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Clare Nolan
Harder+Company Community Research

Alden Mudge
California Council for the Humanities

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Beyond the NPR Crowd: How Evaluation Influenced Grantmaking at the California Council for the Humanities

Clare Nolan, M.P.P., *Harder+Company Community Research*;
and Alden Mudge, B.A., *California Council for the Humanities*

Overview

Grantmaking organizations have encountered increasing demand — and, in California, some recent legislative pressure — to be transparent about the types of populations they are serving. This article describes how an evaluation of a multiyear grantmaking initiative of the California Council for the Humanities (CCH) brought to light new information regarding the types of participants reached by funded programs. Although CCH considers reaching California's diverse population core to mission fulfillment, it found that the typical participant in one of its major grant initiatives was a 55-year-old, middle-to-upper income, white female — what internal staff quickly dubbed “the NPR crowd.” This and other evaluation findings significantly influenced the design of subsequent grant programs.

This article first describes CCH's approach to using the humanities as a tool for engagement of diverse populations in civic life and provides an overview of *California Stories*, a multi-phased grantmaking initiative that began in 2002. It then discusses CCH's interest in evaluation, the methodology and approach used to evaluate *California Stories*, and the findings from this work. This is followed by a discussion of how CCH altered its grantmaking strategy and some lessons learned both for grantmakers and for others interested in strategies for civic engagement.

Key Points

- This article describes an initiative designed to engage a broad cross section of Californians in the humanities. Initial findings from book reading groups were that participants were predominantly white, middle-aged women.
- Changing the type of programming to include poetry slams, photography, digital media, and writing programs broadened participation of various ages and ethnic groups.
- The location of the program also made a difference, with schools and community-based organizations drawing more diverse audiences than libraries.

Making the Humanities Relevant to Californians

Like all state humanities councils, CCH evolved from a Great Society commitment by the federal government to make access to arts and culture available to every American. Embedded in this commitment was the notion that the humanities — or the variety of academic disciplines (linguistics, literature, history, philosophy, religion, ethics, and the other social sciences) that study the human condition — have a vital role to play in a democratic and free society (see National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965, §1-12, 20 U.S.C. §951). That noble impulse continues to animate CCH, which has an overarching goal of providing humanities programming to all Californians and a mission to

use the public humanities to foster understanding between people and encourage their engagement in community life.

In summary, the new campaign underscored CCH's belief in the humanities as a powerful strategy for fostering understanding between people and encouraging civic engagement, a belief based on the groundswell of research at that time regarding the importance of social capital (Putman, 2000).

CCH was founded in 1975 as a nonprofit re-granting affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. From its inception CCH has been challenged by its impulse to serve all of the residents of a state as large, as populous, and as diverse as California. Until the early 1990s, CCH and all the other state councils were prohibited from raising outside funds, and the federal funding formula meant that a large state like California received less than five cents per person to create public humanities programs. When the fundraising ban was lifted, CCH was slow to find constituencies from which to raise additional funds. Too, the humanities themselves, unlike the arts, are difficult to encapsulate in a way that is easily graspable by the general public. Every state council has worked many times on its 30-second elevator speech; not one has gotten it right yet. As historian Francis Oakley (2002, p.5) writes, "Why is it that those of us in the humanities seem to find it so very hard to convey to others the significance of what we do, or its importance for the national well-being, or even the status and current condition of the various fields of humanistic endeavor to which we bring so passionate a commitment?" Even a simple description of the humanities engenders an often-lengthy conver-

sation. Allied with this is the fact that since the humanities are so closely tied to the academy, its typical consumers have usually been college-educated individuals with a liberal arts background. Making the humanities relevant and accessible to the diverse population of California calls for innovation and creativity.

To respond to this need CCH developed a new strategic plan in 2000. The plan dramatically reshaped CCH's approach to public humanities activities. Where CCH previously had offered a diverse array of grant programs, supporting many humanities-based approaches, it now focused all of its resources on a single, statewide, high-profile, multiyear effort — the *California Stories* initiative — as a way of accomplishing its mission and reaching more Californians. *California Stories* lies at the very crux of public humanities because sharing stories is a way that all of us can engage in the exploration — and discovery — of the human condition. The idea behind *California Stories*, as former Executive Director Jim Quay stated at the outset, is that "the opportunity to share stories is particularly important here in California, the most highly diverse state in the United States and home to the greatest number of immigrants of any state (California Council for the Humanities, 2003, p.3)." He elaborated:

Today approximately half of California residents were born elsewhere, with foreign-born immigrants and their children making up more than one-quarter of the state's population. The diversity of California is one of its greatest strengths — and also its greatest challenge. How do people from different cultures and backgrounds connect to one another and the place where they live? How do we solve problems we face if we don't come together? What we have found is that when people tell their stories and others listen, a trust develops that can change community dynamics. In fact, story-sharing is often the spark that prompts people to do work together to find solutions to some of today's most pressing problems.

In summary, the new campaign underscored CCH's belief in the humanities as a powerful strategy for fostering understanding between people and encouraging civic engagement, a be-

lief based on the groundswell of research at that time regarding the importance of social capital (Putman, 2000). Among the key goals of the new initiative were the following:

- More children and adults will practice the humanities and recognize the importance of the humanities to improve their lives and their communities.
- Humanities organizations throughout California will collaborate to create and implement programs.
- Organizations not traditionally associated with the humanities will collaborate to create and implement programs.

Other goals called for additional funding for the humanities and higher visibility for CCH. An unwritten assumption of the plan embedded in these goals was CCH's desire to move beyond the typical humanities consumer and to make the humanities relevant to California's ethnically, linguistically, economically, and socially diverse population for the purpose of strengthening communities.

From Concept to Implementation: *California Stories* Grantmaking Strategies

How did CCH translate these ideas and broad goals into a grantmaking strategy? CCH conceived of an ambitious multiphased initiative called *California Stories*, consisting of focused campaigns, each of which comprised multiple strategies. The inaugural campaign of this initiative was a month-long series of programs centered on the classic coming-to-California story, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. CCH conducted the *Reading "The Grapes of Wrath"* program in partnership with the California Center for the Book and the California State Library. More than 1,000 events took place in libraries and other venues across the state, from book discussions and film series to live performances and poetry slams. The second campaign, a \$1.25 million grantmaking initiative known as *California Stories Uncovered*, sought to broaden the story of California by bringing to light little-heard community voices and issues through a variety of story-sharing programs:

- *Communities Speak*: This grant program supported multiyear projects designed to address critical issues facing communities (e.g., land use, bridging religious and cultural communities, and economic development) through the use of story-gathering and storytelling. Eight projects were awarded grants of up to \$75,000 to implement projects in collaboration with local community-based organizations.
- *California Stories Uncovered in the Library*: This small (\$1,000) grant program supported a variety of library programs and events, from oral history programs to reading and discussion groups featuring an anthology released by CCH called "California Uncovered: Stories for the 21st Century." The partnership with libraries also included a *Writers in Conversation* series in which contributors to the anthology (including Richard Rodriguez and David Mas Masumoto) appeared in conversation in nine cities across the state.
- *California Stories Uncovered in the Classroom*: CCH partnered with the California Writing Project to create a *California Stories*-related writing curriculum. In addition, teachers were eligible for a small award (\$250) to support public events in which to showcase their students' work.
- *New Californians Story Project*: This grant program provided up to \$15,000 for projects that engaged immigrant teens in five communities to explore cross-cultural identities and their experiences as newcomers to California by photographing and writing about their families and neighborhoods.
- *California Story Fund*: This small (\$5,000) grant program supported community-based story projects aimed at expanding the public's understanding of California.
- *California Documentary Project*: This grant program supported film, video, and photography projects that use storytelling to address issues of concern in contemporary California life.

Evaluating California Stories

It seemed only natural that with the launch of a bold initiative like *California Stories* CCH would devote substantial resources to evaluation. This section provides context regarding the history of

FIGURE 1 California Stories Initiative theory of change.



evaluation in the humanities, CCH’s own experience and expectations for the evaluation, and the general approach and methodology used.

Humanities organizations, like arts organizations, have traditionally maintained a low profile with respect to documenting program impact, and social impact has often been inferred from event attendance, financial health, and organizational size (Wyszomirski, 2001). Several promising efforts are underway to improve measurement of humanities programming, including recent capacity-building efforts spearheaded by the Federation of State Humanities Councils. This movement is in part a response to the need for humanities organizations to build public understanding and support for programming (Renz & Lawrence, 2004). In recognition of this context, CCH was intentional in its efforts to use evaluation as a way of making the impact of public humanities programs more explicit.

However, CCH’s decision to commission an initiative-level evaluation went beyond its desire for data that would help justify the impact of humanities programming. At its core, the *California Stories* evaluation was designed to support and further CCH’s own learning about its grantmaking strategies, in particular with regard to the theory of change (described above) guiding its work. This orientation was, in part, a result of CCH’s earlier experience with evaluation. CCH had historically conducted small evaluations of its grantmaking efforts using internal resources. These usually consisted of self-reports from grantees and audience survey forms, which were

haphazardly read by CCH staff with occasional gleanings. For a series of large community heritage grants that predated *California Stories*, CCH hired Harder+Company Community Research, a California-based consulting firm that specializes in research and planning for the social sector. Its findings informed and helped shape the debate about what the focus of the single big idea should be for CCH’s upcoming multiyear campaign. It seemed only natural that CCH would maintain an evaluative approach throughout implementation of *California Stories*.

CCH’s belief in the power of stories to make people feel more connected to each other and to the places in which they live was a common thread across all of its grantmaking strategies and in the evaluation itself. This belief was articulated in the initiative’s theory of change shown in Figure 1.

Harder+Company used a cluster evaluation strategy to understand the contribution of different grant programs and activities with respect to this theory of change. This approach measures a common set of process and outcome indicators across grantees and grant programs (W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 1998). While cluster evaluation has emerged as a common approach to evaluating grantmaking and foundation performance over the past 20 years, CCH was an early adopter of the strategy among grantmaking organizations (Putnam, 2004).

The evaluation framework was grounded in a facilitated logic modeling process involving CCH staff and grantees of one of CCH’s major grant programs. This process resulted in the identifica-

TABLE 1 Evaluation Methods by Grant Program

| Grant program | Grantee reports | Project director interviews | Pre-/ Postsurveys | Focus groups and interviews | Audience surveys | Site visits | CCH staff and partner interviews |
|--|-----------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|------------------|-------------|----------------------------------|
| <i>Reading The Grapes of Wrath</i> | X | X | | | X | | X |
| <i>Communities Speak</i> | X | X | | X | X | X | X |
| <i>California Stories Uncovered in the Library</i> | X | X | | | X | | X |
| <i>California Stories Uncovered in the Classroom</i> | X | X | | | X | | X |
| <i>New Californians Story Project</i> | X | X | X | | X | | X |
| <i>California Story Fund</i> | X | X | | | X | | X |
| <i>California Documentary Project</i> | X | X | | | | | X |

tion of a set of outcomes that could be measured across grantees. Through further discussion and development involving CCH staff, it also yielded a smaller set of outcomes to measure across grant programs. Specific evaluation methods varied according to each grant program and programming activity. All grant recipients were required to submit final reports that provided information on basic process objectives, such as the number of community members who participated in a project or the number and types of humanities products (films, radio programs, Web sites, exhibits, etc.) developed. These reports also included responses to a self-evaluation questionnaire that allowed project directors to articulate perceived impacts, successes, and challenges.

To account for the wide variety of grant programs, data collection instruments were designed and tailored to measure the same outcomes using different means, as best fit each program. Grant programs that included public programming were asked to distribute audience surveys that

collected basic demographic information as well as feedback on public events. One grant program involving youth-administered pre- and postsurveys that tracked changes in youth attitudes in beliefs over the program period. Finally, there was one multiyear grant program that implemented customized evaluation plans, participation in site visits and periodic interviews conducted by the evaluation team, and recruitment of community members and project partners for participation in focus groups and interviews. Table 1 summarizes evaluation methods used for each grant program. Although the level and nature of evaluation varied by grant program, all activities were conducted to identify their individual and collective contributions with respect to CCH's overarching mission and the theory of change guiding the initiative.

Grantmaking organizations face increasing demand for transparency about the types of populations they are serving. However, it is worth noting that the decision to collect demographic data about participants was not driven by external

pressure, but instead by an internal organizational belief that reaching California's diverse population is essential to the fulfillment of CCH's mission of fostering understanding between people and encouraging their engagement in community life. In keeping with the evaluation's knowledge-building orientation, collecting this information was critical for understanding whether the *California Stories* initiative was truly achieving intended goals.

As a result, the *California Stories* evaluation gave special attention to collection of data regarding the types of participants reached through public programs. A core set of demographic measures was developed before campaign implementation and measured consistently across nearly 450 grantees during the three-year implementation of the state-wide campaign. These measures were incorporated into surveys of direct program participants. In addition, all grantees conducting public programming (a core grant requirement of most programs) were asked to administer a brief audience survey to a random sample of participants. The survey was provided to grantees at the beginning of the grant period and was made available in the five languages most spoken in California (English, Spanish, Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese).

Findings: Some Successes and Some Surprises

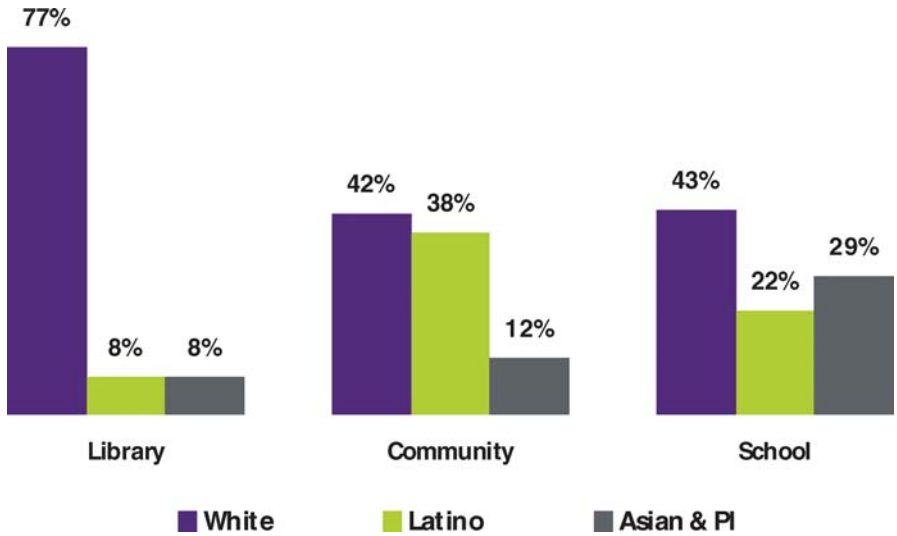
The evaluation of *California Stories* has yielded rich information about CCH's work since reporting first began in early 2003. However, this narrative focuses on a subset of findings that emerged early in the evaluation and that proved to be somewhat disappointing to CCH's staff and board. These findings did not relate to the specific mechanics of the initiative theory of change. Rather, they were about something much more basic and integral, having to do with *who* participates in its programming. This is important because CCH's mission of fostering understanding and encouraging engagement in community life is predicated on the coming together of people with diverse backgrounds and experiences for these purposes.

Evaluation findings regarding the initiative's inaugural campaign, *Reading "The Grapes of*

Wrath," were first reported in spring 2003. The early results were promising in many respects. To begin with, the scope of the campaign was truly impressive. Approximately 7,500 Californians participated in book or film discussion groups of *The Grapes of Wrath*, and an additional 22,000 people attended other project-related activities and events, including read-a-thons, art exhibits, theatrical performances, teen poetry slams, food drives benefiting migrant farm families, and author events. Participants in book and film discussion groups were also highly satisfied with the sponsored programs. Most reported that the groups inspired lively discussion of Steinbeck's novel (75 percent) and that the program made them see similarities between the story depicted in the novel and California today (77 percent), increased their appreciation of California's migrant experience (78 percent), and increased their understanding of California's ethnic and cultural diversity (70 percent). Responses to open-ended questions on the audience survey revealed that the program deepened participants' awareness, appreciation, and empathy for the migrant and immigrant experience, as well as disadvantaged people. One representative comment read, "[The program] gave me a deeper compassion about the poor, homeless, migrants, etc. [It] helped me to understand the extent of the discrimination, abuse, extreme poverty and despair these people suffered."

Despite these positive findings, one piece of data proved to be substantively troubling. The typical participant in a *Reading "The Grapes of Wrath"* discussion group was a 55-year-old, middle-to-upper income, white female — what internal staff quickly dubbed "the NPR crowd." In terms of actual numbers, 77 percent of participants identified as white, 70 percent were female, 60 percent had a bachelor's degree or higher, and 49 percent were over age 55. In some ways the narrow demographic reach of funded programming was not a surprise given that the traditional humanities consumer is a college-educated individual with a liberal arts background. However, this finding was very much at odds with the vision and goals that CCH had charted with this initiative.

FIGURE 2 Ethnicity by grant program setting. This excludes "other" responses, including African American, Native American, and multiracial.



As a result, CCH actively worked to refine and test various grantmaking strategies aimed at broadening its reach throughout California's diverse communities. CCH first modified the design of its grants to libraries by requiring them to partner with local schools, institutions of higher education, and community-based organizations for the purpose of involving a wider segment of the community, particularly youth. Early evaluation results revealed that these programs attracted a more diverse audience with regard to age, ethnicity, and income. However, the strategy also presented challenges for local libraries because of the substantial time demands on librarians to form the required collaborative relationships with other organizations. Further assessment and debriefing with library staff revealed that although these institutions serve diverse youth, the programs CCH was creating did not take advantage of this strength, primarily because many youth are uninterested in typical book reading and discussion group formats. As a result, CCH further modified its programming by developing a "package" photography and writing program designed to appeal directly to youth and that could be easily implemented by librarians. The grant for this program includes a monetary award combined with implementation support materials such as curriculum, a program manual, equip-

ment (e.g., cameras and a computer), training, and technical assistance. Before releasing a call for applications for this grant, CCH conducted a pilot that resulted in several improvements to the design of the program, in response to both the needs of the target audience and the capabilities of libraries themselves.

The evaluation allowed CCH to understand more about the types of programming, settings, and formats most likely to attract diverse audiences and that were most likely to stimulate the telling and sharing of stories by participants. For example, programs that took place in libraries attracted the largest proportions of female audience members. They also attracted the greatest proportion of white audience members. Grant programs that used schools or community-based programs as venues for engaging audiences in humanities programming attracted greater proportions of nonwhite audiences. A deeper look revealed that some grant programs attracted higher proportions of Latino participants while others attracted higher proportions of Asian and Pacific Islanders. This was in part because of the nature of programming as well as the types of organizations that applied for the different grants programs. Figure 2 presents data on ethnicity for attendees of public programming through three

different grant programs, each of which took place in different settings.

Certain outcome measures also varied by grant program, and therefore by program setting. For example, people were more likely to report lively discussions in school settings (87 percent of participants in the *Teacher Grants* program compared to 74 percent of participants in *New Californians Story Project*). Participants were also more likely to report sharing personal stories in school settings (73 percent vs. 57 percent). At the same time, library events received more consistently positive satisfaction ratings (in the low ninetieth percentile across library-based grant programs). Although the evaluation did not capture the reasons behind these variations, it did point to the need to consider and learn more about them in order for CCH to broaden and extend the reach of funded programming.

CCH's experience demonstrates the value of being intentional about collecting demographic data on those reached by its grant funds. These data helped the organization identify the alignment between its mission and the reality of whom it was serving.

Lessons Learned

All in all, CCH learned several lessons from the evaluation relevant to others interested in the humanities and to grantmakers in general. Some of these are summarized below:

Understand what appeals to your target audience: The evaluation clearly demonstrated that different types of humanities programming appealed to different demographic audiences. For example, library book discussion groups were more likely to appeal to older white women, whereas school-

based and intergenerational programs attracted more diverse audiences. Programs that incorporated digital and other visual media were more likely to appeal to youth. These findings have influenced the design of CCH's current campaign, *How I See It*, which is focused on youth.

Be prepared to listen and learn: CCH program staff members recall some initial disappointment among libraries with CCH's decision to launch a book reading and discussion campaign. In hindsight, this may have been due in part to libraries' early recognition of the limitations of these strategies with respect to engaging diverse audiences. The evaluation provided a useful way to collect candid feedback from project directors, thereby allowing CCH to learn from what it was hearing and make program design improvements. The relationships that CCH program staff established with individual organizations throughout initiative implementation also facilitated this process. CCH recognizes that good partnerships — with libraries as well as other institutions — are the most viable way for CCH to serve a vast state.

Play to partners' strengths: Organizations serving the community face various constraints when it comes to implementing programs supported by grant funds. Rather than creating new requirements to achieve funder aims, CCH learned to look for ways to build on existing strengths of funding organizations. For example, while the requirement for funded libraries to partner with community-based organizations did result in some benefits, it proved time intensive for librarians, who had difficulty locating organizations willing to commit the time and resources to a partnership.

Test new ideas before scaling up: As CCH adapted and changed its grantmaking strategy with libraries, it found that pilot testing was a useful way to collect feedback from funded organizations before launch of a new grant program. This was particularly true with respect to implementation of CCH's new grant program, *How I See It in the Library*, in which evaluation of a pilot grant program resulted in several design enhancements.

Don't let scientific rigor stand in the way of collecting meaningful information: California Stories grants range in size from \$250 to \$75,000. All recipients that conducted public programming were asked to administer a brief survey to a random sample of at least 20 community members attending public events. Although this method of data collection would not meet rigor requirements associated with scientific social research studies, it did provide a wealth of meaningful information to CCH by providing, for the first time, an in-depth picture of who participates in statewide humanities programming. This finding is consistent with recent trends away from “gold standard” research on the part of foundations and other institutions in favor of research that supports organizational learning and decision making (Conner Snibbe, 2006; Kramer, Graves, Hirschorn, & Fiske, 2007).

Don't be afraid to find out who you are really serving: In California a recent state bill (AB 624) caused quite a stir in the philanthropic world before being withdrawn (Perry, 2008). The bill would have required, among other things, that large California foundations collect and make public information about the degree to which grant funds reach different ethnic and underrepresented communities. Regardless of various points of debates surrounding the efficacy of the proposed legislation, CCH's experience demonstrates the value of being intentional about collecting demographic data on those reached by its grant funds. These data helped the organization identify the alignment between its mission and the reality of whom it was serving. CCH also hopes that its efforts to be transparent about its own experiences are useful to others in the humanities and grantmaking fields.

CCH is now in the middle of the third and final phase of the *California Stories* campaign, called *How I See It*. This campaign focuses on enabling young people to share — in their own words and through a variety of media — what their lives are like, what they care about, and what it is like to grow up in today's California. The design of this campaign incorporates lessons learned from CCH's ongoing evaluation activities, including those described here. CCH looks forward to learning from ongoing evaluation and to continu-

ing its commitment to bring humanities programming to all Californians.

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Clare Nolan, M.P.P., is vice president of Harder+Company Community Research, a California-based consulting firm that specializes in research and planning for the social sector. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Clare Nolan, Harder+Company Community Research, 299 Kansas, San Francisco, CA 94103 (email: cnolan@harderco.com).

Alden Mudge, B.A., is deputy director of the California Council for the Humanities, an independent state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. He is also a writer and lives in Oakland, CA.