

# From the pages of *Essentials*

Quarterly publication of the Association of Small Foundations



ASSOCIATION OF  
SMALL FOUNDATIONS  
*for foundations with few or no staff*

## A Path to Impact

*Excerpted from 2010 (Issue 3)*

What do you want to achieve with your giving? What path will you follow to get there?

Foundation leaders have at least one thing in common: the desire to make a difference. But change is rarely achieved accidentally, especially in a field that tackles some of society's most complex challenges. Even for foundations with sizable resources, intentionality is key—that is, intentionality in pursuing a particular path for an extended period.

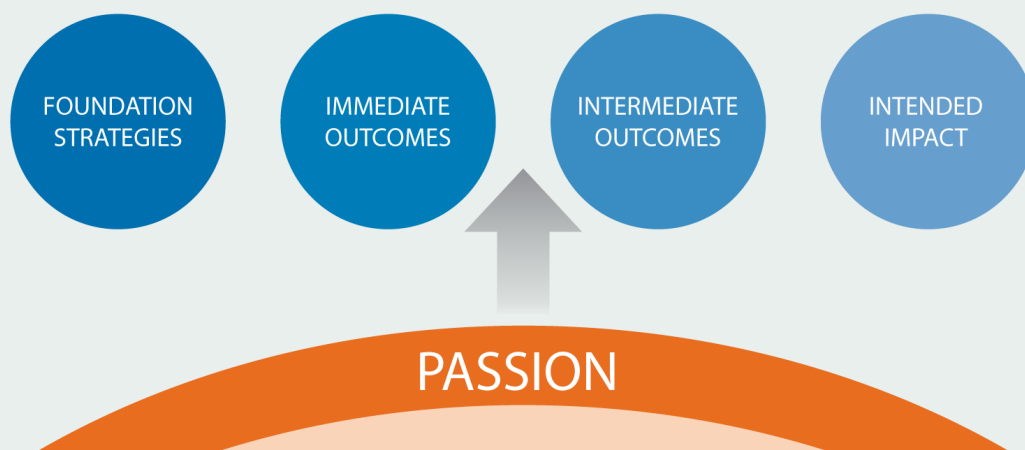
To help your foundation be intentional in its work and

more effective in working toward the impact it desires, we suggest putting pen to paper. By taking the five steps that follow, working backward from your passions to specific strategies, you can begin to outline a roadmap for your giving.

Although the steps are admittedly oversimplified—this important work will take a significant amount of time and effort—a thoughtful path for your giving will begin to take shape. You'll be on the way to working intentionally and finding fulfillment in your grant-making.

### Creating Your Path

Want to make a difference with your giving but not sure where to begin? Start with your passion to create a roadmap for your foundation, or what some call a *theory of change*.



**ABOUT ASF**

[www.smallfoundations.org](http://www.smallfoundations.org)

The Association of Small Foundations (ASF) enhances the power of philanthropy by providing donors, trustees, and professionals with peer learning opportunities, resources, and a collective voice in and beyond the philanthropic community.

ASF serves foundations that operate with few or no staff. More than 60,000 such foundations exist in the U.S., making them a vibrant force for giving throughout the nation and beyond. ASF is the largest association of foundation leaders in the country, 2,600 members strong.

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Let's get started.

Note: For a helping hand to create your roadmap, and for other resources to help you achieve the impact you desire, see the Additional Resources.

## Start With Your Passion

Some foundations are committed to specific towns or regions. Others are moved by homelessness or conservation. And still others want to support new projects or new organizations.

What does your foundation care deeply about? (This is your passion.)

The first and only child in his family to attend college, Jim Smith had a successful manufacturing business in Akron, OH. Upon retiring, he started the J. R. Smith Foundation with his wife, three children, and two longtime business associates on the board. When considering their values, several noted that education was fundamental to their success. All were passionate about opportunities for higher education, and all wanted to focus their giving in Akron.

Your passions may be obvious, or they may be challenging to pinpoint. If you need some prompting, think about your family values, a donor's legacy, something that angers you, or an event that moved you. If you identify many passions, look for common threads or underlying values.

## Define Your Intended Impact

Next, turn your passion into a concrete goal. Thinking about real people and real communities, answer this question: If we are successful in the work

we care about, what will success look like? (This is your intended impact.)

For the Smith Foundation, passionate about higher education and particularly for first generation college students, success looks like this: More Akron high school students become first generation college students and complete their degrees.

## Identify Intermediate Outcomes

Now that you know where you're headed, how will you get there? Work backward by asking: What must happen for us to achieve our intended impact? (These are intermediate outcomes.)

For the Smith Foundation to increase the number of first generation college students in Akron, the board members knew they would have to remove barriers to college entry. That is, all high school students in Akron must understand the benefits of higher education and have the necessary confidence, skills, and funding to access the educational level of their choice.

In the same way the Smith Foundation identified several barriers (i.e., awareness, confidence, skills, funding), foundations often uncover many paths to change. Some pursue several before settling on those that fit them best; others focus their efforts on one or two.

## Identify Immediate Outcomes

Again working backward, ask: What must happen in order for the intermediate outcomes to happen? (These are immediate outcomes.) It can be helpful to ask the question repeatedly; that is, what needs to happen before that can happen? And before that can happen? (These are additional immediate outcomes.)

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To remove barriers to college entry, the Smith Foundation knew this must happen: High schools or outside agencies must offer programs for parents and students, who would be the first generation to attend college, to make them aware of the importance of college and give them the confidence and tools to access college. In addition, high schools must administer a scholarship program to help students pay for testing, applications, and tuition.

At this stage, foundations often begin to recognize appropriate types of grantees. But don't stop here.

## Choose Strategies

Finally, ask: What can our foundation do that will result in the desired immediate outcomes? (These are your strategies.)

Will you make grants? Lend support beyond grant dollars? Convene other funders? Will you fund individuals, single organizations, or groups of organizations? Will you fund existing programs or start new ones?

After much discussion, the Smith Foundation decided to fund local high schools in low-income areas to develop college prep programs to reach the students and their families. If appropriate, the trustees would play an inspirational role by speaking about their life experiences at the college prep programs. They would also set up scholarship funds at the same schools to help with fees and tuition.

## Next Steps

In the end, by moving backward from your passion to your strategies, you've essentially created an if/then

statement, or what some call a *theory of change*, about the way your foundation will work to achieve its intended impact. That is, *if* your foundation undertakes the strategies it identifies, *then* it will put into motion a sequence of events that results in impact.

But where do you go from here?

For starters, encourage your board to create a theory of change together. Start with your passions and work backward to strategies you all support. Does the board need some convincing? Try this: It's tough to know if you're making a difference unless you know where to look. A theory of change points you to outcomes you can measure. Plus, on a more practical level, from your strategies can flow a work plan full of concrete steps to tackle what might otherwise seem to be an insurmountable social issue.

You might hit bumps along the way in creating your theory of change, but it's worth the time and effort. And we're here to help! Call on us and fellow members for advice and support.

## Additional Resources

### 2014 National Conference

[www.smallfoundations.org](http://www.smallfoundations.org)

Join us to learn how to plan for and evaluate your impact, and meet colleagues who can help.

### Member Directory

[www.smallfoundations.org](http://www.smallfoundations.org)

Find fellow members who work intentionally to achieve impact and can help you do the same.