



Improving Evaluation at Foundations

The Evaluation Roundtable gathers foundations together and reports on foundation practices

SUMMARY

In 1998, Patricia A. Patrizi, M.A., at Patrizi Associates, started the Evaluation Roundtable, which has served as a resource to foundation directors of evaluation and program leadership involved in building foundation effectiveness. The roundtable forum is a place where foundation leaders can surface common questions, problems and solutions about evaluation and foundation effectiveness. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) has been a key supporter of the Evaluation Roundtable since 2000.

Between June 2006 and July 2010 consultants from Patrizi Associates convened four Evaluation Roundtables, one mini-Evaluation Roundtable and one workshop with evaluation and program staff from foundations across the United States. Project leaders also recently conducted a benchmarking study of foundations' use of evaluative information, and they developed a special issue of the journal *New Directions in Evaluation*.

Key Findings

- Participants in the 2006 Evaluation Roundtable identified five factors that limit the use and effective practice of evaluation in foundations:
 - Ambivalence of foundation leadership toward the role of evaluation
 - Leadership avoidance of the conflict evaluation data may raise
 - Disconnection of evaluation from a foundation's program work
 - Confusion about the multiple roles expected of evaluation staff
 - Cultural misfit between evaluation and program staff working styles.
- Key findings from the 2009 benchmarking study include:
 - The role of evaluation has expanded in recent years, particularly in developing a foundation's program strategy.
 - Demand is increasing at foundations for all evaluative services and products.

- Yet, support for evaluative activities appears to be decreasing.
- On all indicators, evaluation units reporting to the CEO are more satisfied with how evaluation is used in their foundations. They report having more financial support and more staff and evaluation findings are disseminated to identified audiences more than when evaluation reports to program staff.

Funding

RWJF supported the work of Patrizi Associates related to the Evaluation Roundtables through three grants totaling \$275,000 to OMG Center for Collaborative Learning between February 2006 and July 2010.

CONTEXT

In 1998, Patricia A. Patrizi, M.A., who was at the time the director of evaluation at the Pew Charitable Trusts, convened a small group of foundation evaluation directors to discuss their work and share ideas.

In March 2000, Patrizi, by then an independent consultant (Patrizi Associates), organized an Evaluation Roundtable in Washington for 17 attendees, including evaluation directors and other staff of 12 foundations and representatives of the Council on Foundations, which hosted the meeting. RWJF and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation provided funding for the roundtable (see [Program Results](#) for ID# 037391). Participants examined how their organizations used evaluation units to assess their grantmaking and they developed an agenda to further the contribution of evaluation techniques to foundation performance.

Under a contract with RWJF (ID# 051319) Patrizi Associates convened two additional Evaluation Roundtables. Presenters taught a case study of the evaluation of the RWJF national program *Fighting Back* at each of these roundtables (see [Program Results](#) on this program):

- October 2003 in Princeton, N.J., at RWJF
- January 2005 in Miami.

RWJF's Interest in the Area

RWJF has a strong commitment to evaluation, with about one of every five grant dollars funding research and evaluation initiatives. RWJF's interest stems from a desire to assess the processes of its programs and the outcomes of its funding and to learn from its experiences and those of grantees. Evaluation initiatives range in scope from understanding the results of a single grant to understanding how RWJF itself is performing.

RWJF has been a key supporter of the Evaluation Roundtable and has led a group of foundations in support of the roundtables for many years.

THE PROJECT & ITS FINDINGS

Between June 2006 and July 2010 project leaders (consultants Patrizi and Elizabeth Heid Thompson from Patrizi Associates) convened four Evaluation Roundtables, one mini-Evaluation Roundtable and one workshop. Three grants from RWJF provided support for these meetings as well as a benchmarking study and the writing of articles for publication.

Some foundations sent representatives to most or all of the roundtables, providing a consistent group across the meetings. Other foundations sent representatives to only one or a few roundtables.

Other Funding

RWJF led a group of foundations in providing support for the Evaluation Roundtables. See [Appendix 1](#) for a list of additional funders and the amount funded by each.

Exploring Evaluation Use: The 2006 and 2007 Evaluation Roundtables

RWJF grant ID# 053593 supported Evaluation Roundtables in 2006 and 2007.

Evaluation Roundtable, June 28–30, 2006, at the California Endowment, Los Angeles

Under the theme, "Does Evaluation Add Value to Philanthropy?" meeting conveners challenged participants to consider the ways in which foundations conduct the business of evaluation and raised questions about how well foundations use evaluation to support their work and decisions.

Some 57 representatives from foundations including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation participated in the roundtable. Representatives and consultants from organizations that work with foundations, such as Grantmakers for Effective Organizations and Public/Private Ventures, also participated.

Evaluation consultant Michael Quinn Patton, Ph.D., taught the case, *Looking for Shadows: Evaluating Community Change in the Plain Talk Initiative*, at the meeting. Plain Talk sought to help youth avoid unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmissible infections. It was an initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which funded the development of the case.

Project leaders prepared a report titled *Making Evaluation Matter: Ideas and Action Steps from the 2006 Evaluation Roundtable* based on the roundtable. They distributed the report to American Evaluation Association members, staff from foundations that emphasize evaluation and key researchers and evaluators of foundation programs. Patrizi discussed the report with 30 foundations at the invitation of the Foundation Center, fall 2007. The report:

- Discussed the participants' diagnosis of the problem—i.e., the obstacles and issues that keep foundations from getting the most out of evaluation
- Presented an agenda for action with steps to help foundations benefit from evaluation

Findings from *Making Evaluation Matter*

- **Participants identified five factors that limit the use and effective practice of evaluation in foundations:**
 - **Leader ambivalence.** Participants underscored the critical role of executive and board support for evaluation within a foundation. Yet, many foundation leaders do not view evaluation as part of the foundation's core business of grantmaking. Board members and executives may have minimal interest in the complexities of evaluation, despite asking for the kind of information that evaluation can provide.
 - **Conflict avoidance.** Evaluation data can cause conflict:
 - Assessing foundation effectiveness requires clarity of strategy and goals, which foundation leaders may avoid establishing.
 - There may be dissonance between the foundation's stated vision and its reward structure, as when incentives relate to grantmaking rather than grant results. One participant said, "The unit of work in foundations is making individual grants. This isn't the same as social change."
 - Issues of accountability may be ignored, dismissed or viewed differently by different foundation staff. This can have a negative impact on good evaluation practice, as well as on good philanthropy.
 - **Program disconnect.** One participant said, "The big issue is whether the evaluation function is or is not integrated into the program." The extent to which evaluation is integrated into the foundation's program work will have an important effect on evaluation's ability to inform strategy and decision making.
 - **Role confusion.** Foundation leaders may expect evaluation staff to fill multiple roles, with little focus.
 - **Culture misfit.** Evaluation staff working styles may vary substantially from those of program staff. Program staff may view evaluators as insensitive to the realities

of program implementation and as attempting to impose a rational model on a values-driven and emotional endeavor.

- **Four steps of the action agenda developed during the roundtable are the most critical for realizing the full value of evaluation:**
 1. Clarify evaluation's "value proposition" for the philanthropy field—i.e., what evaluation can contribute to the work of foundations.
 2. Develop new ways to talk about and implement evaluation work and learn to create better avenues of collaboration between evaluators and foundation program staff and leadership.
 3. Understand the political work needed for evaluators to build meaningful alliances with foundation boards and leaders. This means thinking about not only what they contribute to foundations, but also where they need to be placed and how they need to work to be effective.
 4. Develop a flexible yet rigorous approach to building frameworks for foundation accountability that are meaningful and appropriate for key constituencies. The challenge here is to create a framework to assess whether the foundation is achieving its goals.

Evaluation Roundtable, January 25, 2007 at the San Francisco office of the California Endowment

This meeting evolved from the action agenda developed at the June 2006 roundtable. The goal of the action agenda—and, thus, this meeting—was to improve foundations' ability to know whether their program strategies are moving in the right direction. Roundtable leaders believed that foundations should be able to answer questions about how well they are doing and the collective effect of their work.

The 16 participants included representatives of seven foundations (the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Heinz Endowments, the Ocean Conservancy and others), the Center for Effective Philanthropy and the Frameworks Institute, along with consultants who work with foundations.

A Focus on Strategic Direction: The 2008 Strategy Forum Evaluation Roundtable

RWJF awarded a follow-up grant (ID# 059835) to Patrizi Associates, through the OMG Center for Collaborative Learning, to develop support for evaluation among foundation leaders.

They planned a "strategy forum" as the next Evaluation Roundtable. To prepare for the Strategy Forum Evaluation Roundtable, project leaders:

- Interviewed two staff members from 14 foundations planning to attend the strategy forum. Interviewers asked respondents for their perceptions of their foundation's approach to strategy development and execution. The findings helped guide the development of the strategy forum and were shared with participants at the meeting in a PowerPoint® presentation available [online](#).
- Convened a mini-Evaluation Roundtable on February 14, 2008, with evaluation leaders from these 14 foundations. The group examined how participating foundations formed and executed their strategies and considered the relationship between evaluation and strategy.

Evaluation Roundtable, "Strategy Forum," May 21–23, 2008 at RWJF in Princeton, N.J.

Corporate strategy development expert [Henry Mintzberg, Ph.D.](#), was the key lecturer at the strategy forum. Participants included three to four senior staff members from 27 foundations, including the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Hartford Foundation, the Lumina Foundation for Education and the Rockefeller Foundation.

During the roundtable, evaluation consultant Patton taught another case, this one based on RWJF's end-of-life grantmaking, titled *Death Is Certain, Strategy Isn't: Assessing the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's End-of-Life Grantmaking*.

Staff from the McConnell Foundation presented that foundation's program and evaluation approach to the "panarchy cycle," a model for looking at the life cycles of social innovations as they are created, tested, spread, decline and either disappear or re-emerge.

A Benchmarking Study, the 2010 Evaluation Roundtable and Other Activities

Under a third grant (ID# 060131) RWJF supported a workshop, a benchmarking study, an Evaluation Roundtable and the writing of a special issue of the journal *New Directions in Evaluation*.

Workshop, December 2008, at the Wallace Foundation in New York

This workshop on evaluating foundation strategy included 23 program and evaluation staff from 13 foundations. Project staff presented new ways for roundtable participants to think about evaluating their foundations' strategic directions.

Benchmarking Study, 2009

Project staff surveyed 31 foundations on foundation access to and use of evaluative information. Staff also interviewed 29 of the survey respondents to clarify responses and explore differences. Participating foundations included, among others, Colorado Trust, William Penn Foundation, Hewlett Foundation and Atlantic Philanthropies.

The report of study findings, a PowerPoint® presentation titled *Use of Evaluative Information in Foundations: Benchmarking Data*, covers:

- Trends and comparisons of foundations' budgets, staffing, structure and functions
- What is working and what needs improvement in how foundations use evaluative information.

Findings From Use of Evaluative Information in Foundations: Benchmarking Data

Data are from 2007 to 2008; respondent views of changes are reflective of the five years through summer 2009. Key findings in the three areas of analysis include:

• **Functions and Responsibilities**

- The role of evaluation has expanded, particularly in developing foundation strategic direction. Relatively rare five years earlier, 90 percent of respondents reported having a role in strategy. Evaluators reporting to the CEO have more involvement at every stage of program strategy than those reporting to others.
- There is an increase in types of evaluative activities employed. While foundations continue to evaluate individual grants (90 percent) and initiatives (93 percent), most evaluation units also, among other activities:
 - Assess foundation strategies (83 percent)
 - Conduct satisfaction and perception surveys (83 percent)
 - Track grantmaking indicators (83 percent)
 - Identify grantmaking performance indicators (80 percent)
 - Conduct program area and foundation-wide assessments (76 percent).
- Reporting structure varies and seems to affect who has primary responsibility for evaluation activities. For example, evaluation units reporting to the CEO are much more likely to have primary responsibility for every type of evaluation, while units that report to the program staff have little or no primary responsibility for many types of evaluation activities.

• **Evaluation Resources: Staffing and Budget**

- Evaluation staffing has declined substantially since 2005, from an average of 3.9 full-time equivalents in 2005 to 3.0 in 2008.
- Although spending on evaluation varies considerably among the foundations, nearly 40 percent of those surveyed invest less than 1 percent on evaluative activities. This appears to be a decrease from five years earlier.

- Respondents across all foundation sizes and reporting relationships reported the most dissatisfaction with foundation investments in knowledge management (67 percent) and formal learning (57 percent).
- Evaluation units reporting to program staff expressed the greatest concern about the adequacy of investment in strategy, evaluation, learning, knowledge management and indicators. About two-thirds or more believed that their foundation was investing a less than appropriate amount in these functions.
- **Perceptions of Demand for and Use of Evaluative Information**
 - Demand is increasing for all evaluative services and products, and most respondents believed that program staff support of evaluation was at least "acceptable." About two-thirds reported that management support was "frequent" or "often."
 - Respondents view information use as most problematic when programs and strategies are "ongoing."
 - In general, evaluation units reporting to program staff expressed greater dissatisfaction with program use of evaluative information than did units reporting to the CEO or an administrator.
 - Units reporting to program staff also felt that their management and board were less supportive of evaluation than did those reporting to the CEO or an administrator.

Evaluation Roundtable, July 8–9, 2010, at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore

The 2010 Evaluation Roundtable, titled "Information and Its Use in Supporting Strategy," focused on presenting and discussing findings from the benchmarking study on evaluation practices within foundations.

The 64 attendees from 29 foundations (including the Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation, the Colorado Trust, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the Oak Foundation) included teams of senior evaluation, program and management staff. Also participating were 16 representatives of organizations that included the Center for the Study of Social Policy, the journal *Foundation Review* and the U.S. Agency for International Development, as well as consulting firms that serve foundations.

Patton taught another case, this time on the evaluation of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's *Making Connections* initiative, a long-term, multisite effort to demonstrate that poor results for children and families in tough neighborhoods can be changed for the better. (The Casey Foundation funded the preparation of this case titled *Measuring Change While Changing Measures: Learning In, And From, the Evaluation of Making Connections*.)

Special Journal Issue

Project directors also organized the development of a special issue of *New Directions in Evaluation*, highlighting insights and case studies from the roundtables. See [Communications](#) for details about the publication.

CONCLUSIONS

Summing up the value that the Evaluation Roundtables provide to foundations, Patrizi said,

"Our emphasis on the actual practices within foundations gives us a strong platform for improving the field of philanthropy. We document and study foundation approaches and pivotal issues in the field so they can be understood in a broader context and improved. We write about critical issues facing philanthropy to encourage discussion and debate at the field level. Our studies and work across multiple foundations gives us a unique perspective on patterns and trends facing the sector. By raising these issues, we can start conversations that can improve the field."

With regard to the 2009 benchmarking study, Patrizi said:

"This is part of how we help the evaluation directors establish norms for their practice. We get questions all the time, especially from new evaluation departments, about how much people spend on evaluation, how they staff the evaluation function, what they report. The benchmarking findings give evaluation leaders comparative data to help them improve—to see where they fit in terms of their own staffing and spending."

Communications

Project leaders prepared two reports:

- *Making Evaluation Matter: Ideas and Action Steps from the 2006 Evaluation Roundtable*
- *Use of Evaluative Information in Foundations: Benchmarking Data* (in the form of a PowerPoint® presentation).

A major communications effort was the development and publication of the special issue of the journal *New Directions in Evaluation*. Titled *Evaluating Strategy* and published in 2011, the issue includes five articles (abstracts available [online](#)):

- "Strategy as the Focus for Evaluation"
- "Strategy Evaluation: Experience at the International Development Research Centre"

- "Death Is Certain, Strategy Isn't: Assessing the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's End-of-Life Grant Making"
- "The W. K. Kellogg Foundation's Devolution Initiative: An Experiments in Evaluating Strategy"
- "Strategy Evaluation: Emerging Processes and Methods."

Roundtable leaders wrote an additional article on strategy, "Beyond the Veneer of Strategic Philanthropy," published in 2011 in *Foundation Review*. (Available [online](#)).

LESSONS LEARNED

1. **Communicate early in the project with the people you are seeking to influence (e.g., potential roundtable participants).** Understanding what is important to them and how they view the work and figuring out how best to engage them are critical to success. (Project Directors)
2. **Stay in close contact with the intended beneficiaries of your work to ensure that the work you do meets their needs and is timely.** Being flexible and adjusting to the needs of the foundation participants was critical to the success of the roundtables. (Project Directors)
3. **When designing a benchmarking survey, be careful to clearly define terms so that you ensure that you are collecting comparable data from each respondent.** In the benchmarking survey for the Evaluation Roundtable, defining the types of assessments so they were clear to respondents was challenging. For example, project directors worked to identify the difference between a strategy evaluation and a program area evaluation for a single-strategy program area. (Project Directors)
4. **Understand that each time a new meeting or conference convenes there are new people in the room.** Even for those who have participated previously, there is a discontinuity in the conversation from the last meeting. Each time you convene you must start by addressing: What is the issue? What are we about? Why do we exist? This will help to get people feeling purposeful about the work. (Project Directors)
5. **Include program staff when convening a meeting on evaluation in philanthropy, so participation is not limited to the evaluation function.** This brings the evaluators' clients into the room and helps to create a shared vision about why evaluation exists in their foundation. As a result, taking the lessons learned from the meeting back to the foundation will be more successful. (Project Directors)

AFTERWARD

In September 2010, RWJF awarded an additional grant (ID# 060132) of \$125,000 to Public/Private Ventures for Patrizi Associates to:

- Write a paper on the benchmarking study
- Develop a Web site for the Evaluation Roundtables. Project staff expect launch in early spring 2011.
- Prepare a mini-case study
- Convene the next roundtable in 2012.

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RWJF Team: Enterprise Level

APPENDIX 1

Additional Funders

(As provided by the grantee organization; not verified by RWJF.)

Roundtables in 2006 and 2007 (RWJF grant ID# 053593)

- The William Penn Foundation, \$50,000
- The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, \$40,000
- The Lumina Foundation, \$40,000
- The California Wellness Foundation, \$25,000
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation, \$25,000
- John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, \$25,000
- Wallace Foundation, \$20,000
- David and Lucile Packard Foundation, \$7,000

Roundtable in 2008 (RWJF grant ID# 059835)

- The California Endowment, \$195,000
- Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, \$195,000
- David and Lucile Packard Foundation, \$125,000
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation, \$75,000
- The Lumina Foundation, \$75,000
- Wallace Foundation, \$75,000
- The William Penn Foundation, \$75,000
- The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, \$50,000
- Bruner Foundation, \$30,000
- Kauffman Foundation, \$25,000

Workshop in 2008 and Roundtable in 2010 (RWJF grant ID# 060131)

- Annie E Casey Foundation, \$100,000
- California Health Care, \$75,000
- Packard Foundation, \$75,000
- Rockefeller Foundation, \$75,000

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