

## 7.3 The Robina Foundation

- **Year of founding:** 2004
- **Location:** Minneapolis, United States
- **Year it became a limited-life foundation:** 2004
- **Closure Date:** 2020
- **Number of staff:** Two part-time

### Foundation history and guiding principles

James H. Binger was the CEO of Honeywell Corporation, a private investor, philanthropist, and community activist. In 2004, when he was 88 years old, Mr. Binger established the Robina Foundation as a time-limited entity and endowed it with approximately \$150 million to be spent down in the course of no more than 20 years. To oversee the allocation of these grants, Mr. Binger appointed a board of trustees which he deemed to possess “inquiring and critical minds and respect for unconventional ideas and notions of futurism.”

Before passing away, Mr. Binger studied the work of successful foundations in order to craft Robina’s bylaws, which describe not only his philanthropic vision for the foundation, but also the qualities board members should possess. Mr. Binger conveyed his philanthropic vision to the board of trustees and four beneficiary institutions to which he wanted to give back for positively impacting his life. He had studied at Yale University and the University of Minnesota Law School, and he was an active member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Mr. Binger and his wife had also received treatment at the Abbott Northwestern Hospital. Thus his wish was for his foundation to support these four organizations. For each of the four quite different designated grantees, Robina Foundation bylaws include broad guidelines describing the kinds of grants Binger felt would fulfil his vision for the foundation. He also stressed that the board should encourage innovation and creativity, and support forward-thinking, major projects and initiatives.

### Focusing efforts to achieve greater impact

Following this vision, the trustees engaged directly with the four institutions, encouraging them to generate proposals for large-scale, original projects for funding from the foundation. The foundation did not have experts in all of the areas it supported but designated one trustee to be a liaison with each grantee institution. In addition, board members collectively were involved with each grantee and used external consultants to provide expert, in-depth analysis when needed.

Kathleen Blatz, chair of the Robina Foundation Board, explains, “If you have a small board that is active, you get to know your grantees. We visited them a lot over the years. We were actively involved, even with a small staff, and came to intimately know the facets of each proposal before making a decision concerning funding.”



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KATHLEEN BLATZ, CHAIR,  
THE ROBINA FOUNDATION BOARD  
(Pictured above)

It was not always easy, however, to motivate grantees to come up with innovative proposals. Large institutions, such as the ones funded by Robina, are accustomed to mainstream ways of dealing with philanthropists. Ms. Blatz says, “I think that big institutions are used to complying with complex bureaucratic rules to apply for funding. When you say that you want something innovative, they can feel like a fish out of water. Grantees are used to presenting one idea to different potential funders, but we were looking for something different. In the end, it was a learning process for them and for us.”

Nonetheless, the Robina Foundation funded a number of successful projects across these institutions. For example, it supported the Abbott Northwestern Hospital in developing a new care model for patients suffering from Alzheimer’s disease, cancer, heart failure, and chronic illnesses. To expand the creation and production of new plays, the foundation provided funding for the launch of the Binger Center for New Theatre at Yale School of Drama, which commissions and fosters the development of new plays. To date, Binger Center commissions have supported the creation of 50 plays, 10 of which have had multiple productions in American theaters, including on Broadway. The University of Minnesota Law School received funding to develop the Binger Center for New Americans, which addresses the social and legal needs of immigrants. As Ms. Blatz proudly notes, “With the active involvement of law students, the Binger Center helped successfully litigate a case before the US Supreme Court that clarified the circumstances under which an immigrant may be deported for a drug conviction.” Finally, the Council on Foreign Relations was awarded a grant to launch the International Institutions and Global Governance Program, which, among other things, brings international think tanks and policy organizations together to tackle global challenges.

## Challenges and lessons learned

The Robina Foundation’s directive to allocate a series of relatively large grants over a limited time period, with a small staff and board, was challenging. While grantees appreciated that the foundation imposed few bureaucratic demands, several grantee representatives expressed disappointment that some proposals requiring extensive time and effort to develop did not receive funding.

“The criticism you might hear is that we did not have specialists in our staff, so we did not fund a project because we did not have expertise in that particular area,” says Ms. Blatz. “However, our way of working goes against traditional models: big foundations, big staff, people who compartmentalize, specialize, etc. Doing that takes a lot of resources, and we were not trying to be that kind of foundation. Instead, we purposely were a hands-on board with a limited staff that drew on the expertise of consultants when appropriate.”

As a result, the Robina experience could prove valuable to donors who wish to create notable impact with small-to-medium-size endowments and staff.

As Ms. Blatz points out, “Many families do not have enough resources to put into a classic foundation. In my opinion, the Robina Foundation model could be used for a \$10 million fund. You could make the argument that it might make more sense for smaller foundations, with small staffs and boards, to be time-limited. You can punch above your weight, concentrating your resources on a limited number of beneficiaries and areas, with much more impact and influence than if you scattershot it.” ■

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