

A rectangular image showing a green field in the foreground and a blue sky with white clouds in the background.

**Philanthropy.
Open for improvement.**

Request for Proposals
Frequently Asked Questions
**RFP III: INCREASING
FOUNDATION OPENNESS**

March 2015

The following frequently asked questions and answers reflect the questions we received via email and through open conference calls. We are grateful to the hundreds of people who took the time to ask thoughtful questions that helped clarify our thinking. We hope the following information proves helpful to those who are interested in learning more about our 2014 RFPs. **Please note that these FAQs refer specifically to our 2014 RFPs and are not intended to be guidance for future RFPs.**

Can you explain what “foundation openness in service of effectiveness” means? How does it compare to the notion of transparency?

A: When we talk about foundation openness, we’re talking about improving the way foundations share information with and listen to others, including nonprofits, other foundations, and the people we seek to help. Foundations often don’t share what’s going on inside their organizations, and they don’t often share about their failures, about what works or doesn’t work. Or, sometimes when they share about what hasn’t work it ends up becoming a “blame the grantee” game rather than the foundation itself talking about how its own processes may have contributed to the failure.

When we talk about foundation openness, the emphasis really is on the phrase: “in service of effectiveness.” You may notice that on our website we don’t talk about transparency, which is a very loaded word. When we’re talking about openness, we’re talking about what is going to be helpful to foundations and the nonprofits we’re funding, the intermediaries, as well as the people we seek to help through our work. It wouldn’t be helpful, for example, for us to share every single email we’ve had about this entire initiative. That would be transparent, surely, but not very effective. What we’re talking about is not transparency, but increasing openness in two directions. Namely, foundations will be more open to hearing about what others are doing, what works and doesn’t work, and also more open to sharing about what they do and why they do it.

Can you give an example of a promising proposal?

A: We list some examples on page 3 of the RFP. We talk about the different criteria, and at the bottom of that we describe some examples of activities we’re interested in funding.

One fictitious example not on the RFP might be something around failure, because foundations don’t often share failures and what doesn’t work. Perhaps someone would apply for funding to encourage the sharing of failures in the sector. It could be a series of videos where people involved in philanthropy and in nonprofits share their failures or talk about what has been challenging in their work. It could be some case studies about failure in philanthropy. We’re looking for something that’s not a one-time effort, but rather something that will help actually

shift the culture of sharing when things don't work. A one-time conference or event probably wouldn't accomplish that culture shift, although perhaps a conference or event about failure followed up by a number of activities that are thoughtful and strategic could be something that ends up shifting the culture. So again, we're looking at foundation openness in service of effectiveness.

We are not sure about whether to apply for general operating support (GOS) or project support?

A: Our expectation is that most of the grants made within RFP III: Increasing Foundation Openness will end up being GOS grants. The assumption is that the organizations that will be funded in this area are already involved in efforts to influence foundation practice and that the work they're doing meets the threshold criteria. That said if what you're applying for is to specifically improve a particular project within your organization, we want to see what that project is within your organization and what the project budget looks like.

In terms of whether you should apply for GOS or project-specific support, that's something we'll decide once we've reviewed proposals. If the project you're doing is 80% within the sweet spot of what your organization does and its mission, most likely you'll receive a GOS grant. If the project you're proposing and the budget you submit is more like 20% of what your sweet spot is in terms of mission, then you're more likely to receive project support.

Can you explain what the criteria: "previous work influencing foundation practice" on page 3 of RFP III means?

A: This is a threshold criteria because with RFP III, we're interested in organizations that will help us change the culture of staffed foundations to be more open to hearing from others and more open to sharing with others about what they're doing. We think it's highly unlikely that an organization that has never interacted with the foundation community in the past would have the kind of clout or influence necessary to be effective with a project to increase foundation openness if they haven't had previous work around influencing foundation practice. That said we want to be open to creative, innovative ideas and partnerships if your proposal can successfully make the argument that you will be able to influence foundation practice.

There are ideas that are tried and true, and then there are newer and more radical ideas. Is there a priority in this RFP for one or the other?

A: We do have a preference for funding the expansion or evaluation of existing models but we will consider new and innovative approaches. One goal of conducting this open RFP process is to identify great ideas and projects around increasing foundation openness. This is an opportunity for us to learn from what other people are thinking about – the innovative, creative ideas from those already doing this hard work and wanting to expand upon it or evaluate it; and perhaps some innovative, creative ideas from new players. We are open to all of these.

How many grants are you making and how are you thinking about the size and the numbers relative to the total fund?

A: This is a 3-year initiative. The first year of funding is about \$5.5 million. Of that, about \$4.4 million is allocated across RFP I (practice of feedback loops), and RFP II (research around feedback loops). The remaining \$1.1 million or so (and these are approximate amounts), is available for RFP III. Our threshold grant amount is at minimum \$100K for the coming year and that \$100K should be no more than 20% of your annual budget in any year for which you are applying for funding.

Does the focus on foundations carry across all 3 RFPs or does it apply more or exclusively to RFP III?

A: The focus on foundations does carry across all 3 RFPs, although the one that's most explicit is this third one around increasing foundation openness. If you refer to our Theory of Change you will see that we're trying to change the way foundations practice because staffed foundations drive \$40 billion of money to nonprofits on an annual basis. Our theory is that if we can drive change at the foundation level, this will help change practice in other areas. That said, with our first 2 RFPs, if your practice around feedback loops can directly influence foundations, then that would be a major plus. But, it doesn't mean we won't consider applications where the direct connection to influencing foundation practice is not as clear.

Our organization is already focused on influencing foundation practice. Can we apply for a grant that focuses on measuring the extent to which we are influencing foundation practice?

A: Yes. On the bottom of page 3 of RFP III, we note that an example of an activity we are interested in funding is, “evaluate existing efforts to increase sharing by foundations.” There are a number of efforts going on right now in the sector to increase sharing in foundation, for example, posting information on websites or having people write about foundation practice. Efforts to evaluate whether or not those activities are effective could be a real contribution to the field.

Do you have certain types of evaluations, for example qualitative vs. quantitative, that you would support over others?

A: We are open to whatever kind of evaluation you think would be the most effective way of evaluating your effort. Without knowing what the specific program or project is, it’s hard to know whether doing more qualitative interviews would be appropriate or whether doing more quantitative analysis would be appropriate. Depending on what your project is – to increase sharing by foundations or increase listening by foundations – you should determine, with some expert opinions, what the best way to evaluate it is and then propose for funding for that. We don’t preference one type of evaluation over the other.

Do you have any preference for local, regional, or national projects? What do scope and scale mean in this context?

A: In our proposal, we didn’t make any kind of distinction between local vs. regional vs. national efforts. We did note, in terms of criteria, that the overall portfolio of funded work will be more domestically focused, although some international and global projects may be funded. That’s the only sort of geographic limitation we’ve put on our funding.

As we think about the criteria for increasing foundation openness, if there are certain approaches that have a higher potential impact on changing the way the entire foundation field operates, that would be viewed more favorably than a very small local example. However, we can imagine an example to pilot a program with a local or regional association of grantmakers and try to increase foundation openness in that particular region. Or, an example of a city that has only 3 major staffed foundations and the project is proposing to change the way that those few foundations approach openness. So, there is no limitation around local, regional, or national projects, but we want to think about the overall impact that that effort is going to have in the way that foundations think about and practice openness.