

Evaluating Grants

A Brief Guide

An Overview of Evaluations

Evaluations encompass a broad range of assessment practices, and terminology changes depending on the source of information. There are three general categories of evaluation:

- **Project Evaluations** entail the assessment of individual grants. They may include both process, or formative, evaluations, which examine *how* a project was conducted, and outcome, or summative, evaluations, which examine the *results* of a project.

- **Cluster Evaluations** involve examining a group of projects that target a single theme. When several grants to numerous organizations are related to a specific issue, a cluster evaluation can determine how effectively the projects are complimenting each other and is an ideal means for sharing best practices.

- **Program Evaluations** frequently are assessments of the foundation's work that examine how well programmatic themes are being addressed. They may ask questions including "Are the best proposals being identified and funded?", "Are program goals being achieved?", and "How is the donor/foundation perceived by the grantee?"

While acknowledging the importance of Cluster and Program Evaluations, this guide will focus on Project Evaluations.

Why Evaluate?

There are three important reasons for conducting project evaluations. First, taking the time to examine how a project was conducted and what its outcomes were is the best means of determining whether or not it was successful. Was the project carried out according to plan? Were the expected impacts realized? What happened that was unexpected?

Second, incorporating an evaluation plan into the project planning process helps ensure that realistic objectives are established that are measurable and/or observable, and that the right activities are planned to meet those objectives. It requires a clear articulation of what the goals are and how they will be achieved, and establishes the means by which success will be measured.

Finally, conducting an evaluation is a means of documenting what has been learned and capturing best practices in a form that can be easily shared. This provides benefits to a) the funder when refining grantmaking strategies, b) the grantee, who can apply lessons learned to future work, and c) other organizations that can learn from the project's successes and failures.

Planning an Evaluation

Project evaluation should be a continuous activity that involves all of the stakeholders.

- **continuous** in that evaluation is an ongoing process, not an event. If evaluation occurs throughout the duration of the project, and the project is sufficiently flexible, then preliminary findings can be used to change the project mid-course in order to address unexpected results or unforeseen circumstances.

- **involves all of the stakeholders** who have an interest in the outcome of the project. An evaluation will provide more useful feedback, and will be taken more seriously, if it reflects the information needs of everyone involved, from those conducting the project to those funding it, being served by it, serving on the board of the organization implementing it, those hoping to conduct a similar project in the future, and those making public policy decisions related to the project¹.

Incorporating an evaluation plan from the beginning makes the evaluation an integral part of the project process rather than an add-on activity. The *evaluation process* should be as valuable as the *evaluation's findings*. Ensure that the evaluation is viewed as relevant, credible, and actionable by the grantee, and they will be more likely to appreciate its value and to actively participate.

¹ This list of a project's various stakeholders was articulated in *Mapping a Path for Evaluation: A planning guide*, produced by Girl's Best Friend Foundation, Chicago, Illinois, USA.

Some other elements to consider:

- **Capacity building:** Some organizations, particularly small ones, lack the ability to conduct evaluations. Investing in capacity building will improve the quality of the evaluation and the likelihood that it will be used by the grantee to improve current and subsequent work.
- **Funding:** It costs money to evaluate effectively and usefully. It requires an investment on the part of the funder as well as the grantee. For example, the Girl's Best Friend Foundation of Chicago automatically awards an extra 10% to grantees in order to support evaluation activities, and it requires grantees attend two workshops on evaluation.
- **Information sharing:** Support the dissemination of evaluations, including orally at conferences and in a publicly-available version of the project report. Consider supporting a convening of grantee organizations for learning purposes (without being evaluated or judged). This presents an opportunity for funders to learn as well, and to refine grantmaking strategies.
- **Objectivity:** Is the evaluation funder-driven or grantee-driven? Whose questions are being answered? (answer: both). Be honest about the shortcomings of the project – encourage honesty and candor from stakeholders. Too often, funders want justifications that their money was well spent and grantees want to highlight their strengths in order to secure additional funding. Should the grantor conduct the project evaluation, or should an independent evaluation consultant be hired?
- **Focus:** Evaluations should be focused, not necessarily all-encompassing. Examining a few things well will be more useful to stakeholders than a broad, shallow evaluation report. An evaluation that is too time-consuming will be regarded as burdensome by the grantee, and its quality will suffer.
- **Findings:** Once an evaluation has been completed, sufficient funding should be made available to support the implementation of the evaluation's findings, both on behalf of the donor and the grantee. An important element of an evaluation is how it is used to improve future activities including program planning and strategy development

Many evaluation concepts transcend specific issue areas. Conversations with other funders, regardless of their areas of interest, may yield useful insights concerning evaluation practices.

Consider funding longer-term evaluations that seek to measure impacts well after a project is completed or that evaluate the cumulative effects of several projects over time.

Where Can You Go to Learn More?

Council on Foundations

The Council on Foundations has several resources on conducting evaluations at its website, many of which will be useful to individual donors (go to www.cof.org and search for "evaluation"). One such resource is *35 Keys to Effective Evaluation* by Robert M. Johnson, Council on Foundations (go to www.cof.org and search for "35 Keys").

W.K. Kellogg Foundation

The Kellogg Foundation has produced two in-depth resources that discuss project evaluation: *The Evaluation Handbook* and *The Logical Model Development Guide*. Both are available at the Foundation's website (go to www.wkkf.org and search for "evaluation handbook").

Creating a Culture of Inquiry, a report by Georgiana Hernández and Mary G. Visher and published by the James Irvine Foundation, contains lessons for various stakeholders including funders about creating a culture that values evaluations. An on-line copy is available at www.irvine.org/assets/pdf/pubs/evaluation/Creating_Culture.pdf

Using Evaluation to Improve Grantmaking: What's Good for the Goose is Good for the Grantor by Doug Easterling and Nancy Csuti and published by the Colorado Trust, discusses lessons learned in trying to support grantees in conducting evaluations. An on-line copy is available at www.coloradotrust.org (click on 'publications at the bottom of the page').

Innovation Network

The Network's Evaluation Resource Center is a continuously updated website that contains various on-line resources including guidelines, publications, and links to other relevant organizations. www.innnet.org

Grantmakers for Effective Change (GEO)

GEO promotes learning and encourages dialogue among funders seeking to improve the effectiveness of nonprofit organizations. www.geofunders.org