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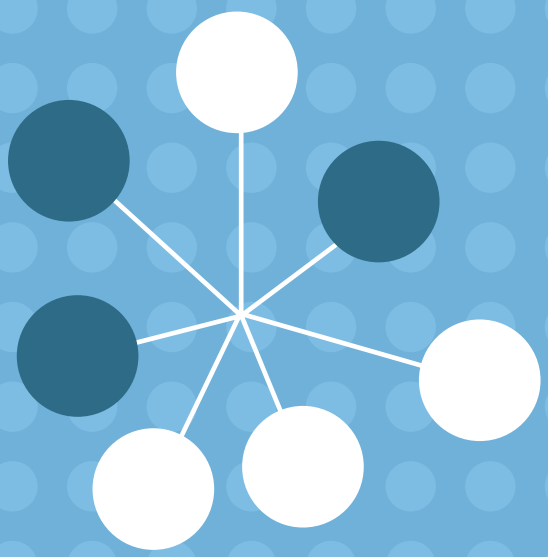
SCANNING THE LANDSCAPE 2.0

Finding Out What's Going On in Your Field



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SPECIAL FEATURES

In this guide, funders working in the United States, Europe, and internationally describe their experiences with scanning the landscape. They explain when a scan can be helpful, how to frame questions to get the answers you need, and how to ensure you get viewpoints from a wide range of sources. An update of GrantCraft's original 2004 guide, this new edition retains perennial wisdom from the earlier piece and explains how technology is making scanning faster and easier than ever before.

This guide was written by Anne Mackinnon and edited by Lisa Philp. It is part of the GrantCraft series. Resources in this series are not meant to give instructions or prescribe solutions; rather, they are intended to spark ideas, stimulate discussion, and suggest possibilities.

GrantCraft is a joint project of the Foundation Center in New York and the European Foundation Centre in Brussels. For further information please contact Lisa Philp at llp@foundationcenter.org or Rosien Herweijer at rherweijer@efc.be.

To access this guide and other resources, please visit www.grantcraft.org.

What Is Scanning?

When you want to do more than "just make good grants," you may find it necessary to look carefully across the field for targets of opportunity — places where your support could be especially influential, where your resources could help develop a new direction or innovation, or where you might be able to join forces or align your work with others in order accomplish something bigger than you could do alone. Finding those opportunities and understanding how a given field works are what we mean by "scanning the landscape."

A way to see more broadly. Scanning can help you learn about a new field or stay on top of new developments in an ongoing program area. As one funder put it, "Every foundation has its own culture with preconceived notions of what the immediate needs are. It's essential to get a broader perspective." A U.S.-based program officer who supports workforce development reported that a scan turned up a completely new, unexpected direction. "Until we had our focus groups, I hadn't realized how important organized labor would be in my work. That was not something I came to the grantmaker role with." Based on what he learned in his scan, he looked for opportunities to develop partnerships with labor unions.

A way to listen and respond. Foundations are sometimes seen, rightly or not, as unaccountable to the communities they work in. The process of consulting people about needs and opportunities can also be a way to make your efforts more responsive to community needs — and can demonstrate that you are really listening. After hearing "over and over about the need for dental care" in community forums, for example, a newly created statewide health care foundation decided to do some strategic grantmaking in that area. A program officer who funds national education policy keeps his eye on how teachers are adjusting to new requirements by following dozens of lively Twitter streams.

WHERE THE EXAMPLES COME FROM

The information in the guide was developed through a series of conversations with funders and grantees who generously shared their time, experiences, and insights about scanning the landscape. Many individuals participated: more than 25 were interviewed for the original version, published in 2004, and 15 more contributed to this updated version. Representing large and small foundations in the United States and Europe and a mix of private, family, corporate, and community foundations, they described using a variety of scanning methods — some very simple and others more complex — to learn about their fields and test their ideas. Most of these ideas and approaches could be adapted for use in organizations of any size and in any locale.

A list of those who contributed their thoughts and experiences is on page 21.

A way to inform others. By sharing what you learn, you can help build a field. For example, an international funder organized a three-day meeting of practitioners and activists in reproductive health. The discussion produced timely information that others needed to know. As she observed, "We documented our findings in a report and circulated about 5,000 copies to donors, government officials, and others working in this area. Anyone who was funding in that field could have picked up the report and found it useful, because it would have told them about the issues that 60 groups are saying are important." A foundation that commissioned a data visualization of the policy environment in a key program area used the graphic to open up conversations and align their work with other funders.

A way to "find the white space." Sometimes a scan can help locate a niche where a funder can make a unique contribution. On the issue of climate change, for example, an international foundation learned from a scan that many funders were supporting climate change mitigation but few were looking beyond to "climate change adaptation" — an important issue for farmers in Africa, city-dwellers in low-lying regions of Asia, and other populations of concern to the foundation. The information helped them shape a distinctive approach. An executive at another foundation recalled learning from a scan that a very large funder was moving into an issue area he and his board had been considering, leading them to concentrate their far more modest resources elsewhere.

A way to stimulate your own learning. Some people value scanning in part because it gives them permission to set aside time and attention for learning. "No matter what your goal is," explained the new director of a family foundation with a small staff, "whether you're looking for organizations to fund or just trying to understand an issue," a scan lets you plunge in and start figuring things out. "Start with one meeting and see where that leads you. It's amazing how quickly you get enough information to have a base from which you can begin asking educated questions and start making decisions." Scanning also helped her build a list of contacts: "After six months of meeting with as many people as I could in our topic areas, I had a whole network of experts to call on if I needed something or had a question." Her advice to funders who worry that they may not know enough to start to scan? "Just start."

Why take a fresh look at scanning?

For this new edition of ***Scanning the Landscape***, we scanned the field to find out how scanning has and has not changed in the years since the original GrantCraft guide was published in 2004. We talked with 15 funders in the United States and Europe and asked them to reflect on shifts in philanthropy and what we ought to do to refresh the guide.

The most obvious change they pointed to was the proliferation of information and information technologies over the past several years. "Data of all types are now so broadly accessible," one noted, "that it can be almost overwhelming. That's something of a new paradigm that really wasn't there even a couple of years ago." Most contributors said they use basic internet searches routinely in their scanning, while recognizing the limitations. More interestingly, they are using web-based utilities to map the interests of other funders, Facebook and Twitter streams to keep in touch with diverse voices, online surveys to gather feedback from widely dispersed organizations, blogs and other online publications to disseminate what they learn, and data visualization tools to depict and share information. The list goes on, as it surely will continue to do so in the years ahead.

Other trends have changed scanning, as well. Many people reported an increase in the use of consultants to conduct scans; some have hired private-sector management consulting firms for scans of complex fields or issues. Some said that changes in evaluation have led them to shift their emphasis away from point-in-time scans toward ongoing data-gathering techniques — or, as one funder put it, "rapid feedback loops that give us learning and insight along the way, either in quantitative or qualitative terms, so we can apply those to our work going forward."

Yet we also heard that nearly everything in the original guide is still useful today. This new version has been refreshed, but the core lessons — about listening carefully, gathering a range of viewpoints, and using what you learn rigorously and creatively — are as applicable as ever.

Different Scans for Different Needs

There are many reasons to conduct a scan, and many ways to do it. Some scans are formal and follow well-defined protocols and timelines; others are more free form. What they all have in common is a focus on gathering information from disparate sources, making sense of it, and learning from the information that comes in. As the examples in this section illustrate, a scan that's begun for one purpose usually ends up serving others, as well, and its benefits tend to ripple out across many areas of work.

FINDING A STRATEGIC DIRECTION

Foundations differ dramatically in how, why, and how often they establish new priorities and guidelines. Whatever the circumstances, the quest for a new approach — whether precipitated by a perceived opportunity, a request from the board, the planned sunset of an existing program, or the appointment of a new president — usually starts with a scan.

A new program officer at an American foundation with an environmental focus was "tasked with looking at domestic transportation policy as a potential area to work in. It was a very broad mandate," he explained. An analysis of the funding environment showed that transportation was an area largely abandoned by foundations: "In the United States, transportation is a classically federalist system," he noted, "where the national government sends aid to the states, and the states decide what to do with that money. There aren't a lot of policy mandates or requirements, and so we knew we'd have to figure out how to work both parts of that machine — state and federal government — if we wanted to make change that would reduce greenhouse gases and expand transportation options for Americans."

With help from a consultant who had worked in both environmental advocacy and state government, the foundation undertook a scan to see "what kind of capacity actually exists in the field to influence federal reform and then, possibly, state reform." They were seeking examples of "capacity we could build on, not really in foundations but in nonprofits, for-profit entities, and others who were just doing good work in that space." At issue was whether the foundation should pursue an advocacy strategy vis-à-vis states or an "inside game, assisting state government and partnering with them, or something entirely different. So it was important for us to understand what was happening across 50 states."

Then something unexpected happened. When program staff asked the foundation's board to approve a longer timeline for the complex policy work they envisioned, the board responded positively, "but it emerged out of discussion that they thought we needed to think about doing something more practical" in addition to the policy work. As a result, he began to scout for a transportation innovation "you could touch and feel" that would complement the foundation's policy reform agenda and that warranted further development. "We've found two cities that have the potential to do 'gold-standard' demonstration projects," he explained, "and we're sort of kicking the tires" to see how workable they are.

An executive at another foundation recalled traveling "up and down our entire state" during his early days on the job "talking to people in nonprofit

organizations who had been engaged in technology in some way. I asked them what was lacking in the field." What was especially valuable was "just the ability to do primary qualitative research as a way to help inform myself. It is always so meaningful and so productive, and it provides rich data."

HEARING FROM KEY CONSTITUENCIES

Some scans are designed to solicit the views of particular constituencies about what they see as the main priorities for their field or community. That type of scan can also be a chance to gather potential ideas for action and even get feedback on strategies that are under consideration. Explaining her reason for scanning, a funder working in reproductive health said that it was important for her to "learn from the perspective of the people out there in the field. People closest to the ground can articulate the problem much more honestly and directly, and can also suggest solutions that people who are a little further removed sometimes can't do."

As part of a scan, an environmental funder hosted three convenings of practitioners, including potential grantees, to share some ideas her foundation had been considering: "It was an attempt to say, does this program idea make any sense, and how could it be improved?" Added another funder working in human rights, "I had been thinking about supporting leadership development. The convenings helped me choose a different strategy. What I heard was that the leaders were there, but they were running their organizations with very minimal resources. What they needed was investment in their institutions."

A program officer who organizes periodic grantee convenings sends out a quick online survey in advance — typically about a month before the meeting — to learn what topics interest them most. "It helps me keep in touch with the challenges these organizations are facing," she explained, "and figure out what kind of resources or expertise will be most useful. For the meeting itself, I often end up asking a more experienced grantee to present their work because they've already wrestled with a problem others are struggling with."

People working in the field aren't the only source of valuable information. An employee charged with revitalizing a corporate foundation went to senior executives across the company to talk with them about what the foundation should stand for and where it should concentrate its funding. "In essence," she reflected, those conversations "directed where we ended up, which is fostering diverse voices and new works in film and theater. That was completely inspired by the executives, who felt that we should do something about helping to identify or nurture new artists."

UNDERSTANDING EMERGING ISSUES

When a new issue appears on the radar, a well-timed scan can help clarify whether or not something is actually happening — and how important the trend might be. A scan like this can yield informative, early-stage data, help define key terms, and shape an ongoing learning agenda.

Scanning builds relationships

Scanning does more than gather data; it makes connections. As a program officer at an American regional foundation described it, "Scanning is about more than just plucking information. The process of conducting a scan can help you develop relationships and connect more deeply with the grantee community." A scan can help you:

- Get to know people and organizations working in the field
- Test ideas or funding strategies before committing significant resources
- Inform potential grantees about your funding interests
- Strengthen ties among people working on similar issues
- Be more accountable to the community or field

Learning to see from a funder's perspective

If you're new to philanthropy, switching from the viewpoint of a practitioner to that of a funder means looking at the issues in a different way. Scanning techniques can help you understand what your potential role might be. As a new funder working in the area of children and families observed, "Before I took this job, I had worked for an advocacy organization in my field, so I knew what the issues were. But as a grantmaker, I had to think about things in a very different way. Now I had to think about, what's the value added of our foundation's money? How can our resources make a difference?"

"I knew that I had to spend my first year figuring out who the main actors were and what their organizations were and what they were doing — more than I could learn by reading their annual reports or websites. But it was also helpful to know the history of these people with each other. I had to think about their historical relationships with each other and how all of that had an impact on what their organizations were now doing."

Good conversations are the place to start. "I basically met with just about anybody who asked me for a meeting," one funder recalled, "because I took seriously what some people said to me, which is that the first year is exploring and learning and trying to figure things out. And unexpected connections get made when you're open. Somebody walks in with an idea that you hadn't thought about and helps you understand... hmm, if we looked at it this way, this is a really interesting approach." One new program officer made a point of seeking out and talking to "everybody who'd managed my grant program for the last 20 years," in addition to reading "all the exit memos my predecessors had written."

At the beginning of the recent economic downturn, for example, a program director at a foundation concerned with the welfare of women noticed an uptick in community organizing on childcare issues. Her foundation was already supporting a small amount of work on childcare, but the evidence suggested that the issue was taking on new importance. She asked a student intern to look into the phenomenon more closely. The intern "talked with a variety of different folks, grantees and others, and did a lot of data gathering. Then she put all the facts in one place so we could see what it really meant." The investigation also showed that "although there's a lot of information about formalized childcare settings, there's much less around informal settings — even though most families use informal care for their childcare needs. Since very few philanthropic dollars go toward that, it became one of our new strategic directions."

In another case, a funder who works on school reform in the United States was curious to know more about a set of activities known variously as "next generation learning," "blended learning," "e-learning," and "technology-enhanced learning." "We wanted to understand how the terms were being used," she noted, "and what was happening in the field — in terms of supply and demand — so we could test our hypotheses about how it all related to new school designs. We knew we needed some market research and analysis done, and that we couldn't possibly get it done with our internal team."

She approached an external consulting group and asked if they'd be interested in tackling the project. The consultant, in turn, "let us know that another foundation was very interested in similar issues," she recalled, and put the two program officers in touch. They decided to "join forces and work on refining the problem definition and scope of work together" — a decision that resulted in a better process and product, she believes, because they were able to "interrogate the materials together" from different but complementary perspectives.

An important outcome was evidence that "because of the relative immaturity of this kind of work, we do actually still need to develop 'proof points,' or school models that use blended learning effectively, to show what might be possible," she concluded. "And that's a good place for my foundation to fit in because we understand model development and what it takes to support that."

When the staff of a European foundation realized that preserving the biodiversity of the high seas "kept popping up in proposals," they responded by organizing a day-long "deep dive" meeting on the issue. "We didn't know enough about it," one person explained. "There are a lot of unknowns

about what is the best approach, and we hadn't really developed our own ideas on that. So we invited in three or four of the big organizations that work on high seas issues, just to have them talk to us about what's going on, what are the different approaches, what might be a reasonable way in for us, and where we could make the biggest difference. We were able to clarify our approach, and what we will and won't engage in."

A foundation that focuses its strategy on targeted neighborhoods within one city has found social media to be an effective feedback loop for emerging issues. A communications director noted, "Weekly blogs linked to Facebook have been successful in generating engagement among our grantees and the larger community. Years ago, we didn't have a way of knowing what was or wasn't connecting. Praise as well as occasional criticism allows us to understand and track trends in real time."

MAPPING THE FUNDING ENVIRONMENT

If you're looking for a unique niche or an opportunity to align and collaborate with others, a scan can uncover who else is supporting work in a particular field or geographic area. But a scan can yield more than a census of funding sources. Scanning techniques can help get below the surface of other funders' interests, build relationships, and sharpen your own ongoing strategy development. "In the past," noted a funder of community-level efforts to improve conditions for children and families, "we would say, oh, let's hire a consultant and have them do a scan that will tell us who else funds in the areas we're interested in. Three months later, the consultant would come back to us and say, here's the report. Now, our scans are much more embedded within the design of how things are rolling out on the ground."

To facilitate ongoing scanning, a regional funder said, "We use the Philanthropy In/Sight mapping tool to understand grantmaking patterns in California's regions, following up on our earlier insight that the inland communities of the state have been underserved by philanthropy. We benchmark the regional distribution of our own grantmaking against total foundation giving to each region in California." He further noted that the online tool provided "the ability to focus a grants search by state and by program area, and also export a table of aggregate giving by county in California."

For a new initiative to increase college completion among minority students, a program officer at an American foundation that works nationwide used scanning methods to get relationships with local funders off to a strong start. "National foundations sometimes have a negative reputation when they interact with local and regional foundations," she noted, "and I didn't want to play into that." Because her foundation had decided to work in a carefully selected group of cities around the country, she invited local funders in each community to meet for a discussion of what was already happening — "what they were funding, or just what they knew was happening" — and where a national funder might fit in. She began each gathering with a quick presentation of some intriguing data her research had uncovered and offered an overview of her foundation's plan; she then opened the floor for a discussion of local programs that were already doing good work and invited the local funders to collaborate over the long term. Their feedback directly informed the national foundation's city-level plans.

"Weekly blogs linked to Facebook have been successful in generating engagement among our grantees and the larger community."

Hoping to attract more partners to an area of federal policy reform that few foundations support, one grantmaker used an informal scan to learn more

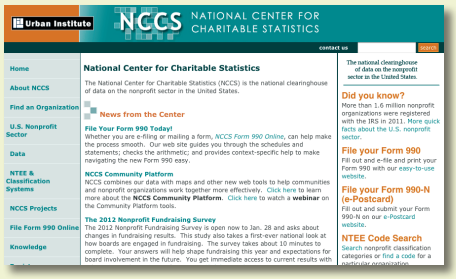
about who was working in related areas. "We were looking to see if we could try to build philanthropic partnerships and perhaps persuade others to enter the game, or if we could work jointly with them at a regional or community level." Because the field is "just not heavily populated," he said, "the scanning phase meant picking up the phone and calling my colleagues and trying to understand how people were thinking about changes in the field."

Some scans are designed to explore funding sources beyond philanthropy. An education funder used a scan to get a more thorough picture of how private dollars were influencing the development of digital learning. "Private capital is part of the ecosystem," she explained, "and it's important to look at how capital of all kinds — foundation and private-sector — is flowing against our issue." A philanthropic advisor working with family foundations scanned for public-private partnership opportunities that would leverage U.S. Department of Education funding. "Tools including Foundations for Education Excellence and the Foundation Registry i3 provided me with real-time information on potential grantees for my clients."

A program officer at an international foundation focused on global access to water knew the

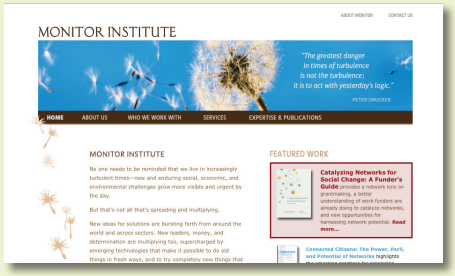
Using data visualization for your learning

New fee-based mapping tools for funders are helping to make scanning an ongoing way of working with partners rather than a point-in-time activity.



The Community Platform, a project of the National Center for Charitable Statistics at the Urban Institute, combines technology, national-level data on nonprofit organizations, and strong partnerships with state and local infrastructure organizations to foster collaboration. www.nccs.urban.org

Philanthropy In/Sight (PINS), a service of the Foundation Center, is an interactive mapping tool that combines data on over 104,000 funders and more than 2.5 million grants with Google maps. Updated weekly with data from around the world, PINS allow users to understand who is funding what, where. Custom PINS projects are available for funders and philanthropy networks. www.philanthropyinsight.org



The Strategy Landscape, created by Monitor Institute and delivered with the Center for Effective Philanthropy, is an online, interactive data visualization tool that makes it easy for users to see and understand patterns of grantmaking and strategies across multiple funders. www.monitorinstitute.com/strategylandscape/

crucial role played by international aid programs, but didn't have an easy way to grasp country-by-country details. As part of his scan of the field, he commissioned a web portal with a mapping feature that includes ongoing updates of foundation and government support for these issues.

SYNTHESIZING INFORMATION — AND FINDING GAPS

A scan can be useful for assembling a specific body of information in order to see what's there, what's not there, and where further action might be needed. Here's an example: to assess the current state of research on the condition of women worldwide, an American foundation took responsibility for assembling a "meta-analysis" of research reports. With help from a consultant, they pulled together "a variety of different reports we knew of from the past five years and took a closer look at trends across the reports," a grantmaker recalled. After synthesizing the available data, they "tried to fill in the blanks from that" and found people to interview who could supply information in areas not covered by major policy reports.

Another funder signed up for regular alerts from philanthropy news and research databases based on her foundation's interests in the arts and children. "I pay close attention to what's going on with my grantees and my local media, but the amount of information out there is overwhelming. Targeted feeds function as a 'clipping service' to allow me to cut through the clutter to catch things I'd otherwise miss."

To prepare for a trip to Rwanda with potential donors, a philanthropic advisor conducted a scan on key issues facing the country. She and her colleagues began by reading current books and articles and talking with experts from universities, think tanks, intermediary funders, and nonprofits. They also knew from planning earlier trips that "the best people to talk to are journalists who have worked there." In every conversation, they asked, a handful of standard questions: What are the key issues facing the country? Who else should we be talking to? Who are your organization's competitors and main collaborators?

They followed up on those leads and assembled a list of key issues and leading organizations working on each. Prior to the trip, they selected a "spectrum" of approaches for addressing a core problem and some organizations that were able to offer informative field visits. The objective was to enable the tour participants to "understand the country they're visiting and its unique context," and to see activities where their philanthropy might make a difference.

A program director at an American foundation documented the results of a scan of the policy landscape by creating "a compelling visual framework that showed the type and variety of activities taking place." The visual was useful in identifying potential opportunities for the foundation. He noted that, "One of the primary benefits of scanning is 'sense-making' and visuals and frameworks can play a major role toward that end."

What to Ask, and How to Ask It

The questions you pose during a scan, and the way you pose them, may well determine the answers you get. Are you trying to find out who's doing what? To identify issues and priorities in the field? To test a specific program idea or strategy? Is your objective to get people to share what they know about their own work, reflect on the state of the field and its needs, or imagine new possibilities?

To get the information you need, it's important to frame your research questions — the ones you ask yourself, and the ones you ask others — with care, and to ask them in a way that elicits feedback that is both on point and candid. Describing a related dilemma, the proliferation of information available through the internet, one funder stated the problem this way: "It's not easy to walk the line between being focused enough in your purpose to navigate this enormous amount of data and at the same time keep your mind open enough to incorporate the unexpected." Our contributors offered the following advice.

"I mostly listened and asked questions. I tried to understand who they were and what they were saying, and what they didn't say."

Make questions as broad or tightly focused as you want the answers to be. "Since we were trying to develop an advocacy program in the field of reproductive health," one funder observed, "there were a lot of questions on what people's understanding of the concept was. What is your understanding of women's empowerment? Of reproductive health? Of advocacy? What does it take to do community activities? We really wanted to understand what was in people's heads, because the people who are doing the work are the ones who, in the end, will transform that into reality."

Another recalled, "I said to them, 'I'm a new grantmaker, and I'm trying to develop some ideas about what funding we should be doing in U.S. civil society. One of the initiatives we have is to look at how community organizing helps increase civic participation, helps strengthen communities. I hope to get insight from you into the needs of grassroots organizing groups."

An arts funder at a large American foundation used a scan to help "shape an initiative around a subject that I was fairly certain we were going to tackle. The questions on the table were: How do you get your hands around it? What's the effective contribution that can be made? Who are the grantees that we would work with for most impact? What are the kinds of processes we might possibly put in place? That's what I was looking for. I didn't do the study to tell me that international collaboration was important in new artistic work. I could see that. I did the study to find out how to get started.'"

To help set priorities for a new initiative on the integration of migrant populations, staff members at a European foundation worked with a consultant to identify organizations with a stake in the issue and several possible areas where the foundation might usefully focus its work. They then used an online survey to find out which issues seemed most important. "We listed the issues in a survey and asked all the stakeholders to prioritize them," one person explained. "A project on family reunification was based in part on their feedback."

Invite respondents to step into your shoes. It's sometimes useful to ask people working in the field to help you think through funding priorities, given limited resources. As one funder observed, "The conversation changed the minute I said to them, well, what if you had only this amount of money and you had to choose? Would you equally allocate the money across those 50 things you've listed, or would you pick and choose among them?"

Another contributor suggested these questions: "What do you think are the most important issues that need to be dealt with, to which our foundation could direct some of its resources? What are the sorts of areas within that field that we ought to emphasize? How can we be most effective? What do you think could be accomplished in a relatively short period of time if our foundation were to direct its resources at those particular issues?"

Ask, probe — but frame questions neutrally and don't dominate. To get the most out of scanning, let the people being consulted do the talking, and make sure your voice or the consultant's voice isn't the only one heard. Equally important, try to frame the conversation so people don't just say what they think you want to hear.

"I mostly listened and asked questions," one funder recalled. "I knew they would try to read tea leaves around what questions I asked, so I tried not to do that in an intrusive kind of way. I tried to see if someone else would raise a point, or I would just continue some line of discussion that someone else had raised — but not be too interfering. I tried to understand who they were and what they were saying, and what they didn't say."

Beyond one-on-one conversations

To get the best and most unvarnished answers to your questions, consider the following scanning techniques to supplement your individual interviews.

- **Surveys.** Using a tool like Survey Monkey can be an efficient way to gather information from multiple sources. You can offer people the option of responding anonymously. You can also tabulate and share the survey results with people in your field.
- **Consultants.** A consultant who is familiar with a field — and trusted by those working in it — may turn up information and perspectives that might not come as easily to a grantmaker. Moreover, some people may be more comfortable expressing controversial or challenging ideas to a consultant than to a potential funder.
- **Focus groups.** Sometimes funders arrange for targeted focus groups of grantees and others working in a field to provide input about a strategy or program idea. A focus group, as opposed to a one-on-one conversation, can encourage people to focus on issues rather than on whether or not they might receive a grant.
- **Convenings.** It's often helpful to host a convening of stakeholders in a particular field to think creatively about its future. This can be a useful method for learning about important issues, getting feedback about grantmaking ideas and strategies, and seeing how potential grantees interact with each other.
- **Social media.** You can learn a lot by keeping tabs on "likes," comments, and other responses to items posted (by you or by others) on sites like Facebook, LinkedIn, Tumblr, and Yammer. Blogs in your program area can also help you detect emerging concerns and trends.

An education funder added, "One of the things I've found in education is that it's very important to push grantees to do the most innovative work they can do, and that you learn in the process what innovative work looks like by asking questions and encouraging people in a direction that they often hide at first. This is because they think our foundation is an established place and they need to play it safe, and they try to make themselves look orthodox. And I often say, I'm not looking for the

WHAT THEY DID/HOW THEY DID IT

Framing research questions together

When program officers from two foundations decided to team up to hire an expert consulting group for a scan that would serve the learning needs of both, they put their heads together to decide what research questions to ask. Later, as the results came in, they conferred frequently with the consultants about what the research was uncovering and what further questions to ask. One described the process:

"When we got started, we had already, somewhat separately, outlined what we wanted to know, and so we merged those questions. Sometimes we didn't have agreement on a question, but if one of us felt really strongly and we could include it for the pot of money we had, we included it. Over time, we structured a lot of communication around the questions. We sometimes had one or two significant work sessions a week with the whole group of us, the foundations and the consulting team, in order to review findings, ask questions, generate new questions to be explored together, really dig and go deep on particular questions. Some of those sessions were exciting! I learned a tremendous amount through that process, and it enriched the partnership and the project."

orthodox; I'm looking for what has been marginal, what has been overlooked, what has been seen as heretical; that's what I want to hear about."

Share what you're learning and refine your questions, as needed. When you organize your questions and findings in written form, share them, and discuss them with others, you may find there are questions you neglected to ask, or conclusions you drew too hastily. A grantmaker working in global civil society prepared a paper with her ideas. "My scanning process went from reading, to developing a small 'brain trust' of outside experts I could share my thoughts with, to writing a paper on the main concepts that I was thinking about. After I shared it internally, I asked a broader set of folks, who were either existing grantees or were part of global civil society, to read it and react to it." At each stage, she refined the questions she asked herself and others.

Managing Expectations

Scanning sends a message, whether you intend it to or not. When a funder undertakes a scan in any visible way — by holding meetings, sending out surveys, or even talking one on one with grantees or other leaders in a particular field — people will naturally draw inferences about the foundation's future plans.

This isn't necessarily bad, as long as you expect it and make sure to give an accurate, helpful impression. The scanning process can be a good way to inform people about your interests and objectives. Here's some advice about how to be clear about the purpose of a scan — and how to manage expectations about its potential results.

Recognize that scanning inevitably raises hopes of a possible grant. Consulting potential grantees during a scan "obviously generates expectations," said one funder. "I don't think you can eliminate that, although you can try to mitigate it by being forthright. I tell people, we're at a learning or search stage right now. We're trying to decide if we want to go into the space. If we do, I will need to present a strategy to the board and get it approved, along with a budget. So we're some distance away from a grant right now." During some later-stage scans, he continued, it can be important to explain honestly that "we have a strategy. This is what the strategy is, and we think these things are important right now. You don't really fit into the strategy."

Another funder learned that inviting organizations to a meeting automatically raised their hopes for a possible grant, even though he thought he had been clear that the purpose was learning: "The first question I asked them was, 'Do you ever get together like this normally?' It was a powerful collection of people. And they said, 'No, we don't. We're here because you, the funder, are in the room and we all want to meet you.'"

Be candid about your assumptions and limits. If you already have a working idea of the scope of your program or the issues it will address, it makes sense to lay those out, either in conversation or in writing, so the people you consult can give feedback in the context of that framework. "We tried to be very, very clear about the fact that we had some fundamental assumptions that, no matter what we did, were likely to inform our decision making," one funder explained. "We created a sort of framing paper for each of our focus groups that laid out what we thought were some of the possibilities. We were worried that we would create a set of expectations that we couldn't possibly fulfill, so we felt it was important that we put some boundaries on the conversations."

On the other hand, it's important to be flexible and open-minded enough to adapt the ideas you start out with in response to the feedback you hear.

Be upfront about what you *don't* know. You may need to make clear that you really don't know how the scan will translate into a funding strategy. "We would tell people," one person recounted, "that our foundation has just expanded its staff commitment and the funding available in the workforce development program area, which gives us a tremendous opportunity to think about how we use those new resources. And so this focus group is part of a process to develop the strategy. We tried to make it clear that there was no immediate plan for follow-on grantmaking, that the ideas laid out in the meeting would be heard, but that they weren't necessarily immediately going to be incorporated into a strategy." In situations like this, it's especially important to emphasize that the ideas generated by the scanning activity will be taken seriously.

Getting Diverse Viewpoints

A scan can be an extraordinary opportunity to hear from many different people. To make the most of it, start by scanning your own background: What topics and people do you know the most about, and the least? What skills or networks are missing from your own prior experience, and how can you structure the scan to compensate for them? How do you go about getting a diversity of perspectives?

It's worth it, many people said, to make the effort to reach a broad spectrum of viewpoints. "I think we left out some key people who should have been at that brainstorming meeting we had," one funder noted regretfully. "We invited the people we knew best and some names that were given to us. There were a couple of people who contributed, but what they brought to the meeting was exactly the same as what someone else brought to the meeting. If I had it to do over again, I would include more people and make it more diverse."

"It's important to get broad input right up front, so you have access to different ways people organize themselves for social change."

Here are some methods for broadening a scan and making it more inclusive:

Draw people from different disciplines, places, and levels of involvement. One way to ensure a diversity of viewpoints is to include people from various fields of expertise and different settings. It's important to talk to people who approach a topic from different technical viewpoints, in different types of organizations, and at different levels of engagement with a problem — at the community level as well as at the policy or funding level.

One foundation program officer convened a series of listening sessions in several cities, each of which was intentionally diverse in its own right: "We had community-based activists, we had academics, we had people from international organizations at the table. It's important to get broad input right up front, so you have access to different ways people organize themselves for social change. Each group had its distinct flair or flavor, and we didn't try to create a comprehensive group in each of the four cities that would represent everybody. We were okay that some groups were going to be leaning one way or the other."

Seek out contrary points of view. It's essential to hear from people you don't agree with, and to find out what they read, whom they talk to, and where they get their information. One funder explained his approach: "I'm always open to talking with people I don't agree with because I want to learn what their position is. And sometimes — many times — you actually come up with projects you can fund." "It's important to have faith that the process of dialogue and discussion and dissent is an okay process," said another. "I don't have to agree with you to work with you." A third offered this advice: "A strong grant program needs to include all kinds

of organizations and viewpoints. It's risky to have everything riding on one type of organization or one point of view."

Find people whose expertise is different from yours. Be sure to talk with people who can help uncover aspects of the field you don't know much about. During an extended scan of a possible new program area, one funder made a point of "keeping a large category open, which I called the 'I don't know' category. This was an empty category that I would fill by meeting people I didn't know, or reading proposals that came in over the transom, or talking to people on the phone who didn't appear to be in any way relevant, but might, in some strange way, connect with what I was thinking or doing. Sometimes these didn't turn out to be useful, but often they turned out to be very interesting."

Ask contacts for *their* contacts. Colleagues, peers at other foundations, grantees, practitioners, and consultants can introduce you to people you may not know about. Hoping to find new projects in certain underrepresented areas of its home state, one foundation developed a list of "mavens — people whose names pop up everywhere and who seem to know everyone," and began to tap their knowledge of their communities. "We asked them, who else should we be talking to? Who can help us better understand the community?" Mavens might be "in any sector — elected officials, public officials, appointed school board members, attorneys, judges, nonprofit leaders. They care deeply about the community, probably are not looking for a grant themselves, and are well connected in the region." Another program officer regularly scans his LinkedIn connections for their connections as a way to expand his network.

Listen to people who are close to the problem. To stay tuned to the work of human rights advocates, one funder said, "I often get breaking news on policy developments through my Facebook news feed. I'll read a status update about a bill signing at the White House, or a blog posting with comments from the field and learn about important events much quicker than through other methods." In another case, colleagues researching a possible strategy to reduce child sexual abuse spent about a year conducting "probably 60 extensive interviews with folks who were in or near this issue," including people from organizations that work with survivors of childhood abuse, "unlikely allies and partners, such as groups that provide sex offender treatment," and a range of people who could help them understand "how this issue translates in the real world."

If you're convening a group, look for people who are collaborative and open-minded. A team from one foundation recruited participants for a convening they hoped would generate new solutions and alliances: "We found that we really needed to look for people who have ideas but are also open to hearing others. These folks make for a much more robust, innovative discussion. Otherwise, we're trying to manage those who have their own agenda to pursue." To find the right people, they gathered intelligence from several different sources, including having pre-conversations with suggested invitees.

Getting a good discussion going

Once you have the right people in the room, how do you get them to share ideas? Here are some questions to get people talking about what needs to be done in their field or community. Use them to get ideas on the table in a large meeting, provoke exchange in a small group discussion, or encourage reflection in a one-on-one conversation. All those conversations can produce useful information during a scan.

- Are we missing some key pieces of infrastructure? Why are they important?
- What worries you the most? What problems keep you awake at night?
- What interesting trends are happening right now? How are they playing out on the ground?
- Where do you think we'll be ten years from now, locally and more broadly?
- What "strange bedfellows," or unexpected alliances, could advance your field?
- What windows of opportunity are open right now? How do we take advantage of them?

Scanning Continuously

For many funders, scanning is more than just an occasional thing, reserved for periods of strategic planning and reflection. Instead, they see it as a continuous set of activities that help them stay current and alert to opportunities. "In my field," said a program officer who funds technology, "you simply don't have the luxury of being behind the curve because you're going to end up making decisions that are irrelevant to the whole world in which you're operating." His statement is equally true in many other areas of grantmaking.

Regular scanning can also help maintain a healthy perspective on your own work. "I see the danger of getting so wrapped up in responding to what I've been given," one person noted, "that I'm not taking enough time to step back and look at what's out there and think about what I ought to be doing." But, of course, finding the time in a busy schedule for meaningful scanning activities is a big part of the challenge.

This section describes a few techniques — some new, some more traditional — that can help make continuous scanning both informative and efficient. Some are manageable by individual grantmakers; others are more useful when they're built into the work of an entire team or foundation.

Routine check-ins on grantees' perceptions. A New York-based foundation makes it a policy to routinely ask all their grantees a small number of open-ended questions. "We have an ongoing, sort of systematic way of talking with our grantees," one person explained, "not just about the progress of their work, but about what they see out there in the world. We ask them about unlikely partners they've been working with, and who they see as their opposition." The foundation also learns how grantees are responding to environmental factors — such as a fiscal crisis — by inquiring "not just how they're faring with it, but how it might be changing the way they think about their work."

Daily and weekly tracking of key topics. At one foundation, a dedicated, two-person "organizational learning team" is responsible for "culling information from newspapers, reports, and websites we've tagged that publish information on our focus area, higher education," explained a program director who relies on their services. "They do a daily compilation for our entire foundation of key news stories, new reports, interesting developments happening in the field. And then they do a weekly summary of the 10–12 projects our foundation is engaged in, what different program officers are working on, what we know, and what we've heard in the field on those topics."

Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and other social media activity. To "track the pulse" of activity in education policy, one American grantmaker regularly follows a select group of blogs and Twitter feeds, "not just by policy wonks but by teachers and others whose opinions I respect, on both sides of many arguments, although they can be very ideological sometimes." He has become an active tweeter himself, having gotten started about nine months before his foundation published a major report. "I began as a way of trying to build up enough of a pres-

"My Twitter account is like a ticker system that just streams to my desktop. Some of it is good, some of it is awful, but for the most part, it's pretty useful."

ence so that when the report came out we could actually make a big splash," he recalled. He soon realized that Twitter could be "an important tool for gathering information and intelligence that in the past was almost impossible to get. It's like a ticker system that just streams to my desktop. Some of it is good, and some of it is awful, but for the most part, it's pretty useful."

Informal, cross-sector discussions of emerging issues. To help surface emerging ideas, a European foundation executive initiated twice-yearly "horizon scanning" meetings, which include funders and NGOs in her organization's area of interest, biodiversity. "We drew on people who were close to us physically. We had about 10 people in the room, and we just did a tour of the tables to say, what are the issues you keep hearing about? What's out there? What should we be paying attention to?" From the topics on the table, they chose a few that seemed most important and discussed them in greater depth. "We tried to say, okay what's going on? Why is this important? What's coming down the pipeline? How's it going to impact us? And if we want to do something, what's the best way to intervene?"

In-depth briefings by experts. A large American foundation holds learning sessions "as needed, but at least once a quarter," featuring an "expert or group of experts who come in and talk about a rising issue or an important issue that our feet are already in or that we are about to explore. Before we started our work on Latino student success in earnest, we had two learning sessions with representatives from colleges and universities, intermediary organizations, think tanks, and student groups with experience in the area. Those meetings were a way to inform not just me, as the lead person in this new area of work, but also to bring up the general knowledge, the bench strength, across the foundation about the basics related to the topic."

Sharing the Results of Your Scan

A good scan can be useful beyond informing the people who conduct it. Indeed, many funders feel a strong sense of obligation to share what they learn with those who contribute to the scan and with others interested in the results. With effort, a scan can contribute to the knowledge and effectiveness of an entire foundation, other organizations, and the field as a whole in a number of ways.

Reporting to the field. After retaining a consulting firm to conduct a complex scan, an education funder worked closely with the consultants and another funder to publish two reports on the results, one on the state of the field and one on future prospects. In addition, she noted, "an additional thing we decided to do was make public a deck of all the analysis, edited down to 70 very detailed slides, to give more people access to the data."

Building a case within your foundation. The results of a scan helped a program officer working in media strengthen her case with her foundation's leadership: "We had been having trouble convincing some of the senior managers that we needed to be funding the infrastructure for digital technology. Our scan helped us to show that building this infrastructure is important for public radio because this was where the field was going."

Brokering new coalitions. A scan can be an opportunity to bring together groups that ordinarily would not have contact with one another, with the potential to reach consensus or develop new relationships. One funder heard from a participant that a meeting he had convened "was the first time she had seen a group of people who would traditionally never talk to each other getting together to hammer out a consensus on what the priorities should be, the commonalties of definitions, and the strategies that are doable within a short period of time. It was also an opportunity to talk about who's going to do the work."

Establishing a network. For a scan on an emerging issue that few groups were working on directly, a team from one foundation did in-depth interviews with leaders of groups working in related policy areas. The foundation issued an RFP that drew close to 250 proposals. "We wound up funding only 11 proposals," a grantmaker explained, "but we have been able to go back to a number of groups that we didn't fund to have conversations with them and to keep them as part of our resource database and a source of information."

Meeting an ongoing information need. "From my perch at a national foundation," an American program officer noted, "I have access to lots of information and lots of people. My blog allows me to synthesize information that comes through my sphere and propagate it out to an audience that's hungry for information about education policy and national education issues. It's helpful for me as a program officer because it pushes me to interpret complex issues and make them clear and accessible, which is very difficult for many of us to do."

Briefing other funders. A foundation that conducted an in-depth scan of an emerging policy issue got help from a funders' affinity group — which in turn asked them to share the information they gleaned with other funders. "We're talking about putting together a webinar to share data and explain what we've learned, basically to educate more funders on the issue," the funder reported.

Setting a baseline for future action. The findings of a scan can become a guide for program development, a benchmark to evaluate the program, and a vehicle to share ideas and priorities with a broader audience. Looking back, a funder recalled writing up a report at the end of a three-day convening that "goes into details of what should be funded, how it should be funded, who can do the work. I can look back at what I've done in my grantmaking and see how it has followed the areas and strategies that were listed in that report."

Online tools for scanning

The **Foundation Center** collects, scrubs, synthesizes, indexes, and continuously updates data on philanthropy into searchable databases that can be used for specific scans or automated alerts based on designated areas of interest. Examples of content offered by these free donor knowledge tools include philanthropy news; foundation-supported and nonprofit research; nonprofit collaborations; social impact tools; social media usage by foundations; as well as custom web portals focused on specific issues and locations.

- **Philanthropy News Digest** is a daily online news service dedicated to philanthropy. www.foundationcenter.org/pnd
- **PubHub** is an online catalog of annotated links to over 7,000 research publications supported by U.S. foundations. www.foundationcenter.org/pubhub
- **IssueLab** archives, distributes, and promotes the extensive and diverse body of research being produced by the nonprofit sector. www.issuelab.org
- **Nonprofit Collaboration Database** is a repository of 650 real-life examples of how nonprofits are working together, drawn from entrants to the Lodestar Foundation's Collaboration Prize competition. www.foundationcenter.org/gainknowledge/collaboration
- **TRASI** is a searchable, expert-reviewed database of over 150 approaches to measuring the impact of social programs and investments. www.trasi.foundationcenter.org
- **Glasspockets** highlights best practices in foundation transparency in an online world, including an extensive round-up of links to 18 different types of social media tools used by 1,300 foundations. www.glasspockets.org/inside

Custom web portals serve as dashboards for funder learning and collaboration and typically include data visualization tools; targeted news feeds, research, and tweets; and special features that support ongoing scanning on issues.

Examples include **Foundations for Education Excellence**, www.foundationcenter.org/educationexcellence, for U.S. education donors, and **WASH Funders**, www.WASHfunders.org, for donors focused on global water access, sanitation, and hygiene issues.

Key lessons for funders

Several take-away points about scanning emerged from the stories and examples shared by our contributors.

- Think of scanning as a golden opportunity to pause and listen to key constituencies. But don't miss the chance to reach out to people beyond your usual network to hear what they have to say.
- Take time to define the purpose of your scan and the questions you want to investigate. But don't get hung up on that first step. Sometimes you need to start scanning in a preliminary way to find the right direction.
- Recognize that scanning can help you build relationships and create networks that go well beyond the initial inquiry. But be mindful of raising and managing expectations.
- Check in with colleagues inside your foundation and in the field at various points: as you frame your scan, as you start to learn, and as you formulate your findings. They'll see things you don't see and help you make connections.
- Consider teaming up with other funders to scan together — either continuously, as a way of keeping up with changes in a field or doing periodic "deep dives," or as a single, shared activity when your interests overlap.
- Investigate and take advantage of technology tools such as searchable databases, news and research streams, and data visualization to scan effectively in the digital age.
- Give yourself permission to scan continuously, even if you need to find ingenious ways to fit it into an overly busy schedule. As social media applications continue to evolve, the possibilities for using them to keep in touch with new trends and diverse voices will keep on growing.

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We wish to thank the contributors who generously shared their experiences and insights to make this guide possible. The list below includes those who contributed to the 2004 and 2012 guides.

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Established in 1956, the **Foundation Center** is the leading source of information about philanthropy worldwide. Through data, analysis, and training, it connects people who want to change the world to the resources they need to succeed. The Center maintains the most comprehensive database on U.S. and, increasingly, global funders and their grants – a robust, accessible knowledge bank for the sector. It also operates research, education, and training programs designed to advance knowledge of philanthropy at every level.

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The **European Foundation Centre**, founded in 1989, is an international membership association representing public-benefit foundations and corporate funders active in philanthropy in Europe, and beyond. The Centre develops and pursues activities in line with its four key objectives: creating an enabling legal and fiscal environment; documenting the foundation landscape; building the capacity of foundation professionals; and promoting collaboration, both among foundations and between foundations and other actors.

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