

**Foundation Staffing:  
Facts, Figures...Meaning?**  
*By Marc Green*

Research conducted by the Foundation Center over the past several decades has produced our most detailed record of foundation grantmaking. The researchers and statisticians who work at the Foundation Center are serious folks, and their data collection methods are—no doubt—both rigorous and reliable. Once the data has been collected, however, it needs to be presented, and that's where the problems start.

*Foundation Staffing: Update on Staffing Trends of Private and Community Foundations* is a case in point. This new report is part of the "Foundations Today" series, the successor to the statistical yearbook, *Foundation Giving*. (Other reports in the annual series cover patterns of foundation growth, foundation giving trends, and the internal practices of foundations.)

According to Loren Renz, the Foundation Center's vice-president for research, the decision to move to a series format was made in order "to present information in a more timely and tailored way." Which begs the question: tailored for whom? Academicians? Foundation insiders? Grantseekers?

Unfortunately, the last choice is also the least likely.

The authors of this new report claim that it "provides the most comprehensive information available on the number of staffed U.S. grantmaking foundations and their staffing patterns." But "comprehensive" does not necessarily translate into "useful."

Many of the report's "Key Findings" merely confirm the obvious (e.g., "Larger foundations were more likely to be staffed and employ full-time staff"). Others are simply factoids. For example, in a section titled "Foundation Staffing by Region," we learn that, despite the concentration of larger and older foundations in the Northeast and Midwest, the number of staffed foundations in the West and South is proportionately higher. This, the authors declare, comes as "an unexpected finding." Unexpected, perhaps, but is it significant? They speculate that it results from "a willingness by grantmakers in both regions to bring on staff earlier in their development than did funders in the Northeast and Midwest." They fail to speculate, however, as to the consequences or the relevance of these geographic disparities.

—— Page 1 of 4 ——

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For a grantseeker, it is clearly important to know whether a particular foundation has professional staff. After all, staffed foundations are the ones most likely to have somebody reading proposals. But how does it benefit grantseekers to know that the number of staffed foundations in their region of the country is marginally higher or lower than in some other region of the country?

If (God forbid!) foundations made block grants the way the federal government does, or if there were some mandate to distribute foundation dollars equitably across regions, then perhaps a geographic analysis of staffed foundations would be useful—to policy-makers or elected officials. But private foundations don't operate that way, and no interpretation of this kind of data is going to result in a more equitable allocation of philanthropic resources. So why does the analysis matter, and to whom is it directed?

Similar questions might be raised about a section titled "Foundation Staffing by Period of Establishment." There we learn that (1) "Since foundation size correlates with foundation age, with older foundations more apt to have received their full endowments from donors, it is therefore not surprising that older foundations are more likely to employ paid staff"; and (2) There are many ways to slice a pie chart—none of them very enlightening.

The report does contain at least one critical piece of information for grantseekers, and it can be found in the very first paragraph: "Only a small share of U.S. foundations employ paid staff to develop projects, review and investigate proposals, and work with the public." Despite what the authors describe as "strong" growth in the number of staffed foundations over the past decade, the actual number of staffed foundations remains relatively small—slightly over 3,000.

Even that number may be a bit misleading, since operating foundations are included in this survey, and operating foundations typically do not make grants. Moreover, the figures on foundation staffing analyzed in the report include all staff positions reported by foundations, not simply those positions associated with grantmaking. As the authors note, a substantial portion of staff time at community foundations may be devoted to cultivating donors rather than making grants, and at large private foundations, staff responsibilities may range "from asset management, to research and evaluation, to facilities maintenance."

So just because you've learned that there are 3,048 staffed foundations out there, don't assume there are 3,048 foundations that might entertain your

proposal. And just because a particular foundation has a staff of ten, don't assume that all ten are involved in grantmaking.

Unfortunately, if you want to know the names and locations of those 3,048 staffed foundations, you won't find them here. That's the kind of information that would be truly useful to a grantseeker. It's also the kind of information that the Foundation Center should logically be supplying—preferably in a single affordable directory.

Instead of creating such a directory, however, the Foundation Center continues to produce dozens of other, less user-friendly directories. An individual grantseeker intent on cobbling together his or her own list of staffed foundations could probably do so by digging through other Foundation Center publications, like the *Foundation Directory Part 1* (which lists the top 10,000 foundations by total giving), the *National Directory of Corporate Giving* (which includes corporate foundations), and the *Directory of Grantmaking Public Charities* (which includes community foundations). But why should anyone have to do that? The Foundation Center already knows which foundations are staffed and which ones are not. The complete list of 3,048 could be readily retrieved from their database. Wouldn't it make sense to take that list, eliminate the non-grantmaking operating foundations, and publish a coherent, comprehensive *Directory of Staffed Grantmaking Foundations*?

The answer may have more to do with marketing strategy than making sense. While such a directory would be a boon to grantseekers, it would also undercut the value of other Foundation Center products. In marketing its directories, the Foundation Center has always encouraged the dubious notion that more data—and more varied presentations of the same data—will inevitably yield more useful knowledge.

Consider the *Foundation Directory Part 2* (cover price: \$185), touted as a “reliable, data-packed” volume which, like the venerable *Foundation Directory Part 1*, features “a sophisticated indexing system that helps you target the most appropriate funders.” The law of diminishing returns sets in pretty quickly when you start plowing through the 10,000 second-tier foundations in *Part 2* and discover how many are small, unstaffed family foundations which restrict their giving to very specific communities and/or pre-selected recipients.

The practice of bundling its publications, and then offering a discount on the cover price, is another way the Foundation Center pushes the theory that

more is somehow better. You can get your own copy of this *Foundation Staffing* report (along with all the other reports in the “Foundations Today” series) if you purchase something called the “Library for Foundation and Corporate Fundraising,” a seven-volume set that also includes both parts of the *Foundation Directory*, *The Foundation 1000*, the *Guide to U.S. Foundations*, and the *National Directory of Corporate Giving*. According to the Foundation Center’s promotional brochure, buying the entire set not only saves \$340 off the \$1,315 list price, it “helps you get the information you need at a price you can afford!”

Of course, if you—like most grantseekers—have no real need to own the “Foundations Today” series, or the *Foundation Directory Part 2*, or the *Guide to U.S. Foundations* (a one-time tool for finding sources of local support), what are you really saving? And if you’re flush enough not to have to ask that question, why do you need a grant?