforms to act on the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through its annual SDG video challenge and weekly virtual gatherings known as SDG Hubs, Co Lab provides a safe, inclusive space for teens to learn, lead, and collaborate on global issues like climate change, mental health, gender equality, and more.

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Led by youth alongside mentors and partners, these hubs foster leadership skills, cross-cultural understanding, and real-world impact.

Recognizing that teens often lack opportunities to engage meaningfully in global challenges, Co Lab fills the gap by offering accessible, teen-driven programming that inspires confidence, creativity, and global citizenship. In collaboration with partners like the Smithsonian Conservation Commons, we have supported a variety of teen-led efforts—ranging from multimedia education projects and virtual reality storytelling to youth-authored publications and policy advocacy at the U.N.

Drawing on my own experience as a volunteer focused on fundraising, I have seen firsthand how strategic grant-seeking can significantly expand a small nonprofit's reach. This strategy paper outlines how our team is sharpening its public funding strategy by using research, funder mapping, and targeted alignment with our mission of empowering youth to create global change. For mission-driven groups working in youth development, education, and international impact, public grants remain a crucial source of support. But in a funding landscape that is constantly shifting, it takes more than just hard work to identify relevant grant opportunities and secure funds to maintain and/or expand programs. It requires thoughtful research and an ability to match the right opportunities with the organization's goals. From my perspective as a fundraising volunteer with the Co Lab, this evolving approach to grant-seeking has already begun to have positive outcomes.

As a community-based nonprofit, aligning our work with the right public funding sources is both vital and often complex. Headquartered in Arlington, Virginia, the Co Lab reflects emerging priorities in public sector grantmaking: digital innovation, youth empowerment, and alignment with international development goals. Even with a modest annual budget of \$80,000, the organization manages to make a wide-reaching impact by equipping teens to take meaningful action toward achieving the SDGs.

As funders increasingly seek projects that promote equity, digital inclusion, and youth-led problem-solving, the Co Lab offers a forward-thinking approach that aligns with current and future grantmaking trends. Unlike many programs that are short-lived, competitive, or inaccessible to diverse communities, our model is designed to be inclusive, continuous, and driven by youth voices. The Co Lab presents a scalable path for supporting meaningful teen

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engagement, combining global digital outreach with hands-on, local action, and can provide a model for other youth-focused organizations looking to sustain or expand their programming.

Key Developments in Public Grantmaking: Insights from the Co Lab's Experience**Leveraging AI for Smarter Grant Discovery**

Operating out of Arlington, Virginia, Co Lab connects with youth globally through an annual video challenge and sustains engagement year-round via weekly online SDG Hubs. These youth-led, mentor-supported spaces give teens a consistent platform to learn, collaborate, and act. As public funders increasingly value digital accessibility, youth-led innovation, and initiatives with sustainable impact, our model is naturally aligned with these current, key priorities.

To strengthen our fundraising efforts, we have begun integrating AI-powered tools such as Instrumentl and GrantForward. These platforms help us more efficiently identify funding sources that resonate with our mission. They even allow us to tailor our approach based on insights from funders' communications, including press releases and blog posts.

Using Funder Mapping as a Strategic Tool

We are adopting a more strategic method for identifying potential funding partners. Platforms like LinkedIn have proven valuable for researching funders' interests and priorities, allowing us to make more intentional connections. This approach has led to opportunities beyond our usual focus, including identifying environmentally focused corporations through targeted outreach. For nonprofits navigating a crowded grant space, this kind of research can create a meaningful difference in both funding success and mission alignment.

Aligning Grant Strategy with Mission and Capacity

Today's grant professionals must go beyond simply tracking available funding to critically evaluating which opportunities align with their organization's mission and ability to deliver sustaining impact. The Global Co Lab Network prioritizes sustainability by focusing our efforts for maximum impact. We categorize grants based on how well they match our programs, values, and capacity. This allows us to channel our energy into opportunities that support our broader vision: empowering youth to take meaningful action on the United Nations SDGs through global collaboration. We assess each opportunity in terms of relevance, feasibility, and alignment with existing initiatives like our virtual SDG Hubs and youth advocacy work. This kind of deliberate

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strategy ensures our limited resources are used effectively, and that our growth remains both mission-centered and sustainable. This intentional, impact-focused mindset can be a key asset in a fast-changing funding environment.

Decoding Funder Trends in 2025: Insights for Grant Professionals from the Global Co Lab Network

As we move through 2025, people working in a variety of grant-related fields must operate within a funding landscape marked by volatility and increasing political influence. Government agencies, philanthropic institutions, and private funders are constantly redefining their focus, often in response to external pressures. For organizations such as the Global Co Lab Network, which is rooted in youth empowerment and sustainable development, remaining dedicated to their core priorities is critical not only for growth, but also for preserving long-term program integrity.

Navigating Political Shifts and Minimizing Risk

Federal transitions have caused many public grantmakers to pivot toward less politically charged, impact-driven areas like STEM education, workforce development, and digital connectivity. These domains offer tangible outcomes and are supported across the political spectrum.

How the Global Co Lab is Responding

The Global Co Lab Network has refined its messaging to emphasize how our teen-led, virtual SDG Hubs foster digital competencies, civic participation, and forward-thinking leadership. This strategic alignment allows us to remain true to our mission while also reflecting funder priorities that are viewed as politically neutral. By showcasing our teen-led SDG Hubs and engaging with global forums like the U.N. High-Level Political Forum, we highlight our dedication to amplifying youth voices and driving equity-focused action. Our proposals underscore civic empowerment, intercultural collaboration, and advocacy as integral parts of our impact to resonate with funders who prioritize transformative, value-driven initiatives. We deliver high-impact programs through a digital model that is both cost-effective and widely accessible.

Strategic Grant Development Starts with Funder Insight

In today's climate, understanding funder intent is just as crucial as knowing their identity. At the Global Co Lab Network, we integrate funder intelligence throughout our development strategy. We examine funders' mission statements, language preferences, and digital presence using tools like LinkedIn.

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Rather than presenting static project details, we craft narrative-driven proposals that reflect funders' own language and values. The Global Co Lab does not just engage youth, we mobilize them for global change. Through a combination of clear mission focus and funder-tailored outreach, we aim to remain adaptable without compromising our values.

Next-Gen Grant Tools: Tracking, Adapting, and Scaling in a Changing Environment

The modern funding landscape demands more than persuasive writing. Grant professionals today must be part researcher and part strategist. They must quickly spot trends early, interpret funder goals accurately, and deliver compelling, real-time messaging. The Global Co Lab Network offers a leading example of how integrating funder intelligence into every stage of the grants process can shift the work from reactive applications to forward-thinking organizational growth.

Keeping Mission at the Center of the Strategy

Maintaining alignment between programming and potential grant funder priorities is also a changing process, which is why the Global Co Lab emphasizes authentic, value-based communication over simply reshaping our mission to fit trends. We position our youth-led SDG Hubs in the context of funder concerns like digital equity, climate resilience, and inclusive leadership while always keeping our vision intact.

Core strategic practices include:

- **Agile Implementation:** Our digital model delivers strong outcomes with minimal overhead. This is ideal for funders looking for high-return, low-cost programs.
- **Trend Awareness:** We track policy shifts and philanthropic themes to ensure we position our work within broader systemic narratives.
- **Funder-Led Framing:** Today's donors want to see that an applicant understands their vision, mission, and goals. We create proposals focused on shared values, not just outcomes.
- **Engaging Formats:** With funders increasingly open to visual and multimedia content, we use videos, infographics, and dynamic storytelling to enhance engagement. The Co Lab produces documentaries to inspire the next generation of change-makers! See Youth Voices on the UN Goals – a 20 min educational docudrama created by teens for teens at link below:
<https://www.globalcolab.net/youth-voices-on-the-un-goals/a>
- **Digital Listening:** By monitoring funders' digital content and social media, we gain early insights into shifting goals and language, allowing us to stay ahead of the curve.

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Grant writing in 2025 is no longer just about meeting deadlines. It has transitioned to creating mutually beneficial partnerships. Organizations like the Global Co Lab Network have moved from chasing grants to cultivating alliances. Today's funders are seeking change-makers who understand systems, not just services.

By combining new grant technologies with mission-led strategy, one can:

- Expand options for funding sources beyond traditional government options.
- React quickly to funder realignment.
- Position youth-led innovation to be a scalable solution to global problems.

In a landscape where funders are searching for vision, creativity, and innovation, success lies in responsiveness, integrity, and personal storytelling that demonstrates real impact.

Conclusion

The Global Co Lab Network's evolving approach to grant research and identification expands our funding pipeline and deepens alignment with mission-driven funders. By adopting data-informed strategies, leveraging AI tools, and applying funder analysis, we have become more intentional and effective in our grant-seeking efforts. Our youth-led model continues to stand out as a compelling differentiator for funders seeking scalable, long-term impact. By adapting thoughtfully and staying true to our values, the Co Lab has evolved from simply pursuing funding to intentionally building strategic alliances. This shift has allowed us to be seen not just as recipients, but also as reliable partners committed to driving meaningful, long-term changes.

Grant professionals across sectors can draw valuable insights from the Global Co Lab Network's forward-thinking approach to grant research and funder engagement. The Co Lab's strategy centers on adaptable, data-driven practices that others can tailor to strengthen their own grant-seeking efforts. By incorporating data analysis into the grant research process, organizations can more effectively identify funders whose priorities align with their mission and values. The Co Lab's integration of AI technologies to streamline research, forecast funding opportunities, and customize proposals has led to greater efficiency and precision. Grant professionals can adopt similar tools to reduce manual work, uncover prospects, and better target their applications. A key takeaway is the Co Lab's ability to remain agile in response to shifting funding landscapes while remaining firmly rooted in its mission.

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Biographical Information

Susan McClellan, MLS, is the Volunteer Fundraising Co-Director for Global Co Lab in Arlington, VA, and the full-time Membership Coordinator for the Comparative and International Education Society. She has over 28 years of experience as a librarian, including leadership positions as director of several small libraries. Throughout her career, Susan has developed strong expertise in grant writing, fundraising, and community engagement, having successfully written and secured numerous local, state, and federal grants to support library programming, operations, and capital improvements. She holds a Master's Degree in Library Science from the University of Pittsburgh. Susan can be reached at susanmmcclellan7@gmail.com.