Building a Career in Philanthropy

Philanthropy, meaning "love of humankind", is the use of one's resources (time, money, skills, and influence) to strengthen communities and solve social problems. Many professional careers are built around philanthropy's core equation: **Asking** and **Giving**.

- **"Asking" entities:** Nonprofits and charities use donated dollars to fund mission-driven activities, such as providing low-cost childcare or restoring a waterway.
- **"Giving" entities:** Charitable foundations, endowment funds, family trusts, corporate environmental and social governance (ESG) allocations, and government programs, provide money and various forms of support to help mission-driven organizations achieve their goals.

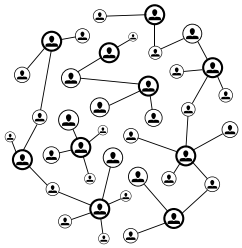
Philanthropy professionals on both sides of this equation work to bridge the needs of the people and organizations seeking funding with the intent of those giving it away. Effective philanthropy is built on deep mutual trust between donors and recipients, iterative communication, and co-established values and norms, requiring deep understanding among stakeholders.

Anthropologists work in all areas of this sector, as fundraisers, grant writers, program officers, impact evaluators, policy advocates, and coalition builders. Increasingly, the Asking/Giving binary has also become more nuanced through

- Community-led and participatory philanthropy,
- Indigenous-led giving,
- Cross-institutional collective impact initiatives.

At the same time, philanthropy has been adopting business-savvy approaches to giving, such as impact investing and venture philanthropy, which leverage capital markets and business principles to help catalyze nonprofits—and even some for-profit social enterprises—to maximize impact.

Why Anthropologists?



Anthropologists bring approaches, methods, and talents to link people and institutions with "wealth" (e.g., money, resources, connections) to the people and organizations that will use it for social good:

- Understanding complex social networks, reciprocity, and meanings attached to giving
- Recognizing power dynamics and flows (e.g., in society, due to donor influence)
- Researching social change
- Seeing and unpacking the unspoken rules that govern charitable giving (e.g., gatekeepers, rituals of solicitation)
- Connecting people who may want to accomplish the same goal--but have radically different ways of conceptualizing it
- Specifying what problems receive resources and what defines "impact"
- Translating across different perspectives, organizations, institutional vocabularies, and cultural settings.

Fundamentally, philanthropy is relationship based; anthropology, more than any other discipline, is grounded in the "relationality" or linkages between individuals, institutions, and systems.

Anthropological Methods As Career Preparation

As nonprofit professionals increasingly find themselves building coalitions and shaping policy through research and advocacy, the human-centered research orientation of an anthropological perspective is invaluable. Through our training in ethnographic methodologies, anthropologists can discover unarticulated rules, systems, and processes such as those that govern the flows of money among donors, institutions, and grant-seekers.

Interviewing

- Encourages close listening
- Enables us to recognize implicit assumptions
- Offers guidance in understanding the deeper meanings and motivations behind acts of giving
- Helps us define in-group jargon
- Positions us to navigate different forms of knowledge

Observation

- Prepares us to understand organizational culture and norms
- Provides indicators of how systems reproduce inequity
- Suggests how to track complex processes
- Leads us to describe differences across institutions and social settings

Blending Qualitative & Quantitative Techniques

- Enables us to translate between data-driven analysis and lived experience

Genealogical Methods

- Prepares us to work within broadly distributed social networks
- Equips us to build and manage relationships with many diverse individuals

Philanthropic Roles

Professional pathways may cross or bridge both sides of the Asking-Giving equation. **Asking roles** support charities and nonprofits seeking funding from donors.

Grant Writer

- Develops and writes proposals and reports capturing the nonprofit's work in the language of the funder
- Develops and maintains a content library (i.e., an organized collection of written materials about your nonprofit's work) which becomes the source material for organizational communications and public impact reports
- Collaborates with leadership, program staff, and finance staff to create a coherent narrative about what your organization does and why
- May conduct evaluations of grant-funded programs using qualitative research methods to demonstrate program impact
- Sometimes hired as an external consultant rather than permanent staff

Foundation Relations Officer

- Manages relationships between a nonprofit and institutional donors (i.e., for-profit companies and philanthropic foundations)
- Typically involves writing grant applications or less formal proposals and reports
- May also include managing collaborative projects between institutions or managing sub-grant recipients

Corporate Relations Officer

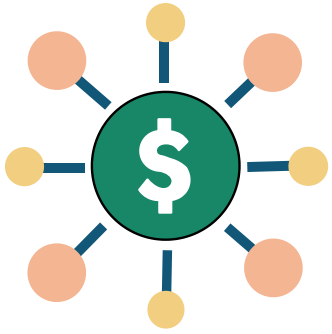
- Focuses on managing public-private research partnerships or internship and recruitment pipelines
- Acts as project manager for shared activities between your organization and its corporate donors (e.g., organizing sponsorship opportunities and volunteer engagements for corporate donor employees)
- Solicits corporate sponsorships for events and programs

Government Relations Officer

- Responsible for pursuing grants from local, state, and federal government
- Acts as a liaison between the organization and government officials at all levels, to build public sector partnerships and secure support for mission-driven initiatives
- Monitors public policy developments affecting your organization's mission and translate policy issues for stakeholders

Gift Officer

- Pursues gifts from individual donors to meet fundraising goals
- Researches prospective donors and prepares donor profiles
- Acts as a proxy for your organization to build a strong, trust-based relationship with donors by learning about why they care about your mission and by helping them feel connected to your cause
- Tracks progress and communications with donors using a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) database
- Manages portfolios of donors grouped by giving level:
  - *Annual Giving:* Small-sum donors; uses print and/or digital communications to engage with large bodies of supporters
  - *Leadership Giving:* Donors who make mid-range gifts; builds quality interpersonal relationships between donors and your nonprofit by making direct requests to individuals
  - *Major and Principal Giving:* High-capacity donors cultivated over a long period of time; typically prepares written proposals or presentations and collaborates with your nonprofit's leadership to secure large gifts



Development/Advancement Officer

- Holds a generalist role with a wide set of responsibilities related to fundraising in small nonprofits
- Designs campaign strategy, organizes fundraising or stewardship events, manages donor communications, and prepares profiles on potential donors
- Assists nonprofit's Executive Director to solicit major gifts
- At larger institutions, the Development or Advancement Team consists of several individuals performing separate and distinct roles devoted to each of these functions

Development Support Services

This set of roles supports outward-facing fundraising through resaerch, database management, and prospect management.

Prospect Researcher or Manager

- Conducts background research on prospective donors, covering biographical, financial, philanthropic, and relational dimensions
- Uses network analysis and wealth screening to map donor affinity and capacity
- Synthesizes donor data into concise profiles that inform fundraising strategy
- Analyzes donor data and trends to make projections about how much a campaign is likely to raise, and how many donors are needed to achieve your organization's fundraising goal

Database Manager

- Designs and maintains the systems that track relationships over time.
- Owns the data architecture behind the donor pipeline including constituent records, prospect ratings, moves management stages, portfolio assignments, and the reporting that shows leadership how a fundraising program is performing

Giving roles support grant-making organizations in directing their charitable giving to achieve their goals.

Program Officer

- Directs grantmaking strategy and processes for charitable foundations which donate funds to other nonprofits
- Oversees grantmaking within a single focus area (e.g., community development, religion)
- Responsible for defining the parameters of their grantmaking, managing grant applications and reporting cycles, evaluating applications, and supporting grantees

Community Relations Officer

- Found in many for-profit enterprises, sometimes hired from within the company or directly from the community
- May be found within the firm's public relations, marketing, or human resources departments, or be a dedicated role focused on community engagement
- Drives corporate volunteerism and matching gift programs to encourage broad community involvement among employees
- Acts as a community liaison, representing the company at community events or on local nonprofit governance boards
- Advises on strategic granting decisions that build strong community partnerships, positioning the company in a positive light, often by sponsoring or collaborating with local nonprofits

Learning and Evaluation Director

- Often holds a PhD and has a strong background in applied research and evaluation
- Consolidates and shares research from across your foundation's grantmaking profile to influence system-level changes (e.g., U.S. education)
- Consolidates and reports on findings by a foundation's grantees or coordinates collaborative research among different institutions to institute policy and system change
- May organize conferences and collaborative learning efforts or other public engagement efforts

Policy/Advocacy Director

- Often possesses legal training or experience in policy research and advocacy roles
- Consolidates and shares the outcomes of the foundation's grantmaking profile with an audience of policy makers and legislators
- Advocates for policy solutions in the foundation's area of focus

Essential Philanthropic Skills

- **Oral and Written Communication** – Writing, storytelling, persuasion, public speaking, negotiation, influencing others, translation between communication styles and vocabularies
- **Project Management** – Goal setting, attention to details, working in teams, execution and follow-through, accountability, tracking progress, reporting outcomes, event planning
- **Relationship Management** – Building trusting relationships with individuals both within and outside your organization, network analysis, trustworthiness, building coalitions across organizations, interpersonal communication
- **Data Management** – Data literacy, data collection and analysis, experience with large datasets and databases, measuring impact and progress indicators, understanding trends and uncovering patterns
- **Strong Ethical Compass** – Commitment to data and donor confidentiality (including knowledge of legal regulations governing the protection of student and patient data, cultural resources, and other sensitive information), ethical management of charitable dollars, accurate reporting of outcomes, strong commitment to donor intent
- **Systems Thinking** – Understanding and outlining a theory of change (your organization's method for achieving its mission), evaluation and research design, developing long-term strategies for raising funds, achieving project goals, planning organizational direction and growth, designing processes to achieve standardized or reliable results. Understanding how your (and others') work fits within the larger social issue your organization addresses, and seeing patterns others miss.
- **Critical Thinking** - Discerning the correct approach for different donors or different projects, reviewing outcomes and identifying problems or failures and making appropriate corrections, planning and preparing for many possible scenarios, asking critical questions that help get to the root of problems
- **Leadership** – Rallying multiple stakeholders around a single goal and course of action, helping others feel valued, understanding the different skills and perspectives of your collaborators and encouraging them to work effectively together, motivating others, holding yourself and others accountable to the promises they make

Educational Requirements

Bachelor's Degree

Most **Asking roles** require a bachelor's degree such as in anthropology, social science, or a field relevant to the organization's focus. Entry level roles start in annual giving and donor support services and may have the words associate, assistant, or coordinator in the job title. Individuals begin working with higher-capacity donors as they accrue years of experience and demonstrate good judgement and relationship management. For **Giving roles**, early and mid-career program associates, assistants, and coordinators require bachelor's degrees.

Master's & PhD Degrees

Most **Giving roles** require greater subject matter expertise and more years of experience or higher levels of education than Asking roles. At the largest foundations, Director and VP-level leaders are often acknowledged experts in their fields. While many foundation leaders have higher level degrees, others may have accrued years of experience leading smaller nonprofits, being vocal advocates, and successfully mobilizing resources for their cause. Professionals in these roles show a wide range of experience from nonprofit leadership, law, finance, and academia, depending on the focus and goals of the grantmaking organization.

Job Considerations

Potential Benefits

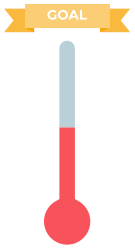
Fundraising roles are typically higher paid than other jobs in the nonprofit sector. A career in philanthropy can be fulfilling because of

- its proximity to an issue you feel passionate about
- the potential for making a positive impact in the world.

Larger institutions such as hospitals and universities have large, specialized fundraising teams where each staff member may have a discrete portfolio or set of responsibilities, whereas smaller nonprofits may have one or two development officers who do a bit of everything. Consequently, there are a range of options to fit your interests. Foundations with endowments tend to be more financially stable and resilient than operating nonprofits.

Potential Drawbacks

Risk of burnout can be high. In some roles, night and weekend hours may be required. On the Giving side it can be disheartening to select among many worthy applicants. It can also be emotionally taxing to feel dependent on other people's wealth or to observe the scale of wealth held by some individuals and organizations, while only a portion is dedicated to charitable work. Both operating nonprofits and grantmaking foundations experience political pressure and negative attention depending on the current political climate.



Career Tips

1) If you are considering a career in philanthropy, consider the mission and focus of nonprofits which are working on issues you are passionate about.

- How do they raise money for their cause?
- How do they measure impact?
- How do they mobilize volunteers?
- How do they communicate with the community and funders about their work?
- What is their theory of change, that is, their strategy for achieving their mission?

2) Volunteer or obtain an internship with a local nonprofit or community foundation. Apply to work in your university's Office of Institutional Advancement. If permitted, observe a board meeting, which is where budgets and operating strategies are debated and approved.

3) Pursue courses or self-directed learning on basic principles of fundraising and quantitative data. Practice your writing and presentation skills. In your anthropology classes, pay special attention to qualitative methods like network mapping, interviewing, participatory and action research.

4) Start to build professional relationships in your chosen field and issue area. Follow local and sector leaders on LinkedIn, attend local professional development and networking events, and join professional associations such as the Association for Fundraising Professionals.

References

Books

Arlen, Sue & Ellen Karsh. 2019. *The Only Grant Writing Book You'll Ever Need.* Rev. ed., Hatchette.

Heyman, Darian R. 2016. *Nonprofit Fundraising 101.* Jossey-Bass.

Podcasts

Break Fake Rules from the Stupski Foundation

First Day Podcast from the Lilly School of Philanthropy

What the Fundraising

General Resources

Association of Fundraising Professionals - Network of membership-based associations for fundraisers; hundreds of chapters providing networking and professional development.

Certified Fund Raising Executive - A widely recognized voluntary credential certifying your knowledge across six domains of fundraising practice, especially useful for early career and career-changing professionals seeking "asking" roles; applicants can work toward certification by accumulating continuing education credits and then passing the CFRE exam.

Council on Foundations - Membership-based association for non-profit foundations; website contains resources for grantmakers (e.g., templates, toolkits, reports about philanthropy sector).

Helen Bader Institute for Nonprofit Management - A well-regarded center for graduate studies that freely publishes research and reports produced by its students and affiliates.

Lilly Family School of Philanthropy - A center for philanthropy research and teaching (Indiana University) providing an array of webinars and courses with evidence-based training.