

Strategies for Effective Evaluation: An Update

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The Marguerite Casey Foundation seeks to build a learning community among our grantees, and we see evaluation as an important means to that end. We understand that many organizations engaged in social change work have mixed feelings about evaluation. In some instances it has been an exercise in filling out forms that has used precious time and resources and not yielded commensurate benefits. We understand that concern, and that's why **the first test we apply to any evaluation activity is that it must be useful to both the grantee and the Foundation.** In our view, the reason to invest precious resources in evaluation is to improve practice and strengthen the organizations we fund.

We also believe evaluation is essential to movement building. Our grantees are engaged in an exceedingly complex undertaking to mobilize low-income families and to connect them across regions. The Foundation doesn't pretend to have the answer to how that might best be done. But collectively, if we make a commitment to learn from one another over time, we will discover the approaches and strategies that work. We see evaluation as a tool to stimulate critical self-reflection and the sharing of lessons learned.

Evaluation is also important for the sustainability of our grantees. To recruit and retain new constituents and staff and to attract new sources of funding, organizations need to be adept at telling the story of their work and the difference it has made in the world. An important part of that process is being able to critically evaluate one's own work by capturing and sharing the insights of front-line practitioners and community members. Our success will depend on our connectedness, just as within the Foundation we see evaluation and learning as integrally connected to our grantmaking and communications efforts.

It's important to note the grantmaking context in which we are developing our evaluation activities. We have chosen to not undertake initiatives or defined grantmaking programs or social experiments with specific, common objectives that might easily lend themselves to more traditional forms of evaluation. Our grantees are engaged in a wide variety of activities to support low-income families including living wage campaigns, environmental justice work, school reform efforts and health care access. Others are providing direct services to families in need. We are providing core operating support for their work in the vast majority of cases.

We have also pledged to meet our grantees "where they are." That is more than just a philosophical statement. It has multiple implications for the ways in which we engage them in the process of evaluating their work. We have begun by surveying them about their prior and current experience with evaluation. That data revealed that many of them are already involved in a variety of evaluation activities. The survey also indicated that there is a wide range of internal capacity among our grantees in their ability to engage in

self evaluation. It is a complicated picture that deserves better than the typical “one size fits all” response. Therefore, we are pursuing a phased, multi-strategy approach to evaluation. We will be engaging in evaluation work at four levels: individual grants; clusters of grantees; cross-cutting metrics; and the performance of the Foundation itself. What follows is a brief report on our efforts in each of these domains to date:

Individual Grants

Over the next year, much of our grantmaking is going to be exploratory in nature. We are getting to know our regions and to identify the “cornerstone” organizations in those communities most of interest to us. The “front line” of evaluation is exacting **due diligence**. The most important part of the Program Officer’s job is to thoroughly check out each organization that is a candidate for funding. We’re not looking merely for skilled proposal writers. We’re seeking to support organizations that are grounded in their communities and have a track record of integrity and results.

Once a funding decision has been made, each grant will be monitored to assess whether the grantee delivered the work they had promised and to determine if they are good candidates for future funding. Those ultimate judgments will be recorded in detailed **closeout reports**, and summaries of those assessments will be reported to the board. As we accumulate a body of closeout reports, we will also be able to make some larger thematic observations about lessons learned based on our experience with groups of grants.

We will also commission independent qualitative **chronicles** of large individual grants to help capture the richness of complicated, multi-year change efforts on an annual basis. For example, Joanne Edgar is chronicling the systems reform efforts of the Department of Social Services in Massachusetts and Julia Pennbridge of the National Health Foundation is developing a similar chronicle of the Child Welfare System Redesign effort in California.

Other large single grants may warrant their own evaluation. We recently made a grant to Georgia State University to conduct an evaluation of ACORN’s three-city Accelerated Income Redistribution Campaign, in collaboration with investigators from the University of Connecticut and Springfield College.

Clusters of Grantees

We will be commissioning a series of cluster analyses of groups of grantees to help us gain additional insight into the common dynamics (and differences) that can be observed among seemingly “like” organizations. The thrust of the first phase of this work will be in-depth qualitative observation and synthesis of lessons learned. It will also give us additional insight into the internal capacity of our grantees and challenges they face in trying to execute their mission in an effective fashion. These analyses should provide rich data on the larger scale impact of our grantees that will help inform the next generation of our grantmaking.

We recently invited a number of our current grantees to participate in **Learning Clusters** with their peers. Based on their response, we have contracted with four different evaluation teams (BTW Consultants; Community Systems Group; Imoyase Community Support Services; and OMG Center for Collaborative Learning) to manage and facilitate

the development of clusters of 7-8 grantee organizations over the next eighteen months. The purpose is to connect the grantees for mutual learning and to help the Foundation gain insight into the challenges our grantees are facing as well as strategies for network development and movement building. We are also planning to commission some other cluster analyses of grantees to see what can be learned by comparing and contrasting their approaches to the same work, e.g. community organizing.

Simultaneously, we will likely fund some basic **skill development** in evaluation for grantee organizations that wish to enhance their ability to assess their own work. One example is a recent grant to the Women's Funding Network, which is developing a simple, yet innovative Social Change Measurement Tool for its partner organizations' grantees to assess their effectiveness in transforming their communities. We have offered the opportunity to a number of our grantees to work with them as "beta" test sites to see how their instrument might be useful in helping them evaluate their own work.

Cross-Cutting Metrics

We are underwriting the development and testing of **metrics** to assess their appropriateness for evaluation in order to look across the work of all of our grantees. The first example is a grant to Blueprint Research & Design to test a comprehensive self-assessment of organizational capacity with our grantees. After extensive modifications based on feedback received from several pilot sites, the revised tool has now been circulated to all of our grantees. We plan to track the evolving organizational capacity of our grantees in the aggregate on an annual basis.

We are also in conversation with investigators about the use of measures of social networks, civic participation, social capital and collective self efficacy as potential proxy indicators of movement building that might cut across specific issue areas. We are also investigating meaningful ways to capture and quantify the work our disparate grantees are doing with families, beyond simply counting the number of families their work touches each year.

Performance of the Foundation

We believe it is also essential to step back from the details of our grantmaking to assess the overall performance of the Foundation itself, and to publicly share the results of that self scrutiny. We have commissioned Fern Tiger to develop a running evaluative **chronicle** of the Foundation, to track how our strategies are evolving over time and to collect and synthesize data on how our work is perceived via interviews with our Board, grantees and other knowledgeable individuals in the field.

We have made a grant to the California Budget Project to help us develop a prototype "**dashboard**" to provide an annual report on a state-by-state basis of not only key demographic and policy trends, but also a report on our cumulative grantmaking in each state. We will begin with general statistics on the number of grants, amount of dollars and type of organizations funded, along with qualitative vignettes of accomplishments and challenges during the year. As our set of relevant metrics is refined, we will build those in to the dashboard for an even more detailed annual snapshot of the impact of our funding.

We are also planning to conduct periodic **customer surveys** with our grantees and unsuccessful applicants. The first survey is planned for the Spring of 2004. We will also regularly survey our Board and Staff to stimulate internal reflection on our performance as an organization. Over time, we will seek to integrate these various sources of information and reports from our various other evaluation activities into a coherent framework (akin to what some other foundations have done with the balanced scorecard) to permit an informed overview of all our activities.

Other evaluation-related activities

In addition to the work described above, we plan to capitalize on what our grantees are already doing in the realm of evaluation. More than half of our grantees have reported that they are already working with an evaluator from outside their organization. If another funder is already underwriting some extensive evaluation work with some of our grantees, it makes sense to first take a close look at the project and see if it doesn't meet our needs as well.

Most grantee organizations are stretched to the limit. Simply adding new evaluation requirements on top of what they are already being required to do by other funders will likely be perceived as more foundation "business as usual" (and not true to our philosophy). Of course, not all ongoing evaluation activities may be useful from our perspective. But we need to take the time to investigate them carefully before making quick judgments about what is most appropriate in a "one size fits all" manner.

Many funders of social change organizations are concerned about how best to evaluate their impact. We have the potential for a number of productive partnerships to pursue this work together. Since we are often funding the same organizations, we owe it to our grantees to engage in that dialogue. We are actively engaging other funders in conversation to see what they are doing in the realm of evaluation in order to identify other, similar opportunities for joint effort.

Postscript

While this strategy is not simple or linear, we believe that, with appropriate patience, it will pay off. Not only will we be able to achieve a clear, in-depth picture of what our grantees are accomplishing, but we will have achieved that goal in a way that is respectful, minimally intrusive, and maximally supportive of our grantees. Wherever possible, we will seek to build our grantees' capacity to conduct their own evaluation of their work. We also plan to introduce them to innovative ways of measuring and reporting their progress that will be of mutual benefit. Guiding all our efforts in evaluation will be our desire to maximize learning by both ourselves and our grantees.