

4. Build new approaches to insuring accountability

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—Deborah Harrington

Many people in Chicago raised questions about how to appropriately evaluate the work their foundations were doing in neighborhoods through tools like small grants programs. “How do you evaluate this work that people are doing?” asked one person. “We need to be willing to look at outcomes differently.”

“We need better ways to identify change,” said another person. “We need to better understand the pathways for seeing how things happen and indicators that show that progress is happening.”

The six people interviewed for this report also talked extensively about evaluation. Several noted the relatively small amounts of money that most funders invest in these communities and pointed out that it isn’t enough money to produce changes in community-wide indicators like third-grade reading scores. Several people also emphasized

that change in these communities take time, which makes short-term outcomes very difficult to measure.

Many people said that, given these limitations, evaluation needs to focus on things that can be measured, especially things that involve the process of change, such as how many new connections a community group has made during the period of a grant. Are new relationships developing? Are community groups working together more? Are more residents developing leadership abilities? Are they deepening their understanding of the forces that affect their community and how to impact these forces? As individuals, are their lives changing?

At the Chicago meeting, both the Woods Fund of Chicago’s *Deborah Harrington* and the Steans Family Foundation’s *Reginald Jones* talked extensively about the issue of how funders can evaluate this work.

Harrington said that trying to use more traditional approaches to quantifying outcomes doesn’t work well for community organizing.

“So we need to not just look at concrete outcomes, but also see the process as an outcome. Are more people engaged in the com-

munity? Are more people door knocking? When a group sends in a report of activities at the end of the year, is 200 doors knocks an outcome? Yes it is.”

Harrington believes that the indicators used in evaluating this work need to relate to the process of building power. “There are certain variables to look at to measure this. Is the group really reaching out and creating relationships? Are more people becoming members?”

She thinks these indicators are useful because, “Organizing is very relational work. It takes a great deal of time to build trust.” It starts with knocking on doors and engaging with residents one at a time.

“Foundations must do a paradigm shift in terms of how we measure outcomes,” Harrington adds. “These things are very slow and long term and we have to be patient.”

What should a foundation expect given the amount of support it is providing is an issue several people raised. They asked whether a funder that is investing a relatively small amount of money compared to a community’s challenges can push too hard for outcomes. “How hard should funders push to get system change out of a small grants program?” is how one person put this concern. “What if funders push too hard and it stops looking resident-led?”

One resident warned that this is exactly what can happen. “What you think we need is not always what we need. You have to let residents lead change and listen to us and not have your own agenda.”

Consuella Brown

**Program Director,
Woods Fund of Chicago**



As Program Director, Consuella Brown sees her role as a fairly practical one. “I help get the money out the door.”

Eight years working in philanthropy—the first five with a corporate foundation—Brown admits that to some, her approach may seem fairly cut and dry. But her fascination with the work comes less from the details, and more from the possibilities. Says Brown, “To enter, frame or populate the world with ideas that can make a tangible difference for a lot of people—this is the most rewarding part of the job for me.”

While Brown sees philanthropy as a “marketplace of ideas,” during “On the Ground” in Chicago she noticed that the individual voices “may not speak the same language, or even be on the same page.”

“Is there a possibility of a shared language that is accessible to everyone?” she says. “This would be important...we may be missing each other.”

Later this person added, “You have to be patient and not expect things to get done quickly.” This theme came up a lot. “We need to set a realistic time frame for change,” said one participant. “Groups are working really hard to get this work done. But we need to be realistic about the time frame.”

Still another person made a similar point. “Funders might want something in a time frame that doesn’t acknowledge what is taking place on the ground. Funders might want certain things done in a year. But I can’t go to my neighborhood association and say, ‘This has to be done in a year,’ because that might not be on their agenda. So we need to ask what the groups want to do and what is important to them.”

Given all the perspectives about accountability in this work, a few people think the key again is the relationships that develop between foundations and communities. “We have to have honest conversations with people about what we want to see built by the time we take the money away,” said one funder. “Is there something here that will keep this work going?”

“We come to these tables from such different places. There is a level of honesty that isn’t taking place. Foundations will make mistakes and residents need to call them on it. But that level of honesty doesn’t happen.”

Funders need to “be prepared to frame resident progress differently,” said another person. “It’s a different culture, using a different language. Don’t diminish that.”

Part of the challenge of measuring this work, said another person, is that the investment is not in things that are relatively easy to measure, like job training. Instead it is about “investing in individuals to create change in their neighborhoods. We’re afraid to make investments in people because how do you measure that?”

For program officers this approach can entail risk because the investment is not in something that can produce straightforward numbers, such as the number of people trained or the number who get jobs, the kinds of quantifiable results that can reassure a funder’s board. “We have to be as vulnerable as the people we invest in,” is how this participant put it.

Alison Janus of the Steans Foundation is of two minds about insuring accountability. On the one hand she thinks it’s

essential. “You have to decide what you want to measure and what you can measure. To say you can’t measure things is a disservice to you and those you work with.”

But she acknowledges that one “casualty” of a small grants investment of, say, \$5,000, is that “there will not be a direct result in numbers.”

“As a funder, what is it that we can affect? What can we measure and be responsible for? Probably not a lot and we need to accept that.”

She adds: “We don’t have the resources to answer the question of, ‘Did we make a difference?’ Five thousand dollars won’t change literacy scores in a school.

“But we do changes the odds. You can measure some things.” You decide what can be measured and then “keep it simple and stick to it.”

She thinks that things that can be measured are the overall effectiveness of a program being funded: How many people are attending? How many people are volunteering? How many people are staying with it?

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—Funder at Chicago meeting

Jennifer Roller of The Wean Foundation also senses this tension between the need and the challenge of measuring results. “I come from a federally-funded program [Upward Bound] so I tend to be very strict with measurable goals. But in this work it is not always so cut and dry. Nor does it need to be.”

Roller thinks one key is whether the information you are gathering is meaningful. “Can I do something with that information? Can I extract something from this—lessons learned, best practices, best conditions under which they can do the work?”

“My goal is for our evaluation to be more about the people and what they learned from the experience. I want to have some flexibility. Some projects won’t fit into strict measures of goals and objectives.”

Simply focusing on the number of girls served by a mentoring program is not enough, she thinks. “Some of those girls may get ignited, but we might not capture that. These are the kinds of transformational changes we want to capture, but that is hard to do. Some things we may never be able to measure.”

Roller uses her own experiences as an example. When she was part of Upward Bound, she went on many cultural trips to plays and museums. Later, on another trip, she found herself on a campus in Chicago with time on her hands. She toured a Frank Lloyd Wright home, something she wouldn’t have ventured to do before.

“Through my experiences with the program, I saw myself transform, but that is not something the program measured or even intended.”

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Lisa Leverette, who works with The Skillman Foundation, also thinks that an important result of this work is the change that happens in individuals, but that this is very hard to measure. “I think there is a way to measure process, but I don’t know how that is done.”

Leverette says that, as she interacts more with applicants, “it does appear that they are more confident and effective advocates for themselves and the youth they serve.” But she’s not sure how you measure “quality of interactions or trust or the particular skills gained during those interactions. The quality of the programming and of the applicants’ advocacy is all I have as a measuring stick.”

Consuella Brown of the Woods Fund agrees that the key element to measure is the growth in a neighborhood’s leaders. She looks at this growth mostly “through the lens of mobilization.”

She asks questions such as, “How deep is their analysis? Are they collaborating more? With whom? Have they expanded

beyond their communities? Did they take a leadership role in a campaign about a policy change?”

Brown is also looking for what she calls “process changes.” The key is not whether a leader got involved in a particular issue campaign, but “whether all of their training could be translated to another issue.”

In essence she is asking whether a leader’s advocacy around a particular issue can be continued around other issues. “If you train on the interconnectedness of issues, you can keep people engaged on a variety of issues. You may have a school win. But in order to keep the schools open, you have to have a stable neighborhood. So then you have to figure out how to also work on affordable housing and jobs. It’s a continuum rather than a focus on one issue.” So the evaluation question, she thinks, is whether people are seeing these connections among issues.

But Brown also says that she sees the importance of personal change as well; that it’s not just about developing a deeper political understanding. She talked about a leader of a local homeless coalition who not only became an advocate on homeless issues but also experienced changes in the rest of her life.

This leader’s ability to get politicians to listen to her “translated into her seeing that she could get a different job, and then she felt she could have an interpersonal relationship and ended up getting married. As an individual, she has mushroomed. I don’t see how you couldn’t have a sense of self after you do this work, and it must translate into all areas of your life.”

Brown says she hears about changes like this from a lot of people. “We put some stock in that, because it is about growing people to feel empowered in whatever they choose to ultimately undertake.”

However a funder measures impact, one key is not to overwhelm grantees with paperwork. “You want to hold them accountable without requiring this to be so staff intensive.”

Reporting can get staff intensive when a neighborhood organization needs to respond to several funders. She urges “a more streamlined approach to funding decisions and interactions with foundations.”

For *Andy Helmboldt*, the resident volunteer for The Battle Creek Foundation, any evaluation must focus on the “point” of their small grants program, which is “to build relationships in the community.”

He explains: “These are the first building blocks for longer-term results. The idea is that people won’t change their neighborhood if they don’t feel connected to others. So the relationship building is very important.” The

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evaluation question is simple: has the small grant caused a group's leaders to develop more relationships?

Over time, if the foundation continues to support a group, "We look for more specific signs of change and more tangible outcomes." Helmboldt notes that Battle Creek's program is still new, which is why it focuses on building relationships and capacity. "But at some point, I think they will want to see evidence that people are living better and have more opportunity. Simply giving away money is not enough. What did you buy?"

As a resident on a small grants committee that is regularly making grant decisions, Helmboldt would like more feedback about the impact of those grants. "A lot of times I feel I am taking a test every month but I never get graded on it." He says that grantees file evaluation reports but that committee members haven't been receiving them, something he says the foundation is working on improving.

David Portillo of the Strengthening Neighborhoods program of The Denver Foundation agrees that more and deeper relationships are key outcomes, though it took some work to establish this principle. "The first board we had really wanted to see hard outcomes, like a reduction in teen pregnancy. But we couldn't expect these kinds of outcomes with a \$500 grant. That wasn't realistic."

Instead, the foundation's staff suggested asking neighborhood leaders what they wanted to measure. "They wanted to know if more people in the neighborhood were getting

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involved and if more people were taking on leadership roles. You *could* gather this information."

The program now has goals about the increase in relationships in a neighborhood, goals it tries to measure both quantitatively *and* qualitatively. To get the numbers, people are asked for a final report that includes quantitative information about leadership.

They are also asked to describe the *qualitative* changes they've experienced, with consultants being hired to listen to these stories. "You would not know relationships were strengthened unless you heard the story," Portillo explains.

Knowing that not everyone will do a final report, the program invites recipients to a party to "come and talk with others while we record their reflections as their final report." While there, those who didn't finish their reports are asked to fill out the quantitative information about their work. The program also asks the group to provide recommendations for how to improve the work.

"These are things we wouldn't have tried at all before," Portillo says. "There are different

ways of listening, like watching a video taken of the evaluation meeting. Often program officers learn more from these discussions than by checking off when a final report has arrived.”

How did Portillo get the foundation’s board to accept a qualitative evaluation? “You need to bring someone from outside to say, ‘Qualitative responses matter too.’” Strengthening Neighborhoods brought in an evaluator from the MacArthur Foundation, which had spent a lot of money to find out if qualitative evaluation was effective. It was.

“Our committee was quite impressed by this,” Portillo says. The lesson from this ex-

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perience? “Bring in the man in the blue suit to say that your evaluation plan has a good strategy.” He adds: “I think every small grants program goes through this struggle.”

