



THE CENTER  
FOR EFFECTIVE  
PHILANTHROPY



Center for  
Evaluation Innovation

# BENCHMARKING

# Foundation Evaluation Practices





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## ABOUT THE CENTER FOR EFFECTIVE PHILANTHROPY



### MISSION

To provide data and create insight so philanthropic funders can better define, assess, and improve their effectiveness—and, as a result, their intended impact.

## ABOUT THE CENTER FOR EVALUATION INNOVATION

### MISSION

Our aim is to push philanthropic and nonprofit evaluation practice in new directions and into new arenas. We specialize in areas that are challenging to assess, such as advocacy and systems change.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

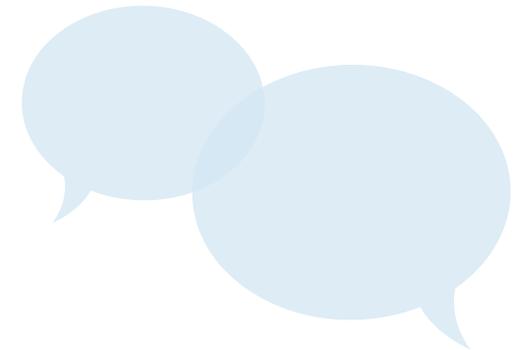
We are very appreciative of the support that made this work possible.

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For more information on CEP, please visit [www.effectivephilanthropy.org](http://www.effectivephilanthropy.org). For more information on CEI, please visit [www.evaluationinnovation.org](http://www.evaluationinnovation.org) and [www.evaluationroundtable.org](http://www.evaluationroundtable.org).



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## Dear Colleague,

In 2015 and 2016, the Center for Effective Philanthropy and the Center for Evaluation Innovation partnered for the first time to benchmark current evaluation practices at foundations. We wanted to understand evaluation functions and staff roles at foundations, the relationship between evaluation and foundation strategy, the level of investment in and support of evaluation work, the specific evaluation activities foundations engage in, and the usefulness and use of evaluation information once it is collected.

To explore these topics, we collected survey data from 127 individuals who were the most senior evaluation or program staff at their foundations (see Methodology). These individuals came from independent and community foundations giving at least \$10 million annually, or foundations that were members of the Evaluation Roundtable—a network of foundation evaluation leaders who seek to support and improve evaluation practice in philanthropy.

**The result of this effort is what we believe to be the most comprehensive review ever undertaken of evaluation practices at foundations.**

It is our hope that the data presented in this report will help you and your foundation determine what evaluation systems and practices align best with your foundation's strategy, culture, and ultimate mission. What resources should you invest in evaluation? On what should your evaluation efforts focus? How can you learn from and use evaluation information? We believe that considering these questions in light of this benchmarking data can allow you to more thoughtfully answer these questions. Ultimately, we hope the information in this report helps you prepare your foundation to better assess its progress toward its goals and its overall performance.

We hope you find this data useful.

Sincerely,

Ellie & Julia

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Vice President – Research  
Center for Effective Philanthropy

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### DEFINITION OF EVALUATION USED IN THIS STUDY

In the survey, we defined evaluation and/or evaluation-related activities as activities undertaken to systematically assess and learn about the foundation's work, above and beyond final grant or finance reporting, monitoring, and standard due diligence practices.

# Respondent Demographics



## ROLE AND TENURE

Of respondents:



**38%**

Thirty-eight percent of respondents have had **responsibility for evaluation-related activities** at the foundation for two years or less.

<b>&lt;1 year</b> 13%	<b>1-2 years</b> 25%	<b>3-5 years</b> 30%	<b>6-8 years</b> 14%	<b>≥ 9 years</b> 18%
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## PREVIOUS EVALUATION TRAINING

Of respondents:

45%

have an **advanced degree in the social sciences or applied research**

37%

have received training in evaluation through **workshops or short courses**

5%

have an **advanced degree in evaluation**



# Foundation Demographics



# ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE



# 34%

of foundations **have a dedicated evaluation unit or department**, separate from the program department

Larger foundations are **more likely** to have a dedicated evaluation unit or department.<sup>1</sup>

Of these departments:

# 19%

were **newly created during the past two years**

# 21%

have had their **name changed in the past two years**

# 79%

have their **own grantmaking and/or contracting budget**



**Common department names include:**

- Evaluation
- Evaluation and Learning
- Research and Evaluation
- Research, Evaluation, and Learning
- Learning and Impact

# 66%

of foundations **do not have a dedicated evaluation unit or department**

Of respondents at these foundations:

# 89%

work in **program departments**

# 20%

work in **operations or administration departments**

# 19%

work in the **President's office or executive office**



<sup>1</sup> A chi-square analysis was conducted between whether or not foundations have asset sizes greater than the median in our sample and whether or not foundations have a dedicated evaluation department. A statistical difference of a medium effect size was found. A chi-square analysis was also conducted between whether or not foundations give more than the median annual giving amount in our sample and whether or not those foundations have a dedicated evaluation department. Again, a statistical difference of a medium effect size was found.

## EVALUATION STAFFING



About half of foundations have 1.5 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff or more regularly dedicated to evaluation work.

Larger foundations tend to have more staff regularly dedicated to evaluation work.<sup>2</sup>



For every 10 program staff members, the median foundation has about one FTE staff member regularly dedicated to evaluation work.

## MODELS OF HOW EVALUATION RESPONSIBILITIES ARE MANAGED

Staff with evaluation-related responsibilities:



**direct and manage** all or most work related to evaluation at **45%** of foundations



**provide advice and coaching** to other foundation staff who manage all or most work related to evaluation at **21%** of foundations



**hire third parties** to direct and manage all or most work related to evaluation on behalf of the foundation at **14%** of foundations

<sup>2</sup> An independent samples t-test indicated that foundations with asset sizes greater than the median foundation in our sample were more likely to have a greater number of evaluation staff. This statistical difference was of a medium effect size.

## EVALUATION SPENDING



▲ **\$200k**

About half of foundations spend \$200,000 or more on evaluation (in U.S. dollars).<sup>3</sup>

▼ **\$40k**

About one-quarter of foundations spend \$40,000 or less on evaluation.

▲ **\$1M**

About one-quarter of foundations spend \$1 million or more on evaluation.

☑ **35%**

Thirty-five percent are **quite or extremely confident** in the dollar estimate they provided.

Of respondents:

▲ **50%**

perceive that funding levels for evaluation work at their foundation **increased** relative to the size of the program budget over the past two years

▶ **45%**

perceive that funding levels for evaluation work at their foundation have stayed **about the same** relative to the size of the program budget over the past two years

<sup>3</sup> In the survey, we did not put parameters around what respondents should or should not include in the dollar value they provided. Respondents were told it is understandable that it may be difficult to give a precise number, but to provide their best estimate.

## GRANTMAKING



Half of respondents report that most or all of their grantmaking is **proactive** (e.g., the foundation identifies and requests proposals from organizations or programs that target specific issues or are a good fit with foundation initiatives and strategies).

50%



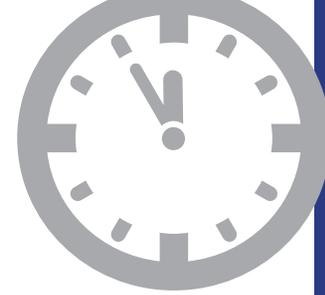
27%

About one-quarter of respondents report that most or all of their grantmaking is **responsive** (e.g., driven by unsolicited requests from grant seekers).

# Evaluation Practices



# PRIORITIZATION OF EVALUATION ACTIVITIES



- respondents spending time on the activity
- respondents spending time on the activity who say it is a top priority

Provide **research or data** to inform grantmaking strategy



Evaluate foundation **initiatives or strategies**



**Refine grantmaking strategy** during implementation



**Develop** grantmaking strategy



Design and/or facilitate **learning processes or events** within the foundation



Evaluate **individual grants**



Compile and/or monitor **metrics** to measure foundation performance



Design and/or facilitate **learning processes or events** with grantees or other external stakeholders



Improve grantee **capacity for data collection or evaluation**



Conduct/commission **satisfaction/perception surveys** (of grantees or other stakeholders)



Disseminate evaluation findings **externally**



Half of respondents report spending time on **at least nine of these activities.**

## INVESTMENT IN EVALUATION ACTIVITIES



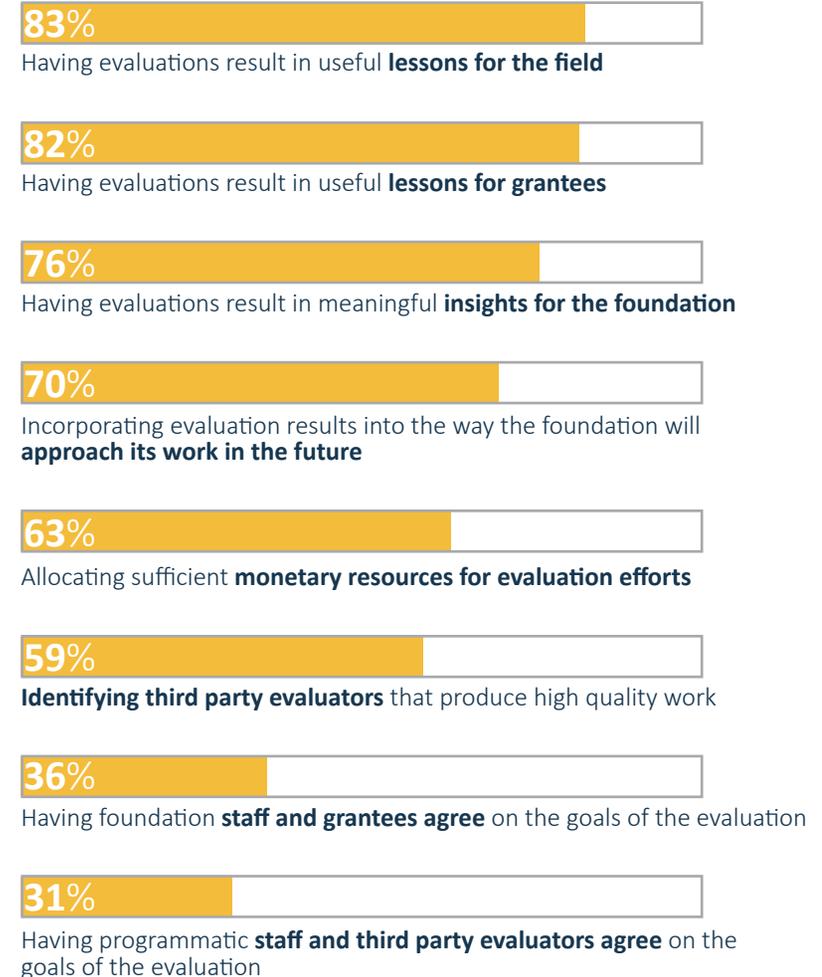
Percentage of respondents who say their foundation invests **too little** in the following evaluation activities



## CHALLENGES



Percentage of respondents who say the following practices have been at least **somewhat challenging** in their foundation's evaluation efforts<sup>4</sup>



<sup>4</sup> Respondents were asked to rate how challenging each of the practices has been to their foundation's evaluation efforts on a 1-5 scale, where 1 = 'Not at all challenging,' 2 = 'Not very challenging,' 3 = 'Somewhat challenging,' 4 = 'Quite challenging,' and 5 = 'Extremely challenging.' The percentages included above represent respondents who rated a 3, 4, or 5 on an item.

# MOST COMMON APPROACHES TO FUNDING GRANTEES' EVALUATION EFFORTS

41%

of foundations have **no common approach** to evaluating grants because funding evaluation efforts differs widely across the foundation's program or strategy areas

19%

of respondents report that grantees can spend a portion of their **grant dollars on evaluation** if they request to do so

12%

of respondents say the foundation commissions **outside evaluators** to evaluate individual grantees' work

10%

of respondents report that grantees receive **general operating support dollars**, and they can choose to use these dollars for evaluation<sup>5</sup>

Almost two-thirds of respondents say their foundations fund evaluations for **less than 10 percent of individual grants**.



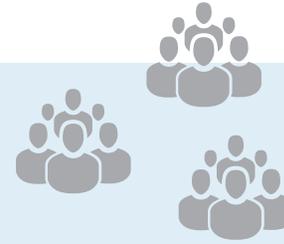
63%

none	less than 10%	10% to 25%	26% to 50%	51% to 75%	more than 75%
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13%

Percentage of individual grants funded for evaluation

# RANDOMIZED CONTROL TRIALS



19%

About one-fifth of respondents say their foundations have **provided funding** for a randomized control trial of their grantees' work in the past three years.

Of those who have provided funding for a randomized control trial:

63%

found it quite or extremely **useful in providing evidence** for the field about what does and does not work

42%

found it quite or extremely **useful in understanding the impact** the foundation's grant dollars are making

38%

found it quite or extremely **useful in future grantmaking decisions**

25%

found it quite or extremely **useful in refining foundation strategies or initiatives**

<sup>5</sup> All other response options for this item were selected by fewer than 10 percent of respondents and not shown here.

## TYPES OF EVALUATION

Frequency with which different types of evaluations are conducted on grantees' work and foundation initiatives or strategies

Evaluation Type	Grantees' Work		
	Regularly	Occasionally	Never
<b>Summative</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>28%</b>
<b>Formative</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>53%</b>	<b>31%</b>
<b>Developmental</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>44%</b>

Evaluation Type	Foundation Initiatives or Strategies		
	Regularly	Occasionally	Never
<b>Summative</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>53%</b>	<b>22%</b>
<b>Formative</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>57%</b>	<b>23%</b>
<b>Developmental</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>42%</b>

# Using Evaluation Information



## COLLABORATION

Over 40 percent of respondents say their foundation has engaged in efforts to **coordinate its evaluation work with other funders** working in the same issue areas.



Yes, we are already engaged in such efforts

28%

6%

24%

**42%**

- No, but we are currently considering such efforts
- No, we considered it but concluded it was not right for us
- No, we have not considered engaging in any such efforts

## UNDERSTANDING



Percentage of respondents who believe their foundation understands quite or very accurately what it has accomplished through its work, when it comes to each of the following

46%

Grantee **organizations** it seeks to affect

35%

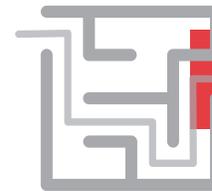
**Fields** it seeks to affect

22%

**Communities** it seeks to affect

20%

Ultimate **beneficiaries** it seeks to affect



## CHALLENGES

Percentage of respondents who say each of the following is a challenge for program staff's use of information collected through, or resulting from, evaluation work

91%

Program staff's **time**

71%

Program staff's **level of comfort** in interpreting/using data

50%

Program staff's **attitudes** toward evaluation

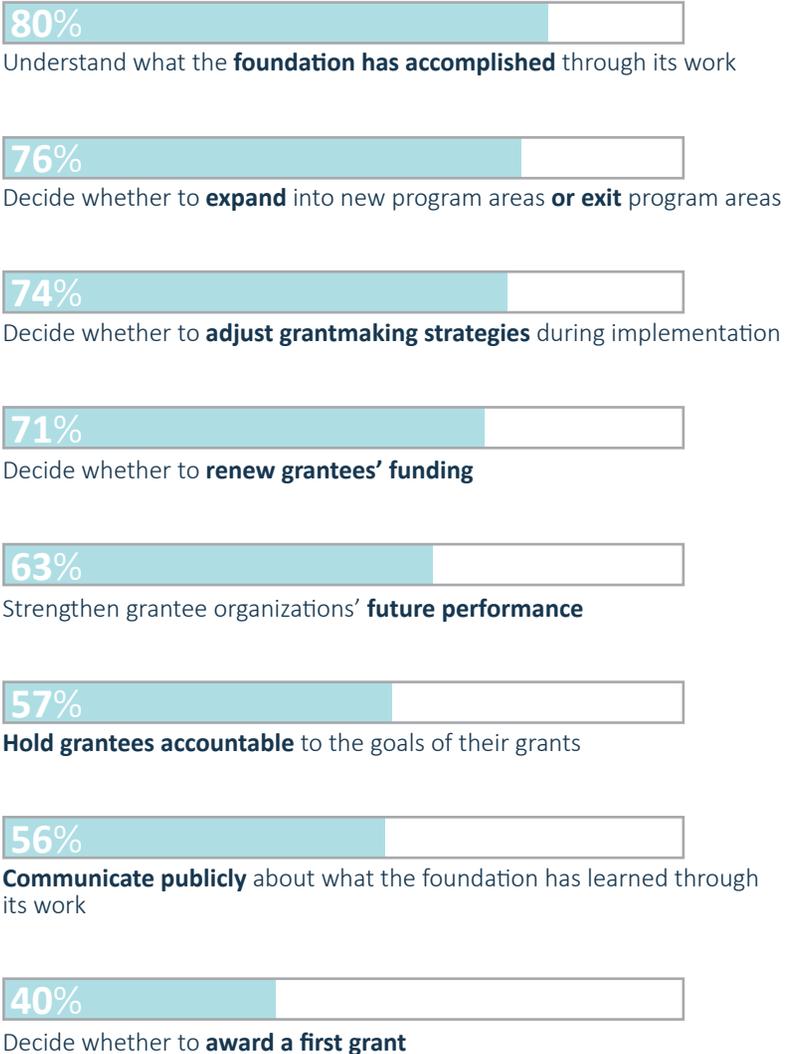
40%

Program staff's **lack of involvement** in shaping the evaluations conducted

## USE OF INFORMATION



Percentage of respondents who say **program staff** are likely to use information collected through, or resulting from, evaluations to inform the following aspects of their work



## LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT OF SENIOR MANAGEMENT



- No engagement
- Too little engagement
- Appropriate amount of engagement
- Too much engagement

**OVER TWO-THIRDS** of respondents say senior management engages the appropriate amount in **communicating to staff that it values the use of evaluation** and evaluative information.



**ABOUT HALF** of respondents say senior management engages the appropriate amount in **modeling the use of information** resulting from evaluation work in decision making.



**LESS THAN HALF** of respondents say senior management engages the appropriate amount in **supporting adequate investment in the evaluation capacity of grantees**.



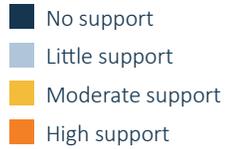
**LESS THAN HALF** of respondents say senior management engages the appropriate amount in **considering the results of evaluation work as an important criterion when assessing staff**.



When a respondent says the foundation's senior management engages less than the appropriate amount in evaluation, the foundation is significantly **more likely to experience the following evaluation challenges:**

- ▶ Allocating sufficient monetary resources for evaluation efforts
- ▶ Incorporating evaluation results into future work
- ▶ Having evaluations result in useful lessons for the field

## LEVEL OF SUPPORT FROM BOARD



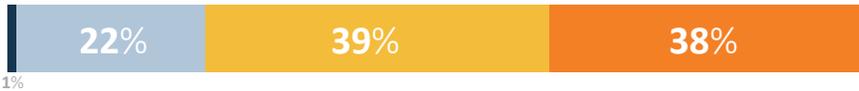
**ABOUT HALF** of respondents say there is a high level of board support for **the use of evaluation or evaluative data in decision making** by staff at the foundation.



**FORTY PERCENT** of respondents say there is a high level of board support for **the role of evaluation staff at the foundation.**



**ALMOST 40 PERCENT** of respondents say there is a high level of board support for **the use of evaluation or evaluative data in board-level decision making.**



**ONLY ONE-THIRD** of respondents say there is a high level of board support for **foundation spending on evaluation.**



When a foundation's board is less supportive of evaluation, the foundation is significantly **more likely to experience the following evaluation challenges:**

- ▶ Allocating sufficient monetary resources for evaluation efforts
- ▶ Having evaluations result in meaningful insights
- ▶ Incorporating evaluation results into future work
- ▶ Having foundation staff and grantees agree on evaluation goals
- ▶ Having evaluations result in useful lessons for grantees
- ▶ Having evaluations result in useful lessons for the field

## SHARING INFORMATION

Percentage of respondents who say evaluation findings are shared with the following audiences **quite a bit or a lot**



# Looking Forward



## THE TOP THREE CHANGES EVALUATION STAFF HOPE TO SEE IN FIVE YEARS<sup>6</sup>

# 1

Foundations will be more strategic in the way they plan for and design evaluations so that information collected is meaningful and useful.

“**Implement more strategic evaluation designs** to measure initiatives and key areas of investment.”

“**Develop clear strategies and goals** for what [the foundation] hopes to measure and assess.”

My sole wish is that evaluation data is meaningful—that it is actually **linked to strategy**.”

<sup>6</sup> Of evaluation staff who responded to our survey, 74 percent, or 94 of 127 respondents, answered the open-ended question, “In five years, what do you hope will have changed for foundations in the collection and/or use of evaluation data or information?”

# 2

Foundations will use evaluation data for decision-making and improving practice.

# 3

Foundations will be more transparent about their evaluations and share what they are learning externally.



Use evaluation deliverables to **inform decisions that improve** our foundation and grantee performance.

I would like to see the full integration of evaluation into **foundation daily practice and routine decision making.**



More and more effective use of evaluative data and information **for the purpose of learning and improvement for foundations.**



**More public sharing both internally and externally** and more frank conversation about what worked or didn't work.



I want to **expand our ability to share information** to inform the fields in which we work and to inform our audiences, such as donors and policymakers.



To improve the level of transparency surrounding evaluation, **less emphasis on perfection and more on discovery.**

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## 1. What is the purpose of evaluation at your foundation?

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How do your foundation's evaluation efforts align with its goals and strategies, if at all?

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How does leadership at your foundation use information from the foundation's evaluation work, if at all?

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How do your foundation's evaluation efforts align, or not align, with its organizational culture?

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## 2. How does your foundation make decisions about each of the following:

How much to budget for evaluation work?

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Which costs will be categorized as evaluation costs (e.g., salaries of staff with evaluation responsibilities, third party evaluators, data collection efforts, etc.)?

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## 3. How are responsibilities for evaluation work structured at your foundation?

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How many staff have evaluation-related responsibilities at your foundation?

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What are the evaluation-related job responsibilities of these staff members? On what do they spend their time?

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In which department or area do staff with evaluation-related responsibilities work, and why?

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**4. How, if at all, does your foundation use information from its evaluation work to inform programmatic decisions?**

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**5. How are decisions made about with whom evaluation information will be shared:**

Inside the foundation?

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Outside of the foundation?

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**6. What changes would you like to see regarding evaluation at your foundation?**

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What would you hope would happen as a result of these changes?

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**SAMPLE**

Foundations were considered for inclusion in this sample if they:

- were based in the United States or Canada;
- were an independent foundation, including health conversion foundations, or community foundation as categorized by Foundation Directory Online and CEP’s internal contact management software;
- provided \$10 million or more in annual giving, according to information provided to CEP from Foundation Center in September 2014 and the Canada Revenue Agency, with help from Philanthropic Foundations Canada;
- or, were members of the Center for Evaluation Innovation’s (CEI) Evaluation Roundtable.

For foundations that were members of CEI’s Evaluation Roundtable, the foundation’s representative to the Roundtable was included in the sample. For all other foundations, the following criteria were used to determine the most senior person at the foundation who was most likely to have evaluation-related responsibilities:

An individual was deemed to be evaluation staff if his/her title included one or more of the following words, according to the foundation’s website:

1. Evaluation	2. Assessment	3. Research
4. Measurement	5. Effectiveness	6. Knowledge
7. Learning	8. Impact	9. Strategy
10. Planning	11. Performance	12. Analysis

To determine which evaluation staff member at a foundation was the most senior, the following role hierarchy was used:

1. Senior Vice President	2. Vice President	3. Director
4. Deputy Director	5. Senior Manager	6. Manager
7. Senior Officer	8. Officer	9. Associate

If no staff on a foundation’s website had titles or roles that included the above words related to evaluation, the most senior program staff member at the foundation was chosen for inclusion in the sample. Program staff were identified as having titles that included the words “Program” or “Grant,” or mentioned a specific program area (e.g., “Education” or “Environment”). The same role hierarchy described above was used to determine seniority.

Only those individuals who had an e-mail address that could be accessed through the foundation's website, CEP staff knowledge, or CEI staff knowledge were deemed eligible to receive the survey.

In September 2015, 271 foundation staff were initially sent an invitation to complete the survey. Two new members of the Evaluation Roundtable were later added to the sample and sent the survey. Later, 19 individuals were removed from the sample because they did not meet the inclusion criteria. Completed surveys were received from 120 staff members, and partially completed surveys, defined as being at least 50 percent complete, were received from seven staff members.

Thus, our final sample of respondents included 127 of the 254 potential respondents, for a response rate of 50 percent. Of the foundation staff who responded to the survey, 58 percent were evaluation staff, 35 percent were program staff, and six percent were staff with a title that did not fall into either of these two categories, based on our previously defined criteria.

## **METHOD**

The survey was fielded online during a four week period from September to October of 2015. Foundation staff with evaluation-related responsibilities were sent a brief e-mail including a description of the purpose of the survey, a statement of confidentiality, and a link to the survey. These staff were sent up to nine reminder e-mails and received up to one reminder phone call.

The survey consisted of 43 items, some of which contained several sub-items. Respondents were asked about a variety of topics, including their role at their foundation and previous experience, their foundation and its evaluation function, their foundation's specific evaluation practices, and the ways in which information collected through evaluations is used.

## **RESPONSE BIAS**

Foundations with staff who responded to this survey did not differ from non-respondent organizations by annual asset size, annual giving amount, region of the United States in which the foundation is located, or whether or not the foundation is an independent foundation. Information on assets and giving was purchased from Foundation Center in September 2014. Evaluation staff of foundations that are part of CEI's Evaluation Roundtable were more likely to respond to the survey than evaluation staff of foundations that are not part of CEI's Evaluation Roundtable.

## **SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS**

Sixty-seven percent of the foundations represented in our final sample were independent foundations and 25 percent were community foundations. Of the

independent foundations, 13 percent were health conversion foundations. The final eight percent of foundations in our sample included other types of funders that were part of the Evaluation Roundtable, aside from independent or community foundations.

The median asset size for foundations in the sample was about \$530 million and the median annual giving level was about \$28 million. The median number of full-time equivalent staff working at foundations in this study was 25. The number of full-time equivalent staff is based on information purchased from Foundation Center in September 2014.

## **QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS**

To analyze the quantitative survey data from foundation leaders, descriptive statistics were examined. Chi-square analyses and independent samples t-tests were also conducted to examine the relationship between foundation size and evaluation structure. An alpha level of 0.05 was used to determine statistical significance for all testing, and effect sizes were examined for all analyses.

Because our sample only consisted of 32 community foundations, we were unable to rigorously explore statistical differences between independent and community foundations in this study.

## **QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS**

Thematic and content analyses were conducted on the responses to the open-ended question, "In five years, what do you hope will have changed for foundations in the collection and/or use of evaluation data or information?" A coding scheme was developed for this item by reading through all responses to recognize recurring ideas, creating categories, and then coding each respondent's ideas according to the categories.

A codebook was created to ensure that different coders would be coding for the same concepts rather than their individual interpretations of the concepts. One coder coded all responses to the question and a second coder coded 15 percent of those responses. At least an 80 percent level of inter-rater agreement was achieved for each code.

Selected quotations were included in this publication. These quotations were selected to be representative of the themes seen in the data.

## CEP FUNDERS

We are very appreciative of the support that made this work possible. See below for a list of funders.

### \$500,000 OR MORE

Fund for Shared Insight  
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation  
The Rockefeller Foundation  
The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

### \$200,000 TO \$499,999

The David and Lucile Packard Foundation  
Ford Foundation  
W.K. Kellogg Foundation

### \$100,000 TO \$199,999

Barr Foundation  
The James Irvine Foundation  
The Kresge Foundation  
Rockefeller Brothers Fund  
S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation

### \$50,000 TO \$99,999

Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation  
The Wallace Foundation

### \$20,000 TO \$49,999

Carnegie Corporation of New York  
Charles Stewart Mott Foundation  
The Duke Endowment  
John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation  
Lumina Foundation  
Surdna Foundation  
W. Clement and Jessie V. Stone Foundation

### UP TO \$19,999

The Assisi Foundation of Memphis  
California HealthCare Foundation  
The Colorado Health Foundation  
The Columbus Foundation  
The Commonwealth Fund  
Doris Duke Charitable Foundation  
Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund  
The Heinz Endowments  
Henry Luce Foundation  
Houston Endowment  
Kansas Health Foundation

The Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust  
The McKnight Foundation  
New Hampshire Charitable Foundation  
New York State Health Foundation  
Oak Foundation  
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