

Typically, grantmakers think of evaluation as something done after the grant has been made. In fact, it is more useful to ask yourself questions before you award the grant. What do we hope to achieve with this grant? How will we recognize the organization's progress? What will success look like? Clarifying expectations allows you and your grantees to stay focused on the goals. It also can avoid misunderstandings and disappointments down the road.

Large foundations have routinely used grants agreements to spell out their expectations of grantees. Now, more and more small and mid-size foundations are also discovering their value. In addition to outlining the program expectations, grants agreements can spell out legal requirements, preferences regarding publicity, and other issues that protect the foundation and ensure common understanding. They take time to write, but the time is well spent.

Write a letter to each grantee outlining the requirements of the grant. The requirements repeat the objectives the grantee enumerated in the proposal. Tell grantees that you would like them to address each of the objectives in their final report to you. (If the grant is large, you may request a brief interim report.) Encourage the grantees to contact you quickly if they have questions or want to clarify the objectives you have listed.

The original objectives often have to be modified once a project gets underway. However, if grantees make any significant changes, tell them that you expect them to notify you. Finally, remind grantees that the purpose of the report is to allow you to learn from them. The insights they share help you to sharpen your thinking about grantmaking.