

Our Approach to Evaluation

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Evaluating Programs vs. Evaluating Community Change

Evaluation has its origins in social science research and its initial applications were directly shaped by the experimental paradigm. It was designed to measure the impact of social programs (“interventions”) with clearly specified target populations, timelines and outcomes. The largest body of program evaluation work has been conducted in education, but it has also become standard practice in a variety of fields, from child welfare to public health to job training and placement.

But when evaluation has been taken outside the “box” of specific programs and applied to complex social change efforts in actual community settings, the results have been decidedly mixed. Random assignment of subjects to treatments and other features of classical experimental design are simply not feasible. Appropriate control groups are very difficult to identify in most cases. The context is constantly changing and multiple, unconnected interventions are frequently occurring simultaneously in the same community, making it virtually impossible to clearly attribute observed outcomes to any one program or initiative. In reviewing the past ten years of experience of trying to evaluate Comprehensive Community Initiatives, the Aspen Institute recently concluded that while we’ve learned a good deal about what doesn’t work, we’ve learned much less about what does or why.

Evaluation is an inexact science (if it is a science at all). No matter how much is spent, the results are rarely, if ever, definitive or unambiguous. This is particularly true when the evaluation effort focuses solely on the measurement of outcomes rather than devoting commensurate effort to understanding implementation (i.e. the dynamics of the change process).

Our way of doing grantmaking has been influenced by the mixed results of prior large scale community initiatives. Rather than imposing a “theory of change” or specific program model on our grantees, we have chosen a non-categorical approach that focuses on families rather than issues (e.g. health, education, foster care). Rather than issuing RFPs, we have devoted substantial effort to identifying cornerstone organizations in our regions that have a reputation for working effectively with a substantial base of families. In some cases, their core business is organizing. In others, they are operating programs and delivering services. Some are already engaged in evaluation activities to assess the impact of those programs.

But we’re not focused on programs. Our goal is to connect these organizations and their constituents in order to support movement building. That’s why our approach to evaluation is different than more conventional program-focused evaluations. Rather than concentrating our efforts on tracking the outcomes of individual grantees, we’re looking across our grantees to assess their progress toward movement building. While we will be assessing the accomplishments of individual grantees, we are most interested in what they are accomplishing in the aggregate.

We believe that the best way to do this is to emphasize the dual goals of learning and accountability. We are very focused on the outcome of movement building, but we think we are most likely to get there if we use our evaluation activities to continuously refine and improve the work of the Foundation and its grantees. Evaluation should help us and our grantees answer the question “are we being effective?”

How will we do that?

We have initiated the following evaluation activities:

Individual Grants

- As each grant concludes, a closeout report will be prepared that analyzes its success in meeting its objectives and synthesizes lessons learned. A summary of each closeout report will be reported to the Board.
- Independent evaluations will be commissioned for selected large individual grants. Three are currently taking place: evaluative chronicles of the systems reform efforts being undertaken by the Massachusetts Department of Social Services and the California Child Welfare Services Redesign; and an outcomes analysis of the ACORN EITC Campaign.
- Other individual grant evaluations will be commissioned as needed going forward.

Clusters of Grants

- 32 of our grantees are engaged in four Learning Clusters, each of which is being facilitated by a different evaluation team. The purpose of the clusters is two-fold: to give us insights into the accomplishments and challenges of our grantees; and to stimulate cross-institutional learning and network formation. This eighteen-month process should also yield insights into the dynamics of movement building on a small scale. More Learning Clusters will be formed going forward.
- We have commissioned an independent analysis of a cluster of four national community organizing networks (PICO, ACORN, Gamaliel and the Center for Community Change) to assess their strategies and accomplishments and to better understand how they function as networks.
- As grants are completed, we will be developing in-house cluster analyses of groups of similar grants to identify lessons to inform our future grantmaking.
- We have funded the Women’s Funding Network to develop a Social Change Measurement Tool appropriate for organizations with little evaluation experience. The Tool has been field-tested with ten of our grantees, and there is the potential for an emerging learning cluster among similar grantees to develop their skills in self evaluation.

Cross-cutting Metrics

- Most of our grantees have completed a self assessment of organizational capacity adapted for our use by Blueprint Research & Design. This data will help us assess the effectiveness of core support in enhancing the capacity of our grantees over time.
- We plan to make a grant to OMG Center for Collaborative Learning to measure the social networks of our grantees. Since connecting a network of networks is central to our movement building strategy, this data will concretely track how that develops as we move forward.
- We plan to make a grant to the Innovation Network to measure mobilization among families reached by a sample of our grantees. Since movement building hinges on families believing they can make a difference and taking action, this data will help us quantify and identify patterns in their civic participation on an annual basis.
- We are exploring the possibility of a fourth metric to assess collective capacity. That will include activities critical to movement building that might be shared across groups of grantees (e.g. strategic communications; technology; action research).

Performance of the Foundation

- We have commissioned an ongoing chronicle of the Foundation which will provide us with feedback on our evolution and effectiveness based on direct observations, interviews with staff and Board, grantees, and peers in the field.
- We will undertake regular surveys of our grantees, peers in the field and other relevant audiences in order to assess how the Foundation is perceived and to receive advice.

What will we know at the end of the day?

Given the complexities of assessing social change efforts, plus our decision to limit our spending on evaluation to no more than 5% of our grants budget, we will not be able to answer every question we might like to pose. At this stage of our work, we are focusing on the goal of movement building rather than specific policy outcomes, let alone outcomes for individual families. So, our first phase of evaluation work is concentrating on describing the work of our grantees and their progress toward movement building (see attached diagram). Along the way, we will likely be funding time-limited campaigns with specific short-term outcomes such as the recent ACORN project to help eligible families claim the Earned Income Tax Credit. In those cases, we can report in fairly short order on quantifiable outcomes at the family level.

We will be seeking to answer the following questions:

- 1. What's being accomplished by our individual grantees?**

Sources of data: closeout reports; Learning Clusters; Chronicles and other commissioned evaluations of large individual grants.

2. What are our grantees accomplishing in the aggregate?

Sources of data: cross-cutting metric on mobilization; Learning Clusters; Cluster Analysis of organizing networks; other cluster analyses.

3. How is the capacity and connectivity of our grantees evolving?

Sources of data: cross cutting metrics on organizational capacity, networks, and collective capacity.

4. What themes are emerging that will help us better nurture movement building?

Sources of data: Chronicle of the Foundation; Learning Cluster reports; cross-cutting metrics; cluster analyses.

5. How is the Foundation perceived? How might it improve the ways in which it does business?

Sources of data: Chronicle of the Foundation; Surveys of grantees, peers, Board and staff; Evaluations of Foundation-sponsored events.

Movement building is a complicated multi-year undertaking. We don't know exactly what a 21st century movement of low-income families will look like. We suspect, however, that it will look different than movements of the past. There are no quick and easy answers to the evaluation questions we are asking. Nor will the outcomes roll out sequentially in a linear fashion. We have employed a variety of methods to try and capture the essence of this unfolding story as best we can given the resources available for evaluation. It will take patience and commitment to ongoing dialogue and learning to "weave" together the different strands of information to guide our actions and those of our grantees. Our evaluation methods will also change as our grantmaking strategy becomes more refined. But that very process of continuous reflection and improvement is quite consonant with our overall aim of nurturing movement building.