

Snapshots

How Foundation Trustees Use Evaluation



EVALUATION HELPS US.

Foundation trustees offer many compelling stories about times when evaluation delivered big benefits for them, their organizations and society. They say that evaluation can be an important tool to:

Better plan our work. Evaluation can help us answer the really big questions: Where should we focus? What results should we aim for? How will our grants create change? Where should we allocate our limited resources?

Improve our implementation. Evaluation can help our foundation and our grantees learn how to improve results while we work on our grantmaking initiatives.

Track progress toward our goals. Evaluation can help us gather big picture data and find out whether circumstances are improving as we had hoped.

The primary purpose of evaluation is to allow us to test whether we are using our resources to the greatest positive effect. The board is anxious to have the greatest possible impact. They want to take retrospective looks at what we've done to validate the direction we are going, or to make changes.

Larry Faulkner
Trustee and CEO
Houston Endowment Inc.

FSG Social Impact Advisors, with funding from The James Irvine Foundation, interviewed dozens of foundation trustees, CEOs and evaluation experts to uncover critical issues and exciting ideas related to evaluation. This document highlights brief stories illustrating a variety of evaluation techniques — and purposes — employed by U.S. foundations today. Additional examples and recommendations can be found in From Insight to Action, available at www.fsg-impact.org/actions/item/177

EVALUATION HELPS US

Better plan our work

GROUNDING CHOICES IN THE FACTS.

WACHOVIA REGIONAL FOUNDATION

Evaluation results gave board members a more realistic understanding of how long it might take to see impacts.

As the Foundation was reviewing its program of neighborhood planning grants to disadvantaged urban communities, staff and trustees began to grapple with a persistent question: Should they expand their reach into new neighborhoods in other communities or provide additional funding to existing grantees? When their program work was evaluated, results convinced the Foundation's staff that it would be unwise to add very many new grantees to the portfolio.

"We learned that a number of organizations which Wachovia has been supporting might need additional support from the Foundation to meet goals laid out in the plans we had already funded," said Dr. Kent McGuire, a trustee of Wachovia Regional Foundation.

"This was an important insight and had a clear effect on the board's thinking about what the Foundation should do to be most successful," he added. "In early years, we were pleased with due diligence and making a good grant versus looking at whether the grant was bearing fruit. But doing evaluation raised questions about implementation and that was an important lesson — I don't know how we could have learned what we did without the evaluation."

SUPPORTING WHAT WORKS.

WALTER & ELISE HAAS FUND

Positive evaluation results moved multiple foundation boards to continue an initiative they'd slated for termination.

"The Creative Work Fund was started by four related family foundations in order to support artists," said Pamela David, CEO of the Walter & Elise Haas Fund.

"When I began as CEO, the program was at the tail end of a 10-year commitment and several of our partners said they were done funding it.

"However, the results of our evaluation showed that it was the best program of its kind in the country. It was incredibly well-run, there are very few resources available for artists who are doing new work, and if this program did not exist it would be seen as a big loss to the community. The evaluation results motivated our trustees to take formal ownership. We put in more money ourselves, and got additional funding from the James Irvine and William and Flora Hewlett foundations. It was the evaluation that helped us make the decision, because it showed us that if the program went away it would have a big impact on the field."

EVALUATION HELPS US

Improve our implementation

REFINING STRATEGY
AND IMPLEMENTATION.

GORDON AND BETTY MOORE FOUNDATION

Evaluation changed the lens through which the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation's board viewed a major initiative by providing a framework to evaluate the sustainability of the initiative's conservation efforts to date.

An evaluation of the Foundation's Andes-Amazon conservation initiative delivered both positive results as well as recommendations for altering the balance of the initiative's major strategies — suggesting that the Foundation decrease funding for its original plan of creating new conservation areas and increase focus and funding on existing area consolidation and management.

"The initiative had helped create many very large protected areas, but we needed some way for those that were created to endure. If all we did was delay their destruction by a few decades, we would have failed. The evaluation recommended that the Foundation explore various sustainable financing solutions and offered a methodology to track progress toward long term sustainability," said Ken Moore, a Foundation trustee and the director of evaluation.

The board and the initiative team adopted the framework as a means to assess progress and sustainability and ultimately to determine whether conditions have been established to exit.

Based on evaluation findings and recommendations, the Foundation increased its commitment to the Andes-Amazon initiative with substantial additional funding specifically for sustainability strategies.

SURFACING ISSUES
AND MAKING ADJUSTMENTS.

WILLIAM PENN FOUNDATION

Evaluation helped the William Penn Foundation board refine its youth development initiative. Feather Houstoun, CEO of the Foundation said, "Our youth development initiative was designed to create a network of all the youth-serving organizations in a neighborhood — helping the groups work together and share responsibility."

"Several board members and I were somewhat skeptical about the probability of success. So, we undertook a process evaluation which showed us that some of the four networks we funded were congealing properly and achieving what we were looking for at a process level. That process evaluation also led us to drop one of the networks."

"We also contracted with an expert in the field, to assess whether what we were doing made sense. The results showed that we were making progress, but the program definitely wouldn't work unless we put the time, effort and resources into it. So, we upped our investment, deciding that as long as these groups were progressing in the way we wanted them to, then we would stick with this program. The evaluation provided a key injection of information that helped us make a decision — it was effective even though it was a modest investment because it came at a pivotal juncture."

"We are now conducting an outcomes evaluation to see if the networks not only help the agencies improve their services and stay connected with participating youth, but also help the youth improve their daily choices and educational outcomes, leading to a healthy transition to young adulthood."

EVALUATION HELPS US

Improve our implementation

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MAKING THE CASE FOR A NEW DIRECTION.

THE JAMES IRVINE FOUNDATION

A midcourse evaluation caused staff and trustees of The James Irvine Foundation to reconsider and significantly redirect their eight-year, multimillion-dollar after-school initiative.

“It was a huge, extremely ambitious program,” said Toby Rosenblatt, a Foundation trustee. “What we learned about halfway through was that we were not having impact.” The evaluation showed that the number of participants fell short of goals, cost per participant was more than double the expected amount, program quality was generally rated poor to moderate, and desired educational outcomes were not being achieved.

Jim Canales, the Foundation’s president and chief executive officer, said, “We brought the evaluation results to the board, which raised the question of whether this program was a wise investment of resources. We had to decide if we should pull the plug, or stick with it because of our prior commitment to do the work and the reputational implications.”

After discussion between board and staff, fueled by evaluation findings, the Foundation decided to redesign the initiative: “We reshaped how the program was being administered, and the content,” said Rosenblatt. The changes emphasized improvements in program quality and delivery, with a new focus on literacy.

The correction was not easy. According to Rosenblatt, “Having been around when the initiative was adopted, we had to swallow pretty hard when we got the evaluation that said it was not doing what we hoped it would do.” But the course correction gave the Foundation a reason to believe better outcomes could be realized — a hope that bore fruit through subsequent implementation and evaluation of the redesigned initiative. “I’ve become convinced that you can get real benefit from using external assessments to make a program better,” Rosenblatt concluded.

EVALUATION HELPS US

Track progress toward our goals

REVEALING THE BIG PICTURE.

THE PEW CHARITABLE TRUSTS

The board and management of The Pew Charitable Trusts used evaluation to re-assess and mitigate the risks of a major project.

Les Baxter, director of Planning and Evaluation at Pew, said, “We were supporting a project that aimed to remove four large dams on the lower Snake River, as the means of promoting the survival of all wild salmon species there. This project started in the mid- to late-1990s. In 2002, we looked at the progress to date, and the feasibility of the project’s objectives.”

“The evaluation showed that the project had been doing terrific work, but when we looked at the surrounding context, the prospect of the federal government removing the dams was highly uncertain, and not favorable, at least through the end of the decade. The board decided to go forward, but also asked staff to find a funding partner willing to share the ‘high-risk’ nature of the project with Pew, thus, providing a stronger base of support for the grantee while also reducing the Trust’s exposure.”

CREATING INFORMATION THAT CHANGES MINDS.

STUART FOUNDATION

The Stuart Foundation’s Child Welfare Program aims to ameliorate the child welfare system’s impact on foster youth. Evaluation data helped change the system.

According to Stuart Lucas, a Foundation trustee, “The child welfare system has had its share of problems: Children who were abused or neglected weren’t helped quickly enough, or too often when they were placed in foster care, they ended up having multiple placements. Ongoing evaluation plays an important role in identifying problems and it informs key partnerships seeking improvement. The Stuart Foundation has provided long-term support for a statewide longitudinal database and website that provides the infrastructure for child welfare administrators and community members to understand, monitor and improve outcomes for children in the foster care system. The database provides critical information on each aspect of safety, permanency and well being at the state and county level and has become the backbone of the outcomes and accountability system in California.”

Lucas said, “This investment has provided key data to monitor progress toward comprehensive system reform to serve young people better. It tracks metrics on a child-by-child basis — confidentially.” As a result of the evaluation process, the Child Welfare Program has detailed outcomes data that it never had before. “Since the data is available, it attracts research, which in turn helps to continually improve the system,” said Lucas. “The social workers who were reticent are now craving the data, using it in their work, and gaining more satisfaction from the results they produce.”

To learn more, please visit www.fsg-impact.org/ideas/item/trustee_evaluation_tools.html