

# Finding Your Path to Impact: Developing Foundation Programs



**S**tarting a foundation is an exciting step in your philanthropic journey. The road ahead may have many twists and turns as you begin to formulate a strategy and build your foundation around your passions and values, but there are some guidelines you can follow to set yourself up for success from day one.

**This article examines how newer foundations can approach the process of creating programs and focus areas for their philanthropy.**

## Establishing Programs /

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Creating programs can help a foundation focus its giving, reflect its values and clarify its interests to prospective grantees. As a foundation is launched, you may have natural focus areas or be starting with a completely blank slate. It's important to understand that one path is not better than the other — the foundation leaders we serve have shown us time and time again that there are several ways to develop programmatic priorities and the path to impact is unique to each foundation.

## Starting with a Focus Area or Areas of Interest

Some new foundations find that they already have a focus area or areas of interest.

These are often based on:

- A founder's personal philosophy.
- A company's primary business or area of operation.
- A cause that inspired the creation of the foundation. For example:
  - > If the foundation was funded from the estate of someone who battled cancer.
  - > If the foundation was created with a geographic focus, such as supporting after-school programs in their local community.



## Starting with a Blank Slate

If you don't yet have a focus area, one way to get started is by selecting a handful of issues to support while learning the ropes, gathering information and formalizing an approach.

Remember that it's okay to experiment and take risks. Starting with a blank slate can inspire creativity, help you clarify what's important to your foundation and provide an understanding of your giving philosophy at a deeper level than you may have explored. Also keep in mind, you don't need to be an expert in your area(s) of funding to get started—you just need to care about making a difference.



To identify potential funding areas, consider:

- Finding topics that have proximate relevance, whether derived from life experience, the local community, career paths or corporate goals.
  - > Define the impact you want to see and then identify organizations, programs or projects that will move towards that goal. For example, a founder for a tech company may be interested in finding ways to grow opportunities in STEM education or a founder who grew up in poverty may want to focus on food insecurity.
  - > Get firsthand experience with the issues—this can be helpful in informing which organizations/projects to support. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways, including informal conversations and interviews with nonprofits, people impacted by the issue(s) and other funders; site visits; primary research; and meta-analysis.
  - > Recognize opportunities to align foundation work with that of the parent company.

- Experimenting with different approaches.
  - > Try different ways to accomplish a goal and see what resonates. For instance, if your goal is improving access to quality education, you could try funding a charitable organization with a similar mission, awarding scholarships and running Direct Charitable Activities (when a private foundation runs a program or activity by itself rather than relying on a nonprofit to carry it out).
  - > Try funding different topic areas within a similar geography and see what has the most meaning to the foundation and the community. For instance, if your goal is to support a particular county, you could simultaneously fund initiatives focused on beautifying public spaces, economic growth and low-income housing to see if one issue gets more traction than another.

No matter how a foundation approaches the process of establishing their initial priorities and focus areas, it's important to:

- Stay open to learning while you experiment.
- Engage with stakeholders including community members, experts and program beneficiaries to get feedback on program approaches and impact.
- Be willing to pivot and try something new.



As you ponder the possibilities of what your foundation can be, remember that you don't have to embark on this alone. Foundation Source is here to help guide you and serve as your philanthropic partner. To learn more about these key takeaways and other valuable insights, listen to the [full webinar discussion](#).

## HAVE A QUESTION?

Call 800.839.0054 or send us an email at [info@foundationsource.com](mailto:info@foundationsource.com).

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