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How Geography Shapes the Grant-Making Landscape

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- 01. Knowledge of how to research, identify, and match funding resources to meet specific needs
- 08. Knowledge of methods and strategies that cultivate and maintain relationships between fund-seeking and recipient organizations and funders

Abstract

When looking for funders and grant opportunities, grants professionals often tap into various online databases such as the Foundation Directory Online or GrantStation. If the funder's name is known (e.g., Ford Foundation), then one can easily learn more about that particular grant-maker by researching their profile, website and 990s. But what if you do not know who these grant-makers are in the first place? There are over 86,000 foundations in the United States alone, not including corporate giving. With so many keyword search options available, what is the best way to find funding? Answering the "where" question first will allow grant researchers to understand where funders are giving their money, and avoid spending unnecessary time learning about misaligned funders.

Introduction

Finding funding and establishing sustainable and meaningful partnerships can be a difficult task. There are a plethora of private foundations and government grant opportunities available, and given the abundance of information available online, where should one start to find an appropriate match?

When using online research tools, there are many keyword search options including *area of interest*, *target population* or *type of support*. While these are important keyword research parameters to consider, using a place-based approach may be a more efficient and effective way to find new partners as most grant-makers have a geographic preference for their giving. This paper provides an overview of how geography shapes the grant-making landscape, and why grant applicants should incorporate a geographic framework when planning programs and projects.

Grant-makers give locally, regionally and nationally, and it is best to understand where the money goes and why.

Both novice and experienced grant researchers may feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of grant opportunities available today. There are currently over 900 federal grant programs offered by 26 different grant-making agencies (grants.gov, 2021). According to the most recent data available, there were 86,203 foundations in the United States in 2015, which funded grants totaling \$62.8 billion. In the same year, 92% of foundations were independent organizations, while 3% were corporate, and 1% were community organizations (Foundation Directory Online, 2021). According to the Foundation Stats published on Foundation Directory Online, the state of New York has the most grant-making operating foundations (11%), second is California (9%) with Pennsylvania coming in third (8%) (data.foundationcenter.org, 2021).

It is likely that most of these grant-makers have geographic parameters.

At first glance, grant researchers might perceive that their mission strongly aligns with a particular funder's focus areas such as animal rescue, human rights or hunger. However, further investigation may reveal that the applicant's organization does not serve the funder's geographic priorities. This may be a regular stumbling block that can be avoided if the researcher sorts or filters the data by geography first.

When using an online database tool, start by entering the state where your organization resides and primarily offers services. This will present all of the funders located within your same geographic area. However, grant seekers must conduct a more nuanced analysis from here. Just because a funder's address is in a particular city does not mean that this is the only place that they fund. Some private foundation funders give in areas outside of where their mailing address is located due to trustee preferences.

What if your organization provides goods and services on a national scale or would like to expand its services nationally? How it be determined if a grant-maker supports organizations with a nationwide reach within the United States? The Kresge Foundation, for example, currently has a grant-making and social investing focus that targets "America's Cities." Since the Foundation's wealth was amassed through the S.S. Kresge Company and eventually the nationwide Kmart chain, they also make specific grants to organizations located in their hometown of Detroit, Michigan. When tapping into an online database that offers a map feature, be sure to use it. This feature shows where the grant-makers are located as well as all of the grant awards that were made to the same location. This detail can reveal information about grant-makers that give nationwide and generate a new list of prospects.

If needed, refine the geographic parameters further sorting by county and/or city. When filtering by city (if using an online database), the information will include the funder's mailing address, but it may also indicate the city(s) that the funder supports, and those may not be one and the same. A funder headquartered in Missouri may also make grants to organizations based in Omaha, Nebraska where a branch of a parent company is located. If the grant seeker is searching on behalf of a hyper local organization such as an arts council, they will want to know who all of the funders are within their respective communities. This can be an effective way to garner information about potential partners, such as private family foundations, who were otherwise unknown.

What if a grant-seeker wants to expand into new areas? How can they best position themselves with aligned funders?

It is important for grant-seekers to thoroughly understand the geographies they serve. For instance, the Senior Charity Care Foundation (SCCF) is a nonprofit that serves a specialized target population within a specific part of Utah. This organization restricted their geographic area because as a start-up they

could not serve the entire state. Instead, they first focused on five counties within a densely populated part of the state and only expanded to new communities when funding became available.

To clearly understand and articulate the need and thus justify where expansion should occur, SCCF performed a service area gap analysis. This involved cataloguing the physical address and number of people already served into a master list (i.e., Excel file) for easy sorting. This allowed the information to be easily sortable by city and/or county. In addition, all of the unserved locations and potential number of new people that could be reached in each particular location were catalogued. SCCF then mapped this data using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology which provided a compelling visual representation of the service area gaps and provided a data-based justification for why specific communities were ripe for expansion due to unmet needs.

The results of the service area gap analysis equipped the Senior Charity Care Foundation with a powerful mapping tool to find new funders. This level of detail empowered SCCF to successfully win highly competitive Community Development Block Grant awards from various entitlement cities. Being able to delineate how many more people in a particular city could be served if a grant was provided made for a persuasive argument. While the service area gap analysis required some upfront work and technical GIS expertise, the investment was well spent. In just two short years, SCCF was successful in securing five new CDBG grant contracts valued at \$50,000 annually which expanded their impact to serve 20-30% more seniors each year.

What about U.S. foundations and grant-makers wishing to make grants abroad? Nearly 90% of international giving is via U.S.-based organizations working overseas.

Given the prevalence of these types of entities, it's certainly worth looking into if a grant-seeker's organization aims to serve internationally. According to the Global Philanthropy Report published in 2018 by Paula D. Johnson with the Harvard Kennedy School, Institutional philanthropy has a global reach. 260,358 foundations in 38 countries and Hong Kong were identified, representing only a partial picture of the sector (Johnson, 2018).

Over 90 percent of identified foundations are independent, but there are strong regional variations. Independent foundations are the predominant model in the United States (96 percent) and in Europe (87 percent); corporate foundations are significant in Latin America (50 percent); government-linked foundations are common in China (38 percent) and the UAE (73 percent); and family foundations are prevalent in Africa (35 percent).

The Council on Foundations has some great resources for organizations looking to partner with grant-makers that give on a global basis (Council on Foundations, 2017). Grantwatch.com also features a search engine that identifies 332 international grant-makers.

Taking a place-based approach to grant-seeking and partnership building is not without its complications.

For some organizations, restricting the funds they receive to serving beneficiaries from specific locations can be too much of an administrative and accounting challenge. But not all grant-makers are as geographically limited as the CDBG entitlement cities. Some grant-makers fund at the statewide level which can make them an ideal candidate for organization's serving multiple counties, or the unhoused in their non-metropolitan community and/or for organizations that lack the address data of their beneficiaries (e.g., an animal rescue).

And while some funders' online profiles will delineate a specific state they support, it is important to dig deeper to see exactly where their awards went. It could be that the funder's online profile states they fund throughout California; however, when researching their 990, it may reveal that only organizations based in Silicon Valley received funding. Spending more time researching these geographic

parameters on the front end will help to narrow a more viable prospect list.

Conclusion

There are many paths that a grant-seeker can take when looking for new partners and the search can be overwhelming. Through the lens of geography, grant-seekers can optimize their search for potential funding sources for their programs or projects. While there are many other aspects of a funder's profile that are important to consider when deciding if a funder is a good match (e.g., giving limitations, types of support, and subject areas) understanding, in-depth, the geographic preferences of a funder will better inform the match selection process and improve a grant seeker's chances of securing funding.

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Liz Kinne, GPC, founded Grant Pro Group, L.L.C. in 2013 and has over twenty years' experience serving as the lead grant researcher, writer, and manager for dozens of nonprofits and government agencies. As a professional grant writer and fundraising practitioner, Liz is recognized as a woman of integrity and compassion who has provided her services and expertise to over 100 nonprofits and government agencies, from health and human services and arts and youth development to post-secondary education, economic development, and ecological conservation.

Liz has held the prestigious Grant Professional Credential from the Grant Professional Certification Institute since 2008 and has authored and co-managed 600+ grant awards. She also published a Strategy Paper in May 2015 for the GPA's annual Journal.

Liz entered the world of grants early in her career when she managed a publicly funded grant-making program designed to support river habitat restoration projects for the Washington State Department of Fish & Wildlife. Her lived experience with poverty during her childhood motivates her to establish meaningful partnerships and manage resources with efficiency, equity, and wisdom. Apart from her professional pursuits, Liz spends her spare time with friends & family and loves to ski. She can be reached at liz@grantprogroup.com.