



## Measuring the Immeasurable: Lessons for Building Grantee Capacity to Evaluate Hard-to-Assess Efforts

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Funders often struggle with how best to evaluate outcomes that are not easy to measure. This occurs frequently when they are supporting programs that are engaged in public policy change or are investing in the murky waters of what is known as systems change. Since the ultimate outcome of these efforts often requires a longer timeframe than grants typically support—and the commitment of many more resources than an individual foundation usually has the ability to devote—evaluation can take a backseat to program implementation. As a result, it remains unclear the extent to which an intervention is meeting its objectives or making a difference. Another option is to focus on outputs as evidence of impact, in which case, funders ask grantees to track their activities, such as the enumeration of meetings held or community members contacted, to measure whether things are going well.

Yet evaluation done well should be so much more than documenting the activities and outputs of a grant. To the extent possible, it should leave an organization with a fuller understanding of the process and impacts of its work. Good evaluation should expand an organization's ability to reflect on its work and consider thoughtfully how to meet objectives and increase impact over time. This is especially important for organizations engaged in policy and advocacy or systems change work because of how difficult it can be to assess the direct impact of their work.

This briefing document helps funders figure out how they can best help their grantees develop the capacity to measure progress towards outcomes on initiatives that are difficult to measure. The data for these findings and conclusions are drawn from our experiences working with the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation's Education Program, which set about trying to help grantees better articulate and document their outcomes, improve their work and enhance their evaluation capacity.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Hewlett Foundation's Education Program asked BTW *informing change* to chronicle the experiences of each of the key stakeholders involved in evaluating this portfolio of grants. The evaluators' perspective was documented in a December 2008 learning memo for the Education Program, which presented some early impressions about how best to conduct evaluation engagements. The grantee perspective was captured through a comprehensive survey fielded with all portfolio grantees engaged in Education Program-supported evaluations and then select follow-up interviews. The findings from this fieldwork, along with additional input from the evaluators, are documented in a December 2009 report to the Hewlett Education Program.

## THE HEWLETT EDUCATION PROGRAM'S EVALUATION APPROACH

The Hewlett Foundation's Education Program (the Education Program) sought to strengthen California's K–12 schools by improving student achievement and attainment. To do so, the Program supported:

1. High-quality research and data analysis on California's schools and students;
2. Dissemination of research and information for a variety of audiences;
3. Public education and engagement to create pressure for reform; and
4. Policy design and technical assistance for policy-makers.

In 2006, the Foundation's Education Program began building evaluation funding into a portion of its California K–12 education reform grants. Since then, the Education Program has included evaluation-specific funding in grants to 29 of the organizations in its K–12 portfolio.<sup>2</sup> These grantees were selected to receive evaluation funds because the documentation and reporting of outcomes were anticipated to be complicated or time consuming due to the nature of the work. The additional evaluation funding ranged from 8 to 10 percent of the grant. Across the 29 organizations, the Education Program allocated nearly \$1M for evaluation and/or evaluation planning. About half (52%) of the grantees surveyed had some degree of evaluation experience prior to receiving a grant from the Foundation for education policy; the other half reported no evaluation experience.

The Hewlett Foundation's Education Program was interested in investing in grantee evaluation because education policy and advocacy organizations have few reliable measures of progress or impact in the short term, often relying on anecdotal stories as evidence that their strategies are effective. The Education Program wanted to help grantees collect useful data about some aspect of their work as evidence of impact and to enhance their overall capacity to engage in evaluation.

To address these needs, the Education Program established broad guidelines for how its dedicated resources should be used, and vetted and pre-selected three evaluation firms—BTW *informing change*, The Imoyase Group and LFA Group—to assist grantees with their varied evaluation needs. Grantees selected evaluators from this pool; the Education Program also allowed grantees some latitude in selecting other evaluation firms that better met their needs. One such area, for example, was communication, where grantee organizations worked with both Hershey Cause and Paragon Media Strategies due to these organizations' particular expertise.

Finally, the Foundation's Education Program was concerned that the grantees *own* their evaluations rather than see evaluation as an additional compliance measure. To address this, the Education Program provided evaluation resources directly to the grantees and had the grantees develop independent contracts and scopes of work with the evaluators.

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<sup>2</sup> Some additional evaluation funds have been distributed in recent months that are not included in this report.

Over the course of one- to three-year program grants, evaluation funds supported a variety of activities, including theory of change and/or logic model development; construction of an evaluation plan; outcomes and indicators development; and evaluation design and implementation. In a few cases, the evaluators discovered that the organizations were in the midst of significant organizational change, such as new leadership or an unexpected and significant loss of funding, that necessitated the organizations to engage in a strategic thinking and planning process prior to pursuing questions of evaluation and assessment. The Education Program allowed for some flexibility to enable the grantees to address these issues either as a part of this work or through an additional allocation of resources. Providing flexibility to grantees became a hallmark component of the Hewlett Education Program’s approach.

### Elements of the Hewlett Education Program Evaluation Model

**What:** Provide additional funds to grantees to identify concrete indicators of progress; develop low-cost data collection tools and processes; gather and analyze data; and create opportunities for learning.

**Why:** Policy/Advocacy grantees typically have limited capacity, tools and metrics for measuring progress towards outcomes as well as capacity to use information to reflect on and improve their work.

**With Whom:** Roughly half of all new grantees in the K–12 education reform portfolio; a “vetted” list of evaluators whom the Education Program trusted and knew that they understood its intentions.

The Foundation’s Education Program also held clear and realistic expectations of what would result from these engagements. Conscious of the fact that nonprofits are enormously busy and often thinly staffed, the Education Program placed an emphasis on engaging evaluators who would strike the balance between encouraging grantees to be more rigorous in how they think

about evaluation, and developing an overall evaluation plan that is realistic and would result in “simple, efficient, inexpensive tools and mechanisms to collect the data that are most important and then [allow grantees to] reflect on their progress over time.” To balance rigor and realism, rather than expecting grantees to have a comprehensive or “gold standard” approach to evaluation, the Education Program emphasized that grantees be engaged in an intentional process of reflection to inform their work.

#### We have three clear expectations for the evaluation process:

- We do not expect independent, methodologically complex evaluations. This is mainly a capacity-building effort to enable our grantees to do better data tracking, reporting and reflection about their work. As such, we expect evaluation teams to work collaboratively with our grantees throughout the process—to clarify the outcomes, to select the most important indicators, to develop evaluation plans, and to collect and analyze data with them.
- We ask all grantees that receive evaluation funding to select and meet with their evaluation team and develop an evaluation plan within the first few months of their grant project.
- We ask the evaluation teams and grantees to schedule some periodic opportunities to discuss data and reflect on their progress during the grant period, not just at the end.

—*Education Program Approach to Individual Grantee Evaluation*  
Hewlett Foundation, March 2008

## Grantee Impacts

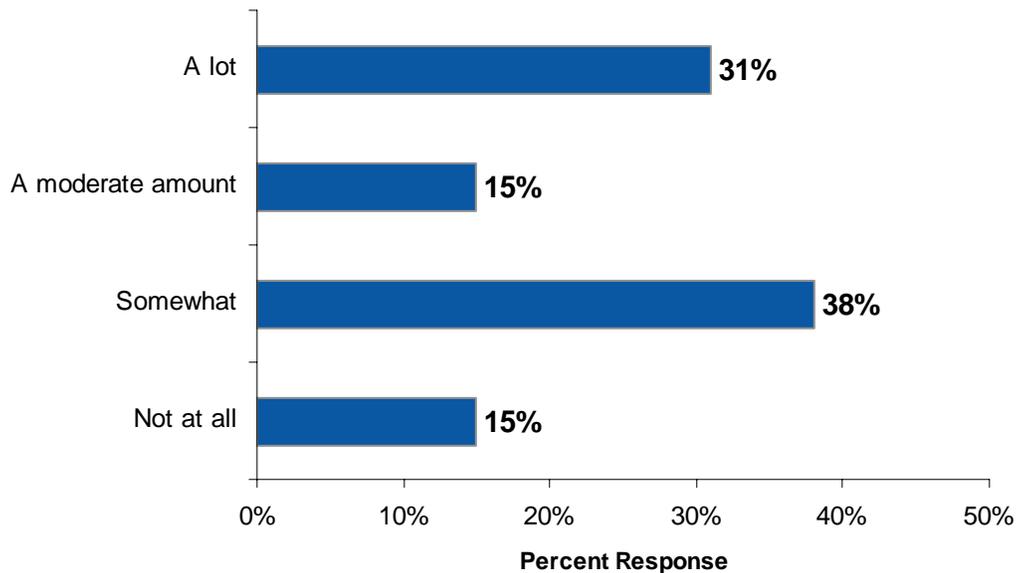
The experiences of the Hewlett Education Program’s approach resulted in several findings that point to some key benefits of intentionally building the evaluation capacity of grantees. Through our survey and interviews we found the following:

**Grantees gained significant value from data collection tools and practical recommendations on how to integrate evaluation into their work.** Almost half indicated they will use the tools they received “a lot” or “a moderate amount” in future evaluations (Exhibit 1). Their willingness to continue their evaluation and reflection work with an evaluator in the future depends, to some extent, on whether the evaluator was able to provide these useful tools that enhance a program’s ability to do evaluation on its own. It is important to note, however, that this is highly dependent on the type and purpose of the evaluation conducted. For example, in some instances, evaluators developed tools for very specific assessments and these tools were not expected to be used again.

### Exhibit 1 Plans to Continue to Use These Data Collection Tools for Future Evaluation

To what extent do you plan to re-use these data collection tools for future evaluation?

(n=13)



Percentages do not add to 100% due to rounding.

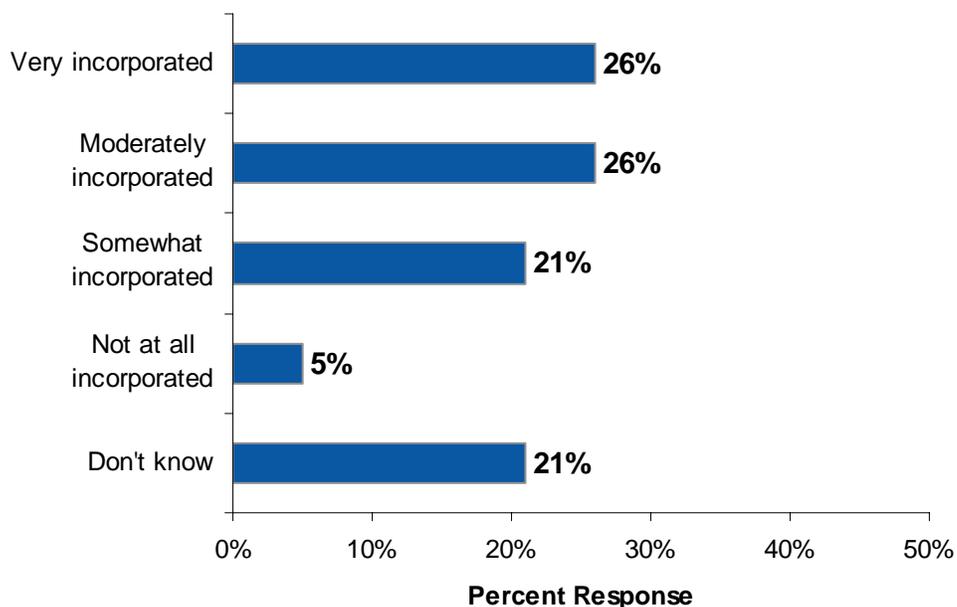
**While all grantees who were surveyed plan to evaluate their work in the future, most report having already continued evaluation work since their Hewlett funding concluded.** More than half of the grantees reported incorporating evaluation activities into programmatic work (Exhibit 2). The reasons for continuing this work were varied, including wanting to continue learning; to improve program delivery and inform long-term strategic planning; to prepare the organization for future grant seeking; and to help the field learn from the organization’s

experiences. Some grantees who do not intend to continue the evaluation work under this grant cite the specificity of the methodology of the evaluation, as noted earlier.

**Exhibit 2**  
**Incorporating Evaluation Activities into Programmatic Activities**

To what extent were evaluation or related activities incorporated into your organization’s programmatic activities (e.g., collecting survey data was built into existing event follow-up work)?

(n=19)



*Percentages do not add to 100% due to rounding.*

**Evaluation activities directly informed organizational growth and maturation, helping to refine programs and clarify strategic directions.** A majority of respondents now consider evaluation during their planning processes. In addition, they report that they have applied the findings from the newly collected data to make programmatic refinements and to plan for future work.

*“[The evaluation] affirmed our suspicions...and when the recommendations came in, we now had to do it!...[The evaluation] laid down a challenge to us, which then had to be fulfilled. We still have a lot of work to do.”*

—Hewlett Education Program Grantee

*“We have identified possible areas for expansion of our work due to some evaluation findings.”*

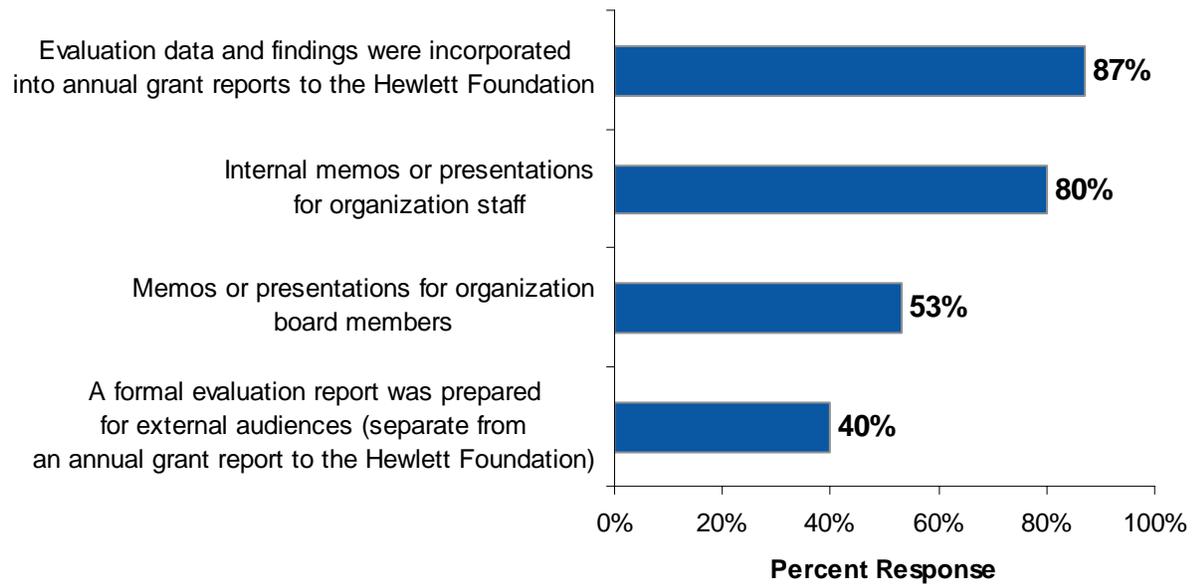
—Hewlett Education Program Grantee

**Grantees all report having some kind of final “product” from their evaluation.** The majority of survey respondents have incorporated evaluation findings into annual grant reports submitted to the Foundation’s Education Program, with four in ten publishing a formal evaluation report for external audiences using their findings. Slightly more than half of respondents created memos or presentations for their board members (Exhibit 3).

**Exhibit 3**  
**Incorporating Evaluation Findings into Products**

How did you document and share evaluation findings or other activities?

(n=15)



*Percentages total more than 100% because respondents could select more than one answer.*



With these findings in mind, the Foundation’s Education Program thought there might be something to be learned about this model of engaging grantees in the practice of more rigorous yet realistic evaluation. Taken together, the Hewlett Education Program’s approach and the efforts at capturing feedback on the process reveal some universal lessons for funders about how to conduct and construct hard-to-measure evaluations.

## KEY LESSONS FROM THE HEWLETT EDUCATION PROGRAM'S APPROACH

### **1. Recognize that all parties involved in evaluation have vastly different perspectives, and ensure that the work begins with a full vetting of shared expectations.**

The foundation, grantees and evaluation consultants all need to have a common understanding of the foundation's expectations of the evaluation, including, as appropriate, the overall goals; the process for accessing and using evaluation funds; roles and responsibilities of all parties; and the degree of flexibility allowed for each engagement (e.g., focus of evaluation, timeframe for starting and completing the evaluation, and feedback mechanisms). The foundation's expectations need to be stated at the start of the grant process, both verbally and in writing, and also reiterated throughout the period. To the extent that foundation expectations change over time, materials documenting expectations need to be updated and re-circulated with grantees and evaluators. Ongoing communication about the evaluation helps to remind grantees of the importance the foundation attaches to the evaluation work and elevates it from being a measure of compliance to a tool for improvement.

Communicating expectations is especially important for grantees since they sometimes lack comfort and experience with evaluation, particularly around work that is difficult to measure. Because of the power dynamic inherent in the funder-grantee relationship, it is also important for funders to reassure grantees that their evaluation plans are on track with foundation expectations.

Likewise, it is important for evaluation consultants to understand foundation expectations because they are working directly with and supporting the grantees to meet these expectations. Grantees look to their evaluators to help them interpret how to apply the foundation's general expectations to their unique situations.

Finally, having clear expectations for evaluation is important within the foundation, since multiple foundation staff may interface with grantees and evaluators, and these staff need to convey a consistent message on behalf of the foundation.

### **2. Assess and address grantees' evaluation readiness.**

A number of key characteristics surfaced as particularly important in indicating grantee readiness to engage in evaluation work. One of the most important is having the commitment of the organization's leadership to evaluation. To demonstrate this commitment, leaders may need to be personally involved on some level (e.g., attending evaluation meetings, providing input on the evaluation design, etc.) and/or ensure that an adequate amount of staff time and other internal resources are dedicated to support evaluation.

Previous experience with evaluation, while not always a key indicator of readiness, can contribute to the amount of time needed to get grantees up to speed about some evaluation basics (such as an understanding of different ways that evaluations can be used) and their ability to dive into evaluation planning and implementation activities. It is important to surface

not only the amount and type of previous evaluation experiences but also the extent to which the experience was positive or not so that any concerns can be appropriately and proactively addressed.

It is important to note that grantees may not have a full understanding of their own readiness. In the Hewlett Education Program model, in fact, high levels of self-reported readiness did not always translate into starting the evaluation in a timely manner. Foundations need to engage in some method of assessing a grantee's readiness for evaluation and then decide how to handle grantees that are not ready. This may include not requiring these grantees to participate in an evaluation, postponing evaluation activities until the organization addresses key readiness issues, and/or providing organizations with additional support to move them to a more ready position (e.g., engaging in strategic planning or a process of systemic reflection).<sup>3</sup>

### **3. Enlist internal champions—in nonprofit organizations and the foundation—to develop a strong evaluation orientation.**

A successful strategy for addressing grantees' limited staff capacity and experience with evaluation has been to identify an "evaluation champion" within the organization who understands the purpose and value of evaluation and can be responsible for implementing evaluation activities. These champions are also critical in helping to achieve "buy-in" among others within the organization (e.g., key leaders) who might be skeptical about devoting resources to an activity that does not seem to directly benefit the program. Champions can increase staff understanding of the learning opportunities associated with evaluation, facilitate the implementation of evaluation activities across the organization, and play a key role in ensuring that evaluation activities are sustained over time.

It is equally important to have an internal evaluation champion within the foundation. These champions understand that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to grantee evaluation and can assist in securing additional resources to help grantees maximize their evaluation experience. This may come in the form of strategic planning or board training work prior to embarking upon evaluation or developing a database for managing grantee data. In addition, the foundation needs a champion who honors the time it takes program staff to engage in this kind of work and who elevate its importance in the grantees' eyes. This could vary for the foundation champion, from creating time for one-on-one check-in calls, to holding all grantee convenings to share experiences, strategies and lessons.

### **4. Provide flexibility within a framework.**

While it is important to have a defined framework and expectations for evaluation work, providing grantees with a certain degree of flexibility in defining the scope of that work tends to facilitate the most effective use of resources. In the Hewlett Education Program's experience, for example, the Program provided the framework of asking grantees and evaluators to move

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<sup>3</sup> BTW has developed a diagnostic tool to assess grantee evaluation capacity. For a copy of this tool, please contact BTW.

beyond counting activities towards measuring concrete, intermediate indicators of change in their organizations and fields. At the same time, the Education Program encouraged grantees to work with their evaluators to decide which outcomes were most important for them to measure and how.

Flexibility is critical for these initiatives that operate in a fluid environment; that is to say, they are so large or on such a long timeline that their evolution and accomplishments can not be anticipated at the outset of the grant. In addition, flexibility also allows the foundation to refine the evaluation process as it learns with evaluators from their collective experiences speaking and working with grantees.

## **5. Find evaluators who are well matched with grantee organizations.**

The first step in having a good evaluation experience is selecting an evaluator. The right match or fit with an evaluation consultant plays a leading role in grantees' overall satisfaction with the evaluation experience, which can increase the likelihood that they will apply evaluation findings to their work and engage in ongoing evaluation and reflection to improve performance and impact. All of the Hewlett Education Program grantees noted that it was helpful that the Program provided a pre-selected list of evaluators and provided additional guidance and input when selecting an evaluator. This pre-selected list served two beneficial purposes: 1) grantees had multiple options to choose from so they could find a good fit; and 2) grantees saved time and resources because they did not need to search for a quality evaluator on their own.

In addition to evaluation skills, the measure of fit includes the extent of the evaluator's content knowledge of the grantee's work specifically and their field in general, as well as the evaluator's personal rapport and reputation. Grantees also talk about the importance of having an evaluator help them build internal evaluative capacity, such as providing them with technical assistance in how to develop surveys, conduct stakeholder interviews, gather data and articulate changes that their programs are making.

Having some autonomy to scope the evaluation work in a way that builds capacity as well as delivers outcomes helps grantees cement a strong relationship with an evaluator. Funders must recognize, however, that they relinquish some control over the evaluation process when grantees select their own evaluators; overall, we believe this is a worthwhile trade-off when building grantees' evaluation capacity is an explicit goal.

*“We were able to define the relationship with [our evaluator] and define what made sense for us. Defining our objectives at the outset was collaboratively done with [the evaluation firm]. [We could] identify what made sense, and we were able to speak frankly with them about our capacity, inclinations and that we didn't have total buy-in for this process. It was important to share that and incorporate that into our plan.”*

—Hewlett Education Program Grantee

## **6. Identify appropriate interim indicators that measure traction and progress, in addition to long-term and ultimate outcomes.**

One of the common conundrums encountered by those engaged in longer-term work is the extent to which their evaluation data should be qualitative versus quantitative. Qualitative data is often dismissed as anecdotal and thus not terribly reliable, while quantitative data veers toward enumeration of activities rather than measuring impact. The evaluators engaged with the Hewlett Education Program grantees agree that quantitative evaluation data can often demonstrate the scale of grantees' impact and describe progress towards ultimate goals more convincingly than qualitative data, particularly among certain evaluation audiences. However, evaluators also note the importance of effectively "coupling the numbers with the story" to preserve the context and richness of grantees' experiences.

In identifying indicators of traction, it is also important to consider that grantees' work may be complicated by circumstances that shift over time. An evaluation metric, therefore, might include demonstrating the capacity and ability to adapt to the ever-changing policy environment. As a result, evaluation plans need to be responsive to the dynamic nature of grantees' work and the environments in which they operate.

## **7. Balance the tenets of adding greater rigor to the grantee evaluation approach while remaining realistic and doable.**

In conducting systems or policy change, when the ultimate desired impact has not yet occurred, foundations seek concrete evidence of progress. Adding rigor to this kind of evaluation means using both quantitative and qualitative measures to help grantees capture the progress they are making towards their ultimate goals. For example, it is not enough for grantees to say that they are engaged in "movement building;" they need to describe what "movement building" means to them and what specific progress they have made.

At the same time, to be realistic and doable, evaluation work can emphasize collecting some simple but useful information (rather than none or less relevant data) without being comprehensive. Even small steps towards showing evidence of progress in some areas can benefit a grantee's work. Also, a positive experience with evaluation can help grantees overcome some of their potential skepticism to the process and investment.

## **8. Ensure strong and clear communication.**

In the eyes of grantees, communication with their evaluation consultants surfaces as an important indicator of customer satisfaction. Communication with outside evaluators goes beyond rapport and accessibility. Grantees may not really know what they want in terms of an evaluation, in which case good communication includes the ability of the evaluator to help grantees iterate new options and possibilities for assessment.

Similarly, grantees value clear and frequent communication with funders. While most Hewlett Education Program grantee survey respondents report that the purpose and goals for evaluation

were clear, they still needed the Foundation’s Education Program to reinforce this message in multiple ways. Written communications are a good start, but finding ways to have periodic check-in calls reinforce both the intent behind and the importance of the evaluation work.

### **9. Encourage the practice of reflection and learning to support continuous improvement.**

To ensure lasting impacts, grantees should be encouraged to reflect on their evaluation work at regular intervals and identify lessons learned. Not only does this practice give grantees a better understanding of the value of evaluation, but it also gives them the opportunity to celebrate their accomplishments and identify areas for modification and improvement. Foundations and evaluators can help grantees integrate this process into their work in many ways, for example, by sending regular reflection questions, hosting convenings and workshops for grantees to share ideas and thoughts, and creating an anthology of grantee experiences to help reinforce the practice of reflection and continuous improvement.

### **10. Recognize that evaluation done well is fundamentally about integration.**

For evaluation to be most valuable for grantees in the long term, evaluation activities need to be integrated to the extent possible into routine practices of the organizations’ ongoing work. Hewlett Education Program grantees were interested in having evaluation tools and practical recommendations on how to integrate evaluation into their work. In addition, their willingness to continue their evaluation and reflection work into the future depended to some extent on whether the process provided these useful tools that enhanced evaluation capacity. In essence, having useful tools became a proxy for evaluation work that is both doable and realistic over time.

*“One thing was missing... [The evaluator] did not leave us with tools to do ongoing evaluation. They came in and designed pre- and post tests and analyzed data. But didn’t leave tools... I don’t know if that was part of the original design. Nonprofits want evaluation tools so we can integrate evaluation as part of our ongoing work. [Evaluation needs to be] seamlessly integrated. Program staff is already busy, so it’s important to know how to do both things at once.”*

—Hewlett Education Program Grantee

## CONSIDERATIONS

The Hewlett Foundation's Education Program is to be commended for its approach to support grantees in evaluation experiences that not only provide useful information for their current grant but contribute to enhanced evaluation capacity that can benefit these organizations over time. The Education Program's flexibility and willingness to develop an approach that evolves over time based on the experience of its grantees and evaluators were especially important. Similar to policy and advocacy work, this type of evaluation is not the easy path to pursue.

Within nonprofit organizations, there are numerous barriers to evaluation, ranging from a culture of seeing evaluation as separate from program work, organizational resource constraints, an acknowledgement that integrating evaluation into program activities takes additional time, and managing expectations among all parties involved. These are dynamic tensions that exist, and none are easily resolved. However, the more these dynamics are intentionally lifted up as part of the evaluation process, the more all parties can learn to navigate them successfully.

For any funder to develop an evaluation approach that works for their foundation and grantees, it is important to be willing to take risks with grantees, allow for shifts in evaluation plans and timelines, augment resources in certain cases, and remain patient to see desired changes. As the Hewlett Education Program's experience demonstrates, there are lessons that can help inform the path of others who are considering this type of support as well as those who are in the midst of doing so. Below we offer specific questions for funders to consider as they reflect on how to most effectively support the evaluation work of their grantees in a way that informs grantees' current work as well as their evaluation capacity for the longer term.

- What types of evaluation do you currently support for your grantees?
- To what extent does your foundation have the capacity to support this approach to evaluation? Is this type of evaluation supported by your foundation's leadership? Is there an evaluation champion? What is the decision-making process for establishing and making changes to this evaluation approach?
- What level of resources do you have to provide evaluation support? What is the best way to distribute these resources across grantees, and what criteria will be used?
- How flexible is your foundation regarding the use of evaluation resources? To what extent, and in what cases, can evaluation funds address issues that better position grantees to engage in evaluation (e.g., strategic planning)?
- What communication mechanisms will be used to ensure that evaluators and grantees understand the purpose of the evaluation, evaluation expectations, and the specific roles and responsibilities of involved parties? How often, and in what ways, will you communicate with participating parties (e.g., about evaluation plans, progress, challenges and impacts)?
- How will you assess the readiness of grantees to engage in evaluation (e.g., commitment of leadership, evaluation champion, previous evaluation experience, organizational context)? What will happen in cases in which grantees are not ready to engage in evaluation or refuse to do so?

- What would characterize successful grantee evaluations (e.g., comprehensive evaluation of program vs. a focus on a specific aspect of a program, outcome indicators vs. indicators of progress towards desired outcomes such as policy passage)? Is this expectation shared with your foundation leadership?
- How will you ensure that resources are used well and in a timely manner?
- How will you identify evaluators for grantees to work with? What will your vetting process look like? To what extent will you provide information and assistance to grantees in their selection of evaluators? To what extent can grantees choose their own evaluators? Will evaluators contract directly with grantees?
- In what ways, and how often, will you assess the success of the evaluation approach and needed refinements (e.g., informal calls, more formal data collection efforts, convenings)? Who will you obtain feedback from (e.g., all or select evaluators and grantees)?

While sustainability beyond specific grant support has been a stated goal of funders for a long time, greater organizational capacity due to grant support has risen as another important goal of grantmaking. The Hewlett Foundation Education Program's approach to evaluation, which is still relatively uncommon, can help funders support their grantees in making progress along both of these dimensions. The importance of doing so has only been accentuated during these uncertain economic times as nonprofits are increasingly called on to make difficult decisions about the focus of their work and use of diminished resources, and many times lack the capacity to collect and use data to do so.

As more funders pursue this type of evaluation, it will be important to share experiences and learnings so that the field collectively benefits. There may be opportunities for coordination or collaboration among funders, such as joint support for evaluation among shared grantee organizations, opportunities for learning among grantees working in a specific field, and funding for specific types of evaluation, which many grantees can benefit from (e.g., statewide annual survey of opinion leaders). Over time, as a greater number of organizations enhance their abilities to collect and use information to improve their work, benefits will aggregate to the field and sector more broadly.