

Philadelphia Common Data Project Summary Report: Findings and Implications

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of the project was to explore the potential value of aggregating data across a set of funders by:

- Analyzing commonality in grant management processes to identify best practices and methods to streamline application and reporting processes
- Understanding commonalities in funding to identify opportunities to improve the effectiveness of the group's funding

Key Finding Themes

- **Opportunity for Streamlining and Impact:** If foundations were to adopt baseline common grants coding and questions, they would be able to collect and share more meaningful data to illuminate funding effectiveness, impact, and opportunities.
- **Data Reveal Gaps in Knowledge:** The aggregate data reveal more about what we cannot conclude than what we can conclude: without common questions and coding, the data are difficult to compare. The current gaps in knowledge point to an opportunity to maximize the use of data for learning and impact.

Process

During May – October 2014, Foundant, at the initiation of two foundation clients, reached-out to 24 clients in the Philadelphia region, 19 of which granted permission to aggregate data on their historical giving.

- Research began with an export of all grant application questions, evaluator (pre-award) review questions, and grant report (post-award) questions. Foundant staff then used keyword matching and human interpretation to define commonality between questions;
- Types of questions asked by funders were analyzed across all 24 foundations since no identifying information was matched with them;
- Data set is limited to the past five years' worth of grant activity (January 1, 2009 – August 14, 2014).

Key Findings

Several key findings emerged from the study:

- **Difference in Questions:** Aggregating data is limited since foundations may ask for the same information or similar information in different ways, limiting comparability and accuracy. This is the primary key finding, and presents an opportunity for the future. Nonetheless, available data reveal several trends, as listed below.

- **Emphasis on Financial Information:** 19 of the 24 foundations asked for budgets and funding sources representing the most common question asked in grant applications/LOIs; in the report questions, the budget/expenditures was the second most common question behind a question about outcomes.
- **Emphasis on the Internal Organization:** The top six of the 10 most common questions focused on the organization’s infrastructure (budget, funding sources, tax documents, board, mission, staff qualifications, in that order); three of the top 10 questions focus on programmatic or organizational impact and community need.
- **Generally Not Asked – Who Is Being Served:** Explicit and standard questions about the community served (demographic or geography) are not common in the grant application/LOI; in the grant report, 11 of 24 asked about ‘what groups were affected’ though this broad phrasing produces a wide range of incomparable responses.
- **Lack of Common Coding:** The definition of coding categories varies greatly (i.e., program area, target population, funding type, and geographic area); for example, the category for Target Population is described with 77 different data options across the data set; geographic and program areas are described with nearly 200 data options; funding type is described with 75 data options. **Therefore, it is difficult to determine where funds go** by geography, target population, or program area because the definitions used by foundations are so varied.
- **Potential to Identify Model Programs and/or Duplication:** The ratios of approvals to denials vary widely among the most common grantees (e.g., West Catholic Preparatory High School had 125 approvals and 1 denial; University of PA Health System had 39 approvals and 27 denials), which indicates the potential for identifying programs or organizations that are commonly regarded as models (or not), and for identifying where funding may be duplicative.

Implications

- **Current Limited Learning Possibilities:** The potential lessons learned from aggregating data are—and will be—limited to the extent that different questions are asked since the answers are and will not be entirely comparable. This limits sharing across foundations about activities, grants, and lessons learned.
- **Opportunity for Learning through Common Coding:** If foundations were to use common coding across a basic set of questions, meaningful data aggregation would be possible, and foundations would be able to identify overlaps, gaps, and opportunities for investments, making it possible to determine as an aggregate:
 - What areas (program, geographic) get the most and least funding?
 - What types (mission focus, budget size) of organizations get the most and least funding?
 - Who is benefiting from our grant dollars?
 - Are the grant dollars reaching the intended beneficiaries?
 - What population groups are not being reached?

- **Harnessing the Potential of Data as a Tool:** Trends in the philanthropy and nonprofit sectors include an emphasis on outcomes and collective impact as a strategy, and the use of data remains a largely untapped tool toward those ends. This pilot project highlights the need for and potential benefit of collecting and sharing grantmaking data and streamlining processes, which could yield significant returns for each foundation that far outweigh the effort required to streamline the grants processes.
- **Nonprofit/Grantee User Experience:** Streamlining grant application would benefit nonprofits, as well, since basic information would not have to be adapted unnecessarily for numerous applications. In addition, by identifying duplication and gaps, foundations may learn of new nonprofit partners and opportunities for funding to advance their missions, potentially increasing access to funding for currently under-served constituencies.