



Evolving the Common Grant Application to the Philanthropy Data Commons

Proof-of-Concept Report: Findings and Next Steps

October 2021

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background:

The Common Grant Application for Philanthropy (CGAP) is a multi-stakeholder initiative launched in 2020 with the goal to develop a sector-wide, interoperable common grant application. CGAP was intended to allow for more equitable access to resources, democratize data sharing among organizations seeking grants and organizations making grants, reduce applicant and funder administrative burden and paperwork, streamline the application process, expedite access to capital, and lower the costs of applying for and awarding funding. CGAP was seeded by the MacArthur Foundation but developed in conjunction with a coalition of funders who comprised the Minimum Viable Coalition (MVC):



After preliminary data collection and analysis of existing grant applications across the MVC organizations from early to mid-2021, the MVC hired a team of independent consultants with backgrounds in philanthropy, grantseeking, technology, and data commons to engage a variety of stakeholders in the sector and design an initial Proof of Concept. This report is a summary of the project team's Proof of Concept findings.

Why now:

The concept and ideals of a common grant application is not new to the sector, as many have attempted to create a form of it over the years. The overall intent of each attempt was to ease the burden for both organizations seeking grants (here on out referred to as “organizations”) and foundations or organizations making grants (here on out referred to as “funders”) regarding the grant-making process. However, while regional or localized grant applications have been created and adopted, a universal version has not been successfully established.

Yet the sector-wide discussion and debate around the need for the philanthropic stakeholders to develop a holistic solution to reduce barriers between funders and organizations never ceased. Furthermore, the increased attention to racial justice (in the United States) and the global pandemic brought both an increase in philanthropic activity and a new awareness on the part of some philanthropic organizations that there might be room to improve the sector's standard practices as the need for more rapid and diverse organizational funding grew.

With an independent team assembled for this effort in mid-2021, MacArthur Foundation committed to taking a different approach to creating a solution. Early on, it was established this effort would be different due to these guidelines:

- **Timeline:** Setting aggressive deadlines for project development and creation
- **Approach:** Incorporating and valuing the importance of collaborative governance and common data, and a discovery process (identifying prospective funders and grantees), in addition to technology and common application pieces

- **Vendor Agnostic:** Taking a “sector” solution approach vs. a vendor-specific solution
- **Shifted Priorities:** Specific attention paid to the nonprofit and grant-seeker perspective and experience
- **Sector Solving:** Targeted nonprofits, funders, GMS vendors, and intermediaries working together to create the solution
- **Transparency:** Communication throughout the process to inform and strengthen the ultimate solution

Key Findings of the Proof of Concept:

This exploration launched from the perspective of reducing barriers to entry for organizations, by eliminating the need for them to re-enter the same organizational information many times in many different places when submitting proposals for funding. While initially coined “Common Grant Application for Philanthropy”, we determined that the innovation is not actually a full grant application in itself, but the shared subset that is common to almost all application processes.

We also discovered that:

- A common application by itself would be fairly limited in what it could do, because there is so much variety in what organizations and funders are trying to accomplish, and in the manner in which they want to accomplish it. Organizations seeking grants are not monolithic: they want to control their positioning for various funders and funding opportunities.
- Funders want accessibility and lower barriers to entry for organizations seeking grants, and funders are interested in learning about organizations who are unknown (or under-known) to them -- specifically, organizations who are engaged in activities of interest to the given funder and who are plausible candidates for support. Importantly, however, funders have different business processes and ask for distinct information from organizations at a variety of points in their various grant approval processes.
- Organizations put a lot of effort into their proposals, and care greatly about the goals that motivate those proposals. Thus they may be interested in having certain aspects of their proposals be discoverable by other funders beyond the one to whom they originally submitted. (This holds whether or not the proposal received funding from that original funder.) At the same time, organizations want firm control over *what* information circulates to *whom* and *how*. Ways to ensure that they have that control are discussed in the sections “Collaborative Governance” and “Common Data Model and Platform”.
- In the initial application analysis, roughly 34% of the data across the MVC applications were common. If this work together could start from these commonalities as an initial building set of data, it would be beneficial for organizations and funders to explore a common approach to reduce efforts across the audiences on non-differentiating information collection. Building off this knowledge to start a common set of questions for grant-seekers and funders is of value.

From the perspective of the project team, one way to achieve these goals is through a *Collaboratively Governed Data Commons*: a set of agreements, protocols, and technologies -- integrated through existing mechanisms such as Grants Management Systems (GMS) interfaces and infomediaries -- that enable organizations and funders to streamline and share their data. It will be critical for data and information to be leveraged from existing tools, systems, and platforms to reduce the burden on application-submitting and receiving organizations, but in a manner that is not competitive or jeopardizes their existing value and contribution. Additionally, a data commons model with collaborative governance would allow an initial set of data/information to flow from organizations seeking grants to funders to initiate the application process.

Conclusion:

As the project team and design team reviewed this CGAP Proof of Concept, we determined that this initiative would be more accurately referred to as a Philanthropy Data Commons (PDC). More than just a name change, the PDC is not fundamentally about technological innovation nor about using the latest artificial intelligence or machine learning techniques; it is about opening up new possibilities to organizations and funders, by organizing data and making that data available in the right places at the right times, but doing so in a collaborative manner that allows individual organizations to maintain their own systems and practices while contributing to the collective goals.

This Proof of Concept validates the need for shared data and governance and creates the beginning stages of a common grant application by consolidating similar questions from funders in the application process. With this Proof of Concept 1.0 as our anchor, the team made specific recommendations noted at the end of this report. Additionally, we believe that this work would benefit from a second phase to build an operating / working version of the Philanthropy Data Commons. This 2.0 version would benefit from an expanded Minimal Viable Coalition that includes organizations seeking grants with the funders to further explore and define the shared governance model. And, with these efforts at play, we could potentially launch a Philanthropy Data Commons pilot in early- to mid- 2022 with a subset of organizations and funders who apply for, review, and fund grants through the solution.

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Stakeholder engagement:

The initiative began with the MacArthur Foundation engaging a group of funders to work together and collectively support the Common Grant Application for Philanthropy initiative. As a result, the MVC was created. Made up of representatives from Arnold Ventures, Ford Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, Robert R. McCormick Foundation, Oak Foundation, and the David & Lucile Packard Foundation, the MVC's purpose was to align and mobilize a coalition of funders to develop, adapt, and implement a common grant application for philanthropy. Each MVC funder committed a staff person to participate in the development of the solution. Representatives attended a series of meetings to learn of project progress, as well as to provide insight and feedback to strengthen the deliverable.

While the formation of the MVC was critical to kickstarting the project, it was imperative that the group also collaborate with organizations seeking grants and other stakeholders. MVC members and the project team conducted conversations with approximately 60 representatives from the philanthropic sector, including individuals from PEAK Grantmaking, Aspen Institute, Candid, Charity Navigator, Fluxx, SmartSimple, McKinsey & Company, NetHope, Salesforce, TechSoup, and more. These conversations served to:

- Spread awareness about the project
- Identify potential risks and opportunities
- Learn about previous and current initiatives that could inform our work
- Use insights to strengthen the solution
- Pull in thought partners where needed


The project team also engaged in a series of interviews with both development (fundraising) staff leadership and nonprofit executives about their experiences with online applications, funder communications and engagement and general grants seeking. The summary of findings can be broken down into three categories:

- Technology
 - From a technology perspective, nonprofit staff communicated the frustration of character limitations in applications, the inability to advance to a later portion of an application without completing the beginning, the complexity of manually tracking grant application deadlines, the discouragement of completing the majority of an application only to discover ineligibility, and more.
- Application Logistics
 - From an application perspective, nonprofit staff communicated the immense amount of time minor working differences in questions across applications require reworking entire answers, the time, energy, and resources taken away from serving the target population, the uncertainty of a renewal grant until late in

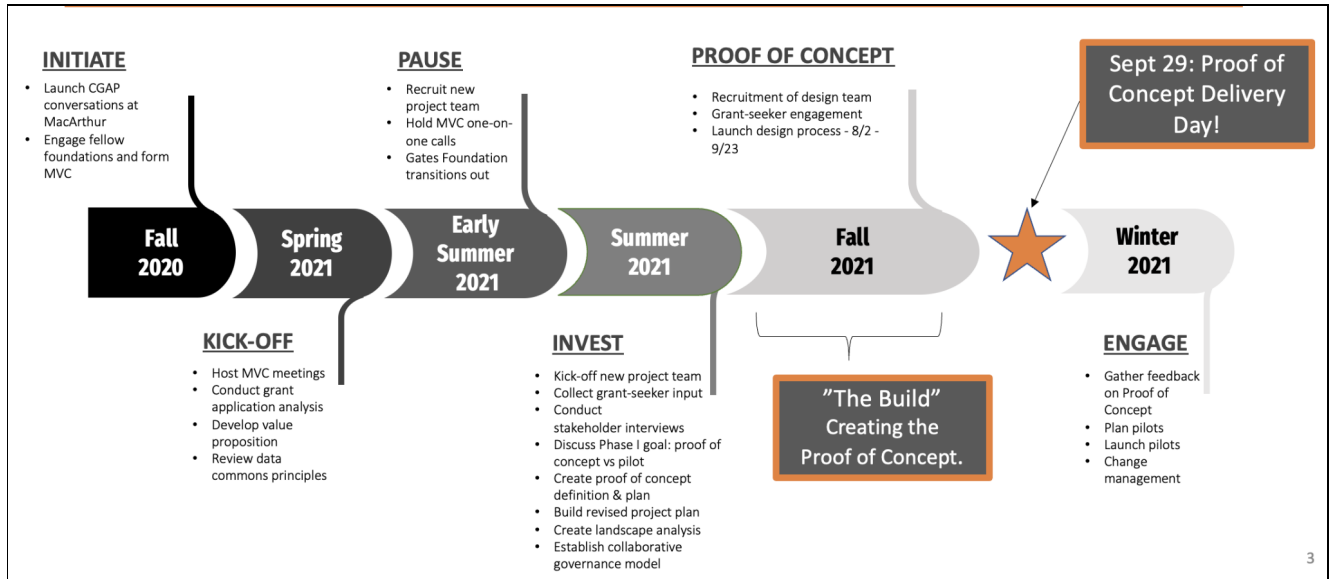
the grant cycle, the difficulty and sometimes impossibility of accounting for where each dollar was specifically spent of a grant, and more.

- Communication
 - From a communication perspective, nonprofit staff communicated the inability to contact a staff member or trustee from the foundation to ask follow up questions as well as the confusion foundation websites create by being vague in their qualification and eligibility descriptions.

Throughout this process, the following value propositions for funders and organizations seeking grants guided the work. It’s important to note that we benefited greatly from partners throughout the sector who have also focused on this work and built complementary efforts for the field, i.e. FixtheForm and others. We knew that CGAP would not be able to nor attempt to address all of the below, but that it was important to understand the opportunity that such collaborations could create for the field:

	Focus Areas	Funders	Grant-Seekers
 <p>'CGAP' Project Goals</p>	Operating Capacity	Improve without significant changes to existing processes	Reduce time on applications so more time to focus on mission
	Reduce Admin Work	Related to awarding grants and costs associated with that	Related to applying for multiple grants across multiple platforms
	Streamline Information Collection	Ease non-differentiating info collection to higher-value work	Standardize and ability to re-use application data
	Increase Opportunities	Ability to scan more grant-seeker organizations for need	Exposure to different funders and possibilities
	Data Ownership and Security	More trust with shared norms and governance	Retain control on how their data is used
	Collaboration and Sharing	Connect with other funders on partnerships, sequence funding	Foster more with ongoing relationships and shared norms

The following is a snapshot of evolution and timeline of the project:



Design process:

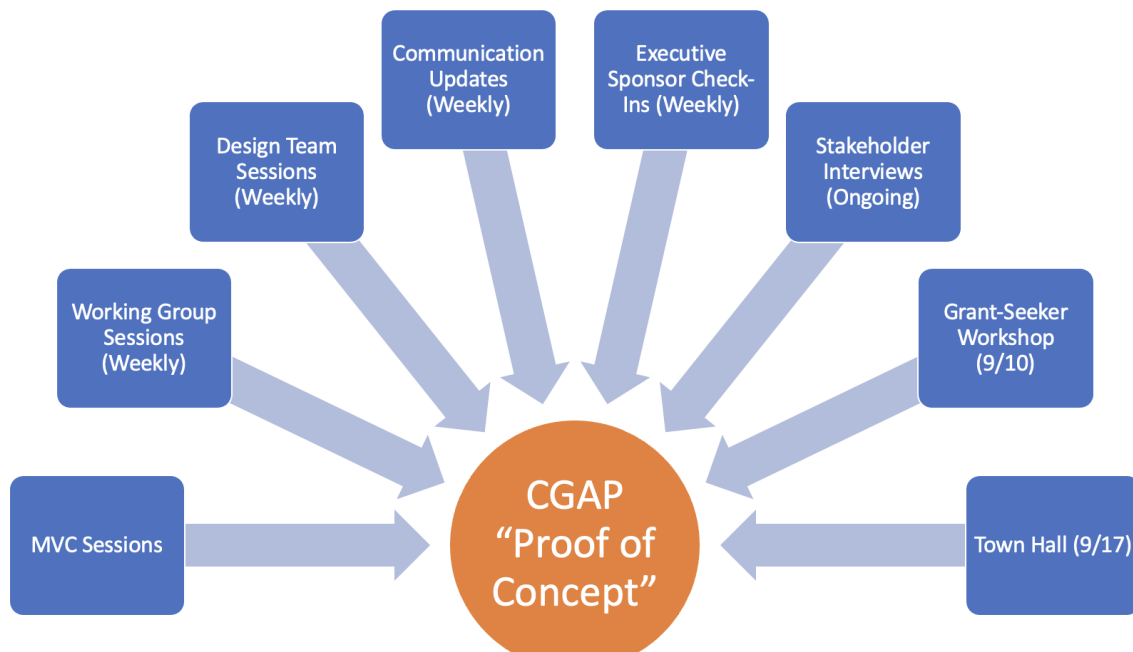
After seeking input from sector stakeholders, including nonprofits, the project team engaged a design team composed of 17 representatives from the MVC participating foundations to actually design an initial proof of concept for a CGAP. Design team members ranged in titles such as VP or Director of Grants Management, Senior Paralegal, Chief Information Officer, Grants Manager and Administrator, Senior Program Officer, and more. Although each foundation varies greatly in their business processes, grant making procedures and priorities, the variety of domain expertise and funding priorities represented in the Design Team helped us to explore a more comprehensive solution in our Proof of Concept design plan. Once Design Team members were identified and committed, the process of seven weekly meetings with the following objectives:

- Week 1: Kickoff/Welcome/Overview
- Week 2: Establishment and Clarification of Workstreams
- Week 3: Application Goals and Considerations
- Week 4: Grant-Seeker Plan
- Week 5: Proposed Deliverables and Current Gaps
- Week 6: Draft Deliverables
- Week 7: Workstream Deliverables and Reflection

In addition to the engagement of the design team, the project team conducted two meetings mid-way through the design stage to engage additional colleagues of MVC representatives and do a deep dive with additional nonprofits to gain their constructive feedback.

- The MVC town hall was meant to engage stakeholders from all MVC organizations to both socialize the idea of CGAP, as well as to gain feedback and questions to further inform the design and future implementation opportunities. More than 40 attendees from six foundations actively engaged with questions, comments and feedback.

- The nonprofit workshop was used to ensure the project was meeting needs and expectations of organizations seeking grants. The bulk of the conversation was reserved for discussion of the proof of concept, determining gaps in the creation, and capturing grant-seeker- specific feedback on the concept. Eight representatives from four different non profit participated. The nonprofits represented organizations with a range of development and grant-seeking experience, included a mix of local and national organizations, and all had received funding from at least two MVC organizations. The nonprofits were compensated for the time they dedicated to the project.



FINDINGS

As stated above the goal of this project was to design a Proof of Concept based on hypotheses that represented our initial thinking about this work - what was needed, what the value was - be able to test these, validate them, reject them, revise and sequence as appropriate.

The project team structured the design process around four workstreams: collaborative governance, common data model and platform, sourcing (identifying prospective funders or grantees), and application. This structure allowed Design Team members to work on specific aspects of the larger concept of the common grant application and operate in parallel on weekly work. Additionally, this approach was beneficial to the overall process as it allowed us to focus on these different areas and challenges to paint a more complete narrative on the complex

aspects of what this would take to shift the existing thinking and account for a more cohesive consideration of existing circumstances for the stakeholders involved.

Common Grant Application

Background

The application and research conversation focused on the data and information needed by grant funders and grant seekers to achieve a common grant application and determine the value of search or 'match-making' functionality to help organizations seeking funding and grant makers to find each other.. This includes data and information about the application submitting and receiving organizations, as well as about the specific proposal itself. Additionally, the sourcing conversation and engagement centered on the source of that data - whether newly submitted or accessed from an existing tool, system, or platform.

Early in the CGAP effort, MVC member organizations provided the project team with a representative sample of the typical grantee applications each funder uses for their philanthropic work with grant-seekers. variation on descriptions and naming were expected across the different applications, the initial hope was that after some analysis work, the team could ascertain a high percentage of common data elements that could form a core set of what the funders were asking and the team could work from that to refine and maybe expand on it to become the common grant application for philanthropy. We found commonality amongst 34% of application questions, which created a great opportunity to streamline the questions and answers of a significant part of the application process.

Assumptions

The team began with a set of assumptions regarding sourcing, including:

- Grant applications and the grant making process varies by grant funder and specific focus areas that they prioritize
- The data and information requested and submitted through grant applications are, at the very least, similar enough that the application and process could be streamlined or made more efficient
- Data submitting organizations are spending valuable time and resources inputting the same, or similar, data and information in multiple GMSs for multiple grant funders
- Grant seekers and funders want to reduce the time and resources that they must dedicate to the grant making process
- Existing grant application sourcing tools, systems, and platforms could help alleviate the burden on grant seekers and funders during the grant application and grant making process

Proof of Concept Deliverables & Findings

During the proof of concept project, the CGAP team were able to test many of these assumptions and obtain even more clarity around the needs, preferences, and constraints related to grant application data and information sourcing and use. While it became clear, early on, that designing and developing a common application might not be feasible - or even of value to all grant funders, CGAP was able to obtain critical information about grant application data and information sourcing, including:

- Too much variation in preferences, priorities, and approaches exist within and across grant funders to realistically expect that one common grant application can be achieved.
- While not all grant funders solicit applications from grant seeking organizations in making grant decisions, all MVC and design team grant funders seek to expand their network and understanding of new grant seeker organizations and application proposals that are aligned with their work and criteria.
- Absent a common grant application, helping to reduce the burden and streamline the grant application process. Grant search, and grant decision making processes would provide substantial value to both grant funders and seekers
- MVC, design team, and grant seeker stakeholders want to leverage existing tools, systems, and platforms, but not to the extent that CGAP would be competitive or jeopardize their work. Instead, CGAP should find ways to both coordinate with existing systems and enhance their work and value to the sector
- MVC, design team want to support all grant seeker organizations, especially those that may not have use of appropriate tools and systems, and those which are not currently using existing GMS or intermediaries.
- There is significant interest in using sourcing data and information beyond grant applications and in the grant making process, and the use of collaborative governance to provide the specific details on how to accomplish that in a secure, responsible, and ethical manner.

Sourcing Recommendations

Based on the work performed during the Proof of Concept, the CGAP team has identified a few recommendations regarding data and information sourcing, including:

- Data and information should be leveraged from existing tools, systems, and platforms to reduce the burden on application submitting and receiving organizations - but in a manner that is not competitive or jeopardizes their existing value and contribution.
- CGAP should focus on helping to streamline the grant application and grant decision making process, including improving the ability to assess eligibility, identify new grant opportunities, and identify and assess grant seeker organizations and relevant proposals.

It was clear, even in the limited timeframe of the proof of concept, that working from that initial common data set we pulled from the application analysis was a great starting point to start to build something together beyond the common application concept. There was excitement and buy-in across the team to leverage what was initially scoped as the beginnings of a common

data application into more of a consistent data commons model with governance and technology to support the sector. We determined that this data commons model with collaborative governance would allow an initial set of data/information to flow from organizations to funders to initiate the application process. We believe this is strong framework from which funders could build on to examine business processes and change what info they require to make grants

The data elements identified in the initial application analysis along with some minor adjustments for this initial set of data are detailed in the **Common Data Model and Platform** findings below in this report.

Collaborative Governance

Background

The governance component of CGAP was intended to be the mechanism that made CGAP different from other philanthropic initiatives: an iterative framework and approach to achieving collective goals that could be leveraged and sustained over time. In particular, the collaborative governance framework was designed to be

- Collaborative, allowing grant funders, grant seekers, infomediaries, and technology vendors to work together to achieve collective goals and solve common pain points
- Equitable, preventing one organization from imposing its will or preferences on other organizations
- Inclusive, enabling all organizations to participate and contribute regardless of data and technical capacities
- Efficient, alleviating administrative burden on grant funder and grant seeker staff in facilitation of routine organizational activities
- Trust-based, eliminating the transactional and adversarial nature of collaboration and data sharing, and,
- Sustainable, encouraging all organizations to leverage the existing collaborative framework to collectively address future goals and challenges.

Assumptions

The CGAP team identified a few assumptions about the design, development, and use of the governance framework, including:

- Collaborative governance is an opportunity to transform how grant funders, grant seekers, infomediaries, and vendors share, integrate, and use data to support their individual and collective work
- the collaborative governance framework should be designed and developed collaboratively, and reflect the needs, priorities, and constraints of grant funders and grant seekers
- CGAP should not be competitive and, instead provide additional value to existing data, collaborations, tools, and technologies

- collaborative governance should be iterative and flexible, allowing for data, resources, and uses of data to change, evolve, or expand over time,

Proof of Concept Deliverables & Findings

The collaborative governance deliverables addressed during the Proof of Concept phase included:

- Designing and developing a draft CGAP charter that detailed how the collaboration of grant funders and seekers, vendors, and infomediaries would work together, roles and responsibilities, and decision making structures, among other details,
- Beginning to identify potential CGAP collaboration governing body members, including grant funders and seekers, vendors, and infomediaries, along with representatives from philanthropic support organizations,
- Identifying components related to initial CGAP collaboration activities, including the data, technical, and governance specifications related to a philanthropic common data model, search functionality, and integration with existing GMS and infomediaries.
- Ensuring that grant funders and seekers were given the opportunity to weigh in on initial thinking about collaborative governance

The CGAP team identified a few findings as a result of the engagement and discussions related to the collaborative governance deliverables, including:

- MVC, design team, and grant seeker stakeholders all agreed that collaborative governance was critical and an area that the sector has not emphasized enough,
- MVC, design team, and grant seeker stakeholders agreed that starting the conversation about CGAP around collaborative governance was important and establishing a governance framework would be critical to getting the buy-in and use across key stakeholders, including GMS', vendors, and infomediaries,
- MVC and design team members liked the idea of collaborative governance composed of a general charter agreement and separate "exhibits" that detail the data, technical, and governance specifications that are needed to address collective activities,
- MVC and design team members were concerned with the time commitment and multiple areas of expertise that would be needed to design, develop, and execute a collaborative governance agreement.

We also found alignment from funders and organizations to coalesce on an initial set of data that could facilitate the work the funders and grant-seekers want, but more as a common set of data to help discover new partnerships, new cohorts, and perpetuate more connectivity across the different stakeholders in the sector. The team moved through the initial focus of the end point aspect of the grant application and moved to more value and a focus on facilitating connections between funders and organizations all while leveraging existing key stakeholders like grant management system providers and infomediaries.

It was clear, even in the limited timeframe of the proof of concept, that working from that initial common data set we pulled from the application analysis was a great starting point to start to

build something together beyond the common application concept. There was excitement and buy-in across the team to leverage what was initially scoped as the beginnings of a common data application into more of a consistent data commons model with governance and technology to support the sector. We believe that establishing a data commons model with collaborative governance would allow an initial set of data/information to flow from organizations seeking grants to funders to initiate the application process. This infrastructure is a strong starting point from which funders could build on to examine business processes and explore modifying the information they require to make grants.

The data elements identified in the initial application analysis along with some minor adjustments for this initial set of data are detailed in the **Common Data Model and Platform** findings below in this report.

Collaborative Governance Recommendations

Based on the work performed during the Proof of Concept, the CGAP team has identified a few recommendations regarding collaborative governance, including:

- Designing and developing the CGAP collaborative governance framework should be led by a core group of collaboration members that then engage with the broader collaboration to obtain feedback and revisions
- A CGAP collaborative governance layer must be inclusive and flexible to incorporate the needs, preferences, and requirements of grant funders and seekers, vendors, GMS, and infomediaries working together to achieve collective goals and address common challenges.

Common Data Model and Platform

Background

As CGAP evolved, it became clear that this is less about a Common Application and more about a Common Data Model (CDM). This model puts information about organizations, their proposals, and their activities into a common, shareable form in order to a) save organizations time and b) help them find appropriate funding sources -- and to help appropriate funding sources find them.

Proof of Concept Deliverables & Findings

One very significant finding in this process was transitioning the focus from a Common Grant to a Common Data Model - thus the MVC, design team and project all recommend changing the name of this project to **Philanthropy Data Commons (PDC)**, which we will use to describe this work moving forward.

The primary source of data is the applicants themselves. When an organization submits a proposal to a funder, PDC offers the opportunity to remember and share certain parts of that proposal for later use with other funders, or with the same funder at some future date. The information retained by PDC is well-defined and access-controlled; the retention and sharing are done with the knowledge and cooperation of the applicant. The data consists of:

1. Information about the applicant organization -- the kind of information that today tends to be repetitively re-submitted with every proposal the applicant makes.
2. Some basic information about the specific project or proposal being submitted. (optional; see below)

The PDC “Core Fields” list defines what specifically is included in this data.¹

For the organizational fields: We arrived at an initial set of organizational core fields by starting from a combined set of all proposal application fields across seven different foundations, narrowing that down to just the organization-related fields, and then keeping the fields for which an applicant organization would likely enter the same or very similar information no matter what funder or project their application was for. In a few cases, we made judgement calls based on experience from both sides of the application process.

For the proposal-related fields: We used a similar process as above, but we were much more conservative about what fields to include, because proposal data is much more sensitive than organizational data. The way an applicant presents their project to one funder may be very different from how they present it to another. Since a goal of PDC is to make successful matches more likely, we tried to identify the generic and re-usable parts of proposals, the parts that applicants would want to be seen by any plausible funder.

As of this writing (October 2021), the draft list of PDC Core Fields is:

- **Organization**
 - Name
 - Mission Statement
 - Website
 - Entity Type (i.e., Tax Status)
 - Registration Number (EIN / TIN)
 - Address
 - Phone
 - Email

¹ The Core Fields list is currently maintained in a version-controlled repository at https://github.com/OpenTechStrategies/pdc-poc-demo/blob/main/docs/CORE_FIELDS.md. It may move to a central web site for Philanthropy Data Commons resources at a later date, in which case a forwarding pointer will be left at the old location.

- DBA Name
 - Banking Information (Bank, Routing Number, Account Number & Type)
 - Legal Docs (articles of incorporation? tax status affirmation?)
 - Board Members (names and affiliations)
 - CEO (or "Org Administrative Lead"): name, title, address, bio?
 - Annual Operating Budget
 - Lobbying Activities (this might be a yes/no question)
 - Start Date ("date commenced operations")
 - Geographic Areas ("In which places does your organization work?")
 - Audited Financial Statements (last 2 years)
Alternatively: Balance Sheet + Income Statement
 - Grant Agreement Signatory
 - Fiscal Year End Date
- **Proposal**
 - Name(s) of Proposal
 - Primary Contact Name, Email, and Phone Number
 - Budget
 - Investment Start Date
 - Investment End Date
 - Project Total Budget (incl. other funders, over entire duration)
 - Type (GOS vs project-specific)
 - Fiscal Sponsorship Org Name
 - Location of Work (may imply an ED vs ER field)
 - Involves Lobbying or Electioneering? (Yes-or-No field)
 - IRB review needed?
If so, IRB approval obtained?
 - Are sub-grants being given?
If so, to whom?
 - Proposal Executive Summary / Description / Purpose

Please note that this is still an evolving list. The most up-to-date copy, along with notes, explanatory comments, and pending questions, can be found in the PDC Core Fields List.

The Role of Grants Management Systems

Data in PDC comes from integration with Grants Management Systems (GMSs). When an applicant enters their organization's information into a funder's GMS, the GMS asks the applicant if they would like to have certain parts of that information -- the core fields -- remembered for future use by this funder and potentially by other funders. If the applicant agrees, the GMSs sends that data to the PDC central platform (described later), possibly updating existing information already stored there if needed.

The GMS then saves the applicant time by using information from that same central platform. When an applicant first starts entering a new proposal, the GMS consults the PDC central data store and saves the applicant time by automatically filling in much of the form. In other words, the GMS *recognizes* the applicant, saving them the trouble of re-introducing themselves.

Example interaction with a PDC-supporting Grants Management System

The following example gives an idea of the applicant's experience in a PDC-supporting GMS. The screen below shows a typical GMS application entry form, and we'll walk through the applicant's experience entering their proposal for the first time.

The applicant starts out by typing a part of their organization's name into the GMS, beginning with, say, "b" in the name field. All known organizations with a "b" will be offered:

Apply Here

The screenshot shows a web form titled "Organization" with a dark header. Below the header, there are several input fields. The first field, "Organization Name", contains the letter "b". A dropdown menu is open below this field, listing five organizations with their phone numbers: "Mobility for the Children of India, Inc. (39-7734449)", "The Big Blue Laboratory, Inc. (90-8873718)", "The Little Blue House (67-1073556)", "Clean and Sober of Seattle, Inc. (90-8561063)", and "The National Football League, Inc. (13-1922622)". Below this are fields for "Organization Mission" (placeholder: "mission statement -- does not autofill"), "Organization Website" (placeholder: "org web site -- autofills (try typing slowly)"), "Entity Type" (dropdown menu with "501(c)(3)" selected), "Registration Number" (placeholder: "EIN -- autofills, showing org name for accuracy"), and "Organization Address" (placeholder: "(e.g. EIN / TIN)").

The applicant then types the next letter, "l" in this case. Now only the known organizations matching "bl" are shown:

Apply Here

Organization

Organization Name

- The Big Blue Laboratory, Inc. (90-8873718)
- The Little Blue House (67-1073556)

Organization Mission

Organization Website

Entity Type

Registration Number

(e.g. EIN / TIN)

Organization Address

Organization Phone

At this point, the possibilities are narrowed down sufficiently for the applicant to simply select their organization, “The Little Blue House”, from the list of choices offered. Once the applicant does so, *all the rest* of the fields fill in automatically and instantaneously -- the applicant does not have to type in them:

Apply Here

Organization	
Organization Name	<input type="text" value="The Little Blue House"/>
Organization Mission	<input type="text" value="Our mission is to support all our children by creating caring and inclusive social play environments that can naturally promote child development in all areas of learning, including literacy and numeracy."/>
Organization Website	<input type="text" value="www.thelittlebluehouse.org"/>
Entity Type	<input type="text" value="501(c)(3)"/>
Registration Number	<input type="text" value="67-1073556"/> <small>(e.g. EIN / TIN)</small>
Organization Address	<input type="text" value="800 Tom Hunter Rd; Charlotte, NC 28213"/>
Organization Phone	<input type="text" value="704-331-4345"/>
Organization Email	<input type="text" value="janet@thelittlebluehouse.org"/>
Organization DBA	<input type="text" value="alternate name -- autofills, also showing org name"/>
CEO / Administrative Lead	<input type="text" value="Michelle Birney"/>
Operating Budget	<input type="text" value="Less than \$1 Million"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> We engage in lobbying activities	
Organization Start Date	<input type="text" value="August 7, 2014"/>
Grant Agreement Signatory	<input type="text" value="Kathrine Kollar"/>
Organization Fiscal End Date	<input type="text" value="December 31"/>

The funder, via their GMS, has recognized the applicant, even though this applicant may never have applied to this particular funder before. This is possible because the GMS is consulting a database that is contributed to by many other funders' GMS's as well. Because this applicant

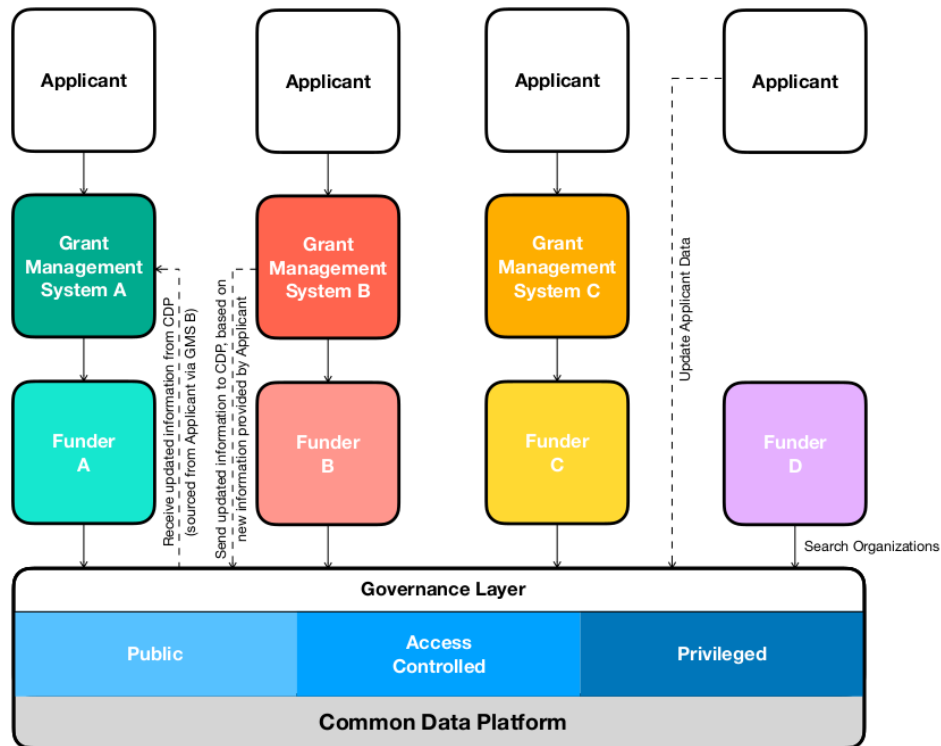
has applied to some other funder in the past, the current funder’s GMS can recognize the applicant.²

If some of the information the GMS presents is out-of-date, the applicant can simply update the relevant fields. The GMS will send the updated information back to PDC, so that the next time this same applicant encounters a PDC-enabled funder -- whether this same funder or a different one -- the application process will be even easier.

How Data Is Maintained and Updated

Behind the scenes, the GMSs are talking to the PDC *Common Data Platform (CDP)*, a central data store with an access-control (governance) layer that enables organizations to share selected information with a wide range of funders.

Common Grant Application Architecture Diagram



² Screenshots are from the CGAP/PDC proof-of-concept demo site: <https://cgap.opentechstrategies.com/poc-demo/>. All the data shown is sample data generated for the proof-of-concept demo; no information from actual organizations was used.

As the architecture sketch above shows, an applicant can also directly update the PDC data store if they choose to. They are not required to go through some funder's GMS. Applicant organizations can simply provide information to PDC whenever they want -- though strictly speaking they never need to do this, and most probably won't bother and will rely instead on the automated, behind-the-scenes process by which GMS's keep their information up-to-date.

Using APIs to Make Information Accessible to Authorized Users

An *Application Programming Interface (API)* is the means by which one computer program talks to another. For example, when GMS's fetch information from PDC or send updates to PDC, they are doing so through PDC's API.

Although PDC at this stage is still just a proof-of-concept, it already has an API, and the general form of that API is suitable for future expansion to cover new fields and types of information. In technical terms, it is a "REST"-style³ API, one of the most widely-used kinds of API and one that should provide the versatility and extensibility needed.

The API is currently documented at <https://cgap.opentechstrategies.com/poc-demo/apidoc>⁴:

³ "Representational State Transfer" -- see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Representational_state_transfer.

⁴ This location would change if the Philanthropy Data Commons gets a central home on the Internet. At that point, the page at the above URL would become a forwarding pointer to the new location.

Application Programming Interface (API)

The PoC Demo API offers programmatic access to the sample data, using a standard [REST-style](#) interface. It works like this:

The API endpoints described below are live — you can try them out in your browser, or using a command-line tool to receive the list of sample organizations (represented in [JSON](#) format) from the API in your browser, just visit:

<https://cgap.opentechstrategies.com/poc-demo/api/organizations/>

Or get the same information on the command line:

```
$ curl https://cgap.opentechstrategies.com/poc-demo/api/organizations/
```

Please note that because this is a demo, there is currently no authentication or authorization defined for the API, so that only authorized parties could access the data.

API Entities and Endpoints

- **Organization** (*entity*)

- **GET /organizations/**
Returns a list of all organizations.
- **POST /organizations/**
Creates a new organization object.
- **GET /organizations/{EIN}**
Returns a single organization.
- **POST /organizations/{EIN}**
Updates an existing organization object.

- **Proposal** (*entity*)

- **GET /proposals/**
Returns a list of all proposals.
Can optionally accept a `s` query parameter which defines a search term.
- **POST /proposals/**
Creates a new proposal object.
- **GET /proposals/{ID}**
Returns a single proposal.
- **POST /proposals/{ID}**
Updates an existing proposal object.

The proof-of-concept implementation does not include any authorization controls -- that is, it does not yet check users' identities or access rights. It is designed to be as easy as possible for people to try out, and in any case deals only with made-up sample data. Authorization controls would of course be part of any production implementation.

Technology Used and Technology Recommendations

Open Source Approach:

All the software used in the PDC proof-of-concept implementation is open source, and we *recommend that PDC development continue to be open source.*

In addition to being philosophically aligned with the public-benefit missions of the non-profits and foundations that would use PDC, open source development would enable partners to contribute technologically as they are able, and enable GMS vendors to use pieces from PDC's own implementation to speed up their integration process.

No Technological Innovation Required:

All of the functionality contemplated so far for the Philanthropy Data Commons can be built using currently-available technologies. PDC is not fundamentally about technological innovation nor about using the latest artificial intelligence or machine learning techniques. It is about opening up new possibilities to organizations seeking grants and those making grants, by organizing data and making that data available in the right places at the right times.

Innovative research involving the data is certainly possible, using the APIs as described above, and we encourage that. However, the core PDC functionality lies squarely within the domains of widely-used, proven technologies (databases, search engines, data exchange formats such as JSON, etc), and our recommendation is to keep it that way, so that PDC is as welcoming as possible to technical collaborators of all kinds.

Technologies Used:

The specific technologies used in the proof-of-concept are listed below, with recommended production replacements noted as needed:

- Implementation languages: **Python 3, Javascript**
- Framework: **Flask**
- Front-end: **Vue.js**
- Web server: **Nginx**
- Database: **SQLite** (*production recommendation: PostgreSQL*)


The PDC Proof-of-Concept Demo source code and sample data are maintained at <https://github.com/opentechstrategies/pdc-poc-demo>, and the live demo site is available at <https://cgap.opentechstrategies.com/poc-demo/>.

CONCLUSIONS

The project team worked effectively across the different, but connected, workstreams with the goal to refine the feasibility and value of a common grant application for philanthropy. In this process and collaboration, it became increasingly clear to everyone involved that certain aspects of the effort resonated more than others. The diversity of needs of the funders and those of organizations seeking grants along with the reality and complexity around coming together around a wide variety of funding opportunities and goals really didn't lend itself to a more rigid standardization or simple re-use of nuanced application information. Elements and aspects of what might be often included into the idea of what the common grant application goal could be did resonate with the teams.

In the Proof of Concept effort and sessions with the design team from the MVC organizations, and in the nonprofit discussions, building something that could provide and facilitate more awareness and visibility under a consistent, safe, and supportive environment did gain a lot of traction. Trying to align around a common application format evolved more into providing shared value in driving neutral common data standards and discovery across the sector to foster new connections with funders and organizations seeking grants.

The Proof of Concept addresses the following against the original goals...

	Focus Areas	Funders	Grant-Seekers
 'CGAP' Project Goals	Operating Capacity	Improve without significant changes to existing processes ✓	Less time on applications; more time for mission ✓
	Reduce Admin Work	Related to awarding grants and costs associated with that ✓	Related to applying for multiple grants across multiple platforms ✓
	Streamline Information Collection	Ease non-differentiating info collection to higher-value work ✓	Standardize and ability to re-use application data ✓
	Increase Opportunities	Ability to scan more grant-seeker organizations for need ✓	Exposure to different funders and possibilities ✓
	Data Ownership and Security	More trust with shared norms and governance ✓	Retain control on how their data is used ✓
	Collaboration and Sharing	Connect with other funders on partnerships, sequence funding ✓	Foster more with ongoing relationships and shared norms ✓

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RECOMMENDATIONS ON NEXT STEPS

We did find merit and value in continuing this work and recommend the MVC build on the findings and conclusions here in a few significant ways. The project team has created a short list of key next steps we recommend for the work to continue into the immediate and longer term future based on what we think will be critical investments in the road ahead.

Branding and Identity Refresh

The CGAP has evolved into more of a focus on common data for the philanthropic sector. At the conclusion of the proof of concept work with the team, it became clear explaining the initiative as just the common grant application for philanthropy was no longer accurate. Moving forward with the larger sector and the various stakeholders will really require clarity and an updated sense of purpose around the evolution of the common grant concept. As the initiative moves forward to seek more sector buy-in and investment, having an updated take on and new starting point around this work is critical to support the other next steps and continuing momentum. As discussed earlier, we recommend rebranding to Philanthropic Data Commons.

Solidify Sponsorship and Representation

Starting this investigative and exploratory work with a limited but motivated cohort of funders and organizations seeking grants was deliberate and helpful to quickly move through viability and directional discussions and decisions for the common grant application efforts. But, moving forward, it will be key to pull in some additional stakeholders as co-owners of the work and supporters of the overall positioning of this investment for the sector as a whole along with representation across the different types of organizations that need to be involved to have this be a success. Showing that we have multiple vendors around the grants management systems on-board along with engaged infomediaries invested in the overall betterment of the sector partnering with a more diverse set of new funders and grant-seekers around all this will be very helpful in reiterating this is something larger than a single vendor or single funder initiative.

Sharpen Focus on Data Commons Positioning and Sector Value

Related to the rebranding and identity shift along with building off the recommended efforts on recruitment of more organizations seeking grants, more funders, key infomediaries, and grant management system providers, the need to improve clarity and purpose will be vital. The effort here will take time and hopefully will be able to show value across the sector to not only those organizations that are actively involved, but others that co-exist but may not be active contributors.

The project team does feel that if we can include some additional stakeholders from the different areas in the sector that provide collective services, we can improve the types of needs and data this cohort can work with because of our status as neutral peer partners and not as vendors trying to extract value from the work.

Iterate and Advance the Technology and Governance

The project team working through the proof of concept understood the value of the technology platform along with the collaborative governance methodology to be able to differentiate this effort around the work from past iterations. As the partnerships grow, as the use cases expand, as the input and stakeholders actively involved widens, it's going to be absolutely necessary to make sure the technology platform needs and governance model considerations expand along with the commons.

Technology and governance should not be the leading aspect of the work, but should not be too far behind what will be beneficial and increase the value of the work for the sector. Part of the proof of concept deliverables was not to close all the threads of development completely. The team wanted to lay the groundwork specifically around the technology and governance so, as the support expanded, so could the supporting frameworks. There is no doubt, after some continuing awareness and partnerships, more investment in a technology pilot platform build and a more formal draft of the governance document will be needed to show progress.

Retain Independent Team To Continue Progress

Lastly on the short list of recommended next steps, the project team feels the need to keep the team together as much as possible for some longer term work around the overall cohort work. Over the last many months, the independent team put together by the MacArthur Foundation to get to something around a Proof of Concept helped move this overall effort along with a group of funders, and nonprofits to get to something that is viable and compelling to continue to advance. If possible, keeping those team members on and perhaps formalizing a longer term roadmap to invest in more collaboration and deliver for the effort and sector with a growing list of stakeholders will foster continuity and traction.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON NEXT STEPS (CHART)

Area	Focus	Short Term Recommendations	Long Term Recommendations
Branding and Identity Refresh for the initiative	The collaborative work and effort over the last year as really become something more than CGAP - it's the Philanthropic Data Commons	Socialize this with the sector, obtain feedback on the work and how we got here. Website presence and public-facing information of initial scope needed	Establish a refined identity and visual brand that corresponds to the sector asset this will move into
Solidify Sponsorship and Representation	Extend the awareness into the larger sector now that we have something less raw to build on together	Recruit at least 2 infomediaries, 2 grant management system providers, and more key organizations and funders that are invested in this work to role model the sector solving for the sector	Establish norms on the manner new organizations and stakeholders can participate and help expand this work with governance and membership to show this will be an enduring positive presence for philanthropy
Sharpen Focus on Data Commons Positioning and Sector Value	Building on brand identity refresh and more partnership, iterate value together	After establishment of vendor-agnostic and sector-focused roots, perform iteration of initial data and tech	Establish collective roadmap and strategic planning around where the work will go so the sector stakeholders can connect and invest
Iterate and Advance the Technology and Governance	As partnership and buy-in grows, follow it with tech and governance investments	With additional sector stakeholders on board, build a pilot that can show the cycle around the happy path on the work. Also, work with a small group to develop the charter agreement that establishes the framework for future collaboration activities	Establish funding and support model along with known reliable cadence on releases and features, updates, etc. on the technology platform and revise and promote regular governance updates
Retain Independent Team To Continue Progress	Leverage the assembled team that facilitated the proof of concept push to help continue the efforts into the next phases	Secure the existing team members brought together with longer term agreements to assure the work will continue without regression through the next few phases (6-10 month cycles)	Establish a more formal organizational structure to solidify an enduring presence and stability for the collective work (501c3 or fiscally sponsored project) with the focus of maintaining the goals of the initiative

APPENDIX

Potential additional functionality (not included in primary report since infomediaries also focus on this work)

Helping Funders to Find New Organizations and Projects

Because the CDP contains information about applicants and their proposals, it provides an opportunity for funders to look for organizations they may not already know about. Funders can search based on organizations' *activities*, not just on names, self-descriptions, and some keywords.

That sort of search is what the rightmost box ("Funder D") shows in the architecture diagram above. Instead of taking place in a GMS, it takes place in a search portal, either one provided by the Common Data Platform itself, as shown in the example below, or one offered by a partner organization that uses the CDP API (see the section "*Using APIs to Make Information Accessible to Authorized Users*" below).

Example of a funder searching in the Common Data Platform

Suppose the funder is interested in finding organizations that are active in disaster preparedness or disaster recovery -- organizations that may have applied to other funders but not yet to this funder. The funder might type "disaster" into the PDC search portal and see these results:

The screenshot shows a search interface with the following content:

- Search Organizations** (header)
-
- Results:**
 - aWash** ([View](#))
15-2239004
347 Pike St #200 Seattle, WA 98101
Proposals
The aWash Project, \$340,000 ([view](#))
Matched on: [Proposal](#)
 - Sierra Disaster Corps** ([View](#))
24-9844145
2440 Tulare St, Fresno, CA 93721
Proposals
Automated Rescue Services, \$30,000 ([view](#))
Matched on: [Org Name](#) [Website](#) [Proposal](#)

Notice how the organization named “aWash” does not have the word “disaster” anywhere in its name nor in its organizational description. However, it has applied to some other funder with a proposal that matches that search term (hence the “Matched on: proposal” indicator at the end of the top result shown above) and therefore that organization comes up in this search.

Again, this is a constructed example -- a real search would generally involve a more sophisticated set of constraints. The point is that the data in PDC enables funders to find organizations active in areas (topical, geographic, etc) that those funders care about. They could be organizations that a given funder doesn't already know about, or just ones that the funder may not have thought of until reminded by search results.