Program Officer Competency Model©

Align mission-area expertise
with role-specific excellence.

Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy

The Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University was established in 1992 with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Our mission is to be a global leader in helping individuals and organizations understand, strengthen, and advance philanthropy, resulting in a smart, adaptive sector that helps create strong, inclusive communities.

We put research to work with and for professionals across the country and the world. Through professional education offerings; research, evaluation, and consulting services; and bold thinking to advance the field, we support a philanthropic ecosystem defined by effective philanthropy, strong nonprofits, and informed community change.

Acknowledgments

Dorothy A. Johnson Center
FOR PHILANTHROPY

GRAND VALLEY
STATE UNIVERSITY

Program Officer Competency Model©

Chart a path toward transformative grantmaking and trust-based relationships.

Foundation program officers play a critical, nuanced role at the intersection of resources, strategies, and stakeholders. The Program Officer Competency Model captures this complexity. Development of the model included an analysis of more than 100 job descriptions, a review by competency model experts, and the input of nine focus groups with grantmakers and nonprofit leaders to determine and define the essential competencies of the program officer role.

This model elevates the importance of demonstrating core KSAOs over the holding of traditional credentials and formal networks — all in the service of supporting professional and personal fulfillment.

- **Current and prospective program officers:** Use the model to check in on and advance your own learning and proficiency.

- **Hiring managers:** Adopt competency-based hiring practices by utilizing the model in position descriptions, interviews, and hiring.

- **Leadership:** Amp up your grantmaking strategies by ensuring your team has the skills and knowledge they need to succeed.

We encourage you to use, adapt, and share this model to map your professional journey, structure position descriptions, design training programs, and so much more.

Interested in learning more? Let's talk.

The Johnson Center offers a variety of competency-based professional development — open courses, private courses for organizations and networks, and fully customized programs — to support you and your team.

Do you have questions about competency models or training opportunities? We're here to help. Give us a call at **(616) 331-7585** or email **jcp@gvsu.edu** to get started.

Definitions & Terminology

Competencies	The knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs) that are required for effective performance in a particular job or profession.
Competency Model	A collection of competencies that are relevant to performance in a particular job, job family, or functional area.
Competency Diagram	A graphic or visualization that summarizes the model to enable users to understand the features and connections of the model.
Competency Dimension	A cluster of closely related competencies.
Sub-competencies	The competencies that comprise or are related to connected to a particular competency.
Behaviors	The observable activities demonstrated by individuals proficient in a particular competency.
Stakeholder Groups	Partners, grantees, communities, foundation management and governance, individuals, and community groups impacted by the work/investment of a foundation.

Sources: Campion et al., 2011; Shippmann et al., 2000

Competency Dimensions

In our model, there are three major sets of competencies, plus a fourth set of cross-cutting competencies that show up across the other three major areas:

Cross-Cutting	Relationships & Field-Building	Proposals & Due Diligence	Strategy, Evaluation, and Learning
Inclusive Practice	Communication	Proposal Solicitation, Review, and Analysis	Strategy Development & Implementation
Grantmaking Philosophy & Approach	Collaboration	Risk Management	Evaluation Design & Management
Analytical Thinking	Grantee-Grantmaker Relationships	Financial Analysis	Sharing Learning
Ethics & Accountability	Grantee Capacity Building	Organizational Assessment	Monitoring & Reporting
Advancing Learning	Sector Knowledge	Power Dynamics	

Cross-Cutting

From inclusive practice to strategic thinking, these five cross-cutting competencies represent the professional skills and knowledge program officers need to be successful across all aspects of their work.

Inclusive Practice

DEFINITION	BEHAVIORS
The routine practice of intentionally including diverse stakeholders and perspectives, fairly and equally, throughout the grantmaking cycle, both internally and externally.	• Recognizes the benefits of inclusive practice. • Exhibits awareness of and addresses one's own filters, privileges, biases, and cultural preferences. • Employs a diversity, equity, and inclusion lens to assess the foundation's policies, practices, and activities both internally and externally • Builds relationships within and between stakeholder groups through inclusive behavior. • Identifies, partners, and leverages relationships with external stakeholders to accurately represent and respond to diverse perspectives. • Identifies characteristics of implicit and explicit bias and employs strategies to effectively respond to them. • Actively seeks to create the conditions for inclusion. • Integrates principles of diversity and inclusion in all aspects of one's role.

Grantmaking Philosophy & Approach

DEFINITION	BEHAVIORS
The knowledge and understanding of the approaches, philosophies, and strategies which guide and inform the grantmaking practice.	• Demonstrates an understanding of the various grantmaking philosophies and approaches. • Identifies and evaluates how the philosophy of a foundation is reflected in the mission, strategy, culture, approach, funding, programming, etc., of an organization. • Recognizes how one's foundation favors particular grantmaking philosophies and approaches based on actual practice. • Evaluates the strengths, weaknesses, and overall effectiveness of various grantmaking philosophies and approaches relative to a given project. • Recognizes the impact of particular grantmaking philosophies and approaches on stakeholder groups. • Advocates for approaches and practices that are appropriately aligned to the size, infrastructure, history, systemic challenges, and organizational capacity of the grantee.

Analytical Thinking

DEFINITION	BEHAVIORS
The ability to identify, gather, evaluate, interpret and synthesize relevant data from a variety of sources in order to clarify fundamental elements, anticipate complexities, and respond to ambiguities in problem solving, planning, and decision making.	• Expresses and exhibits being motivated by curiosity and committed to the value of evidence. • Discovers and examines the interdependence of discrete elements within a system through the use of thoughtful, probing questions. • Employs an iterative process of data-driven, outcomes-based planning, problem solving, and decision making. • Identifies and selects inclusive and appropriate research techniques to gather relevant data and discover ambiguities. • Collaborates with and across stakeholder groups to identify variables that influence outcomes, clarify context, and determine appropriate, reasonable, and viable outcomes. • Considers "what-if" scenarios to think through alternative strategies, courses of action, and consequences. • Synthesizes and reports process, findings, and conclusions in a clear, timely, ongoing, and appropriate manner to stakeholders and partners. • Organizes and synthesizes findings to eliminate extraneous information in decision making. • Translates the foundation's vision, mission, and goals into clear plans and actions.

Ethics & Accountability

DEFINITION	BEHAVIORS
The practice of identifying, assessing, and acting on ethical issues, duties, and obligations related to foundation work so as to maintain the integrity of the organization and oneself.	• Demonstrates an understanding of the significance of ethics to the philanthropic sector. • Recognizes how ethics and accountability issues and principles impact stakeholder groups. • Knows to whom and for what foundations are accountable, internally and externally, and how that accountability impacts foundation work. • Recognizes and adheres to ethical standards as set forth by the foundation. • Identifies, analyzes, and evaluates internal (i.e., mission, donor intent) and external (i.e., legal, stakeholder impact) factors in resolving ethical dilemmas. • Acknowledges and analyzes complexity and sources of uncertainty when evaluating the ethical dimensions of a situation. • Routinely engages in activities that demonstrate a dedication to commonly held values and behaviors (i.e., commitment beyond self, openness and honesty, etc.). • Exhibits self-awareness of privileges, biases, and cultural preferences and how they manifest within one's own ethical behaviors. • Recognizes the moral temptations present in the field of philanthropy and employs appropriate strategies to overcome those. • Employs strategies to ensure timely, professional, empathic communication habits.

Advanced Learning

DEFINITION	BEHAVIORS
To engage in a process of continuous learning that supports collecting relevant data to be acted on in the refinement and scaling of programming/ initiatives.	• Demonstrates an understanding of the value and impact of continuous learning related to foundation mission, vision, and effectiveness. • Identifies and explains the connection between evaluation and learning. • Understands one's role and responsibility in initiating, establishing, and growing learning culture. • Engages and leads others in a continuous process of learning that relies on data to inform each step in the cycle: plan, do, assess, reflect, refine. • Identifies, designs, and facilitates relevant learning opportunities (internally and externally) including individuals, roles, teams, departments, and boards. • Identifies, plans, and advocates for adjustments and innovations in organizational processes, structures, and practices based on learning. • Recognizes that individuals and groups can gain and demonstrate knowledge and skills in a variety of ways. • Demonstrates open and positive curiosity about the knowledge, experience, skills, and capabilities of diverse groups of stakeholders. • Questions assumptions about requirements, qualifications, expectations, and norms. • Assesses the impact of initiatives on individuals and stakeholder groups. • Recognizes, leverages, and facilitates opportunities to engage diverse perspectives in learning and innovation.

Relationships & Field-Building

Sector knowledge and capacity building are examples of the types of skills program officers rely on to engage with the broader philanthropic sector and recognize opportunities.

Communication

DEFINITION	BEHAVIORS
The ability to and practice of effectively exchanging information with and between internal and/or external stakeholders.	• Identifies and implements appropriate and effective communication strategies based on communication type, purpose, audience, and platform. • Exhibits awareness of one's own communication tendencies and styles. • Expresses ideas and information clearly and concisely in various contexts across communication types. • Respectfully clarifies and negotiates complex or technical information. • Interprets and synthesizes proposal elements in response to foundation requirements. • Employs interpersonal communication skills to lessen the impact of power dynamics, build trust, and avoid ambiguity. • Recognizes and anticipates how different perspectives, unwritten rules, and implicit and explicit biases impact communication. • Engages skillfully across stakeholder groups to generate input from multiple points of view and perspectives. • Communicates evaluation data to multiple audiences using appropriate media. • Provides constructive feedback effectively and appropriately.

Collaboration

DEFINITION	BEHAVIORS
The ability to drive, manage, and participate in activities aimed at achieving shared goals both internally and externally.	• Demonstrates an understanding of how collaboration advances and promotes relationships. • Assesses, selects, and employs tools and models used to initiate, develop, and advance collaborations. • Recognizes and values the importance of incorporating multiple perspectives and building consensus with a commitment to integrate divergent perspectives equitably across roles, responsibilities, and tasks. • Exhibits timely and frequent information sharing, problem discussion, and resolution. • Designs and develops action plans and communication protocols to guide collaboration. • Recognizes one's own beliefs, tendencies, and cognitive styles and how they impact collaboration. • Reviews and explains/clarifies how to evaluate collaboration. • Designs and develops activities to support a shared goal that incorporate a common understanding of challenges and shared solutions. • Poses thoughtful, probing questions to discover and consider multiple perspectives.

Grantee-Grantmaker Relationships

DEFINITION	BEHAVIORS
The ability to and practice of cultivating and sustaining strong relationships with grantees.	• Appreciates the power dynamics inherent in grantee-grantmaker relationships. • Prioritizes and practices regular, ongoing communication and dialogue that is honest, candid, and clear. • Demonstrates an understanding of the role and importance of grantee capacity building in the context of cultivating and sustaining strong relationships with grantees. • Recognizes how one's own beliefs, perspective, and cognitive styles impact the grantee-grantmaker relationship. • Reviews and explains/clarifies how evaluation and monitoring is used to guide decision making and promote accountability within grantee-grantmaker relationships. • Poses thoughtful, probing questions to discover and consider multiple perspectives. • Recognizes and acts on opportunities to support grantees via shared learning and capacity building.

Grantee Capacity Building

DEFINITION	BEHAVIORS
The methods and practices of providing intentional support to increase the effectiveness of organizational capacities which, in turn, increase the effectiveness of the grantee organization and its staff.	• Demonstrates an understanding of the different types of organizational capacities, how they are interrelated, and how they impact overall effectiveness. • Demonstrates the importance of and commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion principles and practices when assessing and determining grantee capacity-building needs as well as approaches and tools of support. • Recognizes the ways in which grantee capacity-building issues and opportunities manifest in the grantmaking cycle. • Collaboratively assesses, prioritizes, and recommends internal and external grantee capacity-building strategies based on identified needs and desired outcomes.

Sector Knowledge

DEFINITION	BEHAVIORS
A combination of knowledge and expertise in the history, dynamics, and policies that shape the philanthropic sector.	• Recognizes connections among concepts, theories, and principles of the philanthropic sector. • Demonstrates an understanding of the historic and contemporary role and purpose of the philanthropic ecosystem. • Demonstrates an understanding of key distinctions in the philanthropic sector and the corresponding laws and regulations. • Identifies connections between different actors and entities within the philanthropic sector as well as their connections to other sectors and industries. • Demonstrates an understanding of historic and contemporary topics, trends, and debates in the philanthropic sector. • Understands historical practices across racial groups and how they inform philanthropy today. • Connects contemporary topics, trends, and debates in the philanthropic sector to the foundation's mission, strategy, culture, and other organizational dimensions and activities. • Designs and adjusts grantmaking practice content in response to contemporary topics, trends, and debates in the philanthropic sector.

Proposals & Due Diligence

Once potential opportunities have been identified, program officers shift to proposal solicitation and analysis. This process relies on a broad range of technical skills and knowledge including financial analysis and organizational assessment, all while honoring the foundation's theory of philanthropy and incorporating equitable processes.

Proposal Solicitation, Review, and Analysis

DEFINITION	BEHAVIORS
The methods, processes, and practices of requesting, reviewing, analyzing, and making decisions about grant proposals.	• Demonstrates an understanding of various methods for soliciting proposals. • Recognizes the importance of and communicates methods for simplifying and clarifying grant application processes. • Communicates and clarifies overarching criteria used during proposal analysis. • Applies overarching proposal evaluation criteria with consistency when reviewing and analyzing proposals. • Recognizes the core elements of a standard proposal and common characteristics of good proposals. • Appraises and determines appropriate number and variety of due diligence activities relative to the size of the grant and grantee capacity. • Develops and implements format and process for final evaluation of proposals leading to a grant recommendation.

Risk Management

DEFINITION	BEHAVIORS
The ongoing process of identification, assessment, analysis, and mitigation of potentially disruptive events or conditions.	• Utilizes a growth mindset, collaborative problem solving, and innovative strategies to identify and mitigate risk. • Demonstrates an understanding of the inherently risky nature of philanthropy. • Identifies and advocates for the benefits of risk-taking related to a project or proposal. • Recognizes the difference between risk tolerance and risk management. • Demonstrates an understanding of the different types of risk, the impact on programming and funding decisions, and tools for mitigation. • Understands the foundation's risk profile and how it is reflected in the foundation's philosophy, policies, and practices. • Considers how managing risk impacts stakeholder groups. • Assesses, identifies, and monitors risks, available resources, and contingencies in collaboration with stakeholders to maintain the integrity of the project. • Engages in honest, open, two-way communication with grantees starting with the application process.

Financial Analysis

DEFINITION	BEHAVIORS
Due diligence of the financial status of an organization that leads to understanding and contextualizing the organization's overall priorities, management capacity and stability, and the viability of the proposal.	• Recognizes various sources of financial information and how to apply that information in the grantmaking process. • Demonstrates an understanding of how financial information can be used to determine the health of an organization. • Analyzes and synthesizes project and organization budgets and their component parts. • Demonstrates an understanding of the various types of independent financial audits or reviews — what's involved, what to look for, and how to use them. • Analyzes and synthesizes the information found in IRS tax reports. • Clearly communicates financial analysis findings to internal and external stakeholders. • Identifies, designs, and facilitates opportunities for financial capacity building and technical assistance for grantees.

Organizational Assessment

DEFINITION	BEHAVIORS
The methods, processes, and practices of evaluating an organization's capacity, capabilities, and opportunities for growth.	• Identifies and appraises the components of effective organizations. • Applies appropriate models, approaches, and tools used to conduct organizational assessments. • Demonstrates an understanding of the different types of organizational capacities. • Draws connections between organizational capacities and organizational lifecycle stages and explains how capacities evolve across stages. • Demonstrates an understanding of the role and impact of site visits. • Synthesizes organizational assessment data with the selection criteria. • Identifies, designs, and facilitates organizational capacity-building opportunities for grantees.

Power Dynamics

DEFINITION	BEHAVIORS
The practice of acknowledging and responding to the effects of power and privilege, both within one's role and one's organization, on the grantmaking process.	• Demonstrates an understanding of the power dynamics inherent in grantee-grantmaker relationships. • Demonstrates an understanding of tools, approaches, and models to build awareness of power and privilege dynamics. • Demonstrates an understanding of how power and privilege manifest throughout the grantmaking process. • Works collaboratively with and across stakeholder groups to identify norms, beliefs, attitudes, and practices that exist based on power and privilege. • Demonstrates an understanding of various equity approaches in philanthropy. • Decreases the power gap between grantees and grantmakers. • Actively pursues opportunities to leverage privilege and share and build power in support of stakeholder groups to advance outcomes and goals.

Strategy, Evaluation, and Learning

Program officers rely on strategy development, implementation, and evaluation design and management to implement the grants process and engage in continuous improvement.

Strategy Development & Implementation

DEFINITION	BEHAVIORS
The methods, processes, and practices of developing, implementing, and refining strategies.	• Recognizes the elements of an effective strategy (i.e., testable, realistic, evidence based, etc.). • Identifies relevant data to measure the effectiveness of a strategy. • Employs a variety of evaluation methods to assess, develop, implement and refine a strategy (e.g., observation, interview, surveys, interim reports, qualitative and quantitative methods, etc.). • Organizes and appropriately allocates resources in support of the strategy. • Actively seeks input from internal and external stakeholder groups when developing, evaluating, or refining strategy. • Communicates the trajectory and rationale for developing, applying, or shifting strategy to a variety of internal and external stakeholders. • Observes and can articulate the impact of strategy on internal and external stakeholders.

Evaluation Design & Management

DEFINITION	BEHAVIORS
The methods, approaches, practices, and terminology related to designing and managing evaluations that are aligned with an organization's goals and outcomes.	• Demonstrates an understanding of a range of evaluation methods and processes relative to the stated outcomes and goals of a strategy and the need to balance those methods and processes and adjust to stakeholder resources and capacity. • Designs (assesses and selects) a set of appropriate evaluation methods and processes. • Employs basic principles of collaborative evaluation management that motivate and enable stakeholder groups to build or increase their evaluation capacity. • Connects evaluation to decision making and promoting accountability amongst stakeholder groups. • Simplifies and streamlines evaluation requirements to account for stakeholder resources and capacity. • Interprets evaluation data using inclusive practice and stakeholder context.

Sharing Learning

DEFINITION	BEHAVIORS
Synthesizing and disseminating knowledge gained from evaluation with internal and external stakeholders.	• Organizes, combines, and synthesizes evaluation results to create actionable information and resources. • Appraises, critiques, and communicates evaluation findings based on the stakeholder. • Monitors and detects new information, trends, and advancements in program-specific areas. • Identifies and convenes groups affected by or connected to learning outcomes. • Leverages findings to reinforce and/or redefine foundation culture. • Continuously adjusts activities and strategies based on evaluation results. • Identifies and describes relevant learning opportunities both internally and externally.

Monitoring & Reporting

DEFINITION	BEHAVIORS
Ongoing methods, processes, and practices that support data-driven project management.	• Analyzes and selects monitoring/reporting methods, approaches, and terminology based on the monitoring purpose. • Designs appropriate monitoring management protocols. • Demonstrates an understanding of the impact of monitoring and reporting on stakeholder groups. • Explains the connection between monitoring activities and outcomes. • Works with stakeholders to select and identify data that are reliable, valid indicators of progress. • Recognizes the distinction between quantitative and qualitative data-collection tools and summarizes how they are implemented based on monitoring purposes. • Demonstrates how monitoring and reporting are used for decision making and promoting accountability amongst stakeholders. • Reviews monitoring techniques with grantees to ensure feasibility. • Adjusts program activities and strategies based on monitoring.

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Glossary

Active Listening
Attentiveness, withholding judgement, asking open-ended questions, clarifying, paraphrasing.

Communication Type
Verbal, non-verbal, written, visual.

Diversity
The state of being composed of a demographic mix of people, taking into account, elements of difference across national origins, languages, ethnicities, races, skin colors, cultures, generations, religions, spiritualities, socio-economic backgrounds, gender identities and sexual orientations as well as different skills, abilities, customs, values, behavioral styles and beliefs. (MNA Glossary of Terms)

Equity
The presence of justice and fairness within the procedures, processes, and distribution of resources by institutions or systems. Facing equity issues requires an understanding of the underlying or root causes of inequalities and oppression within our society.

Ethical Dilemma
A situation in which a difficult choice has to be made between two courses of action, each firmly rooted in one of four basic core values: Truth vs. Loyalty: Individual vs. Community; Short term vs. Long Term; Justice vs. Mercy.

External
The field, other funders, grantees, stakeholders, community partners, etc.

Inclusion
The full engagement of individuals sharing power at all levels of [engagement with] an organization. All [stakeholders] are valued, respected and supported. The act of inclusion is reflected in an organization's culture, practices and relationships that support a [diversity] and is an intentional demonstration that counters the historical exclusion of underrepresented communities. Inclusive organizations ensure equal and full participation in decision-making processes by considering all views. (MNA Glossary of Terms)

Inclusive Practice
The routine practice of intentionally including diverse stakeholders and perspectives fairly and equally throughout the grant making cycle both internally and externally.

Internal
At the organizational level and/or within the foundation.

Moral Temptation
Right vs. wrong — clearly based on the core values that a person possesses.

Platform
1:1, small/large group, in-person, web-based, television, radio, print media, etc.

Source Materials

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