

Scanning and Networking: Routines for Discovering the Unexpected

A Closer Look

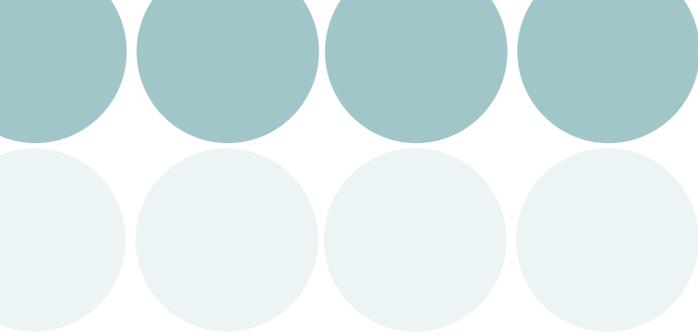
Grant makers frequently ask us for more on various issues that come up in our guides. Our response is a web-only series, *A Closer Look*.

For each edition, we invite several experienced grant makers to explore a specific topic in the context of their foundation, and to answer questions about how it shapes and impacts their work. This virtual roundtable supplements the guide that inspired it, and offers a range of perspectives, approaches, and tools to help you in your own practice.

Linda Lehrer is the author of this edition of *A Closer Look*, which supplements our guide, *Scanning the Landscape: Finding Out What's Going on in Your Field*. Both are available at www.grantcraft.org.

Scanning is something grant makers typically do when planning a new program or contemplating a shift in strategy, yet some foundations also conduct a continuous form of scanning by developing networks. Several grant makers talked about how networks help them look beyond their usual sources for new work, fresh ideas, and innovative organizations:

- **Joy Vermillion Heinsohn, program officer at the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation.** The foundation strives to improve the quality of life of the people of North Carolina by supporting projects in community economic development, environment, democracy and civic engagement, pre-collegiate education, and social justice and equity. In 2005 the foundation awarded \$15 million in grants.
- **Susan Jenkins, executive director of the Cherokee Preservation Foundation.** The foundation works to improve the quality of life of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians and to strengthen the western North Carolina region. It has awarded more than \$27.1 million in grants since 2002.
- **Marion Kane, executive director, Pat Brandes, senior advisor, and Roberto Cremonini, chief knowledge and learning officer of the Barr Foundation.** Based in Boston, the foundation focuses primarily on education and the environment, while also providing support for arts and cultural activities. Its annual grant making totals approximately \$40 million.
- **Mary Kaplan, vice president of program at the Endowment for Health in Concord, New Hampshire.** A private foundation created in 1999 in anticipation of the sale of Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Hampshire to the Anthem Insurance Companies, Inc., the endowment is dedicated to improving the health of the citizens of New Hampshire. Since October 2000 it has distributed nearly \$15 million.
- **Anne Vally, special initiatives officer at The James Irvine Foundation.** The foundation seeks to advance the educational and economic prospects of low-income Californians; engage people in the civic and cultural life of their communities and state; enhance understanding and communication among diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups; and enrich the state's intellectual and creative environment. With assets of more than \$1.5 billion, the foundation awarded \$69 million in grants in 2006.



“Each year we visit communities throughout the state over a one-month period for listening sessions.”

Q: WHY IS NETWORKING IMPORTANT TO YOU AND YOUR FOUNDATION? WHAT SPECIFIC STRATEGIES DO YOU USE?

JOY VERMILLION HEINSOHN: We’ve had an advisory panel for over 25 years. There are fifteen members, and five of them are selected and five rotate off per year. The panel is a way to get to know a number of communities by bringing people together from around the state who can help us learn more about what’s happening in their towns, cities, and regions. North Carolina is a state where half the population resides in 15 counties, and the other half in the remaining 85 counties, so we’re kind of spread out. The panel meets three times a year. We share with them the list of proposals, so if they’re familiar with any of the organizations they’re free to submit comments. Since they are not a decision-making body, we also let them know that we appreciate their input but the board ultimately has the say on what gets funded.

MARY KAPLAN: We’re a healthcare conversion foundation. That means our assets literally came from the premium checks people paid for their health insurance to Blue Cross Blue Shield. We look at these people as our shareholders. Each year we visit communities throughout the state over a one-month period for listening sessions. We try not to go in with an agenda; we don’t mention topics until people bring them up. We publicize the sessions pretty aggressively and work hard to get media attention. We say we’re inviting people to participate in a community conversation about health and health care systems. We let them know that our board, president, and staff will be there to listen. Advocacy organizations also routinely tag along: the American Cancer Society one year, a Medicaid ombudsman another time. So we’re providing a built-in structure that other people can use without investing time and money.

PAT BRANDES: Boston is a majority-minority city, plus it’s a newcomer’s city: 32 percent of the population is immigrants. So keeping up with that kind of change in terms of demographics requires a certain vigilance. Our fellows network, which has been going since 2005, helps us do that. The program was set up not so much for the foundation as for the city of Boston. It was explicitly created to be diverse, representing the arts, environment, human services, housing, and education. We now have 24 fellows who are proven leaders in the city, and many of them come from immigrant communities. We give them a three-month sabbatical and then

TO LEARN MORE:

Two of the network learning strategies featured here — The James Irvine Foundation New Connections Fund and the Barr Fellows Program — are formal programs of their foundations. For information on how each program works, along with guidelines and objectives, see www.irvine.org and www.barrfoundation.org.

keep them together for three years. They also become part of an alumni network, which is another set of eyes and ears for the foundation.

ANNE VALLY: One of the unique things about The James Irvine Foundation is our philosophy of sticking with our partners long term. However, an unintended consequence of this approach is that, over time, grantees can begin to look very much like an insider's club. During the foundation's strategic planning effort a few years ago, we realized that we needed processes to support our value of being open to new ideas and partners. This led us to create the New Connections Fund in 2004. It's an exciting small grant program — with individual grants up to \$50,000 — that has an open application process and two rounds of grants per year. One of our goals for the Fund is to identify and fund organizations that are new to Irvine. Through the fund we've been introduced to interesting organizations doing innovative work in our program areas. These are for the most part community-based organizations with small budgets — usually under a million dollars a year. It's a demographic of organizations that we don't usually reach with our regular program portfolio.

SUSAN JENKINS: In North Carolina, we have "community clubs," which make up an infrastructure that most communities don't have. Some clubs are nonprofits, but most are just informal organizations of people who come together once a month to overcome the isolation of rural areas. They're a bit like the garden clubs that were once popular in the South. Community clubs are a built-in network for us. They help us find out what's going on and what's needed in the community. For the last five years, we've funded a community development coordinator who works with the clubs to help them come up with ideas for grant proposals and also helps them with reporting on their grants.

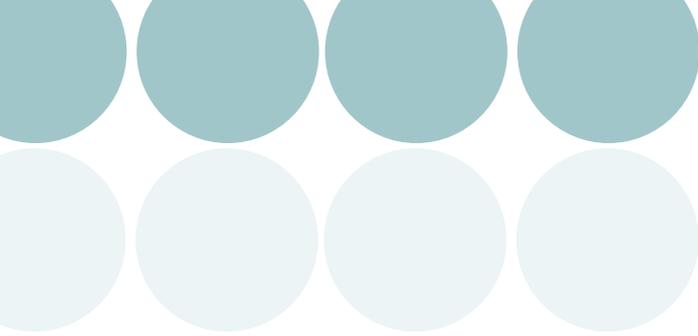
Q: HOW DO YOU FIND PEOPLE WHO CAN CONNECT YOU TO THE NETWORKS YOU WANT TO HEAR FROM?

MARION KANE: I started with the foundation's own staff. When I interviewed potential staff members, I asked them about their networks. I said, "Tell me who you're connected to, who you socialize with, who you know, what networks you reach into." I hired a group of people who had very complementary networks in Boston. The idea was to be one degree of separation from everything we wanted to know, in terms of both issue knowledge and neighborhoods. The staff is responsible for knowing what's going on in their networks so we know what good projects are out there. We don't have an open application process, which means that access can become a critical issue. If you arrange your networks right, you can solve that problem.

ANNE VALLY: In California, the majority of foundation funding is concentrated along the coast, specifically in the San Francisco Bay area and the Los Angeles area. With the New Connections Fund, we wanted to

NETWORKING STRATEGIES IN BRIEF

- **Convene an advisory panel** – Some foundations regularly pull together a diverse group of advisors, each well connected within their community or field, for discussions that help keep grant makers informed and up to date.
- **Sponsor community listening sessions** – Community meetings let grant makers hear directly from constituents about their concerns. Some foundations hold them annually to inform the year's funding priorities.
- **Initiate a fellows program** – A fellows program can support learning by community leaders, build networks among them, and strengthen relationships with foundation staff. Fellowships usually last for a prescribed period, with ongoing connections maintained through alumni activities.
- **Create a small grants fund** – Some foundations use smaller grants, often involving a less demanding application and review process, to fund innovative work and broaden their contacts.
- **Identify "mavens"** – A few foundations intentionally seek out people who seem to "know everybody" in a community or field, then tap them for help with making connections and keeping abreast of new ideas.
- **Hire "connected" people** – A foundation leader may intentionally recruit staff with ties to a diversity of networks, thus building an in-house fund of community knowledge.
- **Explore social network analysis** – Some foundations use specialized software to visualize social relationships, analyze connections, and strengthen networks strategically.



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focus our resources on the central areas of the state. For the last couple of rounds, we’ve identified “mavens” in our priority region – people whose names pop up everywhere, and who seem to know everyone. We’ve added to the list by tapping the knowledge of program staff, board members, and current partners. When we meet people we always ask, “Who else should I be talking to? Who can help us better understand the community?” The people we’re looking for might be in any sector: elected officials, public officials, appointed school board members, attorneys, judges, or nonprofit leaders. They care deeply about the community, probably are not looking for a grant themselves, and are well connected in the region. We ask them to spread the word about each New Connections Fund grant opportunity.

JOY VERMILLION HEINSOHN: We keep a running log of people we meet or run into who we think would make good advisory panel members. We’re always looking for a diverse panel, geographically, racially, ethnically, and by gender. We also look at age and profession. We typically try to have a legislator, a journalist, a teacher, some business folks. We’re looking for people who can tell us about their communities, who are connected to the community, who pay attention to what is going on in the community and also in their professional field, and can keep us informed and relevant. They also help inform people in their communities about the foundation. Former advisory panel members become resource people who come back and speak to our board or current panel. We also ask them for nominations of other folks who would make good panel members.

MARY KAPLAN: New Hampshire is divided into health service areas; each one is loosely based around a hub where people come together to get health services, such as a hospital. The communities we go to for listening sessions are part of those natural affinity groups. Usually there’s someone on our advisory council who’s either from the town or from the area, and we ask them to serve as host or hostess. When we have a listening session in their community, we ask them to use their social networks to help bring people out, which may mean calling the local newspaper or sending out an announcement of the meeting. And they host it – they’re at the door, they introduce us. So the listening session also connects the community to the person who is part of our council.

Q: DOES YOUR NETWORK RELIABLY BRING YOU VALUABLE OR UNEXPECTED INFORMATION OR IDEAS?

JOY VERMILLION HEINSOHN: Sometimes panel members give us a heads up about something that’s going to happen. For example, for the last few years we’ve had someone on the advisory panel who’s involved with a workers’ center. Hearing the issues that he and his clients have been dealing with on immigration – and we regularly work with immigration issues – and having that perspective were really valuable. He’s

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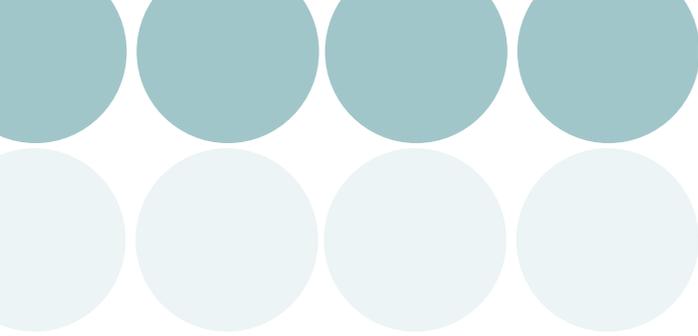
from an area of the state where there are a lot of immigrants but their voices don’t always get represented. Another example has to do with water quantity issues. A few years ago, before anyone was really paying attention and North Carolina was on the verge of a drought, we had an advisory panel member who was interested in water quantity. She alerted us to the problem before it hit the papers and before anybody else was really thinking about it. We were able to gather information and convene folks around the state who had a stake in the topic.

MARY KAPLAN: The major trends we hear about through our listening sessions have always been a surprise. At around session four or five, when the same issue comes up again, we say, “This is going to be it.” For example, about three years ago, people were talking about issues affecting the elderly. Today, they’re talking much more about voice, advocacy, and policy. It’s a rare thing in New Hampshire for foundation staff to come and say, “I really want to hear, tell me what’s going on,” and then sit there and listen. The people who attend the sessions come out feeling empowered. One of the other good things that happens almost every year is that there are conversations that should have gone on in the community that were not happening until our session. We leave the community in a better place just by having been there and holding that session.

Q: HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH SUGGESTIONS OR RECOMMENDATIONS THAT DON’T FIT WELL WITH YOUR FUNDING PRIORITIES?

MARY KAPLAN: We listen to those. Sometimes people have trouble articulating something bigger than what’s going on with them. We sit there trying not to say anything until they’ve finished talking. Then we kindly close the conversation and say, “Why don’t we sit down and talk more about that afterwards?” Sometimes there will be a hospital CEO who has come to listen, and people will be raking him over the coals. But there’s nothing said that isn’t an opportunity to learn.

ANNE VALLY: Our funding priorities don’t always neatly align with how the work unfolds on the ground. So the question for us is, How do we make sure that we’re accountable to the strategies our board has endorsed, but at the same time recognize that the world doesn’t always come in tidy packages? We’re continuing to try to think of different ways to do that. For example, we might exercise expenditure responsibility in order to work with an organization that doesn’t have 501(c)(3) status or we might work with a fiscally sponsored organization. In Riverside and San Bernadino counties, we found interesting work that’s well aligned with our program strategies and has great community leadership, but, for whatever reason, the community doesn’t want to create an organization. It’s a challenge to say, “Okay, how can we work with them? How can we ensure that the dollars are being used smartly and for charitable purposes, but yet fund the work where it’s happening?”



Q. DOES NETWORKING PLACE A BIG BURDEN ON YOU OR YOUR FOUNDATION IN TERMS OF TIME AND RESOURCES?

MARY KAPLAN: We struggle personally to do all the listening sessions in a one-month period. It's grueling and exhausting to listen. We do two a day and drive in between and eat our meals in between. But we do that because, while the conversation might be skewed a little by what is going on that particular month, we're at least trying in an unscientific way to provide some similarity between places. All staff must attend at least one session, and they usually go to more. Our board chair also encourages our board members to go. I have told this story to other foundations and they usually respond by saying, "You spend that much time doing that?" It's only four days a year, and I actually think I should spend more time doing it.

ANNE VALLY: We underwent strategic planning a few years ago, and when we looked at how we handled unsolicited requests, we learned that less than half of one percent of unsolicited contacts became grants. We felt that if we were to be truly open to organizations coming to us and saying, "I've got a project that I think aligns with your funding priorities," there needed to be a method by which they could do that and have a realistic chance of being funded. A tension for us is that new organizations are often smaller in budget size, yet the average grant in our core portfolio is \$250,000 — a number that doesn't work for small organizations. We also value having a lean program staff and low administrative costs. The New Connections Fund is one way we try to balance these pressures. It's a fairly small fund, about \$3 million a year, but between the two rounds we get about 500 applications and end up making about 100 grants. We keep transaction costs low by having less interaction with grantees. For example, we provide web-based resources to coach applicants through the process, rather than offering individual help from a program officer. We also have an application template, and we review the applications in teams.

Q: HOW DO YOU MAP THE NETWORKS YOU'RE INTERESTED IN? DO YOU USE NETWORK MAPPING SOFTWARE?

SUSAN JENKINS: I've studied social networking, and I know there's a lot of technology out there. What you really need is to create an environment where people can come together and develop a relationship of trust and be honest and say, "This is what we need." And, more important, to be able to say, "We're willing, with a small amount of resources, to help solve this problem."

MARY KAPLAN: I make my own notes of what I hear. It's very crude — most of the time it's in pencil. Something like, "These are the topics, these are the towns," and I'm putting hatch marks next to them. I tried to put it on an Excel spreadsheet, but it wasn't worth spending the time trying to be so scientific. That wasn't the issue. And I think our feeling is that the value of this is in not being scientific. Sometimes that's the best strategy.

ROBERTO CREMONINI: We use network mapping software, and it's not that complicated; the difficulty lies in the data collection and in the interpretation. Interpreting network maps can be like reading tea leaves. You can get a very biased view of your network. For me the key challenge is not in the technology, but in gaining the level of expertise and sophistication required to understand the power and limitations of the technology.

PAT BRANDES: Social network analysis brings discipline to networking. We say, "We hire for networks," or "We work with mavens." Well, so did the Old Boys network. The discipline is in reaching outside your natural networks, in recognizing the importance of the peripheral for reasons of innovation, access, and equity. A map of your own network can help you know if you're succeeding.

Getting a Good Discussion Going

Once you have the right people in the room, how do you get them to share good ideas? Linda May, an experienced facilitator and consultant with CFAR, suggested some provocative questions to get people talking, whether in a large community meeting, a small group discussion, or a one-on-one conversation.

Missing "Infrastructure" In thinking about your field, are there key pieces of infrastructure that seem to be missing? Why are those pieces especially critical?

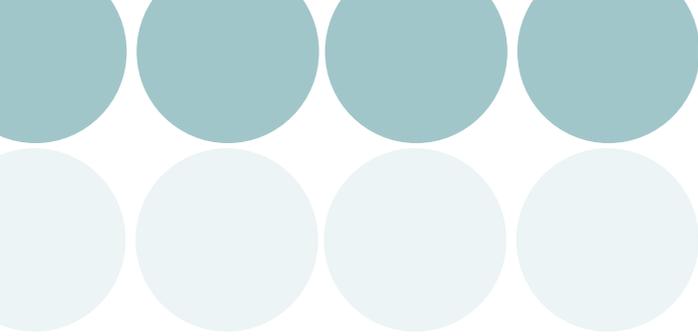
What Keeps You Awake at Night? From your own perspective working in this field or community, what are the three to five things that worry you most — and why? How have you personally seen these issues played out on the ground?

The Big Picture Step back and think about the big picture over the next five to ten years, locally, regionally, or nationally. What are three to five things happening now in the larger environment that have the potential to make a major difference?

Trends in the Field What are four or five of the most interesting trends that are leading to new practices in your field? How have you, yourself, seen these trends played out on the ground?

Strange Bedfellows Innovative strategies sometimes call for unusual affiliations. What are five to seven unexpected alliances, partnerships, and conversations that could advance your field?

Excerpted from GrantCraft's guide, *Scanning the Landscape: Finding Out What's Going on in Your Field*.



The Barr Foundation's Approach to Network Mapping

The Barr Foundation in Boston uses social network analysis, or network mapping, to create visual maps of the “nodes” and connections that make up a network. Chief knowledge and learning officer Roberto Cremonini explains:

One interesting thing that happens when you start mapping a network is that you see the core, the usual suspects, the people always around the table. But you also see very clearly the periphery — the people who are out there close to the external boundaries of your network. At that point, you can make connections and close the triangle between two people who are at the core and a person who's at the periphery if you see a need. You can also show other people that there are important resources at the periphery that should be brought into the core. . . .

We used network mapping a few years ago to identify “weavers” for a project to build stronger connections among Boston's afterschool providers. We looked for people who were already well-connected to the core and able to see far beyond their natural horizon and reach out to people on the periphery. We then funded those weavers to improve communications and build relationships among the providers of sports and arts programming for teens across the city. . . .

Network mapping has been around for a long time, but it's now emerging as a popular technique because of the development of social network software. Network mapping allows you to represent nodes — and those nodes can be either individuals or organizations — and the relationships between those nodes. You can then translate that information into a visual map. Basically, it uses graph theory, which comes from mathematics, to study a network structurally. . . .

We're currently using social network analysis to study a parent advocacy organization and figure out how well the network works. We think the study will help the organization and its network understand what's strong and what's weak and how they can improve. We also want to increase our own understanding of the efficiency and effectiveness of advocacy networks.

The Barr Foundation has used two network mapping software programs: InFlow and UCINET. For more information on social network analysis and available tools, see the website of the **International Network for Social Network Analysis** at www.insna.org.