

# REPORT

FINAL REPORT

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## **Competitive Grant-Making: A Review of the Literature**

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## INTRODUCTION

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As part of the evaluation of the Cities Expanding Health Access for Children and Families (CEHACF) program for the Atlantic Philanthropies, Mathematica Policy Research conducted a targeted literature review of scholarly and other published sources to identify previous publications regarding competitive grant-making strategies. For this literature review, competitive grant-making is defined as a process whereby philanthropic organizations clearly define their goals and objectives, require bidders to compete against each other (sometimes through multiple rounds), thoroughly review those proposals, and grant awards to the strongest bids. The literature review sought to gather evidence to answer five research questions:

1. How are competitive grant-making strategies used?
2. Why have competitive grant-making strategies been used?
3. When are competitive grant-making strategies preferable to a more traditional approach (such as when foundations grant money to organizations with which they have a pre-existing relationship)?
4. How are competitive grant-making strategies evaluated?<sup>1</sup>
5. How do competitive grant-making strategies contribute to sustainability?

In the remainder of this report, we discuss our literature review methods (Section A), background on competitive grant-making (Section B), and findings for the five research questions (Section C).

### A. Literature review methods

To locate relevant articles and publications on these topics, we began in February 2014 with a rapid review of the literature to help us understand the terminology and sources that would be most useful. We searched Google Scholar with the following terms: competitive grant-making, foundation effectiveness, effective foundation grant strategy, strategic grant-making, effective philanthropy, and foundation impact.

In October 2014, we conducted a more comprehensive search by adding more sources to gather literature on the topic from 1999 to present. These sources included the Foundation Center's Catalogue of Nonprofit Literature, *Foundation Review*, EBSCOhost's Business Source Corporate, SocINDEX, and again, Google Scholar. We also widened the original search by adding the following terms: foundation competitive grants, philanthropic competitive grants, foundation grant-making strategies, philanthropic grant-making strategies, strategic grant-making, proactive grant-making, competitive grants to cities/municipalities, cities/municipalities use of grants, and competitive grants.

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<sup>1</sup> In the Evaluation Plan design memo from September 9, 2014, this question was split in two: "How are competitive grant-making strategies evaluated?" and "What standard measures or indicators are currently used (or proposed for use) in the evaluation of the reach, implementation, and impact of competitive grants from foundations (particularly among cities or municipal governments)?" After conducting the literature review, we found these two questions to be interrelated, and thus we combined them for discussion purposes.

We gathered and screened the resulting articles for relevance. We determined 42 to be potentially relevant, and 22 to be highly relevant. We scanned the 22 most relevant documents for additional search terms to identify the terms most commonly found and conducted another search using the following terms: two-stage grant-making, high engagement philanthropy, high engagement grant-making, seed money philanthropy, seed money grant-making, and foundation seed money. In total, we selected 53 articles with potentially relevant information, but after reading these articles, we excluded 22 that we determined off-topic (for example, a discussion of how foundations manage their assets) or that lacked evidence that would answer one of our research questions (for example, a funding award announcement with little additional relevant information). Included in this literature review are the remaining 31 articles, which contained relevant and useful information.

## **B. Background on competitive grant-making**

Competitive grant-making is not an entirely new philanthropic strategy, but its many variations and names (including venture philanthropy, high engagement philanthropy, strategic grant-making, proactive grant-making, etc.) have gained prominence in recent years. Although these models do have differences, the general principles are the same and include *philanthropic organizations clearly defining their goals and objectives, competition (sometimes multiple rounds of competition) to solicit the best possible proposals, careful and unbiased review of those proposals, and an eventual financial award* (Ellsworth 2001). In addition, philanthropic organizations often treat these grants as long-term investments, not gifts; rather than writing a check and moving on, they continuously engage with the grantee by offering capacity-building services (such as consulting, technical assistance, and networking), as well as continuous performance monitoring (Brest and Harvey 2008). The ongoing performance monitoring typically associated with this type of grant-making helps organizations make course corrections if aspects of the program are not having the desired impact, and helps foundations and grantees alike gauge the overall impact of the program (Brest and Harvey 2008). This multiphased approach to grant-making is sometimes likened to a quality-improvement model, in which funders do the research, fund one or more entities to tackle the problem, study the response, and then adapt strategies accordingly (Kessler and Snowdon 2005; Canales 2014).

Although some aspects of this grant-making model have been around for decades, this approach to strategic investment took off during the late 1990s and early 2000s; its leaders were individuals who became wealthy in the dot-com era and wanted to use their newfound prosperity to address social problems (Moody 2008). Many chose to bring the same skills that had helped them be successful as entrepreneurs and translate their competitive strategies into the philanthropic field; this approach then caught on more widely. For example, issuing a Request for Proposals (RFP) to select the most promising grant ideas and implementation strategies was not new, but the process became more common among foundations during this time period, and rigorous due diligence to evaluate proposals has now become the norm (Frumkin 2003; Moody 2008).

## C. Findings

### 1. How are competitive grant-making strategies used?

Competitive grant-making strategies are used to grant money in a number of sectors (including health, education, and research) and to distribute funds to a variety of organizations (including nonprofit organizations, governments, and smaller foundations). As mentioned previously, the goal of this strategy is to develop a rigorous process by which to identify problems and opportunities for solutions, and to fund the entities with the best ideas to address those problems (Ellsworth 2001). Many organizations conducting competitive grant-making also then actively work to ensure through ongoing engagement and performance monitoring that the grantee organization is meeting the goals of their programs.

**Strategic choice of issue.** The first step of the competitive grant-making process is for the philanthropic organization to identify the issues it is looking to address and to develop criteria for funding organizations—not necessarily projects—that will help it meet those goals (Ellsworth 2001). Although this process may not seem particularly innovative, narrowing the focus of the foundation to addressing a specific issue and giving larger grants to fewer organizations in an attempt to be more strategic are rather unique approaches (The Center for Effective Philanthropy 2003; Faulk 2011). These long-term, deep-dive investments in organizations are particularly useful when a foundation identifies an issue that is not already being addressed (or not being addressed adequately), is appropriate in scope and scale (it can be accomplished in a realistic time frame), and will result in visible and measurable impact (Council on Foundations 2008). For example, following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the JPMorgan Chase Foundation knew that it wanted to make investments that would affect change in lower Manhattan (Feller 2002). To determine its priorities, staff at the foundation conducted research and interviews to determine the most critical needs. The desire to deploy the grant dollars quickly was balanced by the need to make investments in the “right” problems and the “right” organizations. Once it established its priorities, it determined the criteria by which it would evaluate grant applications.

**Thorough applicant screening.** The next steps in the process are to issue an RFP and to screen applicants on a competitive basis using a committee of experts (Ellsworth 2001). The rigor by which applications are screened helps set competitive grant-making strategies apart from other alternatives. Some foundations approach their giving with the same due diligence as a venture capital firm, meaning they review grant applications against a set of criteria; assess organizational strengths by reviewing financial reports, past program performance, and capacity for performance measurement; and look at the alignment of the organization’s goals with their own (Moody 2008; Frumkin 2003; Faulk 2011; Giudice and Bolduc 2004; Brest and Harvey 2008). This type of rigorous review helps ensure that the funder and grantee are, indeed, on the same page. Although this rigorous assessment can help foundations determine which organizations offer the best prospects for funding, one criticism of this model is that potential grantees have incentive during the application process to downplay goals and interests that may differ from those of the foundation, to better “fit” the foundation’s goals (Letts and Rayan 2003). Another criticism of this approach is that it can increase the number of resources that organizations have to dedicate to fundraising (to develop winning proposals), which could lead to lower program spending as a share of total revenues within organizations (Faulk 2011).

**Use of multiple stages.** Some initiatives, such as the CEHACF program, have turned the competitive process into a multistaged model, whereby money is competitively awarded for planning activities, and grantees compete against each other for funds to implement their plans. This two-staged approach can be thought of as a way of giving grantees “seed money” to support the planning process in a thoughtful and supportive environment (McCracken and Firesheets 2010). Once plans are developed, the most promising can be funded directly by the original foundation, or could gain financing from another source. Although the recipients of implementation grants are more likely to achieve their goals, even those that don’t receive direct funding have a solid business plan that can be used to solicit funds from other sources and have benefited from the support received along the way. For example, to spread the successful Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ) model of combating child poverty by concentrating interventions in a neighborhood, the federal government awards planning and implementation grants for its Promise Neighborhoods program, which is a community-focused program based on the HCZ model that funds local efforts to improve educational opportunities and provide comprehensive health, safety, and support services in high-poverty neighborhoods. The U.S. Department of Education awards planning grants (one-year awards to create targeted plans for combating poverty in the local community) as well as implementation grants (five-year grants to execute community-led plans to communities who demonstrated a sound strategy and the capacity to implement the plan) (Klein 2010; U.S. Department of Education 2012). Technical assistance and support to the grantees is provided by HCZ, Policy Link, and the Center for the Study of Social Policy.

**Delegation to outside entity.** The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) began decades ago using a style of competitive grant-making through its National Program model, whereby the foundation delegates the management of a related group of grants to an outside organization (often based in a university or other nonprofit organization) called the National Program Office (NPO) (Hughes 2005). The NPO is responsible for competitively selecting grantees, as well as monitoring the work carried out under the grants, providing technical assistance to program sites, and facilitating collaboration and information sharing. RWJF pursued this model (and approximately 65 percent of RWJF’s funding is made through NPOs) as a way to balance the foundation’s desire to maintain a relatively small and nimble staff with the need to monitor the programs scrupulously and with the most knowledgeable and thorough program oversight available. For example, RWJF’s Urban Health Initiative program sought to improve the health and safety of young people in urban environments and was administered through an NPO. To meet the program’s goals, eight cities engaged in a two-year planning process, and five received additional funding for an eight-year implementation phase (Silver and Weitzman 2009). This approach helped the cities harness existing efforts and gain buy-in from political and community leadership. It also brought added resources and visibility to the cause, even for those not selected to be part of the implementation phase.

## **2. Why have competitive grant-making strategies been used?**

**Impact.** Competitive grant-making is used to make the distribution of charitable funds more strategic and more effective (The Center for Effective Philanthropy 2003; Faulk 2011). Bringing a higher degree of analytical rigor and competition to the allocation of charitable funds is meant to improve outcomes and to ensure limited resources are being directed to the most worthy organizations. Competition for funds (both one- and two-stage models) can encourage a more

diverse pool of potential grantees (rather than giving to groups with whom the foundation already has a relationship), which may help foundations uncover unique approaches to tackling problems (Paige et al. 2012). Some evidence supports the idea that a high degree of pre-grant screening can improve the effectiveness of the grant. In a study using predictive software packages to evaluate the performance of grants offered by two foundations (one that used a thorough vetting process, and another that did not), differences in the amount of pre-grant screening were linked to more positive grant outcomes (Harris et al. 2006). The more intensely pre-screened grantees were judged to result in fewer ineffective or problematic grants.

**Jump-start.** Competitive grant-making is also used to “jump-start” organizations and to make upfront investments that they wouldn’t otherwise be able to fund (Breihan 2009). Because the model often involves general operating support or planning grant funding (rather than specific project funding), it tends to give organizations the flexibility and resources to plan and construct a sound approach to a problem, the results of which can spread beyond the initial grant (Mendel and Brudney 2014; Breihan 2009; Greeley and Greeley 2011). It can thus be thought of as a way to “amplify” resources; the foundation stimulates the conversation and supports the process of engaging stakeholders and building capacity, and it gives organizations a solid plan that can then be pitched to other funders. For example, using the one-stage competitive model, RWJF wanted to impact public policy regarding the ability of adults with developmental disabilities to choose their own providers. To achieve this goal, it provided modest competitive grants to states to pursue particular policies (those offering developmentally disabled adults greater consumer choice), and then used statistical analyses to determine whether the small grants awarded helped spur additional funding and action within those states as well as in nearby states, which they did (Breihan 2009). This cascading effect within and across states was an intended consequence, helping to build momentum around the issue and helping grantees gain leverage. In another example, the Kellogg Foundation’s SPARK (Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids) initiative aimed to improve early childhood education and reduce the number of children beginning school unprepared to learn by linking preschool and kindergarten expectations and building effective transitions (Greeley and Greeley 2011). Through this program, Kellogg offered eight grantees \$58.5 million over seven years; the grantees were then able to leverage this funding for an additional \$106 million in financial and in-kind services.

**Public scrutiny.** Another reason cited for adopting competitive grant-making processes is that foundations are subject to public scrutiny due to their tax advantages. By formalizing and being more transparent about their grant selection process, they can demonstrate that they are being good stewards of their funds (Faulk 2011; The Center for Effective Philanthropy 2002). The formalized review process helps funders demonstrate that they are responding to the community needs in a systematic and engaged way (Gronbjerg et al. 2000).

**Disadvantages.** Although many positive aspects to competitive grant-making have been cited, there are some drawbacks to the approach highlighted in the literature. The process is time- and resource-consuming, potentially taking away financial and human resources for other problems (Brest and Harvey 2008). Some observers are also concerned that the sustained relationship required to support and provide technical assistance to grantees could block the foundation’s awareness of innovative approaches by nongrantees, and impede its freedom to change tactics (Ellsworth 2001). Faulk (2011) also notes that no studies actually test a specific

relationship between competition for grants and financial efficiency, nor are there studies measuring the relative importance of financial efficiency across grant markets.

### **3. Under what circumstances or conditions are competitive grant-making strategies preferable to a more traditional approach?**

**Crowded playing field.** Some authors felt that competitive grant-making is the most strategic model, because it helps foundations narrow the often-crowded playing field (Greeley and Greeley 2011; Faulk 2011). When there are multiple entities that could potentially use the funds a foundation plans to disperse, it helps foundations rigorously assess their options to give their investment to the organization that will handle it most efficiently and effectively.

**Long-term goals.** Because the competitive grant-making process can be lengthy due to the many layers of review, it may be preferable when a funder is looking to engage in initiatives with a longer term horizon, such as systems change, policy, or policy development work (Council on Foundations 2008). In these areas, convening diverse stakeholders is often a necessary function, and foundations often have the unique ability to draw together public and private actors to develop consensus and partnerships that wouldn't otherwise take place (Mendel and Brudney 2014). This type of engagement and collaboration requires a significant time investment, however, meaning the model is more useful when funding fewer projects for longer periods (Ginsburg 2010; The Center for Effective Philanthropy 2003; Gronbjerg et al. 2000).

**Capacity-building.** Because of the degree to which funders and grantees interact throughout the competitive grant-making process, establishing and sustaining a relationship is extremely important (Council on Foundations 2008; Letts and Rayan 2003). Especially when the foundation intends to offer supportive elements such as technical assistance and/or consulting services, a strong working relationship is necessary, and offering funds through competition can help winnow out the groups that are ill-suited to work with the foundation. Likewise, if the foundation is offering general operating support (another form of capacity-building), ensuring the grantees' and funder's missions are closely aligned and that the two entities have the trust to promote collaborative trouble-shooting is crucial (Brest and Harvey 2008).

### **4. How are competitive grant-making strategies evaluated?**

Monitoring and evaluation are key principles of competitive grant-making and need to be considered and planned for from the beginning (Brest and Harvey 2008). Foundations that spend a tremendous amount of effort selecting grant recipients should also spend considerable effort helping them succeed (Frumkin 2003). Authors in this literature review had differing ideas about how to evaluate both the strategies undertaken by their grantees and their own performance, but, in general, there is consensus that developing a one-size-fits-all model is next to impossible. Developing a logic model during the initial planning phase and using the same logic model to track and evaluate the grantees was generally described as a fair way to conduct performance monitoring, giving grantees the tools to monitor their processes and outcomes, and helping foundations link their own performance to what they have funded (Kessler and Snowdon 2005; Brest and Harvey 2008). In general, the most important thing to measure is the specific outcome that the program is trying to impact, and to measure it using metrics that are timely, summative, and (when possible) comparable (The Center for Effective Philanthropy 2002). This approach allows for comparison across organizations and for organizations receiving grants to tell the



story of their impact to future funders. Some authors suggest selecting just one or two aspects to measure in a methodical way to determine whether the programs are working and how they could get better (Forti and Yazbak 2012).

Output measures can be used to evaluate the use of competitive grants, and are often one of the more straightforward ways to track grantee performance. For example, in the JPMorgan Chase Foundation example, the grantees measured specific outputs, such as the number of recycled computers donated at New York City firehouses, the number of meals served in a soup kitchen, and the number of World Trade Center survivors treated (Feller 2002). In the Kellogg Foundation example of early childhood education, the foundation asked grantees to track the number of vulnerable children that received services through the programs (Greeley and Greeley 2011). Which outputs to track should be determined at the beginning of the process (with the help of a logic model); determining which data are important is key, and ensuring that both the foundation and the grantees agree on and understand the whys and the hows of the measures that were selected is important (Buteau et al. 2009; The Center for Effective Philanthropy 2003). When output metrics are used, it is also important to provide incentives to nurture a culture of continuous improvement; staff need to see their data collection efforts as a form of immediate feedback and a way to make their work better, not as a punishment for mistakes (Forti and Yazbak 2012).

Foundations focused on larger grants to build organizational capacity sometimes focus more on organizational milestones than output metrics (The Center for Effective Philanthropy 2003). Examples of these types of indicators are investments in technology, and metrics on improvements in human resources, financial, or fundraising capacity. For foundations particularly interested in sustainability, whether the project was sustained at the end of the grant period can be an important indicator of success (McCracken and Firesheets 2010).

Some foundations chose to conduct evaluations of the use and benefits of competitive grant funds, often through formative and summative methods, to explain the factors contributing to grant outcomes. In other words, these types of evaluations help funders understand not only whether their investment is having the intended effects, but why and how those effects occur (Connolly 2011). For example, feedback surveys with grantee staff solicit grantees' comments on the facilitators and barriers to sustainability, and what steps could be taken to make the program more effective (McCracken and Firesheets 2010). An evaluation of the Kellogg Foundation's Social Determinants of Health program sought opinions on the impact of the funding on outcomes such as improvements in neighborhood living conditions, health promotion, disease and injury prevention, and civic engagement (Paige et al. 2012). For RWJF's evaluation of the Urban Health Initiative, the foundation used information from several sources to determine the impact of focusing the intervention at the city (rather than neighborhood) level and how this decision may have impacted service delivery and opportunities for scale (Silver and Weitzman 2009).

Some foundations try to evaluate how their work is transforming society as a whole and creating public value (Mendel and Brudney 2014). The authors assert that public value is realized when individuals trust public policymakers and public institutions, have faith in the system of economy and justice, and enjoy a level playing field to achieve a measure of economic security. These types of public value are generated when public and private, mission-oriented

organizations strive to meet their organizational goals and can be measured by tracing the work beyond transactions (for example, the number of clients served), to grantee performance that benefits larger society. Another way to measure this factor is to consider the “social return on investment.” Although difficult to evaluate, this approach could include measuring the tax dollars saved by helping reduce dependence on public assistance, homeless shelters, and other government supports (Frumkin 2003).

Harris et al. (2006) suggest that foundations ask specific questions that are relevant across many sectors, such as:

- Did the funded work mostly achieve its objectives?
- With the benefit of hindsight, was it the right decision to have funded that work?
- Would you fund the organization again?

Paige et al. (2012) suggest that good performance measures could include the extent to which proposed outcomes were achieved, the magnitude of their impact (perhaps a combination of the number of people likely to be affected and the strength of the intervention effects), the sustainability of the project, and the quality of the cross-sectoral collaboration.

## **5. How do competitive grant-making strategies contribute to sustainability?**

Competitive grant-making strategies can contribute to the sustainability of funded organizations in three major ways. First, as previously mentioned, the technical assistance, management consulting, and time spent building networks of stakeholders help to build the organizational capacity of grantees and create broader support for the initiative’s goals (Frumkin 2003; Isaacs and Knickman 2005). When funders and grantees work together, grantees may be able to more easily achieve their goals because of the capacity-building services offered (such as consulting, technical assistance, and networking) (Brest and Harvey 2008). Further, because this type of funding model often offers general operating support (rather than specific program support), grantees have more flexibility to allocate resources they deem most effective, which can help enhance an organization’s resilience and enable it to respond flexibly to future challenges (Brest and Harvey 2008).

Competitive grant-making (particularly the two-stage model), can help organizations improve their ability to obtain ongoing financial support from other sources and leverage their assets to become more competitive for other funding opportunities. “Winning” a competitive grant (either a grant in general or a planning grant) can signal to other funders that an entity is a good investment, which can yield more funding (Faulk 2011).

Finally, forcing potential grantees to think about sustainability from the beginning of the competitive process can be helpful to ensuring that the systems and programs initiated through the grant really are sustained (McCracken and Firesheets 2010). Grantees can use this approach during the application process as well as throughout the period of funding (Letts and Rayan 2003; McCracken and Firesheets 2010). In the Kellogg Foundation’s early childhood program, for example, each grantee had successfully positioned itself to continue the work it had started; the initial investment allowed them to forge partnerships, energize stakeholders, and to reach a “tipping point” from which they could launch their proven approaches (Greeley and Greeley

2011). For foundations, developing an exit strategy and explicitly discussing plans for after funding ends can be a challenge, especially when a strong relationship has developed (Moody 2008). Failure to develop this strategy from the outset, however, can leave grantees without viable options for replacing critical funds and can contribute to lower degrees of sustainability.

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