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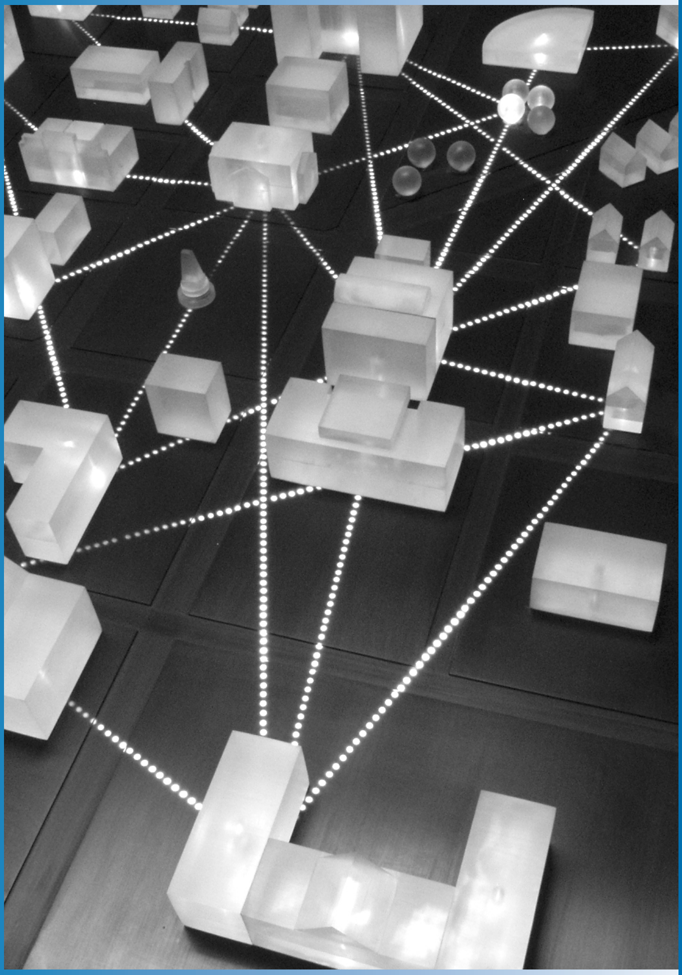

CHAPIN HALL
DISCUSSION PAPER

# Learning for Community Change: *Core Components of Foundations that Learn*

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**Learning for Community Change:**
***Core Components of Foundations that Learn***

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# Contents

# Executive Summary

There is a growing sense in the philanthropic field that knowledge, strategically applied, is as important to community-change efforts as money. If this is true, then foundation leaders must re-imagine and reconstruct the role of learning and give it a central place in their organizations' missions, goals, strategies, internal structures, and external partnerships. In short, foundations must become learning institutions.

During 2004-05, a Chapin Hall team interviewed approximately 35 funders, foundation board members, experts, and researchers prominent in the community-change field about the challenges and opportunities for learning. This paper distills, organizes, and reports our respondents' reflections, descriptions, and practices with regard to learning for community change. The paper identifies and explores seven core components of learning foundations:

## A Clear and Concrete Value Proposition

Learning that improves knowledge and practice doesn't happen by accident; it stems from a clear and concrete value proposition. Steps in developing a value proposition include:

- **Establishing a clear understanding of *learning*.** A foundation's board and staff have to clarify what learning means to them and how they will obtain the full value of learning. Funders view learning in different ways, however. Some equate it with evaluation or link it primarily to university-based research; some believe it includes tacit knowledge from a variety of sources; some link it to "knowledge management" or "organizational learning" initiatives; and some believe it encompasses a range of approaches and content that one internalizes and uses to make better decisions.

- **Making learning a core philanthropic objective.** Funders who make learning an explicit objective view it as a way to expand their impact beyond grant making and as part of a broader re-imagining of foundations' resources. They view a foundation's intellectual capital as an institutional asset on par with financial capital. For them, learning is a way to assess and improve strategies and, potentially, to increase the impact and sustainability of foundation-funded community change.

- **Shaping a learning agenda.** Learning goes hand in hand with the goals a foundation wants to achieve; it can focus activities to achieve those goals and track their effect. When funders think systematically about the kinds of learning that occur in their foundations, they are better able to identify sources of learning, the connections among various learnings, knowledge gaps, and the steps required to fill them.

- **Connecting individual foundation learning to field learning.** Our respondents emphasized that funders need to be more explicit about the relationship between their own learning agendas and programmatic activities and those of other foundations. By making those links, they hope to expand the range and depth of everyone's achievement.

## An Internal Structure Aligned to Learn

The philanthropic field is still experimenting with an evolving array of learning tools and approaches. Some of the foundations in our sample turned to the literature concerning learning organizations and knowledge management for ideas, while others derived an approach organically from previous practices. In either case, major activities include the following:

- **Crafting a learning-oriented organizational structure.** Foundation leaders often begin by establishing learning as a specific line item in their institutional budgets. Some concentrate on learning from a single initiative, while others create new structures, functions, and methods of interacting to infuse learning throughout the organization. Some foundations have created knowledge management departments; others establish internal networks, redesign job expectations, examine the incentives for learning embedded in personnel policies, and/or promote collaboration to spread the responsibility for learning among program staff.

- **Developing processes and incentives to promote internal learning.** Some foundations are developing internal webs of learning to generate rich content and explicit lessons and to foster peer sharing of knowledge. Because the "siloed" nature of funding programs poses a challenge, so some foundations have begun conversations across program areas. Others have turned to the business and management world's communities-of-practice literature for insights about connecting knowledge and learning.

- **Making tools and technology work for learners.** Foundations are developing and using tools to help staff broaden and sharpen their thinking about goals and strategy. These include the development of theories of change or logic models and processes like the "denominator exercise" developed by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Urban Health Initiative to establish targets for scale and identify resource needs.

## Leadership for Learning

Leaders can enable or compromise a foundation's capacity to learn. Key elements of leadership for learning include:

- **Executive leadership that promotes learning and change.** Such leaders are able to cajole, excite, engage, mobilize, and (when necessary) command changes; translate learning into institutional practice; and embed learning in the institution's culture. They value candor and openness. They support smart risk taking and innovation, and they do not penalize staff for honest mistakes. They have strong collaborative and political leadership skills, and they use them.

- **A board that values and engages in learning.** Increasingly, executives of learning foundations are giving their board members targeted information, helping them reach a deeper level of thinking and engagement, rethinking the board's relationship to staff, and encouraging new board roles to deepen members' understanding of the foundation's work.

- **Staff who buy into the learning process.** A learning foundation needs program officers who can encourage learning within the foundation and outside it. Our respondents agree that the best ways to achieve buy-in are to make learning directly relevant to staff members' jobs, involve staff in designing learning tools, and give them guidance on how to incorporate new knowledge into their work.

## A Learning Partnership Between Grantees and Communities

Despite the challenges, a learning partnership can give both funders and grantees more intimate, realistic, and timely knowledge about community progress and problems. Strategies include:

- **Creating the conditions for grantee and funder learning.** A solid funder/grantee learning relationship is characterized by clear and realistic expectations; partner buy-in; adequate time, space, staffing, and facilitation; trust; a shared knowledge base; group accountability for learning; and the ability to recognize changing knowledge needs and respond with flexibility and creativity.

- **Fostering foundation and grantee capacity for learning.** Tools and processes for building capacity include: grants and support for technical assistance; exposure to knowledge through learning scholarships, fellowships, site visits, site exchanges, leadership programs, and convenings; flexible learning funds to encourage buy-in, increase capacity, and motivate learning innovations; and assistance with information collection, such as part-time documenters, data gathering and tracking mechanisms, and listservs.

- **Developing peer learning partnerships.** Leaders of learning foundations have fostered learning partnerships through study circles, action research, and communities of practice. Respondents emphasize the importance of ongoing processes that enable peers to address a specific shared problem, apply a solution at home, report back to peers on the result, and then address another problem.

## A Learning Partnership Among Foundation Peers

The most fully developed learning partnerships entail sustained engagement to exchange insights and lessons, generate and explore new knowledge, articulate new questions, and develop learning agendas. Such partnerships involve a commitment to candor, risk taking, and time. Strategies include:

- **Forming partnerships and networks for learning.** Staff of foundations committed to community change have established many one-on-one learning partnerships with colleagues who help them flesh out the details of strategies. The field is small, so staff tend to know their counterparts at other organizations.

- **Learning through collaboration.** Collaborations come in many forms--strategic alignments, funding pools, joint ventures, and hybrid networks. They exist for many purposes: to address substantive or geographic concerns, advocate policy changes, respond to a crisis, or address an emerging problem. The overarching objective usually is to give funders a greater impact on a problem or issue by aggregating money and visibility.

## A Commitment to Share with the Broader Field

Foundations that learn often share what they learn; their leaders see the organization as a contributing member of a broader field of inquiry. Elements of knowledge sharing include:

- **Committing to "publicness."** A willingness to share knowledge raises the standard for philanthropic practice because it subjects foundation activities to more discussion and review. For that same reason, however, it can pose a challenge. Some foundation leaders have a narrow sense of independence and do not consider themselves part of a broader field with reciprocal obligations. Some may not recognize knowledge as an asset and, therefore, part of the potential value added to community change by the foundation. And few want to be exposed or embarrassed by public criticism.

- **Being smart about sharing.** Foundations need to think carefully about what, why, how, when, with whom, and in what form they share what they know. In particular, our respondents suggested they need to: have a clear sense of what their sharing is supposed to accomplish or stimulate; identify the right audience(s); choose a strategic time to share the knowledge (i.e., when it won't jeopardize the foundation's work in communities); use a variety of products; and find vehicles that will attract widespread notice and help the audience understand, learn from, and apply the knowledge.

## Investment in a Broad and Useable Knowledge Base

Most leaders of learning foundations know that, for a complex enterprise like community change, information will always be incomplete and dynamic. Nonetheless, they believe that decision makers can make better decisions if their knowledge base is rigorous, broad, integrated, multi-disciplinary, multi-dimensional, and applicable. Increasingly, these foundation leaders are working with other funders, practitioners, and researchers to pursue common questions, pool resources, test shared hypotheses, and find demonstrable answers. Their strategies include:

- **Harvesting useable knowledge.** Foundations do this through knowledge management and by gathering, synthesizing, integrating, and interpreting knowledge from multiple sources.

- **Evaluating to learn.** Evaluation helps learning foundations measure progress toward goals, make operational improvements, determine the cost of achieving results, and assess a strategy's effect on a community. Respondents say that evaluation produces useful knowledge when it has a clear purpose; uses data to improve capacity and performance; reflects realistic expectations for community change, engaging evaluation subjects in self-evaluation; pursues an appropriate level of study; encompasses an array of strategies; provides useful feedback; and answers widely shared questions about community change.

- **Thinking about a new kind of knowledge base**—one that is rigorous, broad, integrated, coherent, and useful for decision making. Such a knowledge base would have a practical learning purpose, a basis in reasonable judgment, and a multi-disciplinary and methodologically diverse approach. It would not define knowledge about community change exclusively, or even primarily, through program evaluation. Moreover, because community change is an emerging and fast-changing field, it would be able to incorporate new knowledge and replace obsolete information as needed.

As more foundations become interested in learning, and as those already engaged in it refine their approaches, it will be important to sort out the benefits and tradeoffs of the approaches described in this paper. The most pressing issues include: (1) helping foundation boards understand the value of learning from community change, despite the risks; (2) identifying, assessing, and managing the quality of the knowledge foundations are generating; (3) evaluating the impact of foundations' learning—especially how it affects philanthropic practice in the area of community change; (4) encouraging greater accountability within foundations for learning and continuous improvement; (5) assessing the relative merits of different learning approaches; (6) figuring out the extent to which the philanthropic learning components described in this paper are linked to the field of community change, how applicable they are to philanthropy generally, and how the characteristics of other fields might lead foundations to approach learning differently; and (7) building a learning agenda for the philanthropic field.

# Introduction

Foundations concerned with community change face a challenge and an opportunity with regard to learning. By *learning*, we mean not only the content of knowledge but the broad range of structures, policies, and practices through which individual funders, foundations, and groups of foundations gather, organize, interpret, integrate, assess, transfer, and *apply* information and insights to improve organizational performance. We emphasize the importance of the word *apply* as the fulcrum for integrating and internalizing information—individually, communally, and organizationally—so that it gets used. This paper explores seven core components, derived from interviews with foundation leaders and others in the philanthropic field, that characterize some foundations' responses to the challenge and opportunity of learning.

Foundations that invest in community change are under increasing scrutiny and pressure to clarify their missions, improve their efficiency, provide savvier institutional leadership, work more effectively with partners, communicate more strategically with peers and grantees, contribute more deeply to their own and the field's knowledge base, and enhance overall impact. Many foundation leaders believe that intentional approaches to institutional learning—such as enhanced evaluation, knowledge management initiatives, purposeful participation in philanthropic conferences, expanded data systems, and other learning mechanisms—are important elements of a strategy to address these challenges.

Some philanthropic leaders and experts go even further: they believe that changes in the economic, political, and social order of the United States over the last 20 years—particularly those that affected poor communities and their residents—have made obsolete single-focus or purely technical solutions to complex community problems. They say that neither narrow grant-making nor technical improvements in the way foundations generate knowledge can significantly address the challenges faced by poor communities. Instead, they suggest that foundations must re-imagine and reconstruct the role of learning in philanthropy, giving it a central place in foundations' missions, goals, strategies, internal organizational structures, and external partnerships. In short, foundations must transform themselves into learning institutions. For these leaders and experts, money and learning stand at the core of the modern philanthropic enterprise—and it is the strategic application of both that will make philanthropy better at supporting community change.

Leaders of foundations that have a commitment to learning say their organizations have made progress over the last decade. Their work has benefited from the knowledge and experience gained through the Annie E. Casey Foundation's New Futures Initiative, the Ford Foundation's Neighborhood & Family Initiative (NFI), the Enterprise Foundation's work in Sandtown-Winchester, and other initiatives as well as through their own experiences. Their organizations have developed greater conceptual and operational clarity about key ideas, such as the processes and outcomes of community building. Their institutional approaches to learning have become more extensive, deliberate, and effective, and they can point to numerous intermediary organizations, initiatives, and affinity groups that are expanding the broader field's learning capacity, including Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO), the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP), the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership, the Aspen Roundtable on Community Change, the Improving Practices of Philanthropy Project, and the Neighborhood Funders Group (NFG).

Despite notable forward movement, however, "learning for community change" has not yet reached its full potential for transforming foundations and their work. Few institutions embrace change easily, and a foundation's approach to learning can touch and challenge every dimension of institutional life—from the mission to organizational structure, staffing, and external relationships. Learning also poses an intellectual challenge, because the community-change field is still developing methods, questions, a knowledge base, and an audience. Moreover, some field leaders are trying to shift the focus from "certain but limited knowledge" to knowledge building that is less academically rigorous in terms of method but perhaps broader, more integrated, and more useful for decision making.

The interdependence of foundations' learning further complicates the challenge. Many foundation leaders believe they cannot successfully change communities by acting or learning alone. Their learning depends on learning throughout the fields of philanthropy and community change, and the fields' learning depends on individual foundations' learning. Foundations can only develop the broader knowledge base by expanding their own capacity, and only by having that improved knowledge base can individual foundations enhance their work substantially. It is a daunting intellectual and practical task to link the learning agendas of many institutions in a sector that prides itself on independence and *exceptionalism*—but it is the only way to achieve something larger and more coherent.

## Approach and Overview

This paper is part of a project that began with Chapin Hall's report, "Toward Greater Effectiveness in Community Change: Challenges and Responses for Philanthropy," published in March 2003.[1] That report identified "foundation learning" as one of three areas that deserved additional work. This paper digs more deeply into the challenges of foundation learning and explores the approaches and solutions that foundations are developing to improve their learning. Although we focus primarily on foundations that invest in community change, our examples include foundations for which community change is not a primary or exclusive interest. Moreover, although we recognize that many of the observations and insights we report may have broader resonance for other areas of philanthropy, we start with a focus on improving philanthropic practice as it relates to community change.

During 2004-05, a Chapin Hall team interviewed approximately 35 funders, foundation board members, experts, and researchers prominent in the community-change field about the challenges and opportunities for learning. This paper distills, organizes, and reports our respondents' reflections, descriptions, and practices with regard to learning for community change. The foundations in our sample vary in terms of how intentionally and explicitly they approach learning. Some foundations established formal learning initiatives, while others created intentional learning environments through less formal means. They also vary in terms of their success; most are better at some parts of learning than others, and even foundation respondents who report great strides say they have not made uniform progress.

This paper does not describe all learning issues and approaches across all foundations or attempt to resolve the differences. Instead, we synthesize the most developed thinking and practices that we encountered. Our purposes are to (1) identify the core components of foundations that put a priority on learning for community change; (2) characterize the range of approaches and activities that are being tried; and (3) report on some of the connections among and implications of these activities for individual foundations and the broader field.

In the sections that follow, we identify and discuss seven core components of foundations that learn and use the knowledge to improve community-change

1 For us, community-change philanthropy includes foundations that support comprehensive community change strategies; community-building efforts; community-focused economic development; social and health service programs and reforms; "embedded" funding; and many other integrated community-oriented strategies.

practices. Our respondents believe that, collectively, these components (or something like them) can transform the way foundations approach community change and the results they produce. The components are:

1. A clear and concrete value proposition
2. An internal structure aligned to learn
3. Leadership for learning
4. A learning partnership with grantees
5. A learning partnership with foundation peers
6. A commitment to share with the broader field
7. An investment in building broad and actionable knowledge

The first three components address foundation's internal issues; the middle two are relevant to foundations' partnerships; and the final two explore how foundations understand and contribute to the field's learning. We chose to begin with internal operations and partnerships instead of the more typical discussion about program evaluation and its role in building the knowledge base because (a) our respondents emphasized the importance of applying knowledge to practice and (b) the organizational and operational aspects of acquiring and using knowledge have not been adequately addressed within the foundation-funded community-change field.

For each component, we present a brief rationale that touches on the component's importance and some of the challenges it raises for philanthropy, followed by emerging solutions (concrete actions) and examples of foundations' approaches. Although we address the components one at a time, we urge readers to view them as an interconnected suite of activities that characterize learning foundations, not as disconnected practices. Each of the core components affects how broad, useful knowledge is generated, integrated, internalized, and applied; and each component supports and reinforces the others.

The paper concludes with a brief discussion of challenges for foundations that commit to learning and key areas of focus as the field moves forward.

# Core Components
# A Clear and Concrete Value Proposition

Key foundation leaders and other experts suggest that successful institutional learning requires a foundation's staff and board to develop a clear and concrete value proposition about its learning. Such a proposition explains what a foundation means by learning, how learning will contribute to a foundation's work, what the goals for learning are, and what the implications of a learning approach may be for how a foundation operates. A serious proposition is both feasible and measurable.

## Rationale

Learning that leads to improvements in knowledge and practice doesn't usually happen by accident. Most often, learning occurs because a foundation's leaders have a clear, consistent commitment to making it happen. Foundation staff are always taking in information and ideas, of course, through emails, phone calls, meetings, and conferences. In fact, staff often say they have too much information. The problem, some foundation leaders say, is that learning often is piecemeal, unintentional, irrelevant, or disconnected; the flood of information does not necessarily lead to better practices. As Edward Pauly of the Wallace Foundation comments, "If foundations would ask themselves about the impact of their learning, what they want to learn, and why they want to learn, they would be in very different places."

Foundations' internal barriers to learning include an inclination toward short-term commitments, a forward-thinking (rather than reflective) orientation, a fascination with new approaches, and an emphasis on "moving money out the door." Moreover, most foundations have few obvious ways to judge their progress or be held accountable, so there are few inducements (either for individual foundations or the field as a whole) to develop a learning proposition. Unlike corporations, observes Roberto Cremonini of the Barr Foundation, foundations have fewer incentives to learn:

> Foundations have a requirement to distribute a specific amount of money every year, but no requirement to reflect on and learn from their experiences. As a result, it's easy to get caught up in the transactional aspects of grant making, and it's almost "cool" to say that you don't have the time to invest in reflection. What happens, in reality, is that by failing to learn you end up wasting more time—not to mention energy, resources and goodwill—because you keep

making the same mistakes over and over again. So I think that learning pays back much more than it requires. Learning is something foundations can live without, but not something that they *should* live without.

## Emerging Solutions

Some foundations are developing clear, concrete value propositions for learning. Steps in this process include:

### *Establishing a Clear Understanding of "Learning"*

A foundation's board and staff have to clarify (a) what learning means to them and (b) how they will obtain the full value of learning. Funders view learning in different ways, however—sometimes within the same institution. Some equate learning with evaluation; some link it primarily to university-based research; and some believe it includes both tacit and research-based knowledge from a variety of sources and methods. Some think of learning as any new information that is shared; some equate learning with "knowledge management" or "organizational learning" initiatives; and some believe that learning encompasses a range of approaches and content that one internalizes and uses to make better decisions.

Some funders see learning as the process of monitoring and assessing grantee performance; some think it should improve the foundation's effectiveness; and some view learning as part of building the field's knowledge base. Some view learning as the exclusive domain of large foundations, while others see it as an enterprise for whole philanthropic field.

All of our respondents are at the beginning of a long journey of discovery and experimentation with different approaches to learning. For example:

- The **Woods Fund** in Chicago is engaged in a two-step learning process, according to Ricardo Millett. "Step one is to work with our grantees to build their capacity to collect and report on effective practices and their programmatic challenges by implementing more rigorous evaluation and reporting requirements," Millett says. "Step two will eventually be to aggregate this information across program area clusters to identify common problems, strategies, and solutions; to use this information as a convening mechanism to help grantees learn from each other about how to improve their programs; and to help the Woods Fund learn how we can best add value to their work." Millett emphasizes that "this is a meaning-making exercise that is structured under the recognition that just information-gathering is not learning."

- As one element of a multi-level approach to learning, the **Annie E. Casey Foundation** (AECF) established a knowledge management unit, which AECF's Tom Kern describes as "the trifecta of capturing, organizing, and sharing knowledge." He explains, "The capturing has been rather narrow: mostly gathering things that already exist. But in organizing those resources, we've begun to identify potential opportunities for new knowledge creation because we see gaps that need to be filled. This leads to conversations about documenting events we might not otherwise have written down, or making clear who the experts are so there are networks that people can plug into if they want…This highlights not only what we have but what we need, and it helps us to sort out the best uses of our finite resources and create an [institutional] learning agenda."
- At the **Robert Wood Johnson Foundation** (RWJ), learning reflects the Foundation's interest in policy change. RWJ's Laura Leviton says the foundation "is proud of the important role its work has played in getting some major policy initiatives adopted. These have been directly related to our ability to document program effectiveness and communicate it to policymakers….Policymakers are always a priority because we want to leverage our limited money, and that requires buy-in by public officials."

None of these examples captures the extent of the three foundations' thinking about learning, but they do suggest the seriousness of the enterprise and the variety of considerations in play.

## *Making Learning a Core Philanthropic Objective*

Many foundations' board and staff members think of themselves primarily as grantmakers dedicated to giving money to community organizations and other nonprofits. For these foundations, learning is a secondary concern and not central to their core mission (even though learning activities may grow up around program strategies). Paul Born of the Tamarack Institute observes, "It is difficult to overcome the perception that doing and learning are separate, and that one is more important than the other." But Born and a growing number of other change agents are making learning an explicit objective of their institutional missions.

Funders who make learning an explicit objective view it as a way to expand their impact beyond grant making and as part of a broader re-imagining of foundations' resources. They view a foundations' intellectual capital as an institutional asset on par with financial capital. "Knowledge is a resource, just like money," says Tim Wilmot of the Collaboration Company, adding that a foundation's role is to use every resource "to figure out the levers of community change." In that sense, learning is a central mechanism through which a foundation can determine what strategies are and are not working, improve its own work and that of others, and potentially increase the long-term impact of all foundation-funded community change.

Learning-oriented foundations describe their commitments in different ways:

- According to Anne Petersen, the **W.K. Kellogg Foundation's** purpose has shifted from "grant making" to "changemaking," and staff members view learning as essential for achieving that end.
- At the **Rockefeller Foundation**, learning is "a fundamental part of who we are, and thus we hire people who see their work in this way. We want learning to be infused in everything we do," according to Julia Lopez. "Our foundation is increasingly structured so people are incentivized to prioritize learning as part of their jobs."
- The mission of the **Barr Foundation**, according to Roberto Cremonini, is "to use knowledge, networks and funding to make Boston a better city for all. Knowledge is a central part of what we do, is front and center in our thinking, in how we talk about ourselves, and in how we behave."

Establishing a core commitment to learning can influence many parts of a foundation. Recasting oneself as "equal parts funder and knowledge resource" fundamentally alters the way one thinks about and approaches community-change work, notes RWJ's Robert Hughes. The funding timeline is just one such example. Short-term relationships with grantees and quickly changing foundation strategies do not develop deep knowledge, some respondents say. They suggest that foundations committed to learning often have long-term commitments to their issues, strategies, and partners. For example,

- The **Northwest Area Foundation** (NWAF) is striving to become a "knowledge broker." After board members reviewed 5 years of community-focused philanthropy across the upper Midwest and Northwest, they sharpened the focus on learning. NWAF's strategy now is "to identify what works, to share what works, and to advocate for what works." The success and promise of that approach subsequently led the board to consider expanding NWAF's 10-year commitment to 15 years.

## *Shaping a Learning Agenda*

*Knowledge collection and knowledge management have no purpose in themselves. They are tools to help us learn in a way that leads to actionable changes in behaviors.*

**Roberto Cremonini**

Learning is not an end in itself; the indiscriminate collection of information can be as unproductive as a lack of interest in learning. Learning should have a clear purpose, respondents say; it goes hand in hand with thinking about the goals a foundation wants to achieve, focusing activities to achieve those goals, and tracking the effect of the effort. When funders think systematically about the kinds of learning that occur in their foundations, they are better able to identify sources of learning; the timing of learning; the connections among various learnings; and not only their knowledge gaps but the steps required to fill them and the mechanisms needed to integrate and apply the knowledge.

Thus a key task in developing a value proposition for learning is to create a learning agenda that specifies the purpose and goals of learning, focuses learning activities, and tracks the effects of learning. For example:

- Leaders and staff at the **Irvine Foundation** "learn around specific questions," says Irvine's Martha Campbell. The process of establishing a purpose for learning has shaped the types of learning embraced, the methods of learning selected, and the way the foundation goes about learning. It has helped leaders prioritize learning opportunities, minimize information overload, gather the information needed for decision making, and develop ways to connect learning to the foundation's goals. In addition to improving program performance, Campbell believes that learning has leveraged the foundation's investments in particular programs.

- **AECF's** goals for learning are intended explicitly to contribute to philanthropic results. Explains AECF's Cindy Guy, "We want to learn how to achieve results—how to improve the lives of children. We believe that community building is important in principle, but our main commitment to [learning] comes because we believe it will help disadvantaged children achieve better life outcomes."

## *Connecting Individual Foundation Learning to Field Learning*

Foundations' pervasive individualism and "lone wolf" style of operating can impede learning goals. None of our respondents report that working and learning in isolation from other funders benefits their work. In fact, they suggest that learning within individual foundations and across the philanthropic field are intimately related. "When you see yourself as a learning institution you start asking a very different set of questions about your work," Tim Wilmot observes. "One is: how do you learn better from yourself? Another is: how do you learn better from others? A third is: how do you help all of us in the field learn from each other?"

The implication is that funders need to be more explicit about the relationship between their own learning agendas and programmatic activities and those of other foundations. Our respondents did not view this as a constraint on individual action. Rather, they believe that work with peer foundations expands the range and depth of achievement. "We think about learning not just in terms of our work but about the field," Julia Lopez says. Elwood Hopkins of Los Angeles Urban Funders (LAUF) adds:

> One of LAUF's functions is to capture the learning, synthesize it, and translate it into new practice. The extent to which learnings can be directly gathered from our mistakes at the conceptual and the practical level—and then used to inform our future steps—we are adding value to the foundations, the neighborhoods, and to everyone else doing this kind of work.

Finally, foundation leaders and experts note that other institutions with an interest in community change are not filling the learning void. "There is so much information out there and so much work being done, and yet we don't know how to process it all," observes Anne Kubisch. "Foundations are the only institution with the incentives and the ability to lead that effort. They should be learning leaders."

> *There is a chasm between a foundation's desire to invest in a good community-change effort, do it well, and track what is happening and what is needed for the field as a whole. We have gotten stuck in a pattern where foundations are continuing to design their own initiatives and construct their own evaluations, with the end result being that we now have 100 different evaluations of 100 different efforts—and in aggregate they don't add up to anything more than 100 separate evaluations. You read one evaluation and, unfortunately, you've read one evaluation. Nothing more. We don't have collective knowledge development for the field.*
>
> **ANNE KUBISCH**

# An Internal Structure Aligned to Learn

A commitment to learning can't simply be shoe-horned into current work assignments, accommodated in current budgets, or otherwise unsupported institutionally. It has to be translated into organizational processes and structures. Roles and goals for learning must be embedded in the foundation's work culture and supported by realistic commitments of time and financial resources.

## Rationale

There is no one perfect organizational structure or set of processes to support foundation learning, in part because the field is still evolving and experimenting with an array of tools and approaches. But respondents say there is a big difference between talking about learning and actually doing it—and that *doing* learning requires an appropriate organizational structure. According to Ricardo Millett:

> While we may recognize that grantees don't have the capacity to take on a demanding evaluation process and learning agenda, we don't recognize that foundations are structured with the same limitations and have a lot of work to do internally before we can readily embark upon a continuous improvement process.

Unfortunately, ambivalence about learning pervades some foundations' organizational structure, processes, and culture. Leaders constantly weigh the trade-off between putting time into learning and field building and "getting money out the door," as Tim Wilmot notes. The struggle is especially acute for program staff, whose responsibility for considering, assessing, and processing grants can chew up most of their available time.

Some of the foundations in our sample turned to the "learning organization" and "knowledge management" literatures for ideas on internal learning structures. Others derived an approach organically from previous practices. All of them found that a good test of the commitment to learning is the degree to which the foundation has ways to ensure that new knowledge is used to improve performance. They advise considering the following questions:

- Who has responsibility for learning?
- How, where, when, and in what form is learning supposed to happen?
- How is learning prioritized?
- How is learning rewarded in the life of the institution?

- How is the learning derived from multiple activities integrated?
- How is learning used to change institutional thinking and practice?

## Emerging Solutions

Some foundations are developing solid internal structures to support institutional learning by developing an organizational structure that is learning oriented, developing processes and incentives to promote learning within the organization, and developing and implementing tools that work to facilitate learning.

### *Crafting a Learning-Oriented Organizational Structure*

Foundation leaders often begin by establishing learning as a specific line item in their institutional budgets. For example, the Marguerite Casey Foundation has a dedicated budget for learning that includes "consultation, staff development and conferences, learning exchanges, bringing in experts and peer foundations, capacity building, and so forth," according to Chantel Walker.

Some foundations concentrate their learning efforts in a single initiative, while others create new structures, functions, and methods of interacting to infuse learning throughout the organization. For example:

- The **Annie E. Casey Foundation** has a complex but flexible learning architecture that encompasses several departments: Knowledge Management; Measurement, Evaluation, Communications & Advocacy; a Technical Assistance Resource Center (TARC); Community Mobilizing Around Results; the Project to Promote Co-Investment in Family Strengthening and Community Change, which learns from and shares knowledge with other foundations; Comprehensive Community Initiatives; Information Technology; and other program areas. Although all departments have learning as a priority, they each approach it differently. Staff meet occasionally across departments to discuss issues related to documentation and learning.

The variations among foundations' learning functions are infinite, as the relationship between knowledge management and evaluation illustrates. Some foundations have created new knowledge management departments and placed evaluation within them. At other foundations, knowledge management is part of a redefinition and expansion of an existing internal evaluation function. Still others locate evaluation and knowledge management functions in separate but related departments. Examples include the following:

**Creating internal networks that disperse responsibility for learning among program staff.** The Rockefeller Foundation has a learning and evaluation working group composed mainly of deputy program officers who share what they are learning and build knowledge in substantive issue areas. “We thought this kind of cross-sector work was better than establishing a learning unit because that way everyone owns it and is invested in the work, instead of making it someone’s responsibility and then everyone else’s burden,” Julia Lopez says.

**Redesigning program officers’ jobs, changing expectations, and promoting collaboration to support learning.** NWAF vested its senior program director with learning responsibilities and designated him Director of Program Activities & Learning. He works in close partnership with program staff and the foundation’s chief executive. Similarly, Woods Fund leaders redesigned the program officer job to build in more opportunities for learning from grantees. “We try to free our program staff up from paperwork so they can get out in the field and listen and learn more with grantees,” Ricardo Millett says.

**Examining the incentives embedded (or lacking) in the foundation’s personnel policies and processes.** At the Skoll Foundation, goals for learning are a part of the annual staff review process. According to Sally Osberg, “We build learning objectives into people’s performance plans and evaluations. That is the single most effective measure for ensuring that people see themselves as learners and commit to a learning agenda.”

**Developing a learning partnership.** Instead of bringing all learning functions inside the organization, Canada’s McConnell Family Foundation entered into a learning partnership for one aspect of its community change work (called Vibrant Communities) with two existing institutions, the Tamarack Institute and the Caledon Institute of Social Policy. Tamarack’s primary responsibility is managing and supporting the learning processes among the project’s community partners, while Caledon supports the work of the foundation, Tamarack, and the communities with analyses, research, and policy proposals.

An interesting dimension of these varied learning architectures is that they are still emerging. The structures usually represent a new emphasis for the organization, and therefore they reveal an experimental openness and evolutionary quality. Foundations have not begun to assess the relative value of different approaches or to identify the best match between specific circumstances and approaches. In fact, several of the executives who have the task of building their foundations’ capacity for learning say they are still working their way into their organizations' DNA. "To move this understanding along, I always try to act more as a facilitator than a person in the driver's seat," one executive said. "I emphasize to staff that they are the ones with the knowledge and insights and I'm here to make their life easier and to provide a service, rather than to impose."

### *Developing Processes and Incentives to Promote Internal Learning*

Foundations are developing self-reinforcing, internal webs of learning to generate rich content, foster peer sharing and reflection, collect good information, produce explicit lessons, and expand the channels for sharing knowledge. Some processes are elaborate; RWJ, for example, has national advisory committees of content experts, foundation peers, and local community leaders, which review and comment on funding proposals. Other procedures are small and routine, such as a "trip template" used by staff of the Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation to report what they learned at a site or conference and how they plan to use it. (Trip reports are posted on the foundation's website.)

Some foundations have learned valuable information by improving their procedures for gathering information from grantees, especially about progress made over time. For example:

- The **Marguerite Casey Foundation** added questions to its grantee monitoring reports to elicit lessons learned as part of an effort to identify common strengths and areas needing improvement.
- The **Surdna Foundation** recently revised its application process to engage applicants more intentionally on the front end about their anticipated outcomes, indicators of success, and if and how these match the foundation's theory of change.
- **RWJ** collected information on its operations through CEP's grantee-perception survey. The feedback led foundation leaders to create and fund an internal quality improvement initiative.

Foundation leaders also are gathering information from their own staff. NWAF, for example, changed staff reports and discussions to support more targeted, applicable learning. The foundation's site team leaders now report monthly on progress, evidence of what is being accomplished, and lessons learned. Leaders synthesize the reports and extract themes and lessons, which they discuss in staff meetings and use to shape the site teams' ongoing work.

The compartmentalized nature of many funding programs creates a challenge for internal learning, however. Program silos discourage exchange among staff from different programs, promote competition for scarce resources, and even encourage a kind of privatized learning. Individual program officers can become repositories of insight and experience, respondents say, but the knowledge often stays with them and never gains an institutional home or institutional ownership. When the staff person leaves, so does the knowledge.

To break down barriers between programs and build in processes for sharing information, some foundations have instituted cross-program conversations. The foundations in our sample bring program staff from different funding areas together regularly to comment on each other's grant proposals and ideas, structure staff meetings to encourage critical inquiry and honest dialogue, and ensure that staff share lessons that are relevant across program areas.

Some foundation leaders also have looked to the business and management world's communities of practice literature for insights about connecting knowledge and learning across and within organizations. For example:

- The **Kellogg Foundation** emphasizes both the sharing and synthesis of knowledge. Kellogg describes its internal learning process as a "knowledge loom" through which new data and information are woven together with the foundation's existing threads of collective knowledge.
- A similar concern about integrating staff's knowledge and perspectives led **Wallace Foundation** leaders to create cross-functional teams in each of its three main initiative areas. The teams integrate thinking and planning around program design, public communication, and assessment.
- The **Barr Foundation** established a Quarterly Reflection Process in which each program officer reflects on his or her work for the past quarter as it relates to the foundation's goals, strategies, and theories of change. Staff are asked to identify one or two initiatives or events that were extreme successes, failures, or surprises. ("We ask for extremes because we feel the most effective learning comes out of these instances," Roberto Cremonini says.) At half- or full-day meetings, program officers describe the outcomes they expected, their assumptions going into the work, and what actually happened, and reflect openly on what caused the success or failure. These meetings are documented to capture the "ahas" and interdisciplinary learning that occur. Program officers are expected to use knowledge gained during the Reflections to take action, think about next steps,

and revise their individual work plans. Before each new Reflection, staff review the previous discussion to reinforce connections among the learning experiences.

## *Making Tools and Technology Work for Learners*

Foundations are developing various tools to promote internal learning. Some are best described as thinking tools because they enable staff to broaden and sharpen their thinking about goals and strategy. These include:

**Theory of change.** Respondents say this approach has helped foundation staff flesh out their assumptions, the relationships among them, and their beliefs about the way that actions produce outcomes. For LAUF, "The theory of change has been critical," according to Elwood Hopkins. It is the hypothetical framework that shows funders and nonprofits how their work weaves together. The power of seeing how the pieces fit together is enormous, even when the theory itself doesn't hold true, Hopkins says.

**The *denominator exercise* developed by RWJ's Urban Health Initiative (UHI).** Site staff and board members used this process at the beginning of the initiative to establish targets for "scale"—i.e., to identify approximately how many children would have to be reached by a particular service strategy to bring about a measurable improvement in the relevant citywide child health statistics that UHI aims to affect. The sites could then project the amount of resources needed to achieve their goals at the desired level of scale. Because of its specificity, this thinking tool helped sites identify the knowledge-gathering and learning processes they needed in order to learn about and revise their approach over time.

Foundations have also made strides in using information technology to gather and share information. These tools come in many forms and respond to many different problems. For example:

- **Schwab's** knowledge management staff designed an intranet that allows individual staff members, departments, and teams (as well as external collaborators) to quickly request and share information across the foundation.
- **AECF's** knowledge management system was developed after an internal survey showed that (a) program staff did not know where to find the best information to respond to questions, (b) existing searches often were inefficient, and (c) the information found was not as helpful as staff members hoped. The resulting system, built on the Microsoft application Sharepoint, is a searchable online

database of information organized around knowledge areas of interest to the foundation. It contains both formally published documents, such as reports and books, and unpublished resources, such as training and conference materials, PowerPoint presentations, audiovisual materials, and white papers. Resources contained in the system include: KIDS COUNT Data Books for every state; back issues of Casey publications; EITC campaign materials from Casey grantees; initiative evaluations; presentations on race, culture, class, and power from an internal Casey workgroup; and School-to-Career Partnership training materials. Although the system has been well received, Tom Kern cautions that AECF does not want to overdo technology-based learning tools:

> We try our best to make learning experimental and a useful part of people's work rather than force learning on people with lots of bells and whistles. For example, while technological innovations can be helpful learning tools, foundations can get caught up in these mechanisms (which are often complicated and scare people away from learning) and feel like they have done the work of learning just by setting up the fancy system.

- The Barr Foundation used Microsoft Outlook to develop the Barr Information Network (BIN), a simple, user-friendly tool to help staff members organize and access information relevant to their work. The BIN emerged from a realization that critical learning that could benefit Barr's work was not being captured and organized in a meaningful way. The BIN builds on a simple form, similar to a library card, that staff complete to submit new information. The form documents the type of information, what it relates to (e.g., grantees, other foundations, etc.), the subject, and the foundation strategy and theory of change to which it applies. When staff drop the information electronically in the BIN, other Barr staff automatically get an e-mail informing them.

# Leadership for Learning

Learning requires leadership at the foundation's executive, board, and staff levels. This kind of leadership is something more than the usual constellation of analytic, organizational, and managerial skills paired with substantive competence. Leaders of learning foundations value questions, encourage smart risk taking, reward experiments, de-privatize knowledge gathering and practice, encourage collective reflection, demonstrate a tolerance for conflict and uncertainty, and accept honest mistakes as part of the learning process. As one funder comments, "Foundation leadership is key to creating a culture where learning is not dangerous and where you are not just paying lip-service to learning."

## Rationale

Leaders shape a foundation's culture and enable or compromise its capacity to learn. An organizational structure, however well developed, can only do so much to promote learning. In fact, all the structures, policies, and tools in the field will not yield actionable learning unless key individuals up and down a foundation's chain of command demonstrate a commitment to the learning process, and unless staff buy into that process. Rockefeller's Julia Lopez suggests that staff buy-in to the foundation's principles of learning is more important to promoting learning than the foundation's structure. "We are principle-based, not procedure-based." RWJ's Laura Leviton adds that opportunities to promote learning often arise unexpectedly, and leaders must be ready to seize them:

> There need to be structures in place to promote learning, but the actual process is often very serendipitous. You always need to be alert for opportunities to spark learning. You need structures that are consistent but also flexible. For instance, it is very frowned upon not to attend [internal] team meetings. That is a core piece of people's jobs here, because the institution values the knowledge that is brought to bear through that process.

Scores of subtle, daily interactions within foundations reinforce some behaviors and values and discourage others, including informal hallway conversations, comments that are privileged in meetings, policies for promotions, and the board's treatment of staff. If a chief executive or a board is not committed to learning, the staff will recognize the lack of commitment, regardless of what the executive professes or the structure signals.

*It is hard to tell foundations the truth… [but] unless we are ready to hear the truth, we won't be ready to learn.*

**Spence Limbocker**

The difficulty of soliciting honest feedback from grantees poses a challenge for foundation leaders who want to promote learning. "People talk to you in a particular way, knowing that you are in a funding or potential funding relationship," says Edward Pauly. "Finding out what other people think and are seeing honestly can be hard." This problem isn't unique to foundations, of course, but the lack of outside accountability in philanthropy seems to heighten its effect—as does the fact that, in the field of community change, the truth often is complex and subjective.

## Emerging Solutions

Foundations are taking steps related to executive leadership, engagement with the board, and staffing in order to provide leadership for learning. These include:

### *Executive Leadership that Promotes Learning and Change*

Committed, effective leadership at the executive level may be the most important ingredient for a foundation that learns. Several leadership qualities emerged as themes in our interviews:

**Ability to mobilize internally.** Respondents describe a paradox in foundation behavior: despite a desire to foster change externally, foundation staff and boards often resist internal change. "To really learn—that is, to internalize learning that challenges what you are doing—you need to really want to change or be open to convincing," NFG's Spence Limbocker observes. "People don't learn easily. You are really up against human behavior, and you really need to deal with that."

Thus it is import to have foundation leaders who understand resistance to change but also know how to cajole, excite, engage, mobilize, and (when necessary) command changes; translate learning into institutional practice; and embed learning in the institution's culture. According to Schwab's Alexa Culwell, "The culture of learning is demonstrated through the CEO's example, through our grant work, through utility as a basic value, and through the development and use of lots of our tools." Similarly, AECF staff describe how their executives create "a whole ethos involving sharing and learning in order to produce results."

**Valuing candor and openness.** Learning that leads to change is risky. It unsettles fixed power relationships and it leads institutions into new approaches, routines, and relationships for which the risks are unknown. It stimulates criticism and conflict. It may require staff to admit mistakes, acknowledge their lack of information, reveal imperfections in strategies, and make changes. For these reasons, foundation leaders need to model the learning process themselves by allocating time for learning, subjecting themselves to inquiry, admitting mistakes, and evaluating themselves and others on learning.

Leaders often need to highlight the differences that produce disagreement and encourage staff to discuss contentious or "forbidden" topics. Because foundations get little honest feedback about themselves, it is especially important that their leaders value candor and honest reflection internally. Other leadership characteristics that our respondents named as desirable include: non-defensiveness and openness to critique; supportive of collective reflection; interest in fostering a culture that values questions and independent thinking even when they challenge orthodoxies; and a commitment to deprivatizing practice and knowledge gathering.

**Support for smart risk taking, real innovation, and honest failure.** Foundation leaders often fluctuate between two bad habits--the tendency to do the same thing repeatedly while expecting a different result and an interest in innovation for innovation's sake. Although these habits of mind are superficially different, both have an equally negative effect on learning. In contrast, leaders of learning foundations reward smart risk taking that promises real innovation; they also support good hunches, even if they don't pan out. Anne Kubisch observes:

> If you really look at the activities that most foundations engage in, it's actually a pretty narrow and standard range of things. They try to get the best technical and programmatic design they can, or the best technical approach to organizational development (and those are often quite good). If they are willing to push on traditional ways of doing business, they might stretch out their intervention to 5, 6, or 7 years, or they might be willing to add a little capacity building to a programmatic intervention. But it's really a fairly limited number of strategies, just stretched a little bit. If you are only willing to use the current tools, then you lack risk—and that means you lack real innovation.

Respondents add that leaders who support risk taking must also set a higher standard for rigorous analysis grounded in research and experience, for practical innovation, and for ongoing assessment.

**Collaborative skills for external change.** Credible, knowledgeable, and learning-oriented leadership is crucial for engaging, facilitating, and mobilizing varied

*It is evident that you are a learning organization and not just talking about being one when you invite outsiders to come in and critique your strategy; when you share your work with them and give them free reign to say what you are right about and wrong about; and when you welcome and are ready to adopt their suggestions to improve your impact. A real learning institution can see and point to these activities.*

**Roberto Cremonini**

stakeholders around long-term solutions to complex community issues. Foundation leaders are uniquely positioned to provide just that sort of leadership because of their access to knowledge, money, and key stakeholders, respondents say. Consequently, foundation leaders should have highly developed collaborative and political leadership skills—along with the personal inclination and the institutional backing to use them.

## Building a Board for Learning

Increasingly, executives of learning foundations are providing their boards with strategic, targeted information; helping board members shape agendas and discussions to elicit a deeper level of thinking and engagement; encouraging new board roles to deepen members' understanding of the foundation's goals, outcomes, and lessons; and rethinking the board's relationship to staff. For example:

- **AECF** trustees agreed to be assigned to one of the foundation's "Making Connections" sites. The trustees' role is to visit the site occasionally, develop a relationship with local leadership, become familiar with the challenges the community faces, gain an understanding of the strategies being tried and the progress of the community's work, and serve as a strategic resource to the site and the foundation's board. This has increased the board's understanding of the foundation's work in communities, changed the questions being asked of staff, and emphasized the importance of learning from the work.

- At a retreat of **Surdna Foundation** board and staff members, board members expressed approval of the foundation's approach to the front end of grant making (i.e., identifying grantees, developing partnerships, getting grants out the door) but raised concerns about how well the foundation captured information over the course of a grant. This and other issues prompted Surdna to undergo a year-long process of reflection and development called the Success Measures Initiative, which aims to review the foundation's goals, accomplishments, and practices and develop a set of feedback mechanisms and success measures that can inform and guide Surdna throughout the course of its initiatives. A committee of key board members, the executive director, and the initiative's staff director is helping program staff develop frameworks for measuring success, plan to implement the frameworks, and find ways to evaluate results. "The fact that the board was fully behind and drove this work helped everyone buy into the process, and it provided the space and time for staff to put aside some of their grant-making activities and engage in this reflection," said Dara Major. "This kind of open support [and] dialogue around the Success Measures Initiative was important.

Without it, people tend to get nervous about 'metrics' and you can't get to a learning discussion."

Some foundations try to increase their boards' capacity through recruitment and training. Training for board members can be a delicate matter, because many are highly accomplished in their fields and averse to being "trained." But some respondents report a new level of receptiveness as board members link their interest in outcomes to their own learning. For example:

- Some of the **Kellogg Foundation's** program areas have engaged board members in a deeper conversation about the foundation's strategies, using a framework drawn from complex systems analysis. Among the tools this framework includes is a *causal loop*, which explicates causes and effects on the path to a desired outcome. Together, board and staff leaders explore the purpose and goals of specific initiatives, including their strategies, areas of investment, points of greatest leverage, expected outcomes, and success factors. This experience has changed the nature of the conversations within the board and with staff, raising key questions that were not previously considered and helping staff refine and revise their thinking.
- **RWJ** board members want to know about successes and failures, and the foundation's executive leaders support those discussions. "We can learn from mistakes, but we have to admit them first," explains Laura Leviton. "Once a year, the board holds a retrospective post-mortem discussion of a finished program. They ask those questions and want to hear honest answers….There is also an attempt to have that kind of discussion about the foundation's work overall."
- The **Irvine Foundation's** executive leadership instituted a regular "failure report" as part of board discussions and began assigning valences of risk to parts of the grant-making portfolio. "The board is interested in how staff make decisions to fund in an area of grant making; how we flesh out the choices, tradeoffs, and criteria. We are looking for a conversational way to talk with [board members] about what we're learning and how we use that learning in making decisions," reports Martha Campbell.

Foundation leaders also are introducing new tools to help focus board discussions, ensure accountability, and foster learning. For example:

- **Schwab** developed a *dashboard report*, a concise mechanism to inform its board about qualitative and quantitative progress on key strategies. The dashboard provides basic demographic information on target populations, how many people benefit from the foundation's initiatives, the extent to which those people are being helped, how much it costs to achieve the results, and progress toward specific outcome measures.

- **AECF** staff developed a concise report to the board that focuses on just two of the target outcomes for the *Making Connections* initiative—children healthy and prepared to succeed in school and family economic success. Although the initiative tracks additional outcomes with additional indicators, these reports are helping the board focus on the initiative's core areas of work.

Although respondents acknowledge progress, they also caution that funding for community-change work remains challenging for boards. "Some boards have little tolerance for ambiguity, and this is ambiguous work," Julia Lopez warns. The risks, the uncertainty involved, the costs in staff time and grants, and the developmental nature of these efforts may not suit a board that wants proven approaches with a high promise of success or one that does not value learning.

## Staffing a Learn and Lead

Learning is a deeply human process. It happens in small increments, over time, and cannot be forced to occur. Leaders of learning foundations are deeply aware of the need to invest in the human side of learning. One approach is to help staff develop the skills they need to function more effectively in a learning-oriented environment. RWJ, for instance, trained staff to gather new ideas and information and to use it to revise practices *before* empowering and encouraging staff to engage in learning and improvement. (The training was only one component in a broader, sustained effort to engage staff in learning.)

*Staff become open to learning when it is grounded in their ongoing work.*

**Cindy Guy**

Staff buy-in to the learning process is essential. Our respondents agree that the best way to achieve buy-in is to make learning directly relevant to staff members' jobs. Then it becomes an aid for meeting core responsibilities rather than a distraction. Thus, for example, one foundation involves staff in designing learning tools and gives them guidance on how to incorporate new knowledge into their work. By comparison, an executive from another foundation says that program officers prepare reports at the end of each program cycle but tend to file them without using the information because the reports are viewed as irrelevant.

The beliefs and values of program staff can foster or undermine a learning culture. Therefore, some foundations focus explicitly on hiring staff who are committed to learning and improving practices, both personally and institutionally:

- At **Schwab**, job descriptions, hiring criteria, and performance evaluations reflect the importance of learning. “A willingness to learn is an important characteristic we look for in our hiring process, and staff ability to learn and improve is part of their work responsibility and performance review,” explains Alexa Culwell.
- **RWJ** hires staff who are content experts because “They have much to share with one another [and] they also tend to know what they don’t know,” says Robert Hughes. “Staff expertise contributes to…a culture of critical inquiry.”

A learning foundation needs program officers who can encourage learning with colleagues inside the foundation and with peers and grantees outside the foundation—people who can “convey the learning priority to grantees and help foster their learning capacities,” as Ricardo Millett notes. In return, learning-oriented foundations need to manage staff with fairness, clarity, and consistency, respondents say. For instance, NWAF’s ellery july adapted “Fair Process Management” from the business literature to his work with program staff. This approach engages workers in decisions that involve them, explains why decisions are made, and clearly specifies expectations. July shares with staff a brief essay he wrote on his management approach and encourages discussion on its implementation.

# A Learning Partnership With Grantees and Communities

Grantees and communities are crucial learning partners for foundations, both as a source of rich and relevant information and as potential beneficiaries of new knowledge. An active learning partnership often requires foundation and grantee leaders to re-imagine their relationship and to build processes, tools, and supports to nourish an ongoing exchange. Some partnerships involve a significant conceptual shift so that funders and grantees can collaborate on designing, collecting, interpreting, and generating knowledge. Many also entail significant foundation investment in grantees' capacity to collect strategic information, monitor and evaluate processes, and sharpen analytic skills.

*You can't have organizational learning without ongoing connections to your constituents and stakeholders. You've got to be in continual dialogue. Yet, too often, grantees aren't informing foundations' work even though they're really the experts.*

**Tim Wilmot**

## Rationale

Although grantees and foundations can significantly contribute to each other's learning, the power dynamic inherent in the funder/recipient relationship can impede an honest, reflective, and open exchange. There are good reasons for this; both foundations and grantees carry legitimate baggage into the relationship. Grantees fear they will be punished for candor, and they may need to be convinced that the knowledge pursued by the foundation will actually help their work. They also may worry that another grantee will benefit from their ideas while they will suffer by comparison. Moreover, grantees have little time for formal learning activities, and they may think it is a luxury they cannot afford. Some foundation staff, meanwhile, worry about losing their objectivity if they get too close to grantees. They worry that a closer relationship will limit the foundation's choices or that grantees will take advantage of the situation and underperform.

*Our grantees are the group from whom we learn the most.*

**Anne Petersen**

Despite the challenges, a learning partnership can give both funders and grantees more intimate, realistic, and timely knowledge about community progress and problems. "Because we have such close working relationships with the communities, we don't have to spend a lot of time on monitoring activities," said the Tamarack Institute's Paul Born. "If there is a problem, we know it and the community knows it and generally seeks us and the other communities out to help resolve it. The key is that the problem is not considered a black mark but just another learning opportunity to try out new ideas."

## Emerging Solutions

Foundations are taking steps to foster learning partnerships with grantees and communities by attempting to create the conditions that will foster mutual learning, fostering capacity among foundations and grantees for learning, and developing learning partnerships.

### *Creating the Conditions for Grantee and Funder Learning*

It may be possible to learn under conditions of stress, manipulation, and distrust, but those are not ideal conditions for funder/grantee learning. Fortunately, respondents report that such conditions are not inherent. Foundations and grantees can cultivate and solidify a sense that, as Tim Wilmot says, "We're here to solve a problem together—a mentality that [funders are] working with grantees and that they are a part of the solution."

A solid funder/grantee learning relationship appears to have the following elements:

**Clear and realistic expectations.** The directive to "learn" can be interpreted in many different ways, especially when delivered by a funder. Some foundations avoid confusion by being very specific about what their expectations. Others explore the topic with grantees and reach a shared definition. The Woods Fund, for instance, held extensive discussions with grantees about the need to make learning a strategic priority, elicited feedback on how a learning agenda could support grantees' work, and made sure that new grantees understood they were entering into a learning partnership. "This required grantees to be more committed to learning goals and to develop more discipline, rigor, and transparency around evaluating and reporting on their work than they might be used to," notes Ricardo Millett.

**Buy-in.** At its core, community change is a voluntary process. As Wallace's Edward Pauly notes, change occurs when community leaders and other stakeholders decide it is something they want, not merely because grant money is available. Therefore, it is important for grantees to buy in to the learning process. "We use learning, and lessons, and experience to contribute to [the] voluntary decision-making situation," explains Pauly. "It's not a conversation around a grant-funded activity but rather a discussion about what their demand-driven learning needs are."

Foundations cultivate buy-in by demonstrating their interest in learning opportunities, being attentive and responsive to grantees' concerns and ideas, and developing learning agendas that meet grantees' needs as well as their own. Several of our respondents also emphasized the importance of humility and mutuality. One praised the Babcock Foundation in particular because its grantees "have decided for themselves that the training is something they need" and because Babcock's staff come to learning events with "genuine openness, candor, and curiosity."

**Time and space.** Grantees often are pressed for time and resources, and under that pressure it is very difficult to take time out for learning. "Innovation often gets put on the back burner as a sacrifice to daily turmoil," observes the Packard Foundation's Gale Berkowitz. Consequently, some foundations provide support for the time, space, staffing, and facilitation required for effective learning. (Although in-person learning opportunities have been the priority, some foundations also are developing distance learning mechanisms.)

**Adaptability.** Learning needs change over time as the people involved come and go or take up new learning challenges. Even within a stable group, participants have differing needs and readiness for learning. "It is difficult to construct opportunities that are equally valuable for all participants, especially when there is unevenness among them," says Irvine's Martha Campbell. "We try to minimize this [unevenness] by getting grantees' help in designing the learning opportunities, but it can't be eliminated."

Sometimes it is necessary to invest in grantees' capacity to learn. At other times, learning goals and approaches simply need to roll out in stages. Or, a process that has worked well for a time suddenly grows stale, and a new approach must be found. Foundation representatives say they are learning to recognize the changing needs and stages of learning and to respond with flexibility and creativity.

**Trust.** Grantees must believe that they will not be punished if they speak candidly about the problems they face. A funder can't demand that level of trust, but foundations can earn it by acting consistently over time. "We try to get grantees to talk about what's not working by creating realistic expectations that things won't always go well and that that is normal," says Martha Campbell:

> We include a space on the reporting form about what is not working. We structure a discussion between grantees and program staff about it. However, to really get organizations to open up often requires a high level of trust and a multi-year funding commitment. We try not to punish grantees for things not going well, but instead say that it's a problem only if you don't act on what you've learned from the situation.

Multi-year funding agreements are hugely beneficial to grantee/funder trust, respondents say. They reduce the sense of competition with other grantees, provide a sense of security, and allow grantees to be more candid. Foundation staff from several multi-year, multi-site community initiatives report that the quality of exchange and learning improved significantly as trust grew over time.

**A shared knowledge base.** Grantees and other community representatives come to the work with differing knowledge and assumptions, so it is useful to create a common knowledge base. This usually means investing in some data collection and analysis, which may range from a one-time statistical snapshot of the neighborhood to a group process for reaching consensus on goals.

"A lot of nonprofits and foundations draw conclusions about the neighborhoods based on anecdotal evidence but don't have access to real statistical survey data," observes LAUF's Elwood Hopkins. His organization builds a common knowledge base by developing a logic model for each neighborhood, conducting site visits and group training, collecting baseline neighborhood data, and establishing chronologies of key decisions and events. Using this shared knowledge, the funders and neighborhood partners move forward together.

**Accountability.** Establishing group accountability for learning, from the beginning of the funder/grantee relationship, can be a powerful way to encourage group learning. Some learning processes have formal mechanisms for accountability, but respondents say it is also important to let accountability develop informally as participants' relationships with each other deepen.

## *Fostering Foundation and Grantee Capacity for Learning*

The boundary between capacity building and learning is rarely clear. The technical know-how that a funder provides to a grantee or group of grantees can quickly become the basis for deeper strategic learning, and learning can often reveal a need for further capacity building. In fact, many funders think of capacity building and learning as a continuous loop, and their approaches reflect that view—especially as they begin to link learning and capacity building to their theory and goals for community change. (In AECF's *Making Connections* initiative, for instance, the foundation's desired outcomes directly inform and shape priorities for building capacity within sites.)

*When foundations find really talented people in the field doing this work, they need to figure out how to help that person grow. Change doesn't come about because you have a good theory; it comes about because of talent on the ground. We need to see the talent and invest in it.*

SPENCE LIMBOCKER

Although there is no "best" way to spur learning among grantees and communities, foundation leaders have learned to avoid some models. "What hasn't worked is the more direct and didactic form—saying, 'Here are our lessons'—whether in writing or presentations," says Elwood Hopkins. "They don't care about that. They don't own it and they don't feel empowered to apply it." AECF's experience is similar, as Cindy Guy explains:

> As questions emerge in the work of [residents] on [*Making Connections* neighborhoods], we help them see how the survey results can help answer their questions. But just giving them data and saying, 'Look through it', or trying to answer the questions you imagine they have, doesn't work. Folks have to grapple with questions first themselves, and then they are open to learning.

Foundations have used an array of tools, processes, and even agents to build capacity. These include:

**Grants and support for technical assistance,** provided either by themselves or through an intermediary. For example:

- The **Babcock Foundation's** Southern Grassroots Leadership Development Learning Initiative includes coaching, small implementation and technical assistance grants, learning clusters, learning institutes, and e-groups.
- The **Annie E. Casey Foundation's** Technical Assistance Resource Center (TARC) provides a spectrum of assistance to *Making Connections* grantees and communities, including information scans, skill-building sessions, peer-to-peer matches, cross-site learning sessions, expert assistance, consultation, and facilitation.

**Exposure to knowledge,** for grantees and communities, through learning scholarships, fellowships, site visits, site exchanges, leadership programs, and meetings where they "get people into new settings where they can teach and learn."

**Flexible learning funds** to encourage buy-in, increase capacity, and motivate learning innovations. For instance, the Schwab Foundation, Peninsula Community Foundation, and Sobrato Family Foundation collaborated to create the Organizational Capacity Grants Initiative, a 3-year effort to help human service agencies in the Bay Area with self-determined, internal capacity-building efforts and to enable their participation in learning opportunities with other grantees.

**Learning tools that generate information,** such as part-time documenters, data-gathering and tracking mechanisms, listservs, and the like. For instance, AECF hired consultants to document *Making Connections* activities and decisions; their material informs local collaborators and foundation leaders. AECF also supports Local Learning Partners—coalitions of data providers, holders, and users—to build neighborhood residents' capacity to collect, understand, interpret, and mobilize around data.

**Efforts to include grantees in the early stages of the foundation's strategy implementation or issue development.** At the Wallace Foundation, for example, "We keep drawing on a wide range of input from field leaders to ask what is the fundamental change in the system for supporting communities that we need to address," Edward Pauly explains.

> As our understanding gets deeper, our understanding of the problem and solution may change. So we ask what kind of learning is necessary for our partners, grantees, etc. We aren't the experts. We ask folks outside the foundation what kind of knowledge they need, and we ask field leaders what their learning needs are, too. That has been dramatically important. In some cases we have made a grant for market research.

Grantees are not the only beneficiaries of these efforts. The field of philanthropy has improved as grantees become more integrated into foundations' brain trusts for program, strategy, and operational issues, respondents say. "It helps check our assumptions against the realities of people's experiences on the ground before we make decisions based on those incorrect assumptions," Ricardo Millett notes.

Still, investing in grantees' capacities can be expensive, especially when the activities involve capacity for data collection and analysis. Funders need to be more realistic about (and committed to) providing the necessary level of support, respondents say.

## *Developing Peer Learning Partnerships*

Peer learning seems to be an effective way for grantees and community partners to become more knowledgeable. However, Anne Kubisch raises an important distinction between the kind of learning that occurs through a one-time peer discussion of a topic, however well executed, and "the focused and intensive learning exercises that can happen with the same set of peers over time." Leaders of learning foundations have tried to provide just those kinds of opportunities—ranging from study circles and action research to communities of practice and structured peer learning. In particular, respondents emphasize the importance of ongoing peer learning processes that "provide an opportunity for leaders in the field to come together to address a particular problem, apply the solution developed back at home, report back on what happened, and then take on another problem."

Some foundations run peer learning groups themselves; some hire consultants to run them; and some have provided resources to grantees so they could secure assistance for a learning group.

The peer learning mechanisms that foundations support can be as simple as monthly phone conferences or as elaborate as 3-day meetings held several times a year. For example:

- The **Robert Wood Johnson Foundation** creates Learning Cohorts—groups of grantees who share their knowledge and experiences and solve common problems.
- The **Barr Foundation** organizes Learning Clusters of grantees and non-grantees in the belief that peer learning will produce more systematic impacts. Clusters are organized around a theme (e.g., teachers' professional development) or program area (e.g., experimental environmental education). Meetings typically occur quarterly over the course of 2 to 3 years and are facilitated by at least two external "learning managers," one with expertise in the content and one skilled in the process.
- The **Duke Endowment's** Program for the Rural Carolinas invests in two learning strategies. First, through the managing intermediary of this twenty-two-site community-change initiative, the Endowment provides annual learning institutes for six to eight members of each team, smaller learning cluster meetings on specific issues, individual coaching for each site, technical assistance resources that can be used to bring in experts or sponsor site-team visits to relevant efforts elsewhere, and monthly phone meetings on economic development questions. Second, the Endowment funds a Learning Project team that visits sites, collects data on key questions of relevance across sites, and produces "working memoranda" that share lessons to improve local practice and to build broader knowledge.
- The **Pan Canadian Learning Community** (PCLC) of the Vibrant Communities initiative is a learning network of sixteen communities (www.vibrantcommunities.ca). The initiative is led by the Tamarack Institute in partnership with, and supported financially by, the McConnell Family

Foundation, the Caledon Institute of Social Policy, and other funders. Each community in the learning network is represented by a lead organization (usually a respected community organization) along with four local representatives (one each from the business, government, nonprofit, and local resident communities). One or more representatives from each of the sixteen sites participates in structured, monthly teleconferences to share experiences, discuss policy issues, interact with resource providers, and address planning issues.

Quarterly Tele-learning Seminars include all partners, sometimes up to 200. Topics are selected by Tamarack and the communities. Communities also can call for learning sessions when problems arise or when they want feedback from their partners. These learning sessions are structured by a Peer Input Process in which a community poses a question about its concerns in advance and then, during the phone call, describes the challenge and responds to clarifying questions. The other communities discuss the issue and offer ideas and advice. Tamarack supports PCLC by helping communities draft and monitor an annual workplan; providing coaching on strategic, operational, and funding issues; helping to design annual forums; providing a bi-weekly newsletter to update communities on relevant research, tools, and community stories; and working with evaluators and sponsors to assess PCLC's effectiveness.

# A Learning Partnership With Foundation Peers

A learning partnership among foundation peers goes beyond gathering information and insights from individual funders on a catch-as-catch-can basis, or participating in foundation-oriented conferences and discussions. Peer learning partnerships include informal consultations, formal advice-giving, exchanges on lessons learned, and extended collaborations around funding or knowledge development.

The most fully developed learning partnerships among foundation peers entail sustained engagement over time to exchange insights and lessons; explore, uncover, and generate new knowledge; and articulate new questions and learning agendas. Such partnerships involve a commitment to candor, risk taking, and time.

Funders value these relationships because they meet foundations' distinct conceptual, strategic, and operational needs. For some, peer learning networks and collaborations also play a mediating role through which learning is grounded in context and practice, which helps participants apply new knowledge in their own foundations.

## Rationale

The philanthropic field has not always staged and sustained peer learning effectively or focused it on the most nettlesome questions and issues. Many funder meetings are useful opportunities for networking with colleagues and for learning about technical aspects of their work, but respondents say the rules of etiquette that guide these exchanges and the "inconclusive" nature of most meetings hamper any deep conversation about strategic and operational topics. "Traditional foundation meetings may help you to learn how to be more efficient institutionally but not how to think and execute better," notes Tim Wilmot.

*Community-change learners have often been resistant to community-change learning.*

**Spence Limbocker**

Peer learning among funders isn't easy to cultivate, however. A "class structure" can come into play, Spence Limbocker notes, along with an imbalance of a power that gives undue privilege to certain funders' views. Julia Lopez adds:

> Foundations always want the credit for developing new ideas and for innovative thinking, and paradoxically this can act as a barrier to working collaboratively and to learning lessons from each other. You can't always lead. In order to learn and be effective both individually and as a field, you sometimes need to follow.

Moreover, not all foundation staff members are equally willing to explore ideas that might call current practices into question. The lack of certainty and the improvisational nature of community change introduce a high level of risk to the work, yet foundation leaders need to reassure nervous board members and staff so they will stay the course. Foundation leaders also must reconcile a desire to achieve substantial, demonstrable results with a reluctance to impose their own agenda. Thus, despite their position of power and their high hopes for community change, foundation leaders may be unsure of what they can deliver. In those situations, there are few roadmaps for learning although the need is acute.

## Emerging Solutions

Some foundations are taking steps to establish learning partnerships with foundation peers by forming partnerships and networks for learning and through collaborations.

### *Forming Partnerships and Networks for Learning*

Staff of foundations committed to community change have become proficient at establishing one-on-one learning partnerships with their colleagues. The field is small, so many foundation staff know their counterparts at other foundations. This kind of relationship helps “flesh out the details” of specific strategies, a foundation leader says. For example, when the Seabury Foundation was trying to develop a comprehensive approach to work in a single Chicago neighborhood, it turned to the Steans Family Foundation—another neighborhood-embedded funder—for assistance. “Though we ultimately approached it somewhat differently,” says Seabury’s Deborah Holloway, “in those first months I was talking with Steans all the time about what to do, what not to do, and how to do it. It was invaluable.”

Foundations also are adept at convening groups of funders to explore critical issues and improve knowledge and practice. In 2000, for example, the Germany-based Bertelsmann Foundation organized an international symposium on foundation evaluation and institutional effectiveness. The meeting and the paper it produced, “Striving for Philanthropic Success – Effectiveness and Evaluation in Foundations,” addressed the rationale, principles, design elements, organizational aspects, and challenges of evaluation. Respondents say that such exchanges have become increasingly purposeful and conclusive, with a greater focus on moving the field and developing products that will convey learning beyond the conference itself.

Self-organizing groups of funders and some of the field’s intermediaries and affinity groups have also established learning networks. These venues for information

*There is nothing more powerful than an organic learning system that brings together critical components of a community to learn from and teach each other, to uncover knowledge in both success and even failures, and to use that knowledge to effect positive and lasting change for all.*

**Paul Born**

exchange, discussion, advice, and engagement take several forms:

- The **Neighborhood Funders Group** (NFG) is a national network of foundations and philanthropic organizations that support community-based efforts to improve economic and social conditions in low-income communities. NFG provides information, learning opportunities, critical thinking, and other professional development activities to its members.

- The **Long-Term Funders Exchange**, which operated from 2003 through 2005, brought together leaders from four foundations and a foundation-sponsored initiative (AECF, Northwest Area Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, and the Urban Health Initiative of RWJ) involved in multi-site community-change initiatives. This network promoted high-level, candid conversations about pressing issues, such as evaluation, sustainability, community capacity, the nature and terms of partnership between foundations and communities, building political will, and community engagement.

- The **Executive Sessions for Community Foundation Leaders** (2002-2004), established by the Coalition of Community Foundations for Youth, was a more formally structured learning group. Organized by Chapin Hall Center for Children, it met for four, 4-day sessions. The goal of the meetings was to prepare community foundation leaders and their institutions for greater leadership around issues of children and families in low-income neighborhoods. The meetings combined peer consultations with substantive presentations by outside experts on strategic, leadership, and institutional issues. Participants developed individual work plans at the sessions and reported back on their implementation, outcomes, and remaining challenges. A paper, "Community Change Makers: The Leadership Roles of Community Foundations," captured and shared the knowledge that emerged from the sessions.

Not all foundation-sponsored learning networks are geared toward foundation leaders. Membership of the Aspen Roundtable for Community Change, for instance, encompasses funders, researchers, and practitioners who come together to share and discuss lessons, problems, and questions. The Roundtable uses these conversations to identify and articulate dilemmas and lessons at the broader field level and to identify ways that the Roundtable might help to advance a solution. The Roundtable has produced or commissioned reports on pressing topics, such as evaluation, race and racism, and comprehensive community-change initiatives. It has also initiated presentations and meetings with various audiences to move thinking forward on a topic.

## *Learning Through Collaboration*

Foundation collaborations have emerged as important learning venues. Collaborations come in many forms (e.g., strategic alignments, funding pools, joint ventures, hybrid networks) and exist for many purposes (e.g., to address substantive or geographic concerns, advocate policy changes, respond to a crisis, or address an emerging problem). The overarching objective, however, usually is to give funders a greater impact on a problem or issue by aggregating money and visibility.

*When you put people in a collaborative with a democratic structure, where equality matters because they are making decisions in common, then you get something that really matters.... They have to learn to solve problems collectively, and the collaborative structure itself really keeps people honest.*

**Elwood Hopkins**

Whether or not learning is a central goal at the beginning of a collaboration, it is assuredly one of the benefits that participants take away. In fact, without diminishing the other substantial achievements of funding collaborations, some respondents say that learning is often the most valuable product. Collaborations frequently increase the speed and quality of information, data, and ideas exchanged. They introduce new perspectives and expose participants to important intellectual resources. Moreover, they can expand the analytic capacity brought to bear on a problem and lead to the development of new concepts, knowledge, tools, and approaches.

Some respondents attribute collaborations' learning power to a focus on a specific project and set of outcomes. Well-focused collaborations tend to be more disciplined, intense, candid, and committed, they say. A collaboration's effectiveness also may lie in the common stake that participants share, Anne Kubisch suggests:

> I have a hypothesis that if foundations co-invest they are more likely to learn together than if they don't. For instance, the co-learning investment of Living Cities has required the foundations to all be on the board, to take the blame together, to share in the glory. And it's because they all have money on the table together. There is a value of a shared endeavor. If they don't have anything at stake, the chances that they will learn together are pretty slim.

One local funder collaborative with an explicit learning agenda is Los Angeles Urban Funders (LAUF), a collaboration of approximately thirty private and corporate foundations working in low-income neighborhoods in the Los Angeles basin. LAUF's goals are to (a) help funders gain an in-depth knowledge of three Los Angeles neighborhoods, coordinate their grant making within the communities, and work collaboratively at monthly meetings; (b) strengthen the capacity of leaders and organizations to collaborate on research and decision making in the communities; (c) create healthier neighborhoods by integrating human services, economic development, and community organizing; and (d) share lessons learned with other grant makers, neighborhood leaders, and policymakers.

Torie Osborn of the Liberty Hill Foundation observes that LAUF deepened and expanded her understanding of the community and modeled a way of working with community partners to generate a different kind of learning. It also was beneficial to have a critical mass of funders committed to the process for the long term. “We didn’t walk away. We kept coming back,” Osborn says. “Some things we did right and some things we didn’t, but we kept trying things and assessing our progress, and lessons unfolded. We revised our approach and made changes as we needed to. Learning is not a linear process.”

Some funders see collaborations as a way to improve foundation norms, particularly those related to learning. “A lot of things that work across foundations don’t work within foundations [because] the power of an individual foundation’s culture takes over,” notes LAUF’s Elwood Hopkins. “But, at its best, LAUF’s discussions and decision making…are based on the members’ intellectual contribution.”

# A Commitment to Share With the Broader Field

Foundations that learn often are foundations that share. These foundations see themselves as contributing members of a broader field of inquiry, with reciprocal obligations of openness. Their leaders view their organizations' knowledge and experience—good and bad—as an asset for the field. These funders are not naïve or unsophisticated about sharing information, however. They know they need to be strategic—to have a clear purpose for sharing, to define the audience with whom they are sharing, to choose the right time, and to tailor products to their audience's needs.

## Rationale

The biggest impediment to the field's progress may be when foundations withhold and/or fail to capture what is known. Conversely, one of the biggest opportunities for rapid development and improvement is when people share what they already know. Field leaders are hungry for all kinds of actionable information and believe there is something valuable to be learned from peers' experiences, regardless of whether the news is good or bad.

A willingness to share raises the standard for philanthropic practice (and learning) because it subjects foundation activities to more discussion and review. "Being public exposes you to questions and skepticism in ways that are very stimulating," one funder observes. Being open with knowledge also is a practical strategy for promoting a foundation's own immediate goals. At Irvine, for example, the purpose of sharing is to increase the leverage on investments. Sharing knowledge "extends the impact beyond our grants or opens up other opportunities," Martha Campbell explains. "By doing dissemination we are sometimes able to attract others to invest in the issue, or we are able reframe the debate around the issue so that it can be moved."

Sharing information widely adds an important dynamic to knowledge gathering by exposing ideas, information, and practices to other views and critiques, respondents say. Thus new proposals can compete with established (or "insider") thinking, which keeps the discourse fresh, disciplined, and attuned to emerging opportunities. Although public sharing raises legitimate concerns about risk in the short term, respondents say that the cost of excessive privacy—missed opportunities, unchallenged conventions, and the repetition of stale approaches—is even greater.

## Emerging Solutions

Foundations are making commitments to share knowledge with the field by committing to "publicness" with lessons and findings rather than privacy and by being strategic about the dissemination of what they learn.

### *Committing to "Publicness"*

Foundations are a trove of untapped information, experience, and lessons. As Tim Wilmot notes, "There are so many white papers kept within foundation walls. We're just in our infancy [as a field] in being able to pull this knowledge into an archive and make it available to grantees." The balance between the risks and rewards of publicness still tips toward privacy. And with privacy as the norm, foundation staff who push for greater publicness must argue why a document or other communication should be released.

*My orientation is [to] share information in an appropriate time and format as much as possible. However, every foundation has really terrible projects that they're supporting, whether they realize it or not.…If it's a real stinkeroo, you might want to let it die a quiet, natural death. On the other hand, the negative results might be important information for others to learn about.*

**Laura Leviton**

Sharing is a challenge for many foundations. Some leaders have a narrow sense of independence; they may not consider themselves part of a broader field with reciprocal obligations. Some may not recognize knowledge as an asset and, therefore, part of the potential value added to community change by the foundation. And few want to be exposed or embarrassed by public criticism. According to AECF's Tom Kern:

> The hesitancy to share or give away knowledge is due to a fear that it might be misrepresented or misunderstood. And there are lots of valid reasons for that. Is it ready for sharing? Are there competitive issues? Proprietary concerns? Data sensitivity or confidentiality issues? A worry that "learnings" might be misapplied or assumed to be replicable when they might be dependant on local variables? Other legitimate conversations that need to be had before release?

Many foundation leaders are eager to put the best face on their work, respondents say—even when it means deflecting criticism onto grantees instead of acknowledging the existence of doubts, problems, and mistakes. There are some exceptions. "Nothing in the foundation world should be proprietary; we try to share all our publications whether they reflect poorly on us or not [and] we think everyone else should do the same," says Schwab's Alexa Culwell. Similarly, AECF's Tom Kern explains that the foundation's Knowledge Management division starts with the premise that everything should be shared. If staff push back, he says, "My challenge to us is, 'why aren't we sharing?'"

Publicness is not an absolute value, however. Respondents acknowledge that it isn't smart to be open when the information is uncertain, key stakeholders haven't signed off, or the release would compromise work at a crucial point. Notably, protecting one's own institution from embarrassment is not one of their allowable reasons.

## *Being Smart About Sharing*

Publicness is only the first step in committing to share knowledge with the field. Foundations also must convey their knowledge in ways that have potential to generate positive changes. Yet respondents say that most foundations think too little about how they share and disseminate. "Foundations rarely invest the money to develop and implement a thorough dissemination strategy for their evaluation, and don't want to take the time to get their work placed in peer review journals," says evaluator Susan Philliber of Philliber Research Associates.

Moreover, simply providing information falls short of producing positive change. "Informing the public isn't usually enough to change major policy or systems; you need a broad strategy for that," says Cynthia Curreri of the Urban Health Initiative. Thus foundations need to be smart about what, why, how, when, with whom, and in what form they share what they know. In particular, our respondents suggested, they need to:

**Share on purpose.** Foundations need a clear sense of what their sharing is supposed to accomplish or stimulate. "In sharing knowledge beyond immediate stakeholders, we seek to understand and communicate the characteristics of well-implemented programs, what works for whom, and to focus on understanding the relationship between activities and outcomes—which activities work," explains Irvine's Martha Campbell. "We try to think very carefully about the specific purposes when we decide to invest in dissemination or sharing of learning."

**Identify the audience.** Foundations are putting more energy and thought into who they share information with. Irvine leaders, for instance, see their audience as "people at other foundations, practitioners beyond our grantees, researchers who study this work, and consultants who work in these areas." But they don't stop there; communications staff use rigorous, systematic techniques to learn about prospective audiences and the kinds of communication they consider most effective, Cambell says:

> We identify specific narrow target audiences. We invest in market research of our prospective audiences, interviewing representatives of their audience about the resonance of specific lessons and learning, about how to position learning, and about how to package it….For instance, we try to be very specific about the level of staff we are speaking to.

The Wallace Foundation takes a different approach. Its knowledge-building efforts target specific sectors, and within them foundation leaders are concerned about relying too heavily on defenders of the status quo. "There is nothing wrong with supporting the status quo and with helping build them up and become more stable, but it's not about learning that creates change," notes Edward Pauly. He and his colleagues turned instead to the technology field's theories of diffusion, adoption, and innovation to develop a framework for targeting *innovators* and *early adopters*—those people in organization who are most likely to respond positively to new ideas and to influence others in turn. Pauly comments:

> Innovators and early adopters respond to these documents with their own ideas. They are the ones who will take it and move forward.… Everyone else will read it and say it's horrible because it's too negative, or it will hurt the field, or something else to dismiss it. The people who are able to have the conversation about strengthening programs on evidence are the change agents. The defensive people are not going to help you move forward.

**Choose the right time to share.** When is the right time to engage the field in a particular lesson? Some foundation leaders want to avoid the presumption that they have the answer to a problem, even when they have some useful knowledge to share. AECF staff, for instance, were explicit about wanting to understand their *Making Connections* experience internally before discussing it with people outside the foundation. The establishment of a Knowledge Management unit was one step in preparing for that conversation. According to Tom Kern, "The sequence was first to try to figure out how to improve our internal learning, as a precursor to helping learning and knowledge-sharing with grantees, and to better leverage and engage with like-minded foundations."

**Shape products to reach target audiences.** Foundations and intermediaries produce a variety of products—blogs, newsletters, users' guides, toolkits, discussion papers, presentations, and videos. One size does not fit all, and different audiences respond to different kinds of knowledge products. Respondents suggest that knowledge producers need to be more sensitive and creative about choosing and shaping products for their audiences. Sometimes size or format is a barrier; a sixty-page paper may need to be boiled down to a more useable five pages. Sometimes it's a matter of finding the right way to convey a message so that it is heard. For instance, AECF staff got more traction by framing discussions with civic leaders in terms of "closing the gap between children in disinvested neighborhoods and other children in the same city" than with the language of poverty alleviation. Sometimes it's a matter of translating a document into a different language or adjusting its cultural context. And sometimes a written document is not the right vehicle at all.

**Reach the target audience.** Ideally, vehicles for sharing knowledge attract widespread notice and help the audience understand, learn from, and apply the knowledge. These include mailing lists, "web blasts," conference presentations, and partnerships with organizations that can boost dissemination (e.g., Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, Council on Foundations). Often, foundations choose multiple delivery vehicles instead of only one. They also engage potential information users in knowledge creation so that the product is born with a ready-made audience.

The Internet has become an efficient way to disseminate information (especially in series format) and to evaluate and respond to user demand. For instance, one foundation developed an internal research and news update to help program officers keep abreast of research and developments. The foundation's research librarian conducted weekly Lexis-Nexis searches in major program areas; program officers eventually began forwarding the updates to grantees, who suggested tracking state-level policy too. The librarian added grantees to the circulation list, which quickly grew from a dozen people to more than 1,000, including grantees, practitioners, and policymakers. As the updates developed a widespread reputation, readers began emailing news to the librarian.

# Investment in a Broad and Useable Knowledge Base

*There is a tendency in the field to take the task of stepping back and acknowledging what we know (and don't know) too lightly. The first step is to invest in learning where the field is right now and where it is stuck, and to be deeply in tune with and clear about what we really know, what we have hunches about, and what we don't know.*

**Anne Kubisch**

Most learning-oriented foundations make an investment in producing useable knowledge for the philanthropic field. Their leaders see learning, sharing, and accountability as going hand in hand. They understand the strengths and limitations of various methods for gaining knowledge, various kinds of knowledge, and various information sources. In a complex enterprise like community change, learning leaders know that information will always be incomplete, partial, and dynamic. Nonetheless, they also believe that decision makers can make more informed and better decisions with a knowledge base that is rigorous, broad, integrated, multi-disciplinary, multi-dimensional, and applicable. Increasingly, these foundation leaders are willing to work with other funders, practitioners, and researchers to pursue common questions, pool resources, test shared hypotheses, and find demonstrable answers.

## Rationale

Despite considerable progress in recent years, the extent and nature of philanthropy's knowledge about critical ideas and issues in community change is uneven, partial, and often disconnected from users' needs. There are many reasons for this, including the field's complexity. As AECF's Tom Kern notes:

> Community change work is unique in that it calls for everyone's expertise and [for] people from many different areas to work together. No one person knows everything that is needed, so people have to call on help. A leader may come in with deep expertise in one area but will need to access other areas of knowledge and skills to make [change] happen.

Limited knowledge leads to slow progress, both because of what is missing and because of a lack of attention to the knowledge that already exists. "People continue to do this work because it is compelling, and thus they jump right in and make the same mistakes over and over, rather than taking the time to understand what has worked and what hasn't in the past," Rockefeller's Julia Lopez observes.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to detail the full range of issues and solutions involved in the knowledge base for community change. We are concerned here with what foundations can do about it (although we acknowledge that foundations do not bear the sole responsibility). Part of the solution involves making the institutional changes in foundations described throughout this paper. Part entails improving evaluation and other practices for harvesting knowledge. And part lies in reconceptualizing the kind of knowledge base needed and committing to building it.

## Emerging Solutions

Foundations are taking steps to develop a broad and useable base of knowledge to advance the field of community change. Solutions include:

### *Harvesting Useable Knowledge*

A great deal of potentially useful knowledge already exists within the walls of individual foundations and nonprofits that is considered proprietary or that has not been gathered, synthesized, or interpreted, respondents say. The knowledge management functions emerging in some foundations will help to address this problem. Other steps include:

**Gathering.** The first task is simply to gather together the existing information and research on a broad spectrum of community-change activities. Although gathering does not usually involve assessing the quality of evidence behind the information, it nonetheless has merit. RWJ's Robert Hughes explains, "The needed knowledge is often in our staff's heads and we just need to figure out the costs and benefits of transferring that knowledge to everyone else and develop effective mechanisms to do so."

Gathering can involve interviewing practitioners about a particular approach or set of issues, writing up an approach, or capturing a piece of knowledge that a foundation has generated. For example, leaders of the Jacobs Family Foundation struggled to secure bank financing for a commercial development project in San Diego's Diamond Neighborhood before deciding to mortgage the foundation's assets and generate the capital themselves. The financial maneuver was complex but successful; trustee Norm Hapke realized that lessons learned from the experience might help other funders, so the foundation gathered and organized the information for publication.

Gathering can involve synthesizing insights into philanthropic practice across foundations. The GrantCraft (www.grantcraft.org) and Practice Matters (www.fdncenter.org/for_grantmakers) initiatives do this type of work to report on community change and other issues.

Gathering also involves collecting and organizing disparate pieces of knowledge from multiple sources. The best of these efforts are web-based. For example, the Fannie Mae Foundation and its partners developed KnowledgePlex, a web-based inventory of information designed to support practitioners, grantors, policymakers, scholars, investors, and others involved or interested in affordable housing and community development. KnowledgePlex organizes and presents the most up-to-date, comprehensive collection of publications from its partner organizations, including research, case studies, best practices, scholarly articles, opinion pieces, and news stories from thousands of publications nationwide. KnowledgePlex also offers discussion forums on the same topics as its documents. Similarly, the Aspen Roundtable developed an annotated bibliography of high-quality community-building resources (www.Commbuild.org).

**Synthesizing and integrating.** The next task is to synthesize the wealth of information, assess its quality, extract its significance, and make connections among different pieces of information. For example:

- **AECF** commissioned a series of "Dispatches" that explain how the foundation approached various aspects of Making Connections, the issues encountered along the way, and lessons learned. Other AECF papers synthesize what the foundation has learned across initiatives about a specific topic, such as providing technical assistance. AECF views these products as part of an ongoing dialogue with other philanthropies.

- The **Campbell Collaboration** provides formal evidence-based reviews and syntheses of research and evaluations of interventions (mostly random control trials) in targeted fields.

- The web-based **Pathways to Outcomes** (www.pathwaystooutcomes.org), a project of the Pathways Mapping Initiative (PMI), is an extensive guide to "what works" to help community coalitions, service providers, funders, and policymakers improve selected outcomes, including school readiness and family economic success. The Pathways are organized around goals that identify the major spheres in which communities can act—such as good health, supportive social and cognitive environments, and safe strong neighborhoods for the school readiness Pathway—and major priorities within each goal. The Pathways describe specific actions that contribute to the outcome; key ingredients of effectiveness; indicators that help communities assess progress; the research-based reasons to believe that identified actions are likely to contribute to the desired outcome; and examples of programs and strategies that illustrate the guidance.

**Interpreting.** A third task is to interpret the implications of knowledge so that its relevance for practice and policy can be more easily discerned. Examples include:

- The **Urban Institute's** paper and meeting on "Overcoming Concentrated Poverty & Isolation: Lessons from Three HUD Demonstration Initiatives." The paper looks at the experience of three HUD-funded programs (Moving to Opportunity, Bridges to Work, and Jobs Plus). A subsequent meeting of researchers and practitioners explored and articulated the policy implications of these findings.

- **RWJ's** support for the Urban Health Seminar at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government brought together leading academics, practitioners, and policymakers with Urban Health Initiative participants to expose the entire group to the latest thinking and developments in one or more aspects of community change. Designed to complement and augment the evaluation process, this exchange helped to synthesize academic and on-the-ground learning and draw out the broader implications.

- The **Wallace Foundation** has commissioned research to synthesize, integrate, and interpret knowledge on such topics as the connection between student performance and school leadership. These papers draw out the meaning of the knowledge, the gaps in the knowledge base, and the aspects that appear most (and least) promising.

- The **Aspen Roundtable** publication "Voices II: Reflections on Comprehensive Community Change" captures the state of practice from a cross-section of practitioners, researchers, and funders in the field. It also draws conclusions about next steps for the field.

Notwithstanding these examples, respondents say the field often falls short when it comes to interpretation. In particular, respondents emphasize the need to raise discussion to the strategic level. "Learning is most helpful when it happens at the strategic level as opposed to the operational level, but it is much easier for foundations to focus their learning on how to do things fast," Roberto Cremonini observes. "At the Barr Foundation, we want reflections from the 30,000-foot view to improve not just the way we act but [the] way we think and achieve."

## *Evaluating to Learn*

Many evaluations are done primarily to monitor and assess grantee performance. Although respondents say there is nothing wrong with using evaluation for that purpose, they emphasize that evaluation can contribute much more to foundation learning and grantee performance than it currently does. Respondents see evaluation as a dynamic and forward-looking tool for understanding and measuring progress toward goals, as well as a mechanism to contribute useable knowledge more broadly. An effective evaluation may help a foundation understand what is required to get results, make operational improvements, determine the cost of achieving results, or assess a strategy's effect on community residents' lives. Thus, as Spence Limbocker suggests, "Getting foundations to think about and incorporate evaluation into their work needs to go hand in hand with getting them to take more seriously the knowledge and learning piece."

The following dimensions of evaluation contribute to useful knowledge:

**A clear and balanced purpose.** Respondents say it is crucial for evaluation to have a clear purpose and a commitment not only to monitoring and assessing performance but to (a) using data to build the capacity and performance and (b) contributing to the knowledge of the field. Learning and accountability are not in opposition; in fact, says Spence Limbocker, "results, outcomes and learning go hand in hand":

> Part of the reason that knowledge, information management, and the emphasis on outcomes are coming around at the same time is that they help you improve your practice. [Setting up] evaluation and learning processes…to gather knowledge [is] very different from setting them up to punish.

Foundation leaders also need a clear sense of how they will use evaluation findings. "There need to be practical implications for what you are learning. If you do formal evaluation, then you need to come out with something that is relevant and useful about what makes it work or not, and then that needs to be communicated to the field," notes Aspen Roundtable's Patricia Auspos.

Positioning learning as a central goal of evaluation may alter not only what gets evaluated and the way it is evaluated but the entire project design. Respondents agree that learning questions should shape interventions (when appropriate) rather than adding on a new component post-design. They also believe that this can be done without imposing a foundation's agenda on the community.

**Realistic expectations for the work *and* the evaluation.** Evaluation strategies should reflect realistic expectations for community change, including a clear definition of the problem, an explication of underlying assumptions, and a grounding in other sources of knowledge. Susan Philliber explains:

> Foundations need to come at evaluations with clear short-term and long-term goals in mind and a logic model that can be assessed for how they want to achieve these goals. It becomes a bad situation for everyone when evaluators find themselves having to derive these starting points for themselves half-way through an evaluation.

Evaluations also need to emerge from a realistic sense of what evaluation can and cannot accomplish. Foundation staff and board expectations for evaluation tend to be overblown, respondents say; some expect a level of proof that even the best evaluation of community change cannot provide. According to Susan Philliber:

> The attribution question in community change initiatives is probably the most difficult to address and it is near impossible to develop a rigorous control for this work. As a result, someone can always point to these evaluations and say that the foundation's work was not responsible for the change demonstrated. Some foundations don't always recognize that this is the case, because they have invested an enormous amount of money into essentially trying to prove that they are changing a community in a certain way because of their investment.

**Engaging subjects and building their capacity for self-evaluation.** Respondents believe that foundations should recognize the effect evaluation has on grantees and be open to sustained discussion about its purpose and implementation. "We try to work with our grantees to understand that a small investment in learning and capacity building can ultimately have a big return on improving their ability to improve the lives of their participants," Ricardo Millet says. "We also try to placate their anxiety by not even using the term evaluation and letting them know that we are interested in improving, not proving."

Self-evaluation is an important part of the learning process. Thus evaluations with a balanced purpose often have strategies for building grantees' capacity to understand and monitor their own performance and to extract and apply lessons learned. Some respondents suggest that evaluation should be done in collaboration with grantees to make sure it is relevant and applicable. "It's impressive when a foundation gets all the players together around an issue and asks, 'How do we move the needle?'

and then helps these players to take action and evaluate progress sector-wide," Tim Wilmot observes.

**Choosing an appropriate level for study.** If a foundation supports several grantees working on a common strategy, should the evaluation focus on individual grantee performance or on whether the overall effort is succeeding? Cluster evaluations can help in this instance, respondents say. The Irvine Foundation, for example, generally evaluates clusters of work funded under similar areas that are in place for a long time, which leaders say produces information that can be used "more strategically." Similarly, Wallace's Edward Pauly says "there's not much point in doing evaluation of a single program for its own sake":

> The questions have to be strategic and linked to future choices. Some of the ground we work is very new and it's difficult to anticipate what will be relevant. So we ask, "Who's going to recognize what is relevant?" Then we need to make sure that those people are apprised of the evaluation design and preliminary results in a timely way so that they can help make it better.

*There should never be a debate that pits qualitative and process measures against quantitative and outcome results. Every evaluation should try to include different types of data, which all have their uses depending upon the circumstance, in order to get the most robust picture possible of community change.*

SUSAN PHILLIBER

**Using an array of strategies.** Instead of thinking of evaluation as a single-method exercise, some respondents recommend a continuum of assessment strategies to collect relevant information. Documentation, case studies, self-assessment, process evaluation, focus groups, and key stakeholder interviews all may contribute to an evaluation, in addition to surveys, administrative data, and other quantitative measures. Evaluation strategies shouldn't be mixed on an ad hoc basis, however. It requires careful thought on the front end and a well-developed process for integrating the sources of information to tell a consistent story, respondents say.

**Active and useful feedback mechanisms.** Evaluations are most useful when they produce information in real time that subjects can use to make in-course improvements. Not all information needs to be "final" to be helpful. Because some programmatic approaches are decidedly experimental and their outcomes uncertain, feedback can help a foundation identify what is important or what needs to be refined. "We try to share findings from our evaluations on an ongoing basis rather than waiting until the end of the evaluation," says RWJ's Laura Leviton. "Even pulling together baseline information or setting up a framework for looking at an issue can be helpful to grantees and others."

**Answering common questions.** Most evaluations ask and answer questions from one foundation's perspective. Consequently, the findings may not easily apply to other circumstances or initiatives. Respondents suggest that evaluations would be more useful if they included more information about project design, assumptions, theory, research basis, et cetera so readers have more context for understanding the report. Others call for an effort to develop common evaluation questions, frameworks, or typologies. "Yes, each community is unique, but there ought to be ways to learn at an aggregated level about a cross-cutting question, such as how to strengthen community capacity," Anne Kubisch says.

> There are ways to classify the kinds of capacities that communities have and assess what more they need so that you can identify the range of strategies that will be most effective. If we do more of this, perhaps we can move beyond the "every community is unique" quagmire and start with "if a community has A, B, and C types of capacity then it needs one kind of intervention, whereas if it has X, Y, and Z types of capacity it needs this other intervention.'"

## *Thinking About a New Kind of Knowledge Base*

A fundamental barrier to improving the knowledge base, according to respondents, is the way foundation leaders and staff think about knowledge. Many believe that valid knowledge comes only from sophisticated evaluations and academic-style research. But respondents argue that the philanthropic field needs to broaden and clarify its thinking about the nature and sources of knowledge, the roles of various stakeholders in building the knowledge base, and how foundations might contribute the field's knowledge. Consideration of those issues would highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the current knowledge base and spawn priorities and investments for knowledge development.

Our respondents called for a new kind of common knowledge base that is rigorous, broad, integrated, coherent, multi-disciplinary, multi-dimensional, and useful for decision making. Characteristics of such a knowledge base include:

**A practical learning purpose.** Practitioners and foundation staff must make decisions every day. They patch together the best knowledge they can and use their judgment to fill in the gaps. Thus the need for better knowledge is not an abstract search for "final truths" but a profoundly practical need for a better pool of useable information. Our respondents do not see learning as passive, self-reflective, or merely academic. To them, it is a powerful and practical tool for change, whether directly—

as when one foundation's research on homelessness influenced city policy—or indirectly, as seen in the subtle changes institutions make to evolve over time.

*The ability to make good decisions rests on the ability to make reasonable judgments and avoid irresponsible practices in the face of incomplete information.*

**Lisbeth Schorr**

**A basis in science and reasonable judgment.** Knowledge should be based on the best possible evidence that exists. But the breadth and complexity of the community-change field, combined with the limitations of evaluation methodology, mean that the information inevitably is incomplete. It is possible to fill the gaps in knowledge with information from other fields and methods and by the systematic use of theory, logic, analogy, insight, practice, and creativity to make plausible connections. Although plausible connections are not the same as proof, they often give decision makers enough guidance to make intelligent choices.

**A multi-disciplinary and methodologically diverse approach.** Knowledge about community change should not be defined exclusively, or even primarily, by program evaluation. Evaluation often is seen as the way to learn, notes the Aspen Roundtable's Patricia Auspos, but there also are non-evaluative ways. "There needs to be a spectrum of learning. It's not just that there are problems with the way evaluations are done; it is that even with better evaluation, there would still be… basic information you can't get from evaluations."

A multi-pronged approach to learning values the insight and experience of practitioners and, in many cases, engages practitioners as co-creators of knowledge. It draws from research beyond the walls of one foundation and its grantees. It includes community data on key issues, staff knowledge of effective strategies and practices, information derived from the experiences of community leaders, public-sector data, research reports, evaluation data, the institutional memory of long-term grant makers and grantees, and so on. And it provides guidance on ways to weigh, synthesize, and make sense of the diverse sources.

**A dynamic quality.** Because community change is an emerging and fast-changing field, the information collected will necessarily evolve over time. Respondents say that planning for a dynamic knowledge base will allow the field to orient itself toward change. "The whole point should be that foundations are learning as they are doing, and changing what they do as they learn," says Patricia Auspos.

> Learning should be an ongoing, unfolding process rather than something that happens at the beginning and at the end of a project. If the tendency is to look for lessons at the end, then the learning isn't likely to lead the foundation anywhere because it has probably already moved on to doing something else.

# Conclusion: A Field that Learns

This paper identifies and describes seven domains in which foundations report progress on learning and supports the descriptions with examples drawn from current practice. Implicit in our approach is a view that thinking about learning for community change entails thinking about foundations' mission and structure, leadership, partnerships, and sharing, as well as thinking about the nature and content of the knowledge base. Thinking more effectively about learning for community change also means acknowledging the link between individual foundation learning and the field's learning. To most of our respondents, the core components of foundations that learn interact within foundations and across the field in dynamic and mutually reinforcing ways.

Learning is an emerging priority with broad implications for foundations, and many are still experimenting with ways to grow and institutionalize their approach to learning. Thus this paper is descriptive and analytic rather than critical or evaluative. As foundations' approaches mature, however, it will become important to sort out the benefits and tradeoffs of the approaches to learning that we describe. The most pressing issues include:

***Risk and learning.*** Many foundation boards are averse to struggling efforts, even when they offer opportunity for learning. The desire for initiatives that are assured of success poses a challenge, because the field of community change is uncertain and emerging. Consequently, it may be that not every foundation will want to engage in community change. At the same time, learning becomes even more important for those funders who understand and accept the risks and the possible payoffs, because they have potential to build a long-term field of knowledge and practice. The challenge is to expand board understanding of the important potential of learning from community change.

***Identifying the quality of learning.*** Most of our foundation respondents believe they do a good job of valuing learning and drawing lessons from their grantees and external sources, but they think that the broader field struggles in this regard. This may indicate a lack of consensus on what "real learning" actually entails and what kind of evidence would show that a foundation is engaged in it. Respondents also say that (a) most foundations don't assess the quality of their learning and (b) they don't know whether their learning is of a consistently high quality and whether the sources are sufficiently balanced. The challenge is to identify, assess, and manage the quality of the knowledge that foundations are generating.

***Evaluating the impact of learning.*** Most respondents participate in a variety of affinity groups, conferences, and forums to gather useful information, and they have made many institutional changes to generate and capture learning. Yet how all this learning affects their practice (either informally or formally) is unclear. Similarly, many respondents are trying to use web sites, Intranets, listservs, databases, teleconferences, and other technology as learning tools. These media can offer exposure and easy access to information, but whether they make people more willing or effective learners is unknown. Few foundations describe specific processes for identifying and evaluating whether and how their strategies change as a result of their learning and whether the changes lead to better practices. The challenge is to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of learning both within foundations and on their work with communities.

***Building in accountability for learning.*** Some respondents mention the general lack of accountability for foundations' performance as an obstacle to learning. Who challenges foundations to learn and improve? Because the learning agendas of most foundations are not specific or publicly shared, it is hard to know whether foundations are meeting their own learning goals. The challenge is to encourage greater foundation accountability for learning and continuous improvement.

***Assessing the relative merits of different learning approaches.*** This paper reports on many different types of learning structures, processes, tools, and products. Some were informed by developments in other fields and some emerged organically from a foundation's own practices. Eventually, the field will need to understand their relative merits. Some may prove more effective than others, or they may prove more effective in a particular set of community circumstances, or they may be better suited to a certain kind of foundation. The challenge is to compare and assess the costs, benefits, and effects of different approaches to learning and the circumstances in which they are most effective.

***Understanding the distinctive challenges of learning for community change.*** As noted throughout this paper, the field of community change is in the early stages of development and it draws on many disciplines. This makes it difficult to fit the subject into any well-established area of knowledge. Moreover, foundations are important players in community change as providers of resources and generators of knowledge—a situation that is not true in other areas of philanthropic work where the knowledge base is more mature or where foundations play a comparatively minor role. Thus learning about what the community-change field has accomplished and is doing may be a more critical part of a foundation's learning agenda. It may also affect a foundation's learning strategies, focusing them on stimulating and influencing learning field-wide rather than on the foundation's own learning. The challenge is to figure out the extent to which the philanthropic learning components described in this paper are linked to the field of community change, how applicable they are to philanthropy generally, and how the characteristics of other fields might lead foundations to approach learning differently.

***Building a learning agenda for the field.*** As a group, the foundations involved in community change will need to work more closely with each other, with researchers, and with practitioners to build a common knowledge base and learning agenda. Foundations are unlikely to answer key questions or build effective knowledge by acting in isolation. Moreover, learning is an expensive endeavor when tackled alone; it becomes more feasible through collaboration and cooperative arrangements. The challenge is to bring a group of interested foundation leaders together, find agreement on a set of answerable questions and learning priorities, and work to find answers in their own initiatives and through other knowledge development activities.

## Appendix: Interviews

Patricia Auspos
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The Aspen Institute
Roundtable on Community
Change

Gale Berkowitz
Evaluation Director
The David and Lucile
Packard Foundation

Lucy Bernholz
President
Blueprint Research & Design,
Inc.

Paul Born
President
Tamarack Institute

Martha Campbell
Vice President for Programs
James B. Irvine Foundation

Roberto Cremonini
Chief Knowledge and Learning
Officer
Barr Foundation

Alexa Cortes Culwell
Chief Executive Officer
Charles and Helen Schwab
Foundation

Cynthia Curreri
Deputy Director
Urban Health Initiative

Cynthia Guy
Senior Research Associate
The Annie E. Casey Foundation

Norm Hapke
Trustee
Jacobs Family Foundation

Deborah Holloway
Trustee and former Executive
Director
The Seabury Foundation

Elwood Hopkins
Executive Director
Los Angeles Urban Funders
&
Managing Director
Emerging Markets, Inc.

Robert Hughes
Chief Learning Officer
Robert Wood Johnson
Foundation

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Director of Community
Activities and Learning
Northwest Area Foundation

Tom Kern
Senior Associate
Annie E. Casey Foundation

Barbara Kibbe
Director of Programs
Skoll Foundation

Anne C. Kubisch
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Laura Leviton, PhD.
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Spence Limbocker
Executive Director
Neighborhood Funders Group

Julia Lopez
Senior Vice President
The Rockefeller Foundation

Dara Major
Special Assistant to the
Executive Director
Surdna Foundation

## Appendix: Interviews continued

Mike Maidenberg
Vice President and Chief
Program Officer
James L. Knight Foundation

Ricardo Millett
President
Woods Fund

Ray Murphy
Civil Society Program Director
C.S. Mott Foundation

Sally Osberg
President
Skoll Foundation

Torie Osborn
Executive Director
Liberty Hill Foundation

Edward Pauly
Director of Evaluation
The Wallace Foundation

Anne Petersen
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Lisbeth Schorr
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Sarita Sigueros
Evaluation Officer
Marguerite Casey Foundation

Vince Stehle
Program Officer for Nonprofit
Sector Support
Surdna Foundation

Chantel Walker
Director of Programs and
Evaluation
Marguerite Casey Foundation

Gary Walker
President
Public/Private Ventures

Tim Wilmot
Managing Director
The Collaboration Company

## Chapin Hall Center for Children

Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago was established in 1985 as a research and development center dedicated to bringing sound information, rigorous analyses, innovative ideas, and an independent perspective to the ongoing public debate about the needs of children and the ways in which those needs can best be met.

The Center focuses its work on all children, while devoting special attention to children facing special risks or challenges, such as poverty, abuse and neglect, and mental and physical illness. The contexts in which children are supported — primarily their families and communities — are of particular interest.

Chapin Hall's work is shaped by a dual commitment to the worlds of research and policy. This requires that our work meet both the exacting standards of university research and the practical needs of policy and program development, and that we work to advance knowledge and to disseminate it.

Chapin Hall is committed to diversity not only of experience, discipline, and viewpoint, but also of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and physical ability. Chapin Hall's commitment to all children, with special attention to those experiencing or at risk of serious problems, is reflected in the range of the Center's research projects and publications. The following represent the Center's major areas of endeavor:

- Children's services, covering the problems that threaten children and the systems designed to address them, including child welfare, mental health, public assistance, education, and juvenile justice.
- Community building, focusing on the development, documentation, and evaluating of community-building initiatives designed to make communities more supportive of children and families, and the resources in communities that support the development and well-being of all children.
- International projects, covering Chapin Hall's collaboration with children's policy researchers and research centers in other countries.

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