12-2017

Philanthropy: Evidence in Favor of a Profession

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Recommended Citation

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Introduction

In *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America,* Burton Bledstein (1976, as cited by Stauber, 2010) suggests that a profession is defined by seven standards:

1. a full-time occupation that is one's principal source of income;

2. difficult and extensive training;

3. theoretical training that precedes practice or apprenticeship;

4. mastery of "esoteric but useful systematic knowledge";

5. receipt of a license or degree from a certified institution;

6. provision of "technical competence, superior skill, and a high quality of performance"; and

7. "an ethic of service which taught that dedication to a client's interest took precedence over personal profit." (pp. 86–87)

Scholars and professionals have worked hard to establish nonprofit management as a profession over the last 30-plus years, and evidence has long suggested that nonprofit employment can be viewed as a profession (Hwang & Powell, 2009).

There were over 10.7 million nonprofit workers in the U.S. in 2010 (Salamon, Sokolowski, & Geller, 2012); more than 340 colleges and universities offer degrees and courses focusing on

Key Points

- Philanthropic employees have been cautious in implying that they are pursuing a career in philanthropy. Karl Stauber (2010) presented an argument in support of such caution: that philanthropy failed to meet all seven standards posited by Burton J. Bledstein, that when met, define a profession.

- This article presents a literature review and findings from a survey of 500 members of the Council on Foundations that offer evidence for the counterargument that philanthropic work requires specialized education and training to master a set of core competencies.

- While this article does not argue for or against the question, determining whether philanthropy as a field can rightly be considered a profession has important consequences. Codes of conduct and professional training standards can lead to greater diversity among practitioners. Legitimization lends support for additional work to govern the profession. And the status and prestige stemming from professionalization establish the credibility necessary for grantmakers to influence decision-makers and the public, and to be entrusted with the sound management of charitable funds.

nonprofit management (Mirabella, 2017), and 50 of these programs are members of the Nonprofit Academic Centers Council, an organization that established nonprofit curricular guidelines.

There are also technical competency requirements for nonprofit organizations, defined by such accrediting bodies as the Standards for

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Excellence for the Nonprofit Sector, the Better Business Bureau, and Charity Navigator. Many standards of ethics exist within subfields as well, such as those created by the Association of Fundraising Professionals and the Association for Volunteer Administration.

Although nonprofits and foundations operate under the same 501(c)(3) tax status, full-time foundation employees often view themselves as different from other nonprofit workers. Grantmakers have been cautious in implying that they are pursuing a career in philanthropy (Orosz, 2000, Stauber, 2010). Gardner and Horn (2006) describe philanthropy as very different from other fields because most philanthropy professionals do not plan a career in grantmaking; many end up at foundations while pursuing other work or because they enter the field to accomplish a personal mission.

In 2010, Karl Stauber argued that philanthropy was not a profession because it met only three of Bledstein's seven standards of a profession: it can be a full-time occupation, it involves at least limited mastery of "esoteric but useful systematic knowledge," and it entails an ethic that places the interest of a client over personal gain. This article provides data and evidence gathered from a 2014 survey of professional-development needs, completed by members of

the Council on Foundations (COF), to demonstrate that grantmaking can be considered a profession under Bledstein's criteria:

1. Many full-time grantmakers are employed in the sector.

2. Extensive training is available and utilized by grantmakers through organizations such as The Grantmaking School.

3. Grantmakers pursue theoretical training via master's degrees in philanthropy that are available from multiple universities.

4. Many philanthropic workers have systematic knowledge and mastery of the grantmaking competency.

5. Many grantmakers possess a master's degree with a concentration in nonprofit and/or philanthropic studies.

6. Grantmakers have "technical competence, superior skill, and a high quality of performance."

7. Philanthropic employees have an ethic of service through the mission-driven work of their foundations.

While this article does not attempt to argue that grantmaking should or should not be considered a profession, this additional evidence could serve to further legitimize the field of philanthropy.

Review of Literature

It is difficult to describe the size and scope of the field of philanthropy because the term has many definitions. In this article, "philanthropy" refers to grantmaking by established, incorporated organizations and philanthropic workers — or grantmakers — who are full-time employees of established foundations. This article does not attempt to discuss smaller, volunteer-run foundations or other forms of philanthropic giving.

There are approximately 1.2 million 501(c)(3) organizations operating in the U.S. (National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2017).

Foundations can be incorporated as either private foundations or public charities, which include community foundations. The National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS) reports that 105,000 private foundations completed IRS Form 990-PF in 2016 (National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2017). The Foundation Center (2017) documents 86,726 foundations that currently provide grants: 79,729 independent foundations, 3,687 operating foundations, 2,521 corporate foundations, and 789 community foundations.

Orosz (2000) categorizes foundations according to four approaches to grantmaking:

1. passive foundations, which largely fund a select number of unsolicited requests;

2. proactive foundations, which accept unsolicited requests but also actively search for grantees;

3. prescriptive foundations, which have clearly defined interests and fund grantees through formal requests for proposals; and

4. peremptory foundations, which have clear agendas and select grantees directly, with no competition.

There are no data documenting the total number of staff at grantmaking foundations. Similar to nonprofit workers, however, the majority of grantmaking professionals are employed by the largest organizations (COF, 2011). The COF's 2016 salary and benefits survey sought employment data from all grantmaking foundations listed in the Foundation Center database; the 1,010 responding foundations reported 9,945 paid full-time staff (COF, 2017).

Training Needs of Foundation Professionals

The COF, members of United Philanthropy Forum (formerly the Forum of Regional Associations of Grantmakers), and Exponent Philanthropy (formerly the Association of Small Foundations) offer some training programs for foundation trustees, CEOs, and program officers. Indiana University's Lilly Family School of Philanthropy and Grand Valley State University's

In the past, experience and training in philanthropy was not needed to become a grantmaker; foundations tended to hire people with backgrounds in specific fields rather than individuals with technical grantmaking skills that can be acquired on the job.

Johnson Center for Philanthropy offer longer-term training options for foundation staff.

In the past, experience and training in philanthropy was not needed to become a grantmaker; foundations tended to hire people with backgrounds in specific fields rather than individuals with technical grantmaking skills that can be acquired on the job (Orosz, 2007). In addition, foundations tended to hire people with whom they had an established professional relationship.

Moreover, post-employment training was not popular among foundation staff. Training held a negative connotation for foundations that believed program officers needed to be rotated periodically to bring in a fresh perspective and avoid burnout (Orosz, 2007). And for many grantmakers, philanthropy was merely one chapter of their professional lives. All of these factors often resulted in new foundation staff receiving little guidance on how to do their jobs effectively.

In the past 10 years, however, grantmakers have taken advantage of new opportunities for professional training and education. Notably, Indiana University's Center for Philanthropy became a School of Philanthropy; Grand Valley State's Johnson Center now provides regular training in grantmaking and supports foundations that prioritize training. Moreover, more management-support organizations — including the COF, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations,

The work on grantmaker competencies points to the wide range of knowledge and abilities — from familiarity with philanthropic models to approaches to community organizing — that foundation professionals must possess to be effective.

Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy (EPIP), and GrantCraft — provide professional-development opportunities.

Grantmaker Competencies
Competencies are the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other assets needed to perform a job. In the past, foundations lacked shared professional standards that defined the purpose and practice of grantmaking (Gardner & Horn, 2006). But the past 10 years have seen an influx of defined grantmaker competencies from such organizations as the Grant Professionals Certification Institute (2007); the COF (2013), and EPIP (2013), as well as *Designing Program Officer Competencies for Strategic Grantmaking* (Sturgis, 2008). In addition, the Johnson Center's launch of LearnPhilanthropy in 2015 established frameworks for the field to compile and summarize common grantmaking competencies.

The work on grantmaker competencies points to the wide range of knowledge and abilities — from familiarity with philanthropic models to approaches to community organizing — that foundation professionals must possess to be effective. The nine competencies that appear consistently in the literature are *collaboration, communication, decision-making, grantmaking, grants management, influencing and fundraising skills, organizational development, personal/professional development, and strategic/analytical skills.*

A solid understanding of nonprofits is also essential, including their life cycle, organizational development, and generally accepted accounting principles. Grantmakers also must have a working knowledge of the management of and evaluation process for funded projects (Orosz, 2007). As Castillo, McDonald, and Wilson (2014) observe, grantmaking is more than just giving away money — to be successful, grantmakers must balance analytical, emotional, ethical, and intra/interpersonal competencies.

Nonprofit management competencies are also relevant to grantmakers, given that foundations fund nonprofits. Separate research has defined the responsibilities and necessary skills of fundraising professionals, nonprofit financial managers, and executive directors, and Carpenter (2014) conducted a clustered social network analysis of 15 studies that included nonprofit management competencies, training needs, and capacity-building measures. The analysis revealed 12 core competencies connected across the literature: leadership, planning, public relations, volunteer management, financial management, communication, marketing, governance, data utilization, human resources, fundraising, and information technology. These core competencies and those identified by the COF — collaboration and community building, donor engagement, investment practices — were used as a basis for surveying COF members.

Methodology: Evidence for Philanthropy as a Profession

A February 2014 electronic survey sent to 2,000 COF members contained 33 questions about their job competencies (knowledge, skills, abilities, and other assets), professional-development needs, and training sources; 500 (25 percent) were completed. Twenty-nine of the respondents indicated they were volunteers at a nonprofit or foundation, 95 reported they were employees of a nonprofit, and 376 said they were employed by a foundation. Since little data are available on the total number of employees at grantmaking foundations, the respondents' demographic information was compared to the demographics of nonprofit employees in general; many similarities were found in gender, age, and position level.

TABLE 1 Competencies Performed on a Monthly Basis, Reported by COF Respondents

Competency Performed	% Reported
Leadership	67.8
Grantmaking	62.0
Collaboration and community building	54.2
Program, organizational, and strategic planning and management	54.1
Donor engagement	51.7
Communications, marketing, and public relations	50.7
Nonprofit, philanthropy, history, and ethics	49.3
Financial management	40.3
Governance	38.0
Information management	35.0
Fundraising	34.0
Direct service	33.7
Legal and regulatory issues	32.9
Evaluation	31.2
Human resource management	30.0
Investment practices	29.8
Volunteerism	20.7
Social entrepreneurship	14.3
Advocacy, public policy, and social change	11.7

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This article reports findings from the 376 survey respondents employed by a foundation. The survey results were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The results and the literature review provide evidence that grantmaking meets all seven standards of a profession. To craft the argument, these findings are presented in reverse order:

- **No. 7 - An ethic of service:** Stauber (2010) argued that an ethic of service was a standard met in philanthropy; it continues to be met through the mission-driven work of foundations and the entire nonprofit sector. The general public holds foundations to a high ethical standard. Foundation trustees and staff members are expected to operate for the public good and not for private benefit. This public benefit is codified in the IRS rule requiring all nonprofits to establish conflict-of-interest policies and to review those policies and document potential conflicts annually. The National Center

for Responsive Philanthropy's *Criteria for Philanthropy at Its Best* (2009), a set of principles that is presented at grantmaking conferences across the country, states: "A grantmaker practicing Philanthropy at Its Best serves the public good by demonstrating accountability and transparency to the public, its grantees, and constituents" (p. 8).

- **No. 6 - Competence and skill:** In his 2010 article, Stauber argued that there was no agreed-upon set of skills for philanthropic workers. Since that time, technical competencies have been established for grantmakers (e.g., COF, 2006; EPIP, 2013; Sturgis, 2008); LearnPhilanthropy is based on an agreed-upon taxonomy (Major, 2012). Further evidence of technical competency in grantmaking comes from COF survey respondents, who identified the important competencies they perform monthly. (See Table 1.) The competencies of leadership;

TABLE 2 NIH Proficiency Levels, Descriptions, and Definitions

Proficiency Level (and Description)	Definition
1 (Fundamental awareness)	You have a common knowledge or an understanding of basic techniques and concepts.
2 (Novice)	You have the level of experience gained in a classroom and/or experimental scenarios or as a trainee on the job. You are expected to need help when performing this skill.
3 (Intermediate)	You are able to successfully complete tasks in this competency as requested. Help from an expert may be required from time to time, but you can usually perform the skill independently.
4 (Advanced)	You can perform the actions associated with this skill without assistance. You are certainly recognized within your immediate organization as "a person to ask" when difficult questions arise regarding this skill.
5 (Expert)	You are known as an expert in this area. You can provide guidance, troubleshoot and answer questions related to this area of expertise and the field where the skill is used.

Source: National Institutes of Health (2009) Competencies Proficiency Scale: National Institutes of Health

TABLE 3 Average Proficiency of Frequently Performed Competencies Reported by COF Respondents

Competency Performed	Average Proficiency Level
Grantmaking	*4.15*
Governance	4.02
Fundraising	3.99
Volunteerism	3.95
Donor engagement	3.94
Social entrepreneurship	3.61
Communications, marketing, and public relations	3.50
Advocacy, public policy, and social change	3.47
Collaboration and community building	*3.46*
Leadership	*3.44*
Program, organizational, and strategic planning and management	*3.39*
Investment practices	3.34
Information management	3.24
Evaluation	3.22
Legal and regulatory	3.15
Direct service	3.11
Financial management	2.85

NOTE: Most frequently performed competencies in italics.

grantmaking; collaboration; and program, organizational, and strategic planning and management — identified in the literature as essential to the grantmaking profession — are performed monthly by a majority of respondents.

- **No. 5 - License or degree:** The majority (56.6 percent) of the survey respondents earned a master's degree or higher. In addition, grantmakers can receive a degree from certified institutions: more than 200 schools offer a focus on nonprofit or philanthropic studies (Mirabella, 2017). Most of the respondents (72.1 percent) indicated an interest in pursuing doctoral-level education and, based on their career aspirations, a preference for a professional doctorate degree in philanthropy. Such a degree provides students with advanced, expert-level knowledge and practice-based experience to further develop their philanthropic career (Carpenter, 2016).

- **No. 4 - Mastery of esoteric but useful systematic knowledge:** Mastery of such knowledge can be exhibited through performing competencies (knowledge, skills, abilities, and other assets) at a high level of proficiency. (See Table 2.) Survey respondents were asked to identify the proficiency level at which they perform their competencies. (See Table 3.) An average at the intermediate level (3) or above indicates the respondent believes she or he has mastered the competency. Respondents rated their proficiency at or above the intermediate level — an ability to perform the skill independently — in all competencies except one. Significantly, respondents ranked themselves at an advanced level (4) of proficiency in grantmaking — evidence that respondents have mastered the esoteric knowledge of philanthropy. Respondents also indicated a high likelihood that they would pursue professional development in the competency areas they perform frequently. (See Table 4.) The highest likelihood of seeking professional development was indicated in the frequently

performed competency areas of leadership and of program, organizational, and strategic planning and management, as well as evaluation. Fewer expressed a desire for professional development in grantmaking, presumably since many respondents indicated mastery in that area.

- **No. 3 - Theoretical training:** At this time, 211 universities offer master's degrees in nonprofit or philanthropic studies (Mirabella, 2017); also available to students in the U.S. are six master's degree programs that include philanthropy in their name and offer one or more graduate-level courses in grantmaking. Syllabi for these master's degree programs show that 10 percent of courses offer theoretical training in "philanthropy and the third sector" (Mirabella & McDonald, 2013, p. 250).

- **No. 2 - Difficult and extensive training:** The majority of respondents — 56.6 percent — reported having earned a master's degree, a percentage much higher than the general public (9 percent) (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Respondents also reported attending a variety of philanthropy-related conferences (e.g., COF, Grant Managers Network, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, the Fall Conference on Community Foundations) and pursuing professional development. (See Table 5.) What types of training are considered "difficult" or "extensive" is open to interpretation, but most of the respondents reported using a variety of professional-development sources. In addition, 196 foundation-staff respondents indicated they were members of a professional association in addition to the COF, and the majority of these respondents indicated they were members of three to five professional associations. The most commonly listed were the COF, Association of Fundraising Professionals, Grant Managers Network, American Institute of CPAs, Estate Planning Council, Association of Small Foundations, and regional or state-based grantmaking associations.

TABLE 4 Competency and Likelihood of Pursuing Professional Development

Competency Performed	Likely pursuit of professional development
Leadership	*91.1%*
Program, organizational, and strategic planning and management	*91%*
Evaluation	90%
Donor engagement	88.8%
Investment practices	84.7%
Legal and regulatory	82.5%
Information management	81.9%
Fundraising	81.5%
Human resource management	81.4%
Financial management	80.8%
Grantmaking	*80.7%*
Social entrepreneurship	80.5%
Collaboration and community building	*80.2%*
Communications, marketing, and public relations	78.6%
Governance	78.3%
Advocacy, public policy, and social change	68.7%
Nonprofit, philanthropy, history, and ethics	67.4%
Direct service	60.2%
Volunteerism	56.6%

NOTE: Most frequently performed competencies in italics.

TABLE 5 Sources of Professional Development and Percentage of Use

Source	Use
Books	*99.7%*
Try something new	*99.6%*
Contact a colleague	97.8%
Conference	96.6%
Association	91.5%
Online	88.5%
Organization	84.1%
On the job	75.2%
Club	57.7%
Volunteer	53.9%

- **No. 1 - A full-time occupation:** Twenty-five percent of survey respondents were president/CEO of a foundation, 25 percent were program staff members, and the remaining 50 percent held a variety of other foundation jobs. In terms of experience, respondents also indicated the level of the position they held: 2.7 percent were entry-level employees, 43.6 percent were mid-level, 35.1 percent were experienced, and 18.5 percent were at the executive level. A search of the job compilation site Indeed.com found more than 100 full-time grantmaking jobs and almost 4,000 full-time philanthropy-related positions.

Discussion, Limitations, and Conclusion

In the seven years since Stauber (2010) argued that philanthropy cannot be considered a profession, additional evidence has emerged to provide a counterargument. In either case, determining whether a field can rightly be considered a profession matters — for a variety of reasons.

Professions are governed by a code of conduct and provide standardized training and education, both of which provide for greater diversity and equity within a field. Professionalization legitimizes a field and creates support for additional work to govern the profession. Moreover, as Stauber emphasized, "Being a professional was a way for those born outside of privilege to gain power and prestige" (2010, p. 89). Since grantmaking professionals are typically in the position of recommending funding that utilizes other people's money, professional influence and prestige are important factors in inspiring trust in their grantmaking and other foundation decisions. The standards of a profession lend the credibility necessary for grantmakers to influence decision-makers and the general public.

Nevertheless, the definitions and data used in this article are narrow and its defined scope — a focus on grantmaking within formal, established organizations — has its limitations. Many smaller volunteer-run foundations, giving circles, and nonestablished foundations are left out

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of the discussion; as is true with nonprofit organizations in general, data on established foundations are more readily available.

Traditional data analysis also has its limitations, as does generalizing data to an entire field. In reviewing the demographic data from 376 survey respondents and comparing those data to the available demographic information on the philanthropic sector, it was clear that generalizations could be made about the profession of philanthropy since the COF survey respondents were representative of the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors in such characteristics as gender, age, and level of position.

Future studies can further explore the philosophical side of Stauber's 2010 article. And in pursuit of further evidence in favor of grantmaking as a profession, empirical studies should determine the true size and scope of employment within the philanthropic sector and gather more specific information about the formal education and training that grantmakers receive.

Acknowledgments

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