

“ The knowledge management system is much more than a technology initiative; it is an initiative to shape the culture of a field. ”

Seeking, managing and disseminating knowledge in
education philanthropy:
Information audit of grantmakers

PREPARED BY Lisa A. Petrides, Ph.D. ■ Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education (ISKME) ■ 1 Mirada Road ■ Half Moon Bay, CA 94019 ■ lisa@iskme.org ■
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grantmakers^{for}education 

720 SW WASHINGTON, STE 605 ■ PORTLAND, OR 97205 ■ 503.595.2100 (ph) ■ 503.595.2102 (fx)

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I. Introduction and Key Findings

Grantmakers for Education (GFE) sought to conduct an information audit for the purpose of developing a better understanding of its members' information needs prior to the design and implementation of a knowledge management system. Specifically, GFE's objectives for the study were to:

- Identify what information people most desired in their work;
- Refine the various outcomes and objectives for such a system;
- Assess the potential need for a system and the extent to which GFE's members would use it;
- Determine how these needs might differ by segments; and
- Identify existing or emerging communities of practice that could be used to build support for and use of the system.

This required an examination of the existing patterns of information flow throughout GFE's member communities as well as gaining a better understanding of the specific cultural issues that foundations face as they seek to collect, analyze, and disseminate information. The overall aim of this report is to assist GFE in developing a fuller understanding of its members' information needs and their patterns of information use as it considers options for establishing a knowledge management system for education grantmakers.

The findings in this report are based on two focus groups and 31 individual interviews with grantmakers from small and large foundations (both in terms of number of employees and size of endowments), including national, regional, community, family, corporate and operating foundations, as well as individual donors. The first focus group, held in San Francisco, California, on August 11, 2003, helped to refine the questions used to conduct the interviews. The second focus group, held in New York City on September 5, 2003, helped to explore some of the preliminary findings from the interviews. All interviews were conducted in August and September, 2003, and each interview lasted about an hour.¹ Participants in the interviews and focus groups included foundation presidents, vice presidents, executive directors, program officers and other foundation leaders working in the field of education. Participants included individuals new to the field of grantmaking, new to the field of education grantmaking, as well as those with a great deal of expertise in both grantmaking and the field of education.

Although foundations differed in the types of populations and programs that they served, participants shared several common patterns of information gathering and use. They reported that they were most active in gathering information when they needed (1)

¹ A few quotations in this report have been edited slightly to improve clarity, but not to revise content.

to inform their boards of new developments in the field, (2) to develop projects or programs in new content areas that the foundation had not yet funded, or (3) to justify new directions or areas that they felt the foundation should consider funding.

The most commonly-reported first step in seeking new information on a particular topic began with Web-based searches. Google was most frequently cited as their method of Web-based searching, and all but a few of the participants regularly queried Google as an initial step in the search process. The second most common method of gathering information was via the phone. Face-to-face meetings, which included formal conferences and workshops as well as informal networking opportunities, were the third most cited way of gathering new information.

When asked about their unmet needs for information, participants most frequently cited the need for better synthesis and analysis of the information that was already out there, as opposed to the desire to acquire new information. This was motivated by the overarching sentiment that information overload was a very real impediment to meeting their information needs. Additionally, participants reported that they wanted to learn more from analyses of failures in the field, to avoid reinventing the wheel. As one participant explained, “We need to learn from mistakes. We want reports and accounts of failure that could serve as lessons for learning and improvement.”

Second, participants desired just-in-time information—meaning that they wanted access to specific information when they needed it, as opposed to having more general information “pushed” to them on a regular basis. They wanted to be able to search for information about a specific education issue through an interface that provided a “slice” into many different dimensions of the issue. Such an interface might include information on who else funded programs that address the issue, literature and other resources on the issue, multiple sides or perspectives on the issue, federal and state legislation on the issue, information about issue experts, and information about conferences related to the particular issue.

Third, participants are seeking information on more effective ways to measure the impact of their investments on educational outcomes, particularly a more effective use of evaluations to improve grantmaking capacity and the impact of grantees’ programs. Fourth, many participants said that they are interested in gaining better access to up-to-date information about other foundations’ grantmaking interests, and to practical information related to the craft of grantmaking (such as designing basic metrics and working more effectively with boards). Fifth, participants are seeking improved professional networking opportunities that would allow them to identify and connect with peers that could provide information and resources, which was reported to be one of the most productive means of sharing and collecting information. Based on these participant comments, this information audit sought to identify and explore these information needs in the following areas:

- Better synthesis and analysis of existing information, rather than simply more information;
- Just-in-time information and analysis with robust search capabilities;

- Information that could better measure the impact of funding on educational outcomes;
- Information on the craft of grantmaking; and
- Expanding professional networking opportunities.

This study paid particular attention to various segments within GFE’s membership as participants also had some significantly different as well as common needs for information. For example, those newer to grantmaking were particularly interested in learning about practical issues related to the craft of grantmaking. Those newer to the field of education emphasized a need for better resources concerning the background, history, and context of the specific issues with which they were grappling. Experienced grantmakers were more likely to discuss the challenges they faced in trying to stay current with developments in the field, including best practices and assessment.

The culture within grantmaking organizations will also influence the ways that a knowledge management system is used. For example, participants described a high demand for information, part of which can be attributed to their on-going appreciation for learning. Many of the participants, to be sure, portrayed information gathering as time consuming and difficult, yet they also spoke about its key benefits in keeping them interested and engaged in their field. At the same time, many participants described their own frustrations as they sought to enhance opportunities for sharing, partnering, and collaboration, all of which they described as needed within their own foundations and for the professional development of the field at large. While those in corporate philanthropy more often reported the need to “scrub” internal research and evaluation materials for external distribution, overall, participants indicated that norms within the field of philanthropy concerning a reticence to share information are changing—but more slowly than many would like. Most participants indicated that they would welcome efforts that would assist in this process.

Grantmakers overwhelmingly described GFE, with its reputation for being neutral, proactive, and effective, as the appropriate organization to advance the field of grantmaking by developing a knowledge management system. They emphasized, however, that this is a significant and new responsibility, and encouraged the organization to make conscious and strategic decisions about how much staff time and resources would be necessary to ensure that the endeavor would be successful, as opposed to starting the project full speed ahead and realizing that their resources were not sufficient to keep the system up-to-date, relevant, etc.

Based on these findings, the final section of this study identifies several conditions under which a knowledge management system might be most successful in tapping into the high demand for information in the field of educational grantmaking. These conditions not only offer opportunities for success, but also can help in identifying some of the key challenges that emerge in developing and maintaining a knowledge management system. These conditions for success represent important areas of reflection concerning GFE’s appropriate level of involvement and commitment of its own resources. The conditions for success include the following:

- Remaining current and flexible;
- Offering a system that is easily queried by a wide range of factors (such as education issue, funding support, geographic location, etc.);
- Establishing key functional areas;
- Promoting communities of practice and a culture of information sharing; and
- Measuring and assessing ongoing impact.

Based on this information audit, it appears that the current information climate within and among foundations is conducive to the development of a knowledge management system for educational grantmakers. At the same time, it is clear that developing such a system is a significant undertaking that brings with it many challenges as well as opportunities. The success of the system will depend, in part, on the extent to which GFE can provide and sustain the resources needed to offer a high-quality knowledge management system that not only offers up-to-date information and analysis, but also a space for the kinds of conversations that can move the field forward.

II. Patterns of Information Use

New and more experienced grantmaking participants, representing foundations from across the spectrum—large and small; national, regional, and local—shared several common patterns of information gathering and use. However, participants from these different segments also engaged in different kinds of information quests. These common and divergent patterns of information use could prove helpful as GFE considers its options in establishing and maintaining a knowledge management system.

COMMON METHODS OF OBTAINING INFORMATION

During the interviews and focus group meetings, participants said that their most common first step in gathering information was through the Internet. Their efforts to seek information on a particular issue or topic usually began with or featured prominently Web-based searches, most often Google. Others mentioned the ERIC database and Lexus-Nexus News Service. These searches often led to research-based, university, policy, and advocacy sites, which many described as most useful for the kinds of information they sought.² A small number of participants said that they did not use or rarely used the Internet to gather information. The wide utilization of the Internet lends support to the belief that a web-based knowledge management system could be of value to many.

² Many people were quite experienced with searching on these kinds of databases, but did not know that these searches constitute a form of “query.” When asked if they used search engines, most said yes. When asked if they used query-based information gathering, they typically said no or did not really understand this concept. Understanding these kinds of linguistic distinctions is useful in facilitating use of knowledge management tools since using language that people already feel comfortable with (e.g., “searchable” rather than “query-based”) can facilitate use.

The second most common method of gathering information was over the telephone. Several participants noted that when they had a question about a particular issue, or were looking for additional resources or experts, that they were much more likely to call a colleague (particularly those in other foundations). Newer and those more experienced grantmakers most often called colleagues that they had met through a conference or other gathering, or if someone they knew had referred them. Many participants also mentioned emails and listservs as providing them with useful day-to-day information, and some said that they preferred these means to the phone, because emails and listserv information are more “precise” and retrievable, and less time-consuming, than individual phone calls.

Face-to-face meetings, from professional conferences to informal lunches, were the third most common form of information gathering. Many grantmakers identified national grantmaking conferences and local funders’ forums as useful sources of information. However, several newer grantmakers said they learned more from meetings with field-based practitioners, such as principals, teachers, and community leaders, rather than from meetings attended by other grantmakers.

Participants cited a variety of Web-based and print publications as frequent sources of information. Those consistently cited as being of the highest value included:³

- *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*
- PEN Weekly Newsblast
- *Education Week*
- GFE Newsletter
- Local and national newspapers (and services that aggregated them)
- *Education Next*

COMMON USES OF INFORMATION

Participants described several common uses for the information that they collected. The most widespread of these involved efforts to inform their boards of developments on particular educational issues. Information uses included:

- Keeping up to date on new developments and learnings in the foundation’s current grantmaking areas, including other national or regional grantmaking initiatives.
- Gathering background and analysis on new educational issues that the foundation is interested in funding.
- Developing appropriate evaluation procedures and timelines for the foundation’s current grantmaking areas.

³ Appendix A includes other sources of information that were mentioned less frequently.

- Justifying new program areas or projects that program officers or other staff members will bring before the board.

The following kinds of information uses were also mentioned frequently by grantmakers:

- Gathering background information and analysis on new thematic or geographic areas that are added to their portfolios.
- Obtaining background information about specific grantseekers.
- Researching the social and historical application of a particular program or discipline of specific grant requests.
- Developing reliable information sources (about fundraising and philanthropy in general as well about specific educational issues) that could be uniformly accessed by foundations, grantseekers, grantees, and other local organizations.

SEGMENT DIFFERENCES IN INFORMATION GATHERING AND USE

Although grantmakers share many common patterns of information gathering and use, they also differ in these areas in some significant ways. For example, several participants working for larger and some of the medium-sized foundations described elaborate environmental scans that their organizations regularly performed on specific topics. These scans included conducting national research and literature searches, making contact with leaders and experts in the field, attending conferences, finding out who the consultants are and bringing them in, exploring best practices, putting together advisory boards at both the national and local levels, drilling down into local geographic areas, calling and meeting with other foundations, and developing white papers, position papers, and other reports with recommendations for impact in the field. Topics included such areas as achievement gaps, professional development of teachers, and the effect of small schools on student learning, to name just a few. Grantmakers representing medium-to-large-sized foundations also had access to in-house librarians and other research staff for information gathering, organization, and synthesis.

Alternatively, many regional, community, family, and small foundations, and individual donors who had deep roots in their geographic areas, often took a very hands-on approach to gathering a wide range of research-based and geographically specific information. Although many of these grantmakers attended national conferences, read national literature and research, and otherwise sought to stay abreast of national developments, their priorities were at the local and regional levels. They met often with the local movers and shakers in the field, and they used phone and face-to-face contacts to stay abreast of local developments. Some of these grantmakers spoke about local information-gathering processes to provide their boards with specific information about things such as an initiative on conflict resolution at a particular elementary school or parental engagement and leadership in a particular community or city. In most of these cases, these participants said that could not rely on others within their organization to gather either national or local information since their small staff size precluded such specialization. And while several participants from smaller foundations said that they had access to program assistants, they said that these staff members typically had not

been trained in research methods and, as a result, usually required significant oversight in synthesizing the reams of research results they typically found. Likewise, several of these grantmakers felt that the most useful information gathered at the local level required their personal contacts and level of insider “know-how” that could only be derived from experience.

When asked how they determined the quality of a publication, an article, or a Web site, many experienced grantmakers said that they were easily able to determine the quality of a resource by scanning it. The two most common criteria for judging its quality was either because it came from a trusted source, or because it “rang true” with their own experience in the field. Said one participant:

“I look at where it comes from; who it’s authored by matters. And then if it’s a research study I’m interested in the methodology and if it’s a good match for the topic at hand. And then whether it makes major leaps or assumptions that shouldn’t be made. I often too wonder what resources they have used to write the article, who have they learned from, who has critiqued it.”

However, less experienced grantmakers were not as comfortable in assessing the quality of research in that way, though they did note that the author and sponsoring organization carried a great deal of weight.

Finally, some corporate foundations described information needs that were different from other foundations. In fact, many foundations, not just corporate foundations, said that they gathered information from management journals about effective business management practices and return-on-investment (ROI) models. The corporate foundations, like many other foundations, described information-gathering procedures in the field of education and in their geographic areas. What appeared to be unique to some corporate foundations (particularly those whose budget depended on corporate earnings rather than endowments), was the closer attention they paid to the business climate in their regions, business development opportunities, and the relationship between these trends and opportunities for giving in education.

III. Unmet Needs for Information

This section provides an overview of participants’ unmet needs for information and summarizes these information gaps by grantmakers’ experience level and by foundation type. In the interviews and focus group discussions, grantmakers identified several common unmet needs for information:

- Better synthesis and analysis of existing information rather than simply more information.
- More just-in-time information and resources on a wide variety of information needs.
- Information that could better measure the impact of funding on educational outcomes, particularly in the areas of evaluation, measurement and assessment.

- Information that could inform their boards and push the field forward in terms of practical lessons learned.
- Information from other foundations about the craft and content of their grantmaking.
- The ability to more effectively locate professional grantmaking peers they could contact for information on specific educational issues, funding strategies, or operational grantmaking issues.

BETTER SYNTHESIS AND ANALYSIS OF EXISTING INFORMATION

Participants repeatedly described the abundance of information available on any given topic, but noted that they were too busy to wade through the stacks of reports and other publications that came across their desks, or to explore all the Web sites and e-publications that popped up on Internet search engines for any given topic. For example, one experienced grantmaker said:

“Those of us who have enough gray hair remember how hard it used to be to find research. Now we have too much.”

Another reiterated: “The trouble with information is that there is so much out there.”

The irony of having so much information available is that grantmakers do not have time to assess it comprehensively, and they also believe that the quality of much of the information available is uneven at best. For example, this comment by a grantmaker, who had recently completed research on a specific topic, conveyed the attitude of many:

“It was frustrating because there was so much [information]. I have stacks and stacks of articles that I have printed out, much of which is redundant. I spent so much time researching the topic. But I didn’t get to do it as systematically as I would have liked. I was as comprehensive as your average grantmaker might be, maybe even more so. But it was hit or miss.”

Another grantmaker said:

“It is one of the banes of my existence. I have way more information than I can process. It wouldn’t bug me so much if I didn’t want the information...if I didn’t care.”

Participants explained that what they really needed was not more information but better synthesis and analysis of information that was already available. Although some participants, particularly in the medium-sized and larger foundations, had access to on-staff librarians or research associates, the majority completed the bulk of their research themselves, and most said that their time for tracking down and reading articles and other information on specific topics was very limited.

In explaining what was meant by a need for synthesis or analysis rather than more information, some participants said they would like to see smart and well-informed overviews or summaries of important articles or developments in specific topic areas, as well as robust search engines that could help them find these articles more easily. It was

suggested that these could be formatted like book or article reviews—short pieces that could be written and posted by people in the field. Or perhaps GFE could generate these. Several participants pointed to PEN’s Weekly Newsblast as providing this kind of important service, yet others wanted to see listservs that brought information to them that was targeted more specifically to their field of interest than those currently available. Said one participant:

“I have a pile of stuff, so in a random way, I go to the intellectual buffet that is on a conveyor belt. My brain will get fat but with the wrong stuff. So usually you get too much stuff, I get all of these list serves, it’s almost too much to wade through. If there were a way to filter information, tag things, new issues, new reports...I don’t know how to do it.”

Many participants explained that particularly in education, a field that is highly politicized and where there is no one single answer to any problem, it was very important that the organization providing this type of research and information be perceived as neutral. Those who discussed this issue described a need to have access to a wide variety of viewpoints and experts. Some people said that they had witnessed, within their own foundation, tensions between a conservative board and a more liberal staff—and that this issue of gaining access to a wide range of expert commentary on a given topic was a high priority, but very time-consuming and difficult to achieve currently.

At the same time, in trying to fulfill their needs for better synthesis and analysis, grantmakers sought information and analysis that could help them better learn from the lessons of others. Participants said that foundations needed to focus not only on producing promotional materials that outlined the successes of their funded programs, but on things that would be of more direct value to the field, such as materials that dealt with real problems—practical issues involving mistakes made in the field and lessons learned. Specifically, participants emphasized the importance of providing high-quality materials, with high-quality commentary.

JUST-IN-TIME INFORMATION WITH ROBUST SEARCH CAPABILITIES

Participants described the need for just-in-time information—meaning that they wanted access to specific information when they needed it, as opposed to having more general information “pushed” to them on a regular basis. This was most often described as wanting to search for many dimensions of information about a specific education issue, through an interface that would be able to “slice” into the issue. This “slice” would bring together all aspects of an issue or topic such as information on other funders who work in this area, topical programs, relevant literature and research, multiple sides or perspectives on the issue, pertinent federal and state legislation, information about issue experts, and information about topical conferences. This would allow them to go to one source for information on a wide variety of areas related to grantmaking in the field of education. For example, one participant described how a drill-down feature to a specific topic area could be used:

“If there were a matrix slice-and-dice, if there were a way for me to go in and start with a lens, such as reading programs, and you keep drilling, but I only want K-3 reading, and only parent-teacher programs. Then I could just find the reading programs with the components that I want. I have the programs that have only worked with a particular group. And now how can I track down results, such as those programs that have been in effect for two or more years?”

Participants said that the issue of access was vital in staying current with developments in the field. Several participants said that they wanted regular access to high-quality summaries of current developments (relating both to research and practice), through listservs, newsletters or Web sites. Many people also connected ease of access to good system for organizing the materials. Referring to the amount of “current” information that they were already peppered with daily, they spoke about how much time it took to file information for retrieval at some later date, when they would actually need to use it. What these participants said was that having information come across their computer screen every week did not necessarily mean that they *used* it when they needed it. They wanted such information to be available through an effective cataloguing and searchable system on an as-needed basis—saving them the time and effort of creating their own elaborate filing schemes, which they rarely had time to update except in a piecemeal fashion.

Several participants said that even if a clearinghouse of information were not exhaustive in terms of all the resources available in a particular thematic or geographic area, it would still be useful if it helped get them jump-started. Others wanted to be able to browse within topic and subtopic areas, as well as to search or cross-reference to more specific areas of interest. This type of organization of ideas would be particularly useful for those new to the field—those who were not sure what questions to ask or what query words to enter in order to get the most accurate search results.

Ultimately, when participants described how they want to be able to access a system by a “slice into” a topic, this meant that they wanted all fields to be searchable, with lists of information that would appear based on specific queries. For example, someone might search for small schools, in the southwest. This kind of capability was particularly appealing to those with more experience in the field, those who, in many cases, knew exactly what they were looking for. In any case, people wanted easy access to information; they wanted to be able to access high-quality information more quickly than they could now using Google or other search engines.

INFORMATION ON EVALUATION AND IMPACT

Participants also listed evaluation and assessment information as another important dimension of information they would like. Because so many participants emphasized the need to have information that could better measure the impact of their funding on educational outcomes, this section provides a separate discussion dedicated to it.

Participants explained that foundation boards have endorsed the concept of strategic grantmaking—or at least that component of strategic grantmaking which seeks to fund outcomes rather than activities or organizations. This emphasis shifts the framework for grantmaking decisions from issues of programmatic integrity or organizational competence to issues related to realistic short- and long-term outcomes. In the field of education, however, it usually takes years to see outcome improvements as a result of new service interventions, and boards are not necessarily willing to wait. One grantmaker, for example, described this as one of the reasons several foundations have recently decided to move away from K-12 education entirely:

“Recently when some of the big foundations pulled out of K-12, I think this was in part about lack of credible evidence. One thing we don’t do a good job of is capturing evidence and impact.”

Another emphasized the importance of evaluation as the most pressing issue in this climate of strategic grantmaking: “From where I sit, it is an evaluation issue that most philanthropists are dealing with.”

Several people described a “desperate need” for rigorous evaluations and scientific models that could help establish impact over the long term. More people, however, emphasized the need to develop and exchange information about practical lessons learned from the field and how to develop and measure short- and intermediate-term impacts. For example, one person interested in access to higher education for underserved populations said:

“In an area like that, many times, their definitions of success require you to wait 3 to 12 years. We are not willing to wait that long. What are viable indicators in the short term?”

Others said that having information from other grantmakers about effective short-term indicators of particular program successes could help them more easily make the case to their boards for long-term funding. Therefore, grantmakers wanted access to practical information about how to shorten the time between something done and something learned. As one grantmaker said:

“To give it to true researchers, they’ll get back to you in five years—for the ideologues, right away. I’d like someplace in between, an interim point... So thinking through, it’s almost a process question, the through line between intermediate impact, and resulting impact, and the feedback loop that helps us leverage our investments. If you don’t do that, it has been just about moving money.”

The corporate foundations that were interviewed appeared to have many of the same challenges as others in keeping up with developments in philanthropy and in education. Corporate foundations were more likely to keep closer track of business developments, yet one issue cited was the need for evaluation and program measurement that could be tied to return on investment (ROI) and social return on investment (SROI). The

corporate foundations were acutely attentive to these concepts, and actively sought ways to understand and track them better. Said one participant:

“Evaluation should be used to create a structure for the foundations to get a better sense of the outcomes of their grantees, how to get the grantees to do a better job, to assess them and to assess ourselves.”

INFORMATION ABOUT OTHER FOUNDATIONS’ GRANTMAKING CRAFT AND CONTENT

Participants described a need for more information about the craft and process of grantmaking, as well as more information about the content of other foundations’ grantmaking. In relation to process information, people wanted to know more about the practice—rather than theory—of grantmaking. In other foundations’ experience, how long did certain processes take, such as bringing a program up to speed? How much did certain types of programs cost? What kinds of questions did they get from their boards? In relation to content information, many people said that they wanted more up-to-date information about each foundation’s current interests. For example, one grantmaker, who was working on a new reading initiative, said:

“We’d like to be able to quickly research how other foundations have funded reading projects. We’d want to know what they did, how much money did they spend. We want to be able to learn from what they’ve done.”

Several grantmakers also said they wanted an overview—perhaps a map—of grantmaking, that would show how much money is going to issues like teacher development, the creation of smaller schools, or middle school reform. Some people wanted to know about grantmaking in specific regions of the country, states, and localities. Some said they would like to know how much money is being given to schools, to third parties, to technical support, and to other entities. This information, they said, would provide them with a better understanding of the field at large.

Not surprisingly, those from newer foundations and those who were themselves new to grantmaking were particularly interested in learning about practical issues related to the craft of grantmaking. For example, one participant who was new to grantmaking was interested in seeing how others had moved “from a benefactors vision, through the board’s role in implementing that vision, to the strategies need to make that vision operational.” Those new to grantmaking were particularly interested in information about such “nuts-and-bolts” issues as operating a foundation, strategic grantmaking, and foundation effectiveness. These issues also included understanding when it is appropriate to make unsolicited versus solicited grants, how to decide the timeframe for grants, how to compare and contrast different grantmaking strategies and styles in a K-12 context, how to engage public systems, and how to leverage systems of change. Those newer to grantmaking also indicated that, given the abundance of information available about K-12 issues, which of this information was most useful to grantmaking.

BETTER PROFESSIONAL NETWORKING INFORMATION AND OPPORTUNITIES

Grantmakers emphasized that one of their key needs for information involved greater and easier exposure to others working in their subject area or geographic region. Specifically, several participants expressed the need to be able to identify and connect with peers who could serve as information sources. Some people said that they wanted ways to capture and share the insights from “hallway talks” that occur during conferences and “parking lot discussions” that take place after meetings. Others said that they just wanted to learn about who was working in their area, and then they would network on their own, by phone, email, and perhaps in person. The following comment reflects the viewpoint of many of the participants:

“What I have found particularly helpful is that there is a unique network of other grantmakers who may have had experience in something that you are thinking of moving into. It has developed in very informal ways: You talk to someone because they have knowledge of your work. You need to pick their brains, find out ... their landmines ... their learning. If they could do it over, what would they do differently?”

Participants said that one of the benefits of having a single place to go for information is that it could promote networking opportunities, by providing contact information for researchers, experts, practitioners, and other funders. Many said that promoting networking was the true end for information gathering in the first place, since that is where the more advanced levels of learning and information exchange take place. For example, one person from a large foundation said: “I am much more interested in understanding around the country who is doing what type of work.” A grantmaker from a small foundation said:

“When you bring people together, this is the most important thing. It’s more important than bringing together large amounts of data. [What’s missing is] how to network with people. And more focus on the regional rather than the national.”

Although each of these two grantmakers has a different networking focus—one regional and the other national—they agree that, for them, seeking greater opportunities for networking is a more prominent need than accessing other types of information.

Grantmakers emphasized that trying to continually expand their networks was one of the most difficult aspects of their jobs. Many people described this as laborious, “down in the trenches” work. The work involves, as one person said, “making spaces where people can work together and join forces.”

Several participants mentioned that they would like to see online networking opportunities build from conferences and other face-to-face meetings that have already taken place, for instance, through chat session and virtual discussion groups. Others said that they had never used such forums before, and did not like joining these types of conversations.

Many participants said that they were not just interested in networking with other grantmakers, but also with principals, teachers, and others who were doing good work in the field. Some people, in fact, said that this was the *only* networking they were interested in because it was very difficult to continually expand their network of leading practitioners. Several people also mentioned that the most difficult networking—and therefore their most pressing need—involved trying to move the conversations beyond current grantmaking and practitioner circles to reach networks of policymakers.

DIFFERENCES IN MOTIVATIONS FOR INFORMATION USE BY SEGMENT

The more experienced grantmakers and those with extensive experience in education were more likely to report that they were looking for ways to push themselves to learn things in areas that they did not yet know. Many of these grantmakers discussed the challenges they faced in trying to stay current in a complex field that was politically charged and that was changing rapidly. Like those newer to the field, they were interested in best practices (particularly concerning issues they were not currently funding) and deepening their understanding of evaluation and assessment. They also were very interested in expanding their networking, expanding their resource base, and increasing their opportunities for partnering. As one person said, “It’s the incremental building on knowledge that builds the innovation.” In short, many experienced grantmakers said that they wanted to learn how to do things better and faster, not just in grantmaking but also in engaging and impacting education—and that they were always looking for better tools to help them accomplish that aim.

Other participants emphasized that their most pressing challenges were learning about of grant-funded reforms taking place in particular regions across the country. While a participant may know their topic area from a national perspective, they also wanted to know what other resources might be available and what other similar programs were running in a certain state or local region. When asked why it was important for grantmakers to have this type of information, participants said that they wanted to understand how specific problems had already been defined in the field so that they could be thoughtful about research and practical content, political ramifications, and overall context.

Some of those participants new to education were overwhelmed by the huge learning curve in the field, and they wanted assistance in understanding the background, history and context of the issues with which they were grappling. Many people spoke about the need to understand a wide range of budget issues, including federal, state and local funding streams. In addition, they wanted more local and regional information about the structures and rules in the areas where they served, including information about local reform efforts, union issues, parent engagement and leadership, and district-level policies. Many people also talked about the need for better information about model programs and best practices. As one person new to education said, “I have been frustrated that I can’t find one good set of tools about good models for non-English speaking, low-income students.”

Many grantmakers from national and larger foundations said they needed better information about who was doing what in the field—both the foundation and the educational fields. For example, they said they wanted to know which foundations had programs in which subject areas and which geographic areas—information that could help them partner as well as assist in determining where to focus their grantmaking activities. They also said they were particularly behind the curve in understanding what was going on regionally and locally: Who were the primary local funders? Who were the leaders among school boards, unions, and superintendents? Which states were being proactive in their educational funding and reform? What best practices were bubbling up? National foundations with footprints in several communities nationwide were particularly challenged by their need to stay on top of local contexts. Finally, participants from the larger foundations also indicated that much of the research within their organization was done by program associates, who were typically newer to the field. These staff members, they said, needed access to the kinds of information that all those who are newer to the field need.

Participants from regional foundations said they found themselves pulled both toward the local and the national level. They said that they frequently need to broker information about national developments for local organizations, and about local issues and playmakers for national organizations—and that often the issues fall outside their specific grantmaking areas. They said that they have a strong interest in building capacity within the region, but they found it challenging to gather information and pass it on to others. One person mentioned how “wonderful” it would be if she could simply refer people who called her to a resource, rather than having to call and track down where to find information that they asked for.

Small and family foundations said that they spend a lot of time seeking to leverage funding from other organizations, including larger foundations. In reaching this aim, they are always searching for information about which foundations are working in which areas (geographic and by topic). Knowing more about the funding efforts of larger organizations, they said, would help them to place their dollars more strategically, and also help them to connect local organizations with grant opportunities that were larger than they could offer. Several smaller foundations mentioned that their work—in one- to three-person offices—can get isolating; they described the importance of learning about opportunities to network among grantmakers. Others emphasized the importance of networking with other grantmakers so as to improve partnering opportunities in their local area. Many smaller foundations spoke about the need for information geared specifically to them rather than to “the big dogs”—for instance, how to deal with bureaucratic districts, how to work with individual schools, how to encourage principals to engage in professional development, and how to support schools if they do not have 501(c)3 status. Others said that they needed localized information on budget practices, for instance. Many smaller foundations also emphasized the need for better information about program evaluation, particularly cost-effective methods that are not expensive for the grantees to implement.

Community foundations, like the smaller and family foundations, have a very strong footprint in local areas. However, like the regional organizations (and many of them are,

in fact, regionally based), they also serve as brokers of information between national and local organizations. As a result, many of the same informational challenges that are encountered by small, family, and regional organizations are also encountered by community foundations. In particular, this includes a need for information about partnering with larger foundations and staying on top of grantmaking and educational developments at the national level.

On the other hand, one of the primary tasks of grantmakers working for community foundations is to actively know and organize for their community. They pride themselves on being in the trenches, in knowing the local players and promoting those they see as most promising leaders, and on seeing for themselves which local programs constitute the new best practices. One grantmaker from a community foundation questioned whether the information that GFE could provide to her would be useful, since, she believed, it could not build upon what she already knew of her local conditions. “Things get so de-contextualized,” she said, “that they become useless to us.” Perhaps the challenge implicit here is not so much for GFE to provide information, but to create another avenue for those engaged in specific, local issues to communicate with one another.

IV. The Culture of Philanthropy and Its Impact on Information Sharing

In the interviews and focus groups, grantmakers welcomed the opportunity to discuss the culture of philanthropy itself and their motivations for sharing information. One of the most prevalent characteristics of the grantmaker participants interviewed can best be characterized as an on-going appreciation for learning: a widespread interest in gathering new information and acquiring new knowledge. Grantmakers from across the spectrum described information gathering not as a burden or an encumbrance, but as an opportunity that continually made their jobs rewarding. Many people, to be sure, portrayed information gathering as time consuming, hectic, difficult, overwhelming and unending. Yet they also spoke about its benefits. As one participant said: “It is my responsibility as a grant maker to be as informed as possible.” Another participant said: “I love finding stuff out... I have a thirst for knowledge.”

Participants described the sense of fulfillment they received when they read research material that affirmed what they felt they knew from direct experience. They also described a sense of attainment when they came across information that startled them or otherwise reframed their understanding of an issue. Similarly, grantmakers described a sense of accomplishment as they expanded their professional contacts in the field. They characterized these opportunities for continual learning and personal development as positive elements that helped to make their jobs rewarding.

Participants viewed philanthropy as a changing field, and in particular, a field that was offering greater opportunities for collaboration and partnering. This included efforts in many areas—including grantmaking, convening practitioners, and reaching

policymakers—that reached from the local to the national levels. Many people said that this trend had been developing for some time, and several said that it had become particularly acute recently, as some participants reported that their foundations have had to deal with the repercussions of an economy in which there were limited financial resources for nonprofit organizations. As one grantmaker from a national foundation said:

“In the past there hasn’t been a strong desire to collaborate. Now there has been a shift. We don’t have enough money. The only way we are going to be effective is to develop better partnerships and coordinate better...and to start to get smarter about how we affect results.”

Another participant confirmed these insights:

“After 9/11 there is even more interest in thinking about how to help grantees, and how we can partner in different ways. There seems to be a growing sense of commitment during a difficult time period. As a consequence, exchanging information and background articles is providing a good starting place for continued discussion.”

Another major shift in philanthropy, according to interviewees, involved an increased interest in evaluation and measurement. One outgrowth of this has been, according to several people, an increased interest in research-based, data-driven findings. Another outgrowth has involved more up-front analysis and discussion—within and across foundations—of appropriate programmatic goals and interim objectives to reach the desired outcomes. In each of these areas—finding effective evaluation tools, understanding data-driven research and its impact on practice, and seeking to connect programmatic objectives with outcomes—foundations have found that collaborating and communicating with others offered the best means to improve their work.

On the other hand, many people emphasized that these developments in the field are in a nascent stage at best. Many people described the field of philanthropy as being steeped in tradition and very slow to change. Several grantmakers from small foundations said that although the larger foundations may be talking more about partnering, what they were really looking for were people to share the costs of their programs. Others said that when they take a hard look at the publications that foundations produce, the vast majority of them are self-serving and directed toward public relations rather than developing new knowledge. One person traced this to the nature of philanthropic work itself:

“It is an illusion of power that we can change whatever system you name, when really all we do is give money and some advice. Some people may consider themselves to be very hands-on. But the bottom line is that you don’t control anything. So this creates the culture in which people feel like they have to present their work like great things are happening.”

Some grantmakers said that competition makes people want to put their name on problems as well as on efforts to solve them. Some said that it is crucial to have good

public relations in order to succeed in a competitive environment. Participants also talked about the conflicted nature of philanthropy, in which competition makes it very difficult to share information about the lessons learned from program failures and when to cut losses, while at the same time, as one person said, “We are dying for that type of information. We wish someone would tell us.”

During the interviews and focus groups, many grantmakers spoke at length about internal documents, research findings and recommendations that they prepared for their foundation on specific topics. When asked if they were willing to share these types of documents with other educational grantmakers (with the understanding that sensitive information about grantees would be removed), many grantmakers emphatically said “no”, and many were reluctant to do so. Some said they would be willing to share such documents if they took out their analyses, which they described as subjective—the very kind of information that many claimed was needed in the field. Others were concerned about the amount of time it would take to make internal documents appropriate for external use. Many participants said that they did share this kind of information with others, but only with those whom they knew personally and trusted to use it appropriately. On the other hand, many people said they would be willing to share this kind of “scrubbed” information with others, and that having a way to make it available inexpensively could prompt others to develop internal documents into materials that could “move the dialogue further...push the education reform dialogue in the right direction.”

Many participants expressed reluctance when pressed about their willingness to share internal documents with others and were critical about the field’s track record in disseminating meaningful information. However, most participants were much more positive about their prospects for sharing more general kinds of information, and welcomed having new opportunities to do so. In part, this motivation seemed to spring from people’s appreciation for learning and a deep, ongoing desire to push forward the thinking of the field. Many people said that their foundations had made significant accomplishments, and they wanted to share those learnings with others but had no effective and inexpensive way to do so. Some said that they no longer had the budget to produce white papers or otherwise disseminate their findings. Others said that they knew about the reputation among many grantmakers to “hold things close to their chests,” but that this had not been their experience. They said that once they had begun working with people through local meetings or national conferences, they passed along articles and reports whenever something appropriate came across their desks, even though this was sometimes time-consuming and bothersome. Some people said that they were frustrated by the extent to which they tried to share information, but that it was not being used by others. Several participants said that greater efforts at sharing key information were needed in order to push the field forward. In speaking about this issue of sharing, one grantmaker said:

“We don’t take the time to make a professional culture, in which foundations would share the good and the bad.”

In sum, it was clear from discussions with grantmakers that there is a high demand for information among grantmakers, and that this demand is generated in part by their appreciation for learning. On the other hand, the culture of philanthropy may have an overall dampening effect on the sharing of critical information within the field. Many grantmakers described philanthropy as a field that was changing, but not changing fast enough to meet the many challenges and needs of communities. Many people described their own frustrations as they sought to enhance the opportunities for sharing, partnering, and collaboration, which they described as crucial for the professional development of the field at large. Perhaps most importantly, many people indicated that they welcomed leadership efforts that could assist in this process.

V. The Present and Future Role of GFE as Information Resource

THE PRESENT ROLE OF GFE AS AN INFORMATION RESOURCE

The grantmakers that participated in the interviews and focus groups represented the full spectrum in terms of their current use of GFE for information gathering. As one participant said:

“I could be a poster child. The first time I went to GFE, I found this working group on community organizing. They gave me a ton of things. This is how I learned to talk about this issue.”

Another said, “I call them a lot—for references, if anyone has done research on a particular issue.” At the other end of the spectrum, a few people told us that they were not actively involved with GFE and did not take as much advantage of its resources as they could. Overall, however, people expressed very high levels of respect for the resources that GFE currently provides, and their efforts to engage the field. As one person said, “I rave about GFE, because I have never met a more generous group of people. So willing to share, help.”

Grantmakers said that they appreciated receiving GFE’s listserv alerts, email reminders, and monthly updates—though a few said that they rarely read that information. Many said that they attended GFE conferences regularly, primarily for networking purposes. One participant from a smaller foundation said that the conferences seemed geared more for the larger foundations that were “giving away a lot of money.” Another person from a smaller foundation described feeling “intimidated” by the big foundations, yet nonetheless liked to attend the GFE conferences to get “ideas of things that I can piggyback on.” Participants mentioned that they access GFE’s member database, both for mailings and for research into the program areas of different foundations. Some participants said that the information about program areas would be more helpful if it had additional level of detail about the types of initiatives that each foundation funded and was kept more current; this would have saved them steps as they sought to network with others in particular topical areas.

Several experienced grantmakers said that they consider GFE to be particularly helpful to those who are new in the field, including many in their own organizations—and this

was confirmed by the compliments that GFE received from those new in the field. Some experienced grantmakers portrayed GFE as less helpful for those who are more experienced and now have more specialized needs. On the other hand, other experienced grantmakers said that they continued to use GFE as a key means to expand their networking and partnering. Several experienced grantmakers said that they relied on GFE's networking and resource opportunities when they move into new thematic areas. For example, one participant described GFE as "good for me in connecting me to peers nationally," yet said that he does not contact GFE very often nor engage in online discussions. Another person portrayed GFE as very "interactive" and "proactive" in taking the time to figure out his foundation's particular areas of interest and to provide "the networking that was so important to my work."

THE FUTURE ROLE OF GFE AS AN INFORMATION RESOURCE

During interviews and focus group meetings, grantmakers characterized GFE as the most appropriate and effective organization to undertake the development of a knowledge management system. The vast majority thought that creating such a system was fully consistent with the mission of GFE and the kinds of services that GFE regularly offered, including conferences, meetings, and other formats for learning about developments in the field. For instance, one person said, "This should be a forum of ideas for education grantmakers. This is my understanding of what GFE's mission is." Another said,

"It's not just one more project for GFE. The brokering, and all that, is exactly what GFE is. It's not a technology tool, it's an extension of their mission: their conferencing, this knowledge management system, convening people around these issues."

Many people also said that any organization hoping to create a knowledge management system must be perceived as neutral, highly competent, proactive, and on the leading edge of developments in the field—and many people described GFE as such an organization. One grantmaker said, "The name GFE means something to me—the reputation of the sender." Another grantmaker, who said his organization was not particularly good at sharing information, said:

"I think GFE should be a leader in the field, helping to shape the field, more than just a service organization for its members. It should be creating this expectation that something needs to happen...help create professional norms... It is the preeminent organization to foster the development of educational grantmaking."

Several people mentioned that because of the distinguished reputation of GFE, people were more likely to use the system, and the system itself was likely to be more robust. For example, a grantmaker from a large foundation said:

"I think they are the right organization to do this. Because they aren't a foundation, they work to bring foundations to do this. Their agenda is seen as one that can be trusted. They are in a better position to negotiate with other

foundations, better than any other nonprofit or foundation. People really respect them.”

Many people noted that creating a knowledge management system was an immense undertaking, and they emphasized that the responsibility should not be taken lightly nor the consequences underestimated. Participants were firm in saying that there was no point in doing this if there were not enough resources to be proactive and to produce something of very high quality. Some participants said that it would be a “grand disappointment” if it did not separate itself from the “clutter of all the information” already available. Yet these participants were not suggesting that GFE back away from providing this opportunity. On the contrary, they wanted to make sure that GFE committed the resources needed to effectively implement it. As one experienced grantmaker said:

“Go into it assuming that you are building culture, not just providing service... It shouldn’t be done on the cheap, on the side. This shouldn’t just be one more thing to do. Hire someone full-time.”

Another person added:

“I want to underscore that I hope GFE will do something important in this area. Or do nothing. But not in between. We need real quality and real leadership. Then visibility will follow.”

The vast majority said that they were likely to give such a system a try—but they had very high expectations about content and accessibility that must be met if they were to use it more than just a few times.

VI. Recommendations for Design and Implementation of a KMS

In interviews and focus group discussions, participants described a high demand for information in the field of educational grantmaking. That is, the grantmakers interviewed were, by and large, active and dedicated pursuers of information and knowledge. Finding out new information and making new professional contacts not only were crucial components of their jobs, but also kept them interested and engaged in their field. This high demand for information is likely to play an important role in motivating people to use a knowledge management system. To tap into this high demand, however, an effective knowledge management system should connect, in direct and apparent ways, to people’s specific information needs (see Section III). In addition, it should build upon current information practices (see Section II) and the information-sharing culture of the field (see Section IV).

This section identifies several conditions under which a knowledge management system might be most successful in tapping into the high demand for information in the field of educational grantmaking. These conditions not only offer opportunities for success, but also can help in identifying some of the key challenges that emerge in developing and maintaining a knowledge management system. As a result, these conditions for success

represent important areas for GFE to reflect on, concerning the appropriate level of involvement and commitment of its own resources. The conditions for success include the following:

- Remaining current and flexible;
- Developing a system that has strong robust search capabilities and is easily queried by a wide range of factors (such as education issue, funding support, geographic location, etc.);
- Establishing key functional areas;
- Promoting communities of practice and a culture of information sharing; and
- Measuring and assessing ongoing impact.

After describing the opportunities and challenges presented in these areas, this section offers several concrete suggestions for design and implementation processes, as well as some specific recommendations of attributes that the system might include, including suggestions for system functionality.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN ESTABLISHING A SUCCESSFUL KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Remaining Current and Flexible

Many participants, without prompting, said that no information clearinghouse or knowledge management system could offer everything for everyone. However, participants were firm in insisting that the system be of high quality, that it remain up-to-date, and that it be interactive and flexible in meeting a wide range of needs. In light of these high expectations, one suggestion is to launch the system by providing an overall plan of future capabilities and direction, while at the same time focusing on several more limited but key features that many people need. Within that framework, GFE could build usage around the early features of the site, promote the successes, and then enhance the site as appropriate, given the needs of users. This kind of flexible planning jibes with the identified demand for a system that is adaptable and interactive.

Many people said that one of the biggest challenges the GFE faces in creating a knowledge management system is determining how to keep information current. Grantmakers' needs for current information range from wanting to know which programs other grantmakers were funding, to wanting up-to-date and quality analysis and synthesis of policy developments, best practices, and learning from the field—all in specific topic areas. GFE's approach can be to provide a framework for these kinds of postings and empower its members to drive it. But GFE will need to determine how heavily to invest its own staff time in the constant updating of analysis, information, and links.

The following kinds of challenges arise from these issues:

- Staying abreast of developments in the field, so that new information can be posted, catalogued and cross-referenced quickly and efficiently.

- Being clear about grantmakers' information needs regarding new developments in the field, so that GFE can provide new links to what is already available, rather than constantly creating new threads of information.
- Developing and maintaining a technology that is flexible and modular so that there is not a large risk or investment in adopting it, and so that it can be modified and expanded routinely.
- Establishing effective ways to inform prospective users about the system, train them in how to use it, and provide incentives for them to take ownership of creating and sharing information in it.

Developing a system that has strong robust search capabilities and is easily queried by a wide range of factors

During interviews and focus group discussions, participants repeatedly emphasized their need to find information on demand related to their specific interests, both topical and geographic. The following issue/subject areas were identified by interviewees as important:⁴

- Access to higher education for underserved populations
- Assessment issues
- Charter school assessment
- Charter schools
- Community resources
- Higher education
- K-3 learning
- Literacy
- Middle school issues
- Parent involvement
- Parent-teacher programs
- Preschools (and universal preschool)
- Reading initiatives
- Rural education
- Small schools
- Teacher development
- Teacher quality

⁴ This list is not meant to be comprehensive since it only includes a subpopulation of GFE membership.

The range as well as the specificity of this list suggests the following kinds of challenges for GFE:

- Before the system is in place, determining how to motivate grantmakers (that is, prospective users) to identify a few priority issues or topics that can be used to seed the system.
- Once the system is in place, determining how to encourage and motivate users and prospective users to expand the topic areas in a way that can be supported over time.
- Establishing an accessible and intuitive system for categorizing and cross-referencing information, including the creation of key words, indexes, taxonomies, and other tools.
- Establishing effective ways to access information in each topic area by a set of search terms, such as geographic region, project size, etc.

Establishing Key Functional Areas

During the interviews and focus group discussions, several functional areas emerged as promising rubrics for the collection, organization, and dissemination of information, no matter what topic areas are featured. These areas include:

- *Overall context and history of an issue.* Those new to the field and those who were considering moving into a new topic area were particularly interested in being able to access insightful and short analyses of articles, publications and other information that could provide context for the issue at hand. Many grantmakers emphasized the need for high-quality analyses and a wide variety of viewpoints. Participants also expressed an interest in the grantmaking history of specific topics: which foundations had been active in the topic area (by geographic location); how much funding had been devoted to this topic from foundations recently, and which foundations were still active.
- *Current developments on issues.* Those who were experienced in grantmaking and in education were particularly interested in staying current on issues in which they were already engaged. They wanted succinct updates on recent developments in research, grantmaking, best practices and other areas related to the issue.
- *Literature, research, and best practices.* Many participants said that it was very difficult to stay updated on the research in the field. They said that there were too many Web sites to visit, sources of information to track down, and stacks of publications to wade through. After they had read a good article, they usually could not find it when they actually needed to use it. They wanted perpetual access to a treasure trove of the best literature and research on their subject matter. (A few people emphasized that this was *all* that they wanted in a clearinghouse of information: the ability to probe deeper into their topic of interest.) Many people also said that they were always looking for good research about best practices, and ways to connect research to practice.

- *Legislative and policy implications.* Many participants were interested in better information about the connections between grantmaking and public policy, particularly in terms of legislation on specific education issues.
- *Evaluation and measurement.* Grantmakers were very interested in exploring ways to more effectively measure program effectiveness. Part of the interest involved a desire to learn from what other foundations had done in this area, so that they could understand appropriate standards in the field and be better prepared to present realistic program objectives to their board.
- *Grantmaking strategies and lessons learned.* Most participants mentioned that too much time was wasted reinventing the wheel. They wanted information about other foundations' grantmaking strategies – both those that had been effective and those that were not effective – within specific topic and geographic areas to assist them in their own efforts to replicate or scale up programs. Many participants also expressed interest in sharing information about the track record of grantees. New grantmakers were particularly interested in learning some grantmaking rules of thumb, such as what kinds of expenses were appropriate for evaluation, consulting or expert meetings.
- *Professional networking* (including practitioners, other grantmakers, national experts, local experts, consultants, and policymakers). Many, many people said that knowing whom to contact might be the most important thing that a knowledge management system could provide. Small and local foundations wanted more up-to-date information about national contacts. For instance, they wanted to which national foundations, and which staff members, were working in their subject area. National foundations, on the other hand, were particularly interested in learning about practitioners and local grantmaking experts. Many people said that it would be useful to be able to follow up on conference networking through the Web.
- *Other resources.* Many people said that an effective clearinghouse of information would build upon rather than duplicate already existing avenues for information exchange. They recommended live links to other Web sites and suggested that calendars of pertinent conferences and meetings be available. They also said that conference proceedings, power point presentations and other materials be made available for follow-up use.

Attempting to provide information in these functional areas creates the following kinds of challenges for GFE:

- Determining the proper role of GFE in serving an editorial function, not just in terms of selecting which information and links to include, but also in providing analysis and synthesis of that information. GFE must determine how much time is required to build the capacity to serve that editorial function, if it were to take on this role.
- Informing prospective users about and training them to use the resources available by functional area.

- Maintaining functionality without duplicating other resources already available through the Internet.
- Populating the system with data and postings prior to its launch and providing incentives for members to continue to use and contribute to it.

Promoting Communities of Practice and a Culture of Information Sharing

In order to create a knowledge management system that is helpful for those who need information, it should be accessible and pertinent to those who are in a position to share information and resources. Although many people expressed a reluctance to share internal documents to a wider audience, the vast majority said that they were willing to share a wide range of other kinds of documents and information. On the other hand, they also said that they had little time to do so. In fact, people said one that of the biggest barriers was that they did not have a simple and inexpensive way to disseminate their findings and information within the field.

An interactive, Web-based interface could be designed to provide quick, simple, and on-going opportunities for people to review documents in their area of expertise and post their commentary. It could provide easy opportunities for grantmakers to upload their own learnings from the field, and to receive feedback via the Web from others.

Some regional and community foundations were doubtful that a knowledge management system could provide them with contacts in their local area that they did not already know and have. One of the opportunities of such a system, however, is the ability to applaud and value what these local experts know—to encourage them to post information about their area’s local expertise, in exchange for information from national foundations about their own grantmaking practices.

Several people mentioned the need for mentors in the profession, and that the system might have a mentoring section, or a running FAQ (frequently asked questions) post for new members, by topic area. Another way to encourage sharing from experienced grantmakers would be to engage them in live, Web cast interviews called “brown bag lunches.” Another possibility is to organize Web-based mini-conferences in specific topic areas for new grantmakers, and enlist experienced grantmakers to post documents and lead a conference call or Web-based chat. One grantmaker proposed having a “Guru Day” in which experts would be enlisted to post grantmaking information on the site on a particular day.

Participants provided several examples of informal working groups that had already organized around particular issues, research topics, or training needs. These groups communicated with each other through face-to-face meetings, monthly conference calls and Web-based virtual communications. These communities of practice had come together quite organically and were assisting members in moving their own learning forward. Some participants suggested that these types of activities might be supported by GFE to help to seed the new knowledge management system by encouraging communities to self-organize around these kinds of issues and share back to the general membership. Essentially, these communities of practice would be working together to

develop content in a systemized way that could be of great benefit to GFE, to its membership, and to themselves. It was suggested that this might be a way to get members to not only use the system, but to own it.

The key challenges related to promoting the sharing of information include the following:

- Providing incentives for the more experienced grantmakers to post pivotal works and to provide analyses of current information in the field.
- Providing incentives for local and regional grantmakers to post information about practitioners and others working at the local area.
- Establishing better opportunities for networking as well as providing information about who to contact for advice about specific regions and topics.
- Empowering users to develop their own communities of practice, and providing them with support in this process.
- Informing prospective users about and training them to use virtual networking opportunities.

Measuring and Assessing Ongoing Impact

Grantmakers concurred that GFE could best measure the effectiveness and ongoing improvement of a knowledge management system by providing frequent and easily accessible feedback mechanisms. Participants said that they would want to offer immediate feedback and critiques about features of the system, as well as on specific articles and other posts. These forms of feedback not only would assist in identifying areas of improvement, but also would help to engage users actively on the site. The more they participate in the knowledge management system, the more they are likely to visit it and participate again.

The idea here is that the knowledge management system will not just provide information, but will also create communities of users. In this context, it is crucial to watch closely to see what features are being used, accessed, criticized, and ignored. Measure these kinds of responses to improve the system.

Of course, the number of hits, and length of time spent on the site are important indicators of usage. In addition, considering that flexibility and interactivity are primary features that grantmakers have identified as important, it would be useful to measure the system's changes and organic growth as indicators of success. The number of new postings, by type of posting, would be a vital statistic.

The key challenges in setting up a system for assessing impact include the following:

- Providing incentives for users to offer feedback about specific attributes of the system.
- Providing technical support to system users.
- Monitoring the efforts of communities of practice that arise from system use.

POSSIBLE KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM ATTRIBUTES

Many interview participants emphasized that a knowledge management system, in order to be functional, must have a database that is completely searchable—for example, by specific issue, by general subject matter, by geographic area, and by funding patterns over time.⁵ Moreover, in order to be an effective tool for grantmakers, a knowledge management system must separate itself from—and not duplicate—information outlets that are already available. For example, the Education Commission of the States provides information about legislative action by state, and *Education Week* offers up-to-date news about education issues and developments. Rather than providing a list of generalized “links” to the Web sites of these kinds of organizations, it is important that a knowledge management system offer users links to specific items on other Web sites as a result of specific queries.

Even more importantly, participants said that a knowledge management system for educational grantmakers must be more than just a site that offers cataloguing of research and conference information that contains a user-friendly search function. Participants emphasized that it should be envisioned, planned, and implemented as a means for creating broader and more interactive conversations within the field—conversations that could, in turn, push the general field of grantmaking in education forward. The following list provides examples of system attributes directed toward this overall aim:

- *Expert corner*, to provide experienced grantmakers with an easy way to share information with others. Possible features could include on-line, prescheduled “brown-bag lunches,” “jams,” or “guru days”—where people can ask any question of a panel of experts during lunch, for one afternoon, or for up to 48 hours and they will provide an answer during that time.
- *New grantmakers welcome*, which could offer a welcome packet for those new to the field, as well as a matrix of roles and responsibilities.
- *Hot topics*, to encourage sharing of information about recent developments.
- *Informal Sharing*, which could include such features as “parking lot talks” or “hallway chats.” Prompts could include: “Here is what I did, here is how I applied it, and here is how it worked.”
- *What I learned* database focusing on mistakes and lessons learned in the field. Prompts could include: “What did I learn?” “I’m smarter now because...,” “Here are 10 reasons not to do X,” or “What I learned in my first year of grantmaking.” Another possibility is to establish a “Bloopers of the Month.” As with all items on this list, these features could have hot links to relevant documents, and searches would lead users to those conversations that are pertinent to their interests.
- *Mentor corner*, to enable newer grantmakers to connect with more experienced grantmakers for on-going conversations and advice.

⁵ Materials on the knowledge management database could be made readily accessible by tagging them with specific search labels, or key words.

- *Boards in practice*, to encourage posting of materials relating to board development and practical issues that arise in working with boards. For example, prompts could include: “What questions to expect from your board” and “Questions we got from our board.”
- *Issues database*, to provide access to educational topics, or subject areas, through the functional areas described above, such as the overall context and history of an issue (including a variety of viewpoints), relevant research literature, and information about experts, conferences, workshops, “blogs”, policy links, state and local legislative action, etc.
- *Partnering center*, to encourage the exchange of information about collaborative opportunities. This could include links to local, regional and national funders, as well as international funders.
- *Networking center*, to provide a one-stop shop for information about how to access information about others working in the field, including grantmakers, practitioners, consultants, policymakers, policy organizations, and others.
- *Evaluation center*, to encourage sharing of information about such issues as capacity development, establishing interim indicators, evaluation sharing database (see program evaluation template in Appendix B).
- *Grantmaking metrics*, to provide practical information about operational issues, such as program costs and timelines, as well as offer models for determining return on investment (ROI).
- *Grantmaking update*, to offer up-to-date information about foundations, by topic areas, geographic region, niche areas, most recent areas of interest, etc.
- *Grantee of the week*, to encourage sharing of information about effective practitioners and model programs.

The following technical features could also be important in enabling the system to stimulate conversations within the field:

- Email this page
- Download/save this page
- Comment on this page
- Read other comments on this page
- Full tagging and searchability on all system features.
- The ability to “slice” into one or two particular issues. This could include member-generated syntheses of information and links to other sites.
- A commenting system for articles and other posts
- A way to search user commentary by contributor
- A way for members to personalize their interface with the system

The following items could be important to track as a way to improve the system over time:

- Who downloaded this article, who else is using it, what they thought about it and how they applied it.
- What is being used, accessed and ignored.
- How many queries people made that did not provide effective results, and what the objects of their search were. For example, a pop-up could say, “This category has not been created” and that offers an option to “Create it now.” This interactive feature provides an example of how to structure and seed a system, and empower community users to refine it.

VII. Scenarios for Next Steps

This research found an overwhelming desire on the part of GFE members to engage with interactive web-based technologies that would enable them to build and support a growing knowledge base spanning a myriad of educational and grantmaking issues. Specifically, members seek to not only have more sophisticated systems in which they can have access to high quality just-in-time information resources, but also a place where they can engage with their peers in the creation of new knowledge in their work domain. This combination of findings requires that the new knowledge management system be designed to not only facilitate the building of content, but also to serve as a conduit for sustaining formal and informal networks of grantmakers who will help to shape and foster the professional needs of the grantmaking community by using and contributing to the system.

The following is a set of recommendations for GFE’s deployment of a knowledge management system. It is based not only on the findings from this study, but also on ISKME’s experience helping organizations design and implement technologies that support the organizational mission and goals, taking into account the impact of information behaviors and organizational culture.

The following features are recommended:

1. The knowledge management system should have a *robust search mechanism* that allows users to query the entire content of the system across a wide set of variables, such as the particular education issue, sector, geographic region, legislative status of issue, commentary, etc. This could involve the development of a taxonomy that would support this type of indexing, tagging, and sorting, and/or a more semantic web approach that would allow users to conduct word searches that are generated through words, word patterns, and other sophisticated artificial intelligence that is being used today for web searching.
2. The system should include the ability for users to create new content, both by *posting links to resources and by adding commentary to content* in the system. The commentary could be on a particular report, research article, evaluation

report, or a meta-level commentary on a particular set of discussions or issues that are taking place within the system. This commentary should be searchable by author, issue, date, community of practice or any other “unit” that would provide relevant analysis. For example, the user might want to search for all the commentary that a particular author has made on the issue of small schools—whether those comments were on a research article, a conference presentation or discussion group.

3. The system should include both *individual and collaborative discussion spaces* that could be created on a variety of issues. ISKME recommends that GFE include a “blogging” feature, where groups of individuals or communities of practice can post comments or have discussions around issues of their choosing in a highly flexible environment that is easy to search and to cross-reference with links.

The following are recommendations for the initial deployment phase of the system:

1. Begin with one or two primary content areas that can be used to communicate the vision of the system. Specifically, GFE should help to *identify existing communities of practice and use these networks to create a user base around one or two particular issues*, such as urban schools, early literacy, etc. Communities of practice are likely to be highly motivated to facilitate and exchange ideas and resources around their primary issue or purpose. GFE can work with these initial groups to create a model for how a community can use this system to use, share and create new knowledge within a particular domain area or educational issue. This would require working with the selected community to populate the system with topical evaluation models, research reports, expert lists, conferences, discussions, indexes and commentary. This would allow GFE to develop a prototype and get members’ reaction and feedback on it before they allow access to system tools for other interested groups. Additionally, GFE might look to draw content from existing web resources by initiating partnerships with other related organizations who have well-developed information resources. Taxonomies could be applied from a variety of sources, such as ECS, ERIC, AERA, and other organizations that maintain education-related databases. It may also be possible to utilize newer technologies that incorporate artificial intelligence search engines that do not rely on standard taxonomies.
2. *Develop a template for a more robust grants database*, including strategies for ongoing maintenance of the database. When asked what type of information they most desired, participants almost always agreed that it was for information about what other foundations were funding. Motivations for this type of information include the desire to partner with foundations in specific regional areas, seeking advice from experienced funders when embarking on a new project area, looking for good models of evaluation in a particular content area, or looking for a unique program niche that was not widely funded. Again, this would require a database with full search and query capabilities, as well ongoing incentives for keeping this information current. This could be linked to the point above (using communities of practice) in which those people who are involved in these initial efforts comply with requests for additional information. They are many creative strategies that

could be employed to gather this information from the foundations themselves, other than a standard form that is filled out once a year.

Decision Points:

1. GFE will need to *determine whether or not the new system should be built in-house or purchased off the shelf*. This will require identifying a few key vendors and having them demonstrate how their product meets the requirements for the GFE, as well as identifying people capable of building such a product in-house. While cost is indeed a factor, emphasis should be given to the feature base of vendors, customer support, experience in the non-profit and education sectors, etc. The decision should include a discussion of open source versus proprietary systems. It is likely that an open source approach would leave more flexibility and room for development in the future, but it would require a more hands-on approach early on.
2. There are a wide range of roles and responsibilities that GFE could assume in this process. While nearly every interview participant was very excited about the prospect of the knowledge management system, they were equally emphatic that *GFE must clearly determine its ongoing commitment to such a project*. One approach would be for GFE to fully take on the role of research librarian, community organizer and manager of quality control. While GFE has the credibility and capability to do this, it is also true that this would require hiring additional GFE personnel. However, another approach is for GFE to strategically parse out the ongoing maintenance of the system to highly engaged members, while also relying on automated feedback systems that could be embedded into the system. For example, if a GFE member posted a report that might have been vetted as low quality, that report could either be manually taken down (requiring ongoing vigilance), or a well-functioning commentary system would kick in the required response to such a report, similar to an Amazon.com type of rating system. This type of approach would allow for more in-depth discussions about quality and relevance of materials, and would make the process transparent, where the users (GFE members) are responsible for the community's information resources as a whole—all features of a knowledge management approach to organizational learning.

VIII. Conclusion

Based on this information audit, it appears that the current information climate within and among foundations is conducive to the development of a knowledge management system for education grantmakers. For example, grantmakers share several common patterns of information gathering and use. They share a wide variety of needs for information, as well as some pressing needs for expanding their networking opportunities. In general, they appear to be driven by a profound appreciation of learning, and there appears to be a trend toward greater partnering and collaboration in the field, though this trend is not as pronounced as many would like to see.

Grantmakers suggested during interviews that a knowledge management system could assist in promoting this effort toward greater sharing and collaboration. Participants endorsed Grantmakers for Education—with its reputation as a neutral, proactive, and effective organization—as the most appropriate organization to undertake the development of such a system. Interviewees suggested that developing a knowledge management system is fully consistent with the mission of GFE. In fact, many suggested that providing such leadership for the field lies at the heart of its mission.

Several GFE member organizations are themselves embarking on knowledge management efforts. These organizations have a great deal to contribute, particularly to advising GFE on the development of implementation processes and procedures as well as suggesting strategies and incentives for the ongoing maintenance and use of such systems. These organizations include the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Lumina Foundation, and the NewSchools Venture Fund.

Ultimately, the success of a knowledge management system will not depend on the technology, but on the extent to which GFE can provide the ongoing resources needed to maintain the system with up-to-date content, as well as create a space for the kinds of conversations among its members that can move the field forward. The knowledge management system is much more than a technology initiative; it is an initiative to shape the culture of a field. It requires the active participation of GFE's member community to bring together isolated conversations, articles, experts and practitioners to create a nexus of activity. To realize its full promise, it must engage grantmakers not just as participants, but as owners of the system.

Appendix A

COMMON SOURCES OF INFORMATION CURRENTLY USED

Section II identified the most common sources of information that participants said they currently use:

- *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*
- *Education Next*
- *Education Week*
- GFE Newsletter
- Local and national newspapers
- PEN Weekly Newsblast

Other sources of information that were mentioned less frequently include the following:

- American Educational Research Association
- *The American School Board Journal*
- Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD)
- The Conference Board
- The Council on Foundations
- Donor's Forum
- The Education Commission of the States (ECS)
- Eisenhower National Clearinghouse Headline News
- *The Education Gadfly*
- Education Trust
- The Foundation Center
- Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO)
- GrantStation.com
- *Harvard Review of Education*
- Hoover Institute
- Institute for Education and Social Policy (NYU)
- Kato Institute
- Middleschool.net

- Middleweb.com
- Philanthropy Northwest
- *Progressive Magazine*
- State Departments of Education
- *Teacher's College Record* (TCR)
- *Teaching to Change LA* (UCLA online journal)
- U.S. Department of Education

Appendix B

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROGRAM EVALUATION TEMPLATE

Section VI suggests including an “evaluation center” as a knowledge management system attribute. This “center” would encourage sharing of evaluation findings and metrics as well as helping to develop more effective program evaluation methods. For example, users could access, discuss, and post improvements to a program evaluation database that was directed toward obtaining solid, rigorous, quantitative data and narrative information. Such a database might include a template with the following:

- The specific education issue the project or program addresses
- Description of any statistically significant results
- At what level the program was applied (school, district, etc.)
- Whether there was a government or policy mandate attached to it
- Where it succeeded
- Where it fell short
- Lessons learned
- What to do differently (on part of funder and grantee)
- Link between cost and impact