

GRAD Guide to Careers in Foundations

OVERVIEW

This guide focuses on careers at **private foundations** — organizations with employment opportunities for graduate degree holders keen to make a positive impact in the world. While the term “foundation” is used with varying degrees of specificity, private foundations are **nonprofit, philanthropic organizations that give money for charitable causes** in areas such as education, community, healthcare, religion, science, arts, and culture. Some private foundations are sustained by funds or endowments from individuals or families, while others are funded by corporations. Foundations make grants to other nonprofit organizations or to individuals whose work aligns with their core missions and priorities. As graduate students and postdocs, for instance, you’re likely aware of the broad array of scholarships, fellowships, and on-campus initiatives supported by funds from private foundations. **Overall, foundations attract employees with excellent writing, research, and communication skills who are interested in philanthropy.**

UNDERSTANDING THE LANDSCAPE:

PRIVATE FOUNDATIONS, PUBLIC CHARITIES, AND THE SPACES IN BETWEEN

Private foundations are entities that sit within the broader nonprofit sector. Another significant organization type that exists in this area is the **public charity**. While qualifying private foundations and public charities in the US are viewed as tax-exempt by the IRS with a 501(c)(3) status, they differ in terms of funding and in the ways that they operate. In general, **private foundations give money in support of charitable causes while public charities engage in direct charitable service**. Vitally, private foundations are commonly self-funded while public charities solicit financial support from the public, the government, or from other organizations (including private foundations). To confuse things a little, however, some private foundations do engage in direct service (a.k.a. “private operating foundations”), and some public charities make grants (sometimes called “public foundations”).* For further information on the natures of and distinctions between private foundations and public charities, visit the following resources produced by [Candid.org](#), [Foundation Source](#), and the [Council on Foundations](#). Likewise, if you are eager to learn more about careers in the wider nonprofit arena, read this [GRAD guide](#).

The **J. Paul Getty Trust is an example of a private operating foundation. **Save the Children Federation** is an example of a grantmaking public charity. Area-focused “community foundations” found across the US (such as **The Chicago Community Trust**) are also recognized as grantmaking public charities.*

SELECTED PRIVATE FOUNDATIONS IN THE US

There are thousands of private foundations located across the US and worldwide. The table on page 2 of this guide presents a small sample of US-based organizations that demonstrate just how diverse their areas of impact are. When researching the foundations landscape, the following tips might be helpful: **1.** View the mission statements included on organization websites. Make a list of organizations with missions that align with your values and areas of expertise. **2.** Explore the specific projects and programs with which foundations are involved; read through the profiles of employees working on projects of interest. **3.** View the lists of grant recipients reported on foundation websites to see exactly how their money is spent.



SELECTED PRIVATE FOUNDATIONS IN THE US (cont.)

Foundation	Headquarters	Areas of Focus
Carnegie Corporation of New York	New York, NY	Inc. democracy, education, and international peace
Andrew W. Mellon Foundation	New York, NY	Arts and humanities
MacArthur Foundation	Chicago, IL	Inc. global climate solutions; nuclear challenges; local justice reform in the US; issues in Chicago and Nigeria; journalism and the media
W.K. Kellogg Foundation	Battle Creek, MI	Children; families; communities
Lilly Endowment Inc.	Indianapolis, IN	Community development; education and youth; religion
Getty Foundation	Los Angeles, CA	Visual arts
Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation	Seattle, WA	Poverty; disease; inequity around the world
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation	Princeton, NJ	Healthcare
William and Flora Hewlett Foundation	Menlo Park, CA	Inc. education; environment; performing arts; community issues in San Francisco Bay Area
Ford Foundation	New York, NY	Inc. poverty; democracy; promotion of international cooperation; advancement of human achievement
Henry Luce Foundation	New York, NY	Inc. Asia; higher education; religion and theology; art; public policy

POSSIBLE ROLES AND JOB TITLES

Foundations offer a wide range of employment opportunities in areas such as grantmaking, communications, operations, and administration. This section of the guide focuses on jobs in the realm of **grantmaking**. Among many things, employees in this area build grant portfolios that reflect the missions of their respective organizations; read and assess grant applications; build and sustain relationships with grantees; write reports on the effectiveness of specific projects; and engage in various administrative and project management tasks.

Importantly, foundations value many of the skills acquired at graduate school. First, graduate training helps sharpen your writing, research, oral communication, and critical thinking skills vital for work at a foundation. Second, through graduate research, you practice identifying salient issues, trends, and knowledge gaps in your respective field. At foundations, these skills will help you make informed decisions when reviewing grant applications, and help you identify exciting new grantmaking opportunities.



POSSIBLE ROLES AND JOB TITLES (cont.)

While you might enter a foundation as a subject area expert, you'll soon become an informed **generalist** through engagement with grantees working on a wide range of topics.

If you are interested in grantmaking, look out for **program staff roles**. Positions with titles such as **program director or manager** are reserved for individuals with extensive experience in the field. **Program officer** roles are possibilities for PhD holders depending on your areas of expertise and prior work experience. Other positions include **program associate, analyst, coordinator, or assistant** roles. The level at which you enter will depend upon the intersection of your subject matter expertise and related work experience. Informational interviews with foundation employees will give you a better sense of this landscape, as will searching through employee profiles published on foundation websites. For insight into the broad variety of possible roles in the philanthropy sector, visit this resource produced by [Philanthropy New York](#).

REQUIRED SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE FOR PROGRAM ROLES

- Experience and familiarity with the grantmaking process (see the next section of this guide)
- Strong oral and written communication skills, and the ability to communicate with both specialist and non-specialist audiences
- Research skills
- Critical thinking and analysis skills
- Interpersonal and relationship-building skills
- Ability to work on collaborative projects
- Project management and administrative skills

UNDERSTANDING GRANTMAKING (AND GETTING EXPERIENCE)

As the primary objective of private foundations is to give money (“make grants”) to causes that align with their missions, demonstrating that you understand the intricacies of the grantmaking process will help make you an attractive candidate for a job. **In program roles at a foundation, you'll be reviewing and assessing grant applications rather than writing them from scratch.**

As a graduate student or postdoc, you're likely familiar with **writing grants** to solicit funding for your own research, or for other scholarly activities like workshops or conferences. These valuable experiences offer insight into one side of the grants process. To pivot into a *grantmaking* role at a foundation, try to get experience on the other side by **reviewing grant applications**.

Want grant reviewing experience? Research different kinds of grantmaking organizations focused in your area of expertise and volunteer to sit on a **grant review panel**. Individuals in the arts and/or humanities, for instance, might reach out to city, county, state, or national arts or humanities agencies — many of which actively seek grant reviewers on a regular basis. Look out, too, for opportunities to review or manage grants for various on-campus initiatives, such as Grad Council.



QU: I'm a humanist interested in grantmaking work beyond private foundations. Where might I look?

Research the complex networks of **nonprofit arts, culture, and humanities agencies** across the country and worldwide. US citizens might explore opportunities at federal agencies such as the [National Endowment for the Arts](#) (NEA) or the [National Endowment for the Humanities](#) (NEH). **Grantmaking public charities** also offer an array of employment opportunities for individuals with advanced graduate degrees.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH PROFESSIONALS

In the nonprofit, philanthropy sector, there is a high premium placed on communication and relationship-building skills. If you are interested in working at a foundation, making connections with professionals in this area will give you valuable insight into the overall field. It might even help you secure a full-time job or some work experience. How, then, might you get started?

- **Arrange informational interviews:** search for alumni working at foundations that interest you using the [alumni directory](#), [Wisr](#), and [LinkedIn](#). Beyond alumni, explore the profiles of foundation employees published on individual organization websites. For more information on informational interviews (and for sample outreach messages), see this [UChicagoGRAD presentation](#).
- **Make connections via on-campus career events:** attend events such as the annual [GRADUCon](#) career exploration conference and look out for relevant treks and career conversations organized by UChicagoGRAD. Visit [GRAD Gargoyle](#) for event listings.
- **Explore internship opportunities at foundations:** check the websites of individual organizations for postings. Note, however, that many internship schemes at foundations are designed for undergraduate students. This doesn't mean that graduate opportunities don't exist!
- **Twitter:** follow the accounts of philanthropy professionals whose work fascinates you.

FINDING JOB POSTINGS

- Search for job postings on the websites of individual foundations.
- Explore the job boards and career centers on sites including [The Chronicle of Philanthropy](#), [Inside Philanthropy](#), and [Philanthropy New York](#).
- Search for job postings on sites such as [LinkedIn](#), [Glassdoor](#), and [Idealist](#).



NEXT STEPS AND ADVICE

- Build your professional network by connecting with professionals at foundations.
- Gain familiarity with the grantmaking process and seek out grant reviewing experience.
- Explore internship opportunities at foundations. Check out UChicagoGRAD's [GRAD Global Impact "Pitch" Program](#) through which you can design an internship that aligns with your academic and professional interests.
- Consider voluntary positions/work experience at other nonprofit organizations.

You see a suitable job posting and decide to apply. Tailor your resume and write a strong cover letter. Need help or inspiration? See UChicagoGRAD's guides focused on [resumes](#) and [cover letters](#). Articulate clearly the ways in which your work and personal interests align with the missions of the organization under question and demonstrate that you are knowledgeable of the specific programs the foundation supports.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

- [The Chronicle of Philanthropy](#) and [Inside Philanthropy](#) — online publications focused on charities and foundations that features articles, advice, opinion pieces, job postings, and more.
- [Candid.org](#) — nonprofit organization and online resource that provides detailed information on private foundations and other nonprofits in the US and further afield.
- [Nonprofit Quarterly](#) — articles and resources focused on the nonprofit sector.

