

THE GRANTMAKING SCHOOL ONE YEAR ON

That which does not kill us . . . Joel J Orosz

'That which does not kill us', advises the ancient Chinese proverb, 'makes us stronger.' Market discipline kills many a business, but leaves the survivors stronger. Electoral discipline kills many political careers, but leaves the winners stronger. In the sequestered world of charitable foundations, however, there is no salutary killing force to cull the weak and strengthen the survivors. Foundations, and the programme officers who work for them, have no markets to discipline them, no electorate to turn them out of office – in fact, precious few critics even to scold them. How in the world, then, are programme officers to improve their performance? How can they learn from their mistakes if they are never confronted by them? Indeed, how can they learn their highly distinctive jobs at all?



Dr Joel J Orosz is Distinguished Professor of Philanthropic Studies at the Dorothy A Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Director of The Grantmaking School. He is author of *The Insider's Guide to Grantmaking: How Foundations, Find, Fund and Manage Effective Programs*, published by Jossey-Bass. He can be contacted at oroszj@gvsu.edu

Until last year, the answer was quite simple: they learned on the job. There were no programme-officer-prep courses in US colleges or universities. There were only introductory workshops offered by the Council on Foundations (CoF) and various Regional Associations of Grantmakers (RAGs). Beyond those few basic introductions to the field, every programme officer was left to find the right books or the right mentor, or simply to find time to reflect alone and without feedback on his or her mistakes. Ironically, most programme officers would look askance at a grant proposal from an organization whose senior staff were basically untrained to carry out an important project. So why the apparent lack of interest in grantmaking training?

Why the lack of interest?

These young grantmaking professionals seek to solve daunting social problems. In the process, they are called on to consider plans of work, examine balance sheets, evaluate debt ratios, research benchmarks, define outcomes, negotiate contracts, draft grant agreements, secure board approvals, monitor projects and report results. In the face of escalating social problems, mounting public scrutiny and tremendous interest in accountability, grantmakers find themselves facing ever more complex, technical and data-driven issues.

Despite the demanding nature of the work, we met with considerable scepticism in the field when we put forward the idea of an in-depth university-based grant-

making training. Philanthropy seems to be the last bastion of the old British ideal of gentlemanly amateurism, the prevailing feeling being that you can pick up grantmaking by osmosis, with a little smattering of on-the-job training. There is also perhaps an underlying feeling that giving is essentially good, so what grantmakers do is essentially good and how could they possibly need training in how to do it better? Some grantmakers we talked to insisted that they had 'evidence' that they were doing well – in other words a constant stream of flattery from grantseekers!

We also came across an interesting objection to the whole idea of grantmaking training from some successful grantseekers, perhaps anxious that they might fare less well under a more systematic approach, who expressed the fear that the foundation field would become ossified as a result of inflexible teaching of best practices.

As we developed The Grantmaking School, we continued to believe, in the face of this negative feedback, that many bright, articulate, young programme officers would in fact be interested in continuing education specific to their careers in philanthropy. And we were right.

How much to charge?

The issue of how much to charge was a thorny one – and closely related to the issue of demand. The CoF and RAGs can offer three-day introductory courses for as little as \$500 because their work is subsidized through membership fees or private foundation grants. They clearly adopt this approach partly because it is assumed that there is very little appetite for grantmaker training and you wouldn't get away with charging more.

Our fees had to be commensurate with other university tuition costs – nearly four times higher than those typically charged by membership associations. Could we 'make the sale' at this cost? We felt sure there were programme officers out there who were eager for training and would pay what it cost – and we were proved right by the success of our first five fee-paying programmes. In fact, the higher cost seems to reinforce the perceived quality and scope of the course, and is still quite affordable for most foundations.

Carving out our niche

The differential in fees also reinforces the fact that The Grantmaking School is not in competition with the CoF or RAGs' training programmes. We saw our key target market for training as programme officers

with one to three years' experience – not highly experienced grantmakers but not brand new to the field either. The 'brand new' programme officers are well catered for by the CoF and RAGs. So within our original target population we carved out an exclusive niche of *advanced grantmaking*.

It's one thing to define a very specific niche and quite another to stick to it. It probably shouldn't have been at all surprising that we received an overwhelming number of requests for courses from leaders and fundraisers of non-profit organizations. For grantseekers, greater understanding of how grantmakers tick can only be extremely valuable.

However, The Grantmaking School is for grantmakers, and it was relatively easy to draw the line and say that it was strictly prohibited for non-profit grantseekers to attend. But it is more difficult, because less clear-cut, to deal with applications from foundation staff who work outside programming. Foundation accountants and grants managers – even CEOs and Trustees – realize that grantmaking is at the heart of their work, and often seek to learn more about this vital function. Our approach has been to carefully limit the number of non-programme officers enrolled in each session, so that the curriculum focus remains on grantmaking.

We see this very narrow defining of our niche as essential to our success. Interestingly, one of the few other successful grantmaking programmes, at Stanford, has an equally narrow target market: foundation leaders. Being too inclusive and having course participants with a very wide range of experience would make it almost impossible to pitch the training at the right level. Mixing groups representing various sizes and types of foundation in the US hasn't been a problem, however – though many participants have initially asked to have classes specific to their own foundations.

Developing a curriculum

When developing the curriculum for The Grantmaking School's first course, Advanced Proposal Analysis, we sought advice from experienced programme officers. They pointed out that there are no hard and fast rules for good philanthropy. The very establishment of such rules would be the antithesis of a learning organization that seeks to be fluid and responsive in addressing social ills. We incorporated their advice into the curriculum, discussing at length the need to capture and use learning and to be flexible

– while at the same time recognizing that there is a body of knowledge that need not be reinvented by every newcomer to the field.

In June 2004, we piloted Advanced Proposal Analysis to a group of 22 grantmakers from throughout the US. Feedback from this pilot group, which included a range of grantmaker experience – from those with a few years to those with a few decades – was very positive. News about the course spread through our own marketing efforts and by word of mouth, so that by the time we offered our first fee-based course a few months later, we had a full class and the beginning of a waiting list.

In the past year, The Grantmaking School has offered five three-day Advanced Proposal Analysis courses and developed two additional courses: Ethics in Grantmaking and Advanced Portfolio Management, both of which will be piloted in the coming year.

Our experience so far

It has been an exciting first year. We have learned that foundation professionals, when they are fairly new to the field but have some experience, really are eager for a deep, relevant curriculum about grantmaking – though it must be admitted that what participants appreciated even more was the opportunity to learn from each other over a period of three days living, studying and conversing together. At The Grantmaking School there are no bosses, no grantseekers, no trustees to consider – only other programme officers equally eager to learn to do their jobs better. This was evident from the first pilot course, and we have since adjusted the curriculum and teaching methods to allow for even more small group work and interaction.

One thing that did surprise us, reported by a few programme officers, is that they have encountered some resistance when trying to share what they've learned with senior staff back at their foundations. New ideas on such topics as customer service for grantseekers, due diligence and ethics appear to be unwelcome to some more traditional programme staff, who prefer to cling to the ongoing and unchanged way of operating that they're used to.

The launch and first year of The Grantmaking School 'has not killed us'. In fact, it has made stronger both its faculty and its participants. If we can help build a rich culture of ongoing learning and continuous improvement in the grantmaking field, we will ultimately improve and strengthen the practice of philanthropy for all. @