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# The Theory of Philanthropy of the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative

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*Keywords:* Theory of Philanthropy, strategy, Palix Foundation

## Background: From Program Launch to Developmental Evaluation to Theory of Philanthropy

In 2009, the Palix Foundation (formerly the Norlien Foundation<sup>1</sup>) launched the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative (AFWI) as a long-term, collaborative effort to improve health and wellness outcomes across Alberta, Canada. Collaborating partners in the AFWI include government, academia, community organizations, and the health system in the province. The AFWI aimed to support the development, translation, and application of relevant scientific knowledge to improve prevention and treatment services for addiction and other mental health problems, including from an intergenerational perspective.

With this broad purpose in view, the foundation and its partners have explored and set in motion a wide variety of activities, ranging from direct support for basic science, and research and development in “framing” methodologies for translating scientific results, to professional development for practitioners, policymakers, and multistakeholder consultations and seminars.

In 2010 the AFWI rolled out a knowledge-mobilization program for a carefully selected cross-section of leaders at multiple levels in

## Key Points

- This article presents the theory of philanthropy of the Palix Foundation, which seeks to improve health and wellness outcomes for children and families in Alberta, Canada, by mobilizing and applying knowledge about brain and early childhood development and the link to lifelong mental health and addiction outcomes.
- Through years of intuitive exploration and adaptation, the foundation evolved its role to include brokering access to the latest scientific knowledge, convening key players in multiple forums to explore applying that knowledge, and serving as a learning partner to public systems and communities in Alberta.
- Following evaluation of a major phase of the foundation’s work, its leaders asked the authors to work with them to address questions emerging from the evaluation relating to the next phase in its development. This led to a concentrated effort to synthesize the foundation’s underlying theory of philanthropy and apply it to those questions.
- Articulating the theory of philanthropy helped “make the implicit explicit” and provided a useful way for the foundation to engage with its stakeholders and recalibrate its approach for a new phase of work.

Alberta’s policy and on-the-ground service systems affecting child development and mental health. The program featured two separate three-year knowledge and leadership development symposia series, each series designed for a

<sup>1</sup> Norlien changed its name to the Palix Foundation in June 2015; we use the new name throughout. In its public profile, the foundation has consistently preferred to emphasize its collaborative partnership – the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative – rather than the foundation’s own name. (See “Identity and Branding,” Table 3.)

*The conclusion of the symposia, in 2013, marked a natural inflection point in the AFWI's activities, and as a result the foundation decided to conduct an interim, developmental evaluation of the AFWI's work.*

distinct cohort of such leaders: the Early Brain and Biological Development series and the Recovery From Addiction series. The idea was to make available recent scientific insights about early brain development and addiction to policymakers and practitioners across the province in a usable form for nonspecialists. Highlights of these translated insights, the basis of a “core story of brain development” (AFWI, 2013) developed by the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2015, p. 7), include:

- Early experiences in life build “brain architecture,” with simple circuits forming first and more complex circuits building upon them.
- Children develop in an environment of relationships that begins in the family but also involves other adult caregivers. The developmental process is fueled by a reciprocal “serve and return” process, in which young children naturally reach out for interaction and adults respond – and vice versa.
- Genes and environments interact to shape the architecture of the brain. Genes provide the basic instructions, but experiences leave a chemical “signature” authorizing how and even whether the instructions are carried out.
- Cognitive, emotional, and social capacities are inextricably intertwined and learning, behavior, and physical and mental health are highly interrelated over the life course. We can't have one without the others.

- “Toxic stress” derails healthy child development and can have long-term negative effects on learning, behavior, and physical and mental health.
- Brain plasticity and the ability to change behavior decrease over time, so getting things right the first time produces better outcomes and is less costly, to society and individuals, than trying to fix them later.<sup>2</sup>

The three-year symposia program was only the beginning; the AFWI is a long-term initiative with at least a 10-year impact horizon. But the conclusion of the symposia, in 2013, marked a natural inflection point in the AFWI's activities, and as a result the foundation decided to conduct an interim, developmental evaluation of the AFWI's work. The foundation engaged the authors of this article as advisors in the developmental evaluation, and commissioned the international consulting firm FSG (2014), through a team led by Hallie Preskill,<sup>3</sup> to carry out the evaluation itself.<sup>4</sup>

In working with the evaluators, the AFWI's leadership made it clear that their long-term strategy centered on catalyzing system change: they wanted to help the AFWI's public and private systems become substantially more effective and able to achieve substantially better outcomes for Alberta children and families. With this in mind, the evaluators drafted a series of multisector system maps and set out to chart the AFWI's progress in the effort to support system change.

Early drafts of the maps had the foundation at the center and foundation partners close by, with arrows of influence radiating out to the many sectors and subsectors the AFWI touched. But

<sup>2</sup> Bulleted items are direct quotations. For an interactive presentation of the linkages from early experiences to lifelong outcomes, see [http://developingchild.harvard.edu/index.php/resources/multimedia/interactive\\_features/biodevelopmental-framework/](http://developingchild.harvard.edu/index.php/resources/multimedia/interactive_features/biodevelopmental-framework/).

<sup>3</sup> FSG is an international consulting firm focused on serving organizations seeking social change: <http://www.fsg.org/>. Preskill, a managing director at FSG, leads the firm's strategic evaluation area: <http://www.fsg.org/people/hallie-preskill>.

<sup>4</sup> For some insightful comments on the FSG work with the AFWI as an example of evaluation in the context of complexity, see the FSG blog post <http://www.fsg.org/blog/what-complexity-and-emergent-strategy-mean-evaluation>.

**BOX 1** Developmental Evaluation of the AFWI: Key Methods: (Source: FSG)**Developmental Evaluation of the AFWI: Key Methods**

- Review of more than 500 AFWI documents, including previous evaluation and progress reports.
- Detailed survey of 299 AFWI participants, using a retrospective, “post-, then pre-” design.
- 58 interviews with 55 stakeholders (a few stakeholders were interviewed twice), including researchers, community leaders, practitioners, critics, and foundation staff.
- Reflective practice sessions with 31 individuals, including practitioners, physicians, government officials, practitioners from and/or primarily serving the aboriginal community, and community funders.
- Ripple-effects mapping sessions with 10 individuals, including researchers and community leaders.
- Survey of 148 AFWI website visitors.

the foundation wanted the maps redone to place Alberta children and families in the center, with the various services touching the family forming the next ring and with radiation outward to the systems supporting the service providers. At the AFWI’s request, the evaluators then focused on understanding how key stakeholders were receiving and acting on knowledge in their various actions and interactions to support Alberta children and families; there was, intentionally, much less focus on the dynamics of the AFWI’s own operations and interactions. With this focus on external systems agreed, the evaluators analyzed stakeholder response across relevant systems through in-depth key informant interviews, surveys, reflective-practice sessions, case study analyses, and ripple-effects mapping sessions. (See Box 1).

The findings from the developmental evaluation were remarkable: To a striking extent, the AFWI had succeeded in developing a multisector cadre of “change agents” who were steeped in the results of recent brain science and eager to collaborate in applying those results to their work. (See Table 1.) The excitement in the field was almost palpable; one of the present authors was listening as a group of stakeholders told the evaluators what a “gift” the AFWI’s program had been to the province as a whole.

The stakeholder enthusiasm revealed by the developmental evaluation provoked a series of questions:

- What was it about the foundation’s programming that stimulated this level of stakeholder response?
- Given that this was an interim evaluation and an interim success – around learning and engagement, but not yet full-scale system change – how could the AFWI’s existing investment be built upon most effectively?
- Would different approaches be needed as the work moved from knowledge translation and mobilization to an increased focus on application to yield better family outcomes?
- What learning could be harvested for broader application – for example, by the philanthropic community – from the AFWI’s results to date?

In its charge to the evaluators, the AFWI’s leadership had downplayed these topics to avoid their focus on the foundation’s internal dynamics, activities, and strategy; but the very success of the evaluators in tracking the external results brought these more internal questions into strong relief. So the foundation then asked the present authors to develop a theory of philanthropy as a step towards generating answers.

### Developing the AFWI Theory of Philanthropy: From Implicit to Explicit

The authors’ advisory engagement in the AFWI developmental evaluation positioned us well to work with foundation leadership in developing a

TABLE 1 Developmental Evaluation Results: Answers From Survey of 288 AFWI Participants: (Source: FSG)

Developmental Evaluation Results: Answers From Survey of 288 AFWI Participants			
The questions below were drawn from a major section of the detailed survey conducted by FSG. Respondents were given a 5-point scale (1 low, 5 high) and asked:			
Please indicate the answer which best describes your current state now and your state before engaging with the AFWI.			
Questions Asked of the "Early Childhood Development" Stakeholder Group	"Now" Mean	"Before" Mean	Difference Between Means
How would you rate your familiarity with the effects of toxic stress on early brain development? (n = 116)	4.49	2.95	1.54*
How would you rate your familiarity with the role of serve-and-return interactions in healthy early childhood development? (n = 118)	4.53	3.07	1.46*
To what extent is brain development affected by early childhood experiences? (n = 118)	4.75	3.71	1.04*
Questions Asked of the "Addiction and Mental Health" Stakeholder Group	"Now" Mean	"Before" Mean	Difference Between Means
How would you rate your familiarity with how the brain's reward, motivation, and related systems play a role in addictions? (n = 148)	4.15	2.78	1.37*
How would you rate your familiarity with process addictions (e.g., gambling, food, sex, Internet)? (n = 147)	3.93	2.70	1.22*
To what extent do you think addiction is a brain disease? (n = 145)	4.48	3.28	1.20*
To what extent does the following statement represent your opinion: "Families are important participants in addiction treatment"? (n = 148)	4.82	4.03	0.78*
Questions Asked of All Respondents	"Now" Mean	"Before" Mean	Difference Between Means
How often do you collaborate professionally with individuals from other sectors (e.g., health, education, justice, human services, and provincial policy)? (n = 236)	3.62	2.81	0.82*
To what extent has your professional practice been influenced? (n = 261)	3.84	2.83	1.00*
To what extent do you think you can play a role in influencing your own organization to be more effective? (n = 238)	4.05	2.94	1.12*
To what extent do you think you can play a role in influencing other organizations to be more effective? (n = 264)	3.62	2.52	1.10*
* Paired sample t-tests significant at $p < .05$			

draft theory of philanthropy. After reviewing evaluation data and a range of foundation documents, we embarked on an intensive round of interviews with foundation leaders and stakeholders, with a special emphasis on people who had known the foundation and its programming for a long time.

As we discussed the insights and perspectives these stakeholders offered, it became clear that the foundation's way of operating – if you will, its

implicit theory of philanthropy – had evolved over time and that this evolution was far from random: it represented a strategic response, an ongoing adaption to what the foundation was discovering in successive strategic eras in its work. When we applied the theory-of-philanthropy lens to this evolution, we discovered a strong, consistent set of principles that underlay the AFWI's work throughout – the commitment to accessibility and openness to new stakeholders and new ideas, for

**BOX 2** Major Themes From the AFWI Theory-of-Philanthropy Work**The AFWI Theory of Philanthropy: Key Themes**

1. Unique theory of philanthropy: The Palix Foundation is pursuing a distinctive theory of philanthropy that focuses on large public systems rather than individual projects, and features direct entrepreneurial action by the foundation rather than traditional responsive grantmaking. A set of strong guiding principles underpins the theory of philanthropy.
2. Evolving, adaptive strategy: While the underlying principles have been there from the beginning, the approach to philanthropy has evolved based on the foundation's ongoing experience. The foundation's focus, grant portfolio, impact strategy, and operating methods changed in an aligned way through what we identified as four strategic eras.
3. Current focus on catalyzing system change: The foundation is in transition from its third to its fourth strategic era, as it seeks to make new progress along the long-term causal pathways of its theory of change:
  - The broad ambition is to support substantially improved outcomes for all Albertans in early brain development, addiction, and mental health.
  - This requires catalyzing improvement in the performance of large public and community systems in the province, which in turn requires a long-term, collaborative strategy.
  - After extensive strategic exploration, the foundation concluded that neither demonstration projects nor policy advocacy would alone lead to this kind of far-reaching change in system performance, so a different approach was needed.
4. Distinctive, complementary foundation roles: The foundation decided to focus on building cross-boundary connections and energizing them by mobilizing knowledge as the engine for systems change. It does this by acting directly as a knowledge entrepreneur, a catalytic convener, and a partner on the learning journey with public and community systems.
5. High alignment of strategy and design: The foundation's adaptive, entrepreneurial approach has led to a high degree of alignment across the foundation's theory of philanthropy, theory of change, operating processes, leadership, staff, and governance. Looking ahead, as the foundation increasingly focuses on helping its partners apply knowledge for on-the-ground impact, the theory of philanthropy will likely continue to evolve.

example – and a dynamic action model that had emerged from the encounter of those principles with years of experience in a specific philanthropic enterprise.

For the most part, neither the overall principles nor the dynamic action model had been articulated explicitly by the foundation, but they were clearly implicit in the foundation's work. The theory-of-philanthropy work had the effect of bringing this implicit reality into an explicit discussion, creating a basis for the foundation in turn to constructively address the strategic questions it is currently facing.

To bring out some overall themes (see Box 2) from our work developing the AFWI theory of philanthropy, we will begin by sketching, in four

“strategic eras,” the evolution of the foundation's work. We then will outline the consistent, core principles that we found had guided that evolution. Finally, we will turn to the results of the foundation's evolution in 2014-2015 by presenting a dynamic model of the foundation's current activities. This model – which together with the principles form the core of the theory of philanthropy – turns out to be strikingly well aligned with, yet distinct from, the theory of change that had emerged from the developmental evaluation.

### The Evolution of AFWI

The foundation's programming – beginning with its founding, through the launch of the AFWI, to the interim evaluation of the first phase of the AFWI's work, and onto the leadership's current efforts to build on that evaluation – can be thought of as passing through four strategic eras.

*The foundation's leaders delved into its new focus area with a distinctive approach: exploring continuously, consulting widely, building relationships across disciplines, and maintaining accessibility and openness to partnership from multiple directions. They worked with researchers, academics, university heads, policymakers, and practitioners in the province and beyond.*

*Strategic Era 1: Founding and Early Grantmaking (1997-2004)*

Founded in 1997 as a family foundation based in Calgary, it made its early grants in a range of areas of interest to its founders, including music, environment and health. Signature initiatives included an annual organ festival that brought world-class performers to Calgary; the foundation also supported academic research in targeted areas. Some features visible in this first stage have continued to characterize the foundation's work: a creative spirit, an appreciation of the value of academic research, and a focus on recruiting and engaging top international talent.

*Strategic Era 2: Refocus and Exploration Around Addiction and Mental Health (2005-2008)*

What we have dubbed Strategic Era 2 began in 2005, when Nancy Mannix was appointed patron<sup>5</sup> and chair. Under her leadership, the foundation continued its grantmaking in key areas from Stra-

tegic Era 1, notably music, while at the same time settling on a priority area for focused attention: improving services for the prevention and treatment of addiction and other mental health problems in Alberta. As a result of this decision, Strategic Era 2 saw a rebalancing of resources: from 80 percent to 90 percent of the foundation's annual funding went to the new focus area.

The foundation's leaders delved into its new focus area with a distinctive approach: exploring continuously, consulting widely, building relationships across disciplines, and maintaining accessibility and openness to partnership from multiple directions. They worked with researchers, academics, university heads, policymakers, and practitioners in the province and beyond.

This exploratory work has never stopped, but already in Strategic Era 2 the foundation had reached some conclusions that anchored its subsequent programming. The importance of brain development in the early years for subsequent health and well-being, and the intergenerational nature of addiction and mental health problems for many families, emerged as a major theme from both biological research and on-the-ground experience. Specifically, the cumulative effects of adversity in early childhood result in high risk of disrupted development of the brain and other organ systems, leading in turn to elevated risk for addiction and other adverse mental and physical health outcomes; and adults facing addiction and other mental health problems in turn have reduced capacity to buffer the effects of adversity on their children – put positively, secondary prevention for adults is primary prevention for children. Yet, these facts were only intermittently integrated into service provision (in Alberta and elsewhere); there were major gaps between “what we know” about brain development and mental health, and “what we do” to prevent and treat addiction.

The foundation set out to help policymakers, practitioners, and scientists close that gap, and began devoting the majority of its resources to this challenge. Among its early initiatives with this focus in mind, the foundation:

<sup>5</sup> The role of the patron is to provide overall vision and leadership for the foundation and to serve as chair of the board of directors.



**BOX 3** The CUPS One World Child Development Centre: (Source: CUPS)

#### The CUPS One World Child Development Centre

The Calgary Urban Project Society (CUPS) One World Child Development Centre provides integrated health care, education, and housing services to help people to overcome the challenges of poverty. Last year, CUPS worked with more than 8,400 Calgarians. The One World Child Development Centre is one of CUPS's flagship programs, providing full-day preschool and kindergarten programs for children age 3 to 6, together with a package of related services, including:

- transportation;
- parent education;
- family support workers and referrals for counseling;
- nutritional breakfast, lunch, and snacks;
- health care services including visits from pediatric residents, dentists, and opticians;
- collaborative on-site services such as psychology, speech and language pathology, occupational therapy, and physiotherapy;
- partnerships with social-service agencies; and
- transitional support for children moving from kindergarten to first grade.

Reported impacts in 2014-15 for One World and related CUPS programming include:

- After one year at One World, children moved half a grade closer to their peers academically; on average, they progressed from 1.5 grades to one grade behind their peers, based on one year of participation in the three-year program.
- Among parents in the Nurturing Parent Development program, high-risk attitudes about corporal punishment decreased by 73 percent and empathy toward children increased by 0.32 standard deviations (Cohen's *d* effect size), significant at  $p < 0.05$ .
- Families in the home-visiting program showed marked improvements in living situations, such as an increase in stable housing from 63 percent of families to 87 percent.

- created and funded the Fraser Mustard Research Chair in child development at the University of Calgary;
- developed connections with, and often funded, leading researchers in Alberta and worldwide (for example, Dr. Bryan Kolb, a leading neuroscientist at the University of Lethbridge);
- supported the creation of the Calgary Urban Project Society (CUPS), a model integrated facility providing health, education, and housing services for families in poverty, and sustained it through long-term funding (the CUPS One World Child Development Centre provides an excellent illustration of the application of the scientific insights ideas promoted by the foundation in a practical setting – see Box 3);
- supported and partnered with the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University and the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (NSC), a major knowledge synthesis and translation initiative led by the center;<sup>6</sup>
- connected, through the Harvard center, with the FrameWorks Institute, which the foundation commissioned to conduct research on public attitudes in Alberta and to help the foundation adapt and apply, in the Alberta context, the “core story” on brain development that FrameWorks had developed with the Harvard center and the NSC);
- convened two Building Blocks conferences, in 2007 and 2008, for high- and mid-level leaders in the Alberta mental health system to discuss research in early brain development and its connection to later health outcomes; and

<sup>6</sup> The NSC's working papers provided up-to-date insights on current, first-rate science in a form usable by policymakers; the foundation energetically made these available in Alberta and used them as a research base to support improvements in policy and practice.



- convened two Addiction Summits, in partnership with the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission and the Calgary Health Region, in April and May 2008, that brought together 200 professionals from the addiction treatment community in Calgary and included presentations from eight Alberta families who had experienced addiction and recovery.

*A signature component of the Palix Foundation's work across all four eras is its openness to feedback. Each of the events in this era included small-scale evaluations and informal but systematic solicitation of feedback; the patron made it a personal priority to hear from stakeholders and existing and potential partners.*

A signature component of the Palix Foundation's work across all four eras is its openness to feedback. Each of the events the Foundation hosted in this era included small-scale evaluations and informal but systematic solicitation of feedback; the patron made it a personal priority to hear from stakeholders and existing and potential partners. As a cumulative result of such listening, the foundation decided to shift its role to focus less on funding discrete, individual projects (for example, Palix elected not to fund a new addiction treatment facility) and more on creating and supporting a systematic, coherent, and collaborative knowledge-mobilization and system-change effort. Thus the AFWI was born.

*Strategic Era 3: AFWI as a Knowledge Mobilization and Systems-Change Initiative (2008-2014)*

In her continuing role as patron and chair, Mannix made two key moves in 2008 to build the AFWI

as a systematic initiative. First, she brought on Paula Tyler as the new president of the foundation. Tyler had spent many years in health and child services with the governments of Alberta and New Zealand, including at the deputy minister level, and brought a strong understanding of health systems and of policymaking generally. Second, Mannix and Tyler convened a two-day retreat to discuss opportunities and potential direction for the AFWI, culminating in a core AFWI strategy.

At the heart of that strategy were the three-year symposia series, one on early brain and biological development and one on addiction recovery. Participants were invited from a carefully identified list of leaders across relevant sectors; each participant signed up for a full three-year series. Participants attended three annual week-long symposia in a retreat setting in Banff, with support for small-team activities in the interim as well. The symposia featured presentations from international leaders in relevant disciplines and interactive working sessions on applying scientific advances to policy and practice. The symposia and related activities were designed to stimulate in-sector and cross-sector relationships that could spur innovation and larger-scale change.

The intergenerational link between early brain development and lifelong physical and mental health underlay the content of both symposia series, but each series approached the core science from a distinct direction (brain development and addiction respectively), so participants started work in their own areas of focus. These two parallel symposia series finished at the end of 2012, and the thematic streams then converged with a unified follow-up series, Accelerating Innovation, beginning in 2013. AFWI governmental partners – e.g., Alberta Human Services, Alberta Health Services, and Alberta Innovates-Health Solutions – extended vital support to the symposia by providing funds and freeing up staff time for participants.

With the symposia as a backbone, the foundation continued to develop relationships, scan for and welcome fresh connections and opportunities, and commit funding in targeted areas where

it could build knowledge, close gaps, and enable system change. (See Box 4.) The foundation worked actively with grantees and other stakeholders to create projects of mutual interest with maximum potential impact:

1. Working with symposia participants and other partners, the foundation supported the development of new policy frameworks within the government and engaged with professional associations and educators in, for example, medicine, nursing, and pharmacology to connect its knowledge base to practice. Examples of policy shifts influenced by this work, traced in more detail in the FSG evaluation report, include:

- the Alberta government’s new policy on early childhood development,<sup>7</sup> released in 2013, followed by the adoption of the Children First Act in May 2013. The policy articulated uniform goals and measurements for early childhood services across the province, while the act funded new investments toward those goals; the policy drew explicitly on the science-based concepts promoted by the AFWI, including the way early experience builds “brain architecture,” the beneficial effects of “serve and return” interaction, and damage caused by toxic stress; and
- Alberta’s new policy on addiction and mental health, released in September 2011 in the document *Creating Connections: Alberta’s Addiction and Mental Health Strategy*.<sup>8</sup> Encompassing both prevention and treatment, the strategy was described by an FSG interviewee as the first time the government had an integrated “truly provincial” plan in this domain. The AFWI’s contribution was especially salient, according to an interviewee involved in the policy process, in developing two “strategic pillars” –

*The foundation developed a significant set of professional development initiatives, including a “professionals in residence” program at the Betty Ford Clinic for medical students at the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary; a certified sex-addiction training program for therapists; and training in addiction science for judges as part of the AFWI’s substantial partnership with the justice system in Alberta.*

Building Healthy and Resilient Communities and Fostering the Development of Healthy Children, Youth, and Families.

2. The foundation developed a significant set of professional development initiatives, including a “professionals in residence” program at the Betty Ford Clinic for medical students at the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary; a certified sex-addiction training program for therapists; and training in addiction science for judges as part of the AFWI’s substantial partnership with the justice system in Alberta.
3. Working with FrameWorks, the foundation refined the “core story” and promoted it more broadly, including a feature in a special issue of Apple magazine, a monthly publication of Alberta Health Services. In addition, the foundation developed “Science in Seconds” video

<sup>7</sup> [http://earlychildhood.alberta.ca/Document/Together\\_We\\_Raise\\_Tomorrow\\_Alberta\\_Approach\\_Early\\_Childhood\\_Development\\_2013](http://earlychildhood.alberta.ca/Document/Together_We_Raise_Tomorrow_Alberta_Approach_Early_Childhood_Development_2013)

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.health.alberta.ca/documents/Creating-Connections-2011-Strategy.pdf>.

## BOX 4 Building the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative

## Building the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative

The foundation's approach in developing the AFWI included a combination of direct operations, such as running the symposia series, and targeted grantmaking. This strategy was marked by:

- continuing engagement with participants in the symposia series to harvest feedback and help them build on and apply what they were learning;
- multiple collaborations for direct action, including knowledge syntheses (with the National Scientific Council), knowledge-translation tools development (with FrameWorks), policy initiatives (with the Alberta government), communications work, and cross-sector and community-based initiatives;
- active relationship building for fresh connections, with a constant eye to new possibilities and opportunities;
- a flexible, rapid-action grantmaking model enabling proactive responses to such opportunities;
- consistent emphasis on finding and backing first-rate people; and
- high engagement with grantees.

The result was a diverse granting portfolio of people and projects identified largely through alignment of goals and assessment of quality, to complement the active operating portfolio. The FSG evaluation report summarized the AFWI as:

- a platform to invest in improving the health and wellness of children and families in the province by sharing and promoting the application of knowledge about brain and biological development as it relates to early childhood development, mental health, and addiction. This work is based on the understanding that there is a link between early life experiences and brain development, which subsequently contributes to health and wellness outcomes throughout life. AFWI is particularly interested in engaging with stakeholders and partners to contribute to better outcomes pertinent to mental health and addiction.

Given the cross-sector and multidisciplinary nature of what AFWI is aiming to achieve, the initiative was set up as a knowledge-mobilization effort to engage and catalyze relationships across stakeholders from science, policy, and practice domains. The purpose is to reduce the gap between the knowledge base and what is done in policy and practice. Ultimately, AFWI seeks to:

- convene, inform, educate, and create engagement across diverse stakeholders from academia, health, human services, justice, and education sectors so that relevant knowledge can become embedded in all levels of policy, funding, programming, professional education, and practice; and
- support and facilitate the understanding and application of this knowledge to catalyze system-level, integrated change in policy, service provision, and on-the-ground practice rooted in cross-sector collaboration for the ultimate benefit of children and families.

clips, which break down the “core story” into vignettes accessible to the general public.

4. The foundation brought the government of Alberta group working within Human Services on early childhood development together with the Frontiers of Innovation community, a network of researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and philanthropists in the early childhood field convened by the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard. The resulting Frontiers of Innovation relationship catalyzed work by the Alberta government with community stakeholders to create and test new programs for improved results in early childhood development.

#### *Strategic Era 4: Building on Knowledge Mobilization for Systems Change and Large-Scale Impact (2015–)*

Throughout the AFWI's Strategic Era 3 work, the patron systematically solicited feedback – for example, by telephoning every participant in the symposia after each week-long session. Moreover, as that era progressed, there were numerous clear signs of success in knowledge mobilization, leading to specific changes at the policy and practice levels. To build on this informal feedback, assess the effect of its investment, and plan for a new phase of work, the foundation commissioned the FSG evaluation in late 2013, leading to a detailed report in June 2014. The report includes a rich analysis of the AFWI's progress on multiple dimensions, sector by sector, and concludes:

Findings from the AFWI developmental evaluation show that the initiative is contributing to changes in individuals, organizations, and systems. Changes in understanding, attitudes, relationships, and behavior experienced by change agents as a result of participation in AFWI activities are consistently strong. Changes in organizations and systems are also being observed, albeit to a lesser extent than changes in individuals. The social science literature [cited in detail in the report] on learning transfer, organizational change, and systems change provides context for [the evaluation] findings and helps calibrate expectations for progress given the initiative's activities.

Certainly, AFWI's progress thus far is impressive, given the early stage of the initiative's implementation and its emergent and dynamic strategy.

These strong findings suggest that, although AFWI's investment is resulting in progress, substantial ongoing investment will be needed to reap longer-term benefits at the child and family wellness level. For example, the successful knowledge mobilization strategy is increasing participants' understanding of the knowledge. This has built up a cadre of people thirsty for more guidance and tools to help them put this knowledge into practice. In addition, change agents have been catalyzing changes within their respective organizations, and to a lesser extent, across organizations. Yet there is a desire among change agents to do more. High-profile shifts in provincial strategy, for example, in early childhood development and addiction and mental health, have set the stage for continued progress, and the time has now come to ensure high-quality implementation of the strategies. All signs point to growing success as the initiative builds on its strong knowledge mobilization outcomes and continues to adapt to support change agents, and others, in putting the knowledge into practice. (FSG, 2014, pp. 4-5)

It was with this sense of achievement, combined with the ambition to meet the challenge posed by the reported desire among stakeholders to "do more" to help move from knowledge to impact, that the AFWI began planning for Strategic Era 4. The AFWI's leaders wanted to sort out how it should target resources both to sustain and build

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on its ongoing knowledge mobilization work and to "do more." Ideas ranged from broader public engagement to "seed grants" for innovation, from re-investment in stakeholders who had already responded positively to targeted engagement with new stakeholders. To help with such decisions, the foundation wanted to better understand what aspects of its way of operating were most important to the success it was already seeing, and how it might need to adjust its approach to meet new challenges. Enter the theory of philanthropy.

### **AFWI's Theory of Philanthropy: Four Strategic Eras**

In each of the four strategic eras in its evolution, the foundation had distinct aspirations for the kind of impact it hoped to achieve, and correspondingly distinct investment portfolios (grants, etc.), strategies, and operating and organizational methods – in short, distinct theories of philan-

TABLE 2 Theories of Philanthropy in Four Eras of the Foundation's Evolution – Major Elements

Strategic Era  Theory of Philanthropy Category	Founding and Early Grantmaking (1997–2004)	Refocus and Exploration Around Addiction and Mental Health (2004–2008)	Launching the AFWI as a Knowledge-Mobilization and Systems-Change Initiative (2009–2015)	Building on Knowledge Mobilization for Systems Change and Large-Scale Impact (2015–)
<b>Aspirations for Impact</b>	Creative contributions in key areas of interest.	Helping Alberta children and families in the areas of addiction, mental health, and early development.	Improving outcomes for Alberta children and families by catalyzing significant improvements in the public systems that serve them, specifically by promoting early brain development and preventing and treating addiction.	Same as previous era.
<b>Portfolio of Investments: Projects, Grants, Staff, Other Resources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hosted annual organ festival, drawing first-rate international musicians.</li> <li>Founded capital and operating support for a comprehensive family-service center through the Calgary Urban Project Society (CUPS).</li> <li>Made grants to additional projects, academic research.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continued major support for CUPS.</li> <li>Decided against founding new addiction treatment center.</li> <li>Established Fraser Mustard Chair at University of Calgary.</li> <li>Hosted science-based convenings on addiction-related topics.</li> <li>Targeted additional funding to researchers in addiction and mental health.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hosted two major, three-year learning-and-action symposia series: Early Brain and Biological Development and Recovery From Addiction.</li> <li>Directly funded research (international and local), knowledge synthesis (National Scientific Council/ Harvard Center), and knowledge translation (FrameWorks).</li> <li>Responsively funded diverse portfolio of people and projects where goals align (e.g. research, professional development, community initiatives).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Host and support others hosting multiple small-scale convenings and learning-to-action sessions.</li> <li>Continue long-term support for research, knowledge synthesis, and knowledge translation; introduce new focus on biology of resilience.</li> <li>Develop knowledge and communication tools with particular attention to communities and general public (e.g., comedy videos).</li> <li>Fund responsively, including greater focus on community-driven knowledge-application projects.</li> </ul>
<b>Nature and Sources of Foundation Value Added</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creative spirit.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bring credible, scientific knowledge.</li> <li>Identify system gaps and aim to fill them by making connections and targeted funding.</li> </ul>	Three major roles of foundation (see, also, Figure 2 and Figure 3): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Knowledge entrepreneur.</li> <li>Catalytic convener.</li> <li>Learning partner for public and community systems.</li> </ul>	Same three roles as in previous era, enhanced by emphasis on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wider community base.</li> <li>Distributed leadership, with “change agents” also enacting the three roles, energizing a broad network.</li> <li>Tighter connections between knowledge and action – innovation.</li> <li>Science-based measurement and evaluation tools.</li> </ul>
<b>Organizing and Operating Approach</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Informal, responsive grantmaking.</li> <li>Conceiving and orchestrating high-caliber international event series.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Patron-led exploratory process.</li> <li>Openness, continued accessibility to new partners.</li> <li>Focus on people who bring promising ideas and projects.</li> <li>Customer orientation to partners and grantees.</li> <li>Seeking out, backing the best, locally and globally.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Operating model, staffing aligned to specific a theory of change focused on knowledge mobilization as pathway to system change (see Figure 1).</li> <li>High engagement with grantees, partners, multiple collaborations.</li> <li>Active relationship building and forging of fresh connections.</li> <li>Flexible, responsive approach – all elements from previous era still apply.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>New small-grant series for community projects, responsive to emerging needs.</li> <li>New staff role for network management.</li> <li>New level of interest from outside province leading to newly productive links between Alberta work and national and international work.</li> <li>New collaborations (e.g., U.S.-based Alliance for Strong Families and Communities).</li> <li>Focus on cumulative impact.</li> </ul>

thropy. While these were rarely codified in foundation documents (nor, for that matter, were the four strategic eras), our interviews revealed that the foundation's own open, exploratory way of engaging had led it, in an adaptive fashion, to four well-aligned though implicit theories of philanthropy underlying its work, one such theory for each strategic era. (See Table 2; for a fuller exposition of the theory of philanthropy underlying the work in the foundations most recently completed strategic era, see Table 3.)

#### *AFWI's Theory of Philanthropy: Guiding Principles*

As our evolutionary narrative and strategic-era description illustrate, the nature of the foundation's work, and the challenges it faces, look radically different today from where they were in 1997. Yet time and again, as we heard stakeholders tell stories of the work from different strategic eras consistent themes would appear and reappear. These themes, our interviews indicated, are recognizable as aspects of the foundation's identity in the community and form a basis for its ability to operate effectively. Put differently, the following guiding principles lie at the core of the foundation's theory of philanthropy:

- Make the world better for children and families.
- Promote scientific knowledge in the service of improving performance of public systems.
- Provide sustained commitment: Focus on the long-term goal, but with flexible means.
- Stay people-centered: Build committed relationships based on mutual benefit and respect in a way that is open to dialogue with all and marked by humility.
- Scan the field constantly for opportunities to make a difference; keep an "open door" to people and their ideas.
- Work at the highest level of excellence and quality, engage top experts worldwide and locally, provide first-rate support to all partici-

*The AFWI's leaders wanted to sort out how it should target resources both to sustain and build on its ongoing knowledge mobilization work and to "do more." Ideas ranged from broader public engagement to "seed grants" for innovation, from re-investment in stakeholders who had already responded positively to targeted engagement with new stakeholders. To help with such decisions, the foundation wanted to better understand what aspects of its way of operating were most important to the success it was already seeing, and how it might need to adjust its approach to meet new challenges. Enter the theory of philanthropy.*

pants, create a generous and generative learning space and avoid a penny-pinching "world of deprivation" mindset.

- Adopt a customer orientation: "If you're not happy, we're not happy."
- Think systems change: Identify gaps and work to fill them; seek out opportunities for leverage.



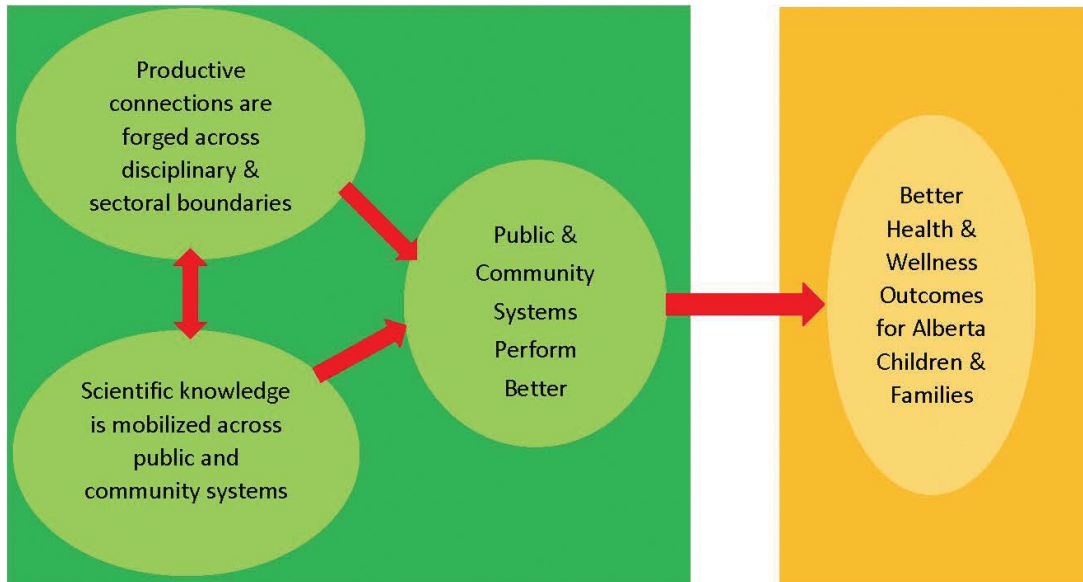
TABLE 3 The AFWI Theory of Philanthropy – Comparative Philanthropic Elements

Philanthropic Element	Traditional Private Philanthropy	Palix Foundation
<b>1. Philanthropic niche, approach</b>	Charitable giving and grantmaking in multiple, diverse areas of concern.	Strategic focus in one primary arena: Preventing addiction and enhancing family well-being.
<b>2. Roots and source of focus</b>	Founders' traditional charitable interests.	Patron's experience and deep commitment.
<b>3. Identity and branding</b>	Family name, e.g., J.W. McConnell Family Foundation.	Family anonymity; created a unique name. AFWI designed to be the visible platform to attract support and enable shared ownership – e.g., partnership with the government of Alberta.
<b>4. Strategy</b>	Responsive grantmaking: Make grants to a variety of nonprofits.	Direct action through the foundation's own creation, AFWI; implement the change process through foundation staff in supportive partnership with key stakeholders: "learn together."
<b>5. Leadership roles</b>	Develop and publicize grant criteria, screen grant applications to determine worthy grant recipients according to standardized criteria. Focus on following procedures.	Knowledge entrepreneur: patron's active engagement; open, accessible, listening, learning; seeking new patterns, relationships, possibilities; connecting people, promoting brain science, knowledge mobilization. Focus on opportunities to support change.
<b>6. Staff roles</b>	Implement grantmaking procedures; ensure compliance with standardized processes.	Support and facilitate implementation of AFWI; build and nurture relationships; support exploration and realization of new opportunities. Facilitate distributed leadership throughout AFWI.
<b>7. Overarching principles</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Follow procedures to ensure fairness, accountability.</li> <li>• Manage relationships based on understanding and maintaining the distinct roles and responsibilities of grantmakers (program officers) vs. grantees.</li> <li>• Professionalism.</li> <li>• Honoring and protecting the family name.</li> <li>• Eye on effectiveness of each grant.</li> <li>• Meeting payout requirements.</li> <li>• Efficiency.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make the world better for children and families.</li> <li>• Promote scientific knowledge in the service of improving performance of public systems.</li> <li>• Provide sustained commitment: Focus on the long-term goal, but with flexible means.</li> <li>• Stay people-centered: Build committed relationships based on mutual benefit and respect in a way that is open to dialogue with all and marked by humility.</li> <li>• Scan the field constantly for opportunities to make a difference; keep an "open door" to people and their ideas.</li> <li>• Work at the highest level of excellence and quality, engage top experts worldwide and locally, provide first-rate support to all participants, create a generous and generative learning space and avoid penny-pinching and a "world of deprivation" mindset.</li> <li>• Adopt a customer orientation: "If you're not happy, we're not happy."</li> <li>• Think systems change: Identify gaps and work to fill them; seek out opportunities for leverage.</li> <li>• Test assumptions; learn and adapt.</li> <li>• Understand the roots of addiction, particularly early brain development and the intergenerational cycle: Don't blame the addict.</li> <li>• Be a resource; provide knowledge to support partners' work for common goals but also acknowledge "we don't know everything."</li> <li>• Enable partners to themselves take the lead in enacting these principles and carrying them further.</li> <li>• Expect defensiveness and resistance and don't be overwhelmed or discouraged; this comes with the territory.</li> </ul>
<b>8. Time horizon</b>	Grant cycle (1-, 2-, 3-year grants)	Long term, ongoing, stay the course.
<b>9. Arena of action</b>	Wherever family has interests and presence.	Focus on Alberta: place-based philanthropy.
<b>10. Contextual sensitivity and trend scanning</b>	Largely context-free; projects conceived as stand-alone interventions and closed systems.	Change processes are affected by trends and developments in addiction, mental health, research, services, public policy, and politics in Alberta (e.g., major changes at Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission), Canada (e.g., Mental Health Commission of Canada), and internationally (e.g., new Harvard Center on the Developing Child working papers).
<b>11. Perspective on foundation's assets</b>	Money is the primary asset.	Assets are multidimensional, interrelated, integrated: financial support, knowledge, staff engagement, agenda setting, relationships, long-term commitment.
<b>12. Funding continuity</b>	Funding available for grantmaking dependent on ROI of the endowment; when market returns drop, grantmaking drops.	Commitment to maintain funding at effective and budgeted levels; in lean ROI years, prepared to use the endowment capital to maintain consistent, committed funding level for AFWI.



Philanthropic Element	Traditional Private Philanthropy	Palix Foundation
<b>13. Approach to risk</b>	Make risk assessment part of the due diligence process and, to the extent possible, avoid risk.	Take advantage of being "relatively new and young" to try out new or nonstandard approaches; take risks, accept consequence that some experiments will fail; learn and adapt.
<b>14. Collaboration approach</b>	Convene people; support collaborative action among grantees (but don't be engaged directly in collaboration).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Catalytic convening.</li> <li>• Be collaborative, initiate collaborative action, and be active part of collaborations.</li> <li>• Connect through knowledge: Connect people to people – across sectors, levels, resources, disciplines, and politics – by connecting through knowledge and collaborating around knowledge mobilization. Connect research to action.</li> <li>• Foundation collaborates as a resource and knowledge entrepreneur, not to advocate a specific, predetermined agenda, "way things should be done," or public-policy position.</li> </ul>
<b>15. Life-cycle approach, evolution</b>	Transitions across generations.	Strategic learning stages: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Begin generatively, exploring possibilities, engaging in conversations, and building knowledge.</li> <li>• Try select research grants and demonstration projects.</li> <li>• Evolve from project orientation to systems-change vision.</li> <li>• Decide on direct action to catalyze systems change.</li> </ul>
<b>16. Governance</b>	Family board; negotiate priorities within family.	Palix board; AFWI advisory council; distinctive role of patron and chair.
<b>17a. Communications at launch of a major initiative</b>	Publicity around launch to attract public support and recognition for the foundation.	No big, official launch of either Palix or AFWI; launched "under the radar." Didn't want AFWI to create pressure on partners or policymakers. Didn't want to risk a big launch having the effect of "throwing a grenade into the system." By not shining a light, foundation and partners retained flexibility.
<b>17b. Ongoing communications approach</b>	Minimal public reporting; meet legal reporting requirements.	Communications tools and strategy a major component of AFWI's substantive work. Patron reports semiannually to the community; reporting focuses on AFWI, not Palix. Communication driven by goal of "learning together." Become more public in stages, when ready.
<b>18. Ownership</b>	Private foundation owns its grantmaking.	AFWI goal is public ownership of addiction prevention, support for healthy families, systems change.
<b>19. Approach to scaling</b>	Promote successful projects so other funders might adopt the approach; support replication.	Scale the theory of change (not a best-practices model), propagating a way of thinking, a way of working, patterns of effectiveness; encourage "change agents" to use knowledge in catalytic role similar to that of AFWI itself, forming a fractal scaling model; implications of this overall approach for on-the-ground practice can in turn be adapted to context; this is "embedded scaling" (embedded in catalytic-convening process).
<b>20. Evaluation and monitoring approach</b>	Grantee routine accountability.	Patron regularly solicits feedback from all participants; individual project evaluations in normal course; developmental evaluation of AFWI overall informed by periodic qualitative and quantitative data-gathering and analysis by external evaluators.
<b>21. Alignment</b>	Grantmaking aligned with established, normative philanthropic practices and procedures.	Elements of theory of philanthropy are integrated and mutually reinforcing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long-term goal rooted in patron's experiences, values, commitments. Leadership's learning journey in support of this goal is basis for theory of change and strategic niche and approach developed by foundation, including the decision to act directly as a knowledge entrepreneur and learning partner to catalyze system change. The foundation's leadership and staff roles, organizational process, and the multidimensional perspective on the foundation's assets, are attuned to enabling it to play this entrepreneurial and catalytic role.</li> <li>• Overarching principles flow from patron's vision, values, and commitments and are basis for long-term time horizon, approach to collaboration, governance approach, and openness to and engagement with developmental evaluation.</li> <li>• Of particular note is the alignment between the theory of philanthropy and the theory of change. This degree of alignment is neither easy nor common, but where attained supports sustainable, strategic engagement and positive change.</li> </ul>

Figure 1 Simplified AFWI Theory of Change



- Test assumptions; learn and adapt.
- Understand the roots of addiction, particularly early brain development and the intergenerational cycle: Don't blame the addict.
- Be a resource; provide knowledge to support partners' work for common goals but also acknowledge "we don't know everything."
- Enable partners to themselves take the lead in enacting these principles and carrying them further.
- Expect defensiveness and resistance and don't be overwhelmed or discouraged; this comes with the territory.

### AFWI's Theory of Philanthropy: Supporting a Core Theory of Change

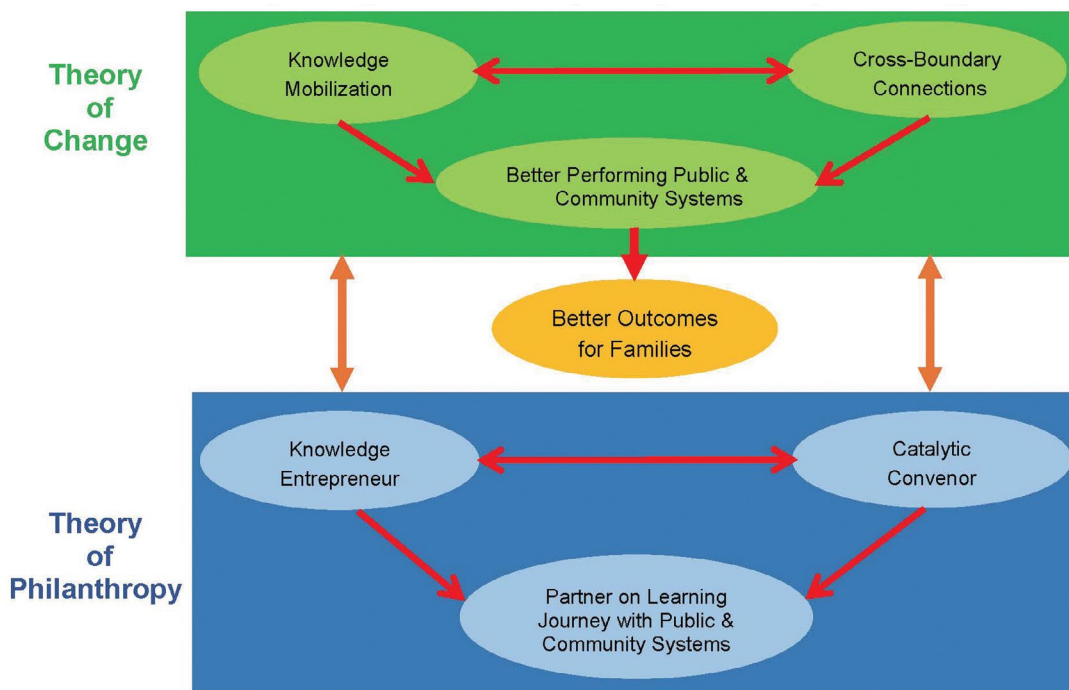
It was when we moved from identifying the principles that had guided the AFWI's evolution to exploring the action model that had emerged as a result of that evolution that the distinction between "theory of philanthropy" and "theory of change" came into its own for us. We had worked with the AFWI on its theory of change in 2013, the run-up to the evaluation. There, the

focus was, in accordance with classical theory of change work, to identify a causal chain of external changes that AFWI hoped to catalyze, with the foundation's ultimate goal as the final link in the chain. While the actual theory-of-change map that resulted was quite detailed, it can be sketched in broad outline. (See Figure 1.)

The schema represents the external focus of a theory of change and the requested focus of the FSG evaluation. The underlying strategy emerged from lessons the foundation had garnered as early as its initial exploration of the territory, when the link between early brain development and later mental health outcomes emerged as a key area of scientific knowledge that hadn't been sufficiently integrated into practice, and the rigidity of boundaries between disciplines and sectors emerged as a key reason why. The foundation aimed to attack these two interrelated problems simultaneously as a way to stimulate better performance in relevant service provision.

Looking from left to right in the theory of change, the FSG "interim evaluation" found that as of 2014 the AFWI had achieved considerable success in the first two ovals, which had in turn

Figure 2 Alignment of AFWI Theory of Change With Its Theory of Philanthropy



led to identifiable areas of progress – “points of light” – in the third oval. To get to the final outcome for children and families, those “points of light” clearly needed to be enlarged and intensified; the evaluation suggested that there was a high level of interest among relevant stakeholders in doing just that.

As we turned to the theory of philanthropy, with its more internal focus on how the foundation goes about its work, we were struck by the alignment of the individual theory-of-philanthropy elements we identified with key focus areas of the theory of change. (See Table 3.) The narratives we heard about the way the foundation was operating showed us how it had undergone a systematic evolution in its programs and operations as it moved through its history. The cumulative result of this evolution was that the foundation is geared up to play a set of distinctive functional roles that seem perfectly tailored to the changes it aims to catalyze, as represented in its theory of change.

### *Mobilizing Knowledge*

Knowledge mobilization was a core theme of the launch of the AFWI, but over time the foundation discovered that it needed to do far more than simply place knowledge in the hands of policymakers – it needed to help make the knowledge usable. Thus, the foundation developed a distinctive set of capacities and strategies to develop, translate, and communicate knowledge in ways that were directly responsive to needs and gaps in relevant systems – needs and gaps that the foundation continuously identified through its direct, open engagement with those systems.

The foundation maintained active links with academic researchers, groups focusing on knowledge synthesis and translation (e.g., the National Scientific Council), and communications experts (e.g., FrameWorks) on the one hand, and, on the other hand, with an extraordinary range of actual and potential users across sectors and professions in the province; it stood ready to fund

new projects and develop new tools whenever it saw a relevant opportunity, whenever it saw demand in the “marketplace” that aligned with the AFWI’s overall mission. This flexible, adaptive, user-friendly strategy seemed to underlie the enthusiastic reports we heard from interviewees (more systematically reviewed in the FSG evaluation) about how exciting and useful they found the knowledge the foundation was sharing. The foundation had carved out a special philanthropic niche, in a role we called knowledge entrepreneur.

### *Forging Cross-Boundary Connections*

Again, making connections was part of the foundation’s DNA from the start, but, again, it turned out that getting people together in one-off sessions was insufficient to catalyze the change the foundation sought. Instead, the foundation evolved another distinctive set of strategies, based on lessons from its early programming and featuring the carefully structured, multifaceted symposia series. These new strategies proved to be a way not only of attracting and engaging with key leaders, but also of providing them with an ongoing common language (the “core story”) and project framework (in small teams) so they could effect change together.

The underlying knowledge the foundation was sharing, in its knowledge-entrepreneurial capacity, was a key starting point for this cross-boundary work, but carrying the work through with the success reported to us and to FSG involved more than knowledge mobilization: here, the foundation was also acting systematically in a distinctive role we called catalytic convenor.

### *Improving System Performance*

Policymakers described to us how they are used to private groups coming to them with data, presentations, and advocacy, and how different their experience with the AFWI was from the familiar pattern. While advocacy groups can indeed inform or influence specific policies or actions, changing large-scale systems requires sustained, long-term engagement led not by the external party, but rather by internal system managers. In such a relationship, the external party must be

trusted to act as a source of advice and support, not as an agent pushing a specific agenda.

The AFWI, we were advised, achieved this kind of relationship through its sustained, long-term commitments, its openness to discovery and dialogue, and its willingness – even eagerness – to see its partners sort out for themselves the practical implications of the knowledge it was sharing. Knowledge entrepreneurship and catalytic convening contributed to picture, but more was involved in the AFWI’s success at this level: namely, the AFWI in the role of a long-term partner on a learning journey with public and community systems.

These three roles – knowledge entrepreneur, catalytic convenor, and partner to public and community systems in a learning journey – are organizing principles for the capacities the foundation has developed to support the changes it seeks. As such, they comprise the essence of the foundation’s theory of philanthropy. (See Figure 2.)

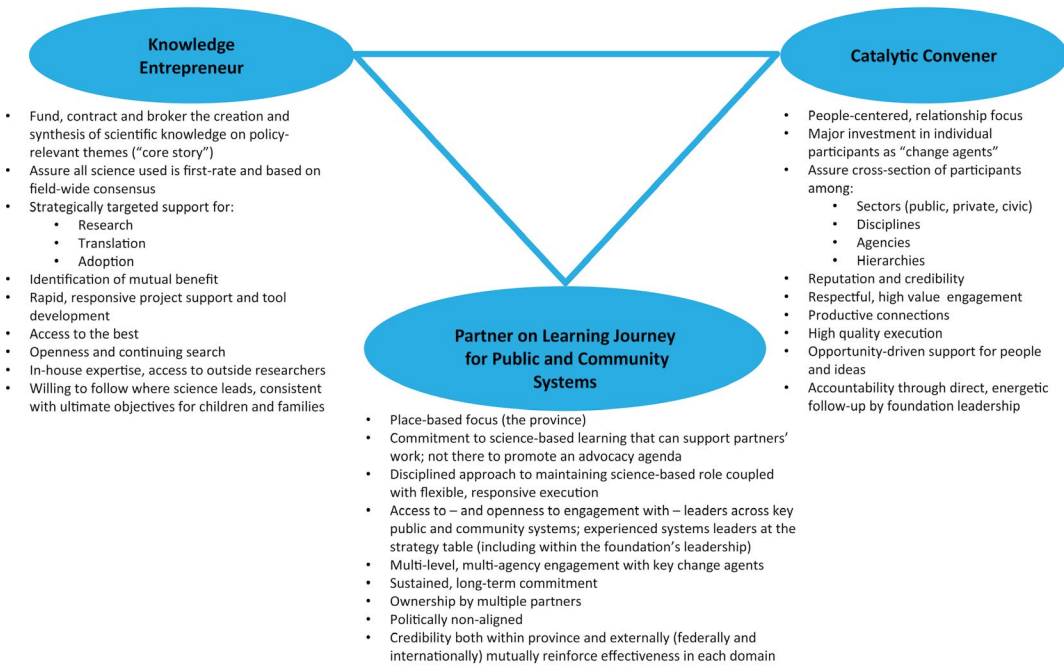
### **AFWI’s Theory of Philanthropy: Fulfilling the Key Roles for Change**

The roles of knowledge entrepreneur, catalytic convenor, and partner to public and community systems in a learning journey require a distinctive set of capacities, operating methods, and organizational strategies for the foundation to carry them out effectively. The knowledge entrepreneur role, for example, requires a nimble capacity to identify and fund projects as gaps or opportunities appear; the catalytic convening role requires in-house expertise on key elements of public and community systems; and the learning partner role requires the ability to make sustained, long-term program commitments.<sup>9</sup>

In short, the “discover, adapt, and evolve” principle with which we began in our description of the theory of philanthropy has enabled the foundation to shape its operations in a way no one could have anticipated, but which now underpins

<sup>9</sup> The philanthropic elements identified in Table 3 support these functions admirably, though they evolved before any of the roles were explicitly identified.

Figure 3 Requirements for Success in the Three Roles the Foundation Plays in Its Theory of Philanthropy (Preliminary List)



its ability to make the knowledge-to-action-to-outcome cycle in its theory of change effective. Now that the theory of philanthropy has made this evolution explicit, the AFWI has the opportunity to re-assess and sharpen its core capacities and directly adapt them to the challenges identified in the FSG evaluation. At this writing, the authors are working with foundation leaders and stakeholders to do just that. (See Figure 3.)

Taking a synthetic look at these aspects of the theory of philanthropy, in the spirit of Ghara-jedaghi and Ackoff (1985), we would emphasize that part of the successful evolution of the AFWI philanthropy is the way the various aspects fit together to form an effective whole:

- Knowledge products developed or adapted by the foundation – video clips and interactive learning tools, for example – in turn have become key mobilizers throughout the cycle, supporting cross-boundary engagement, sustaining long-term partnership, and providing a discovery orientation that enables systems to adapt and improve.

- The “core story,” built from the work of the National Scientific Council and adapted based on the foundation’s investments to the Alberta context, has become a comprehensible but also flexible way of promoting knowledge: it “travels well.”
- The foundation models the three-part cycle (knowledge entrepreneur, catalytic convening, learning partnership); stakeholders then experience this way of working and bring it back to their home environments and spread it: a fractal scaling model.

### Applying Theory to Practice: AFWI's Transition to Strategic Era 4

The developmental evaluation of the AFWI was conducted in 2014, at the end of what we are calling the foundation’s Strategic Era 3. The results of the evaluation were very encouraging, but they also reflected the interim nature of the evaluation: the AFWI is still early in its development. Specifically, the evaluation highlighted the success the AFWI has achieved in translating, synthesizing, and embedding

## *In the new strategic era the foundation is growing its capacity to support distributed leadership.*

relevant scientific knowledge among important stakeholders in Alberta. That very success suggested some new questions the foundation needed to answer about how to help those stakeholders apply that knowledge to serve families better. The evaluation indicated that the foundation was playing an important, ongoing role in propagating knowledge, but also that it would need to build on that role to meet the demand it had itself catalyzed for ways to act on that knowledge.

The question of how to evolve the foundation's role to build on what had been accomplished in Strategic Era 3 became a defining issue for Strategic Era 4. The AFWI's decision to develop a theory of philanthropy has helped the foundation's leadership begin to answer that question, in a striking way. They shared the core elements of the theory with key internal and external stakeholders, and reported to us that it was "enormously helpful" not only in generating understanding of "what kind of foundation we are and how we work," but also in encouraging leaders outside the foundation to take their own initiative in advancing the overall mission, by taking up, in their own way, the very roles highlighted in the theory of philanthropy: knowledge entrepreneurship, catalytic convening, and learning partnerships.

Thus, in the new strategic era the foundation is growing its capacity to support distributed leadership:

- **Catalytic convening:** Instead of basing its convening strategy on a series of large, foundation-hosted symposia as it did in Era 3, for example, the foundation is now supporting "innovation teams" and community-based groups that are themselves convening local

stakeholders around applying science to improve service.

- **Knowledge entrepreneurship:** In addition to general knowledge synthesis and translation, which has continued from Era 3, the foundation is now developing targeted knowledge products to support community-based leaders and funding small projects generated at the community level through a new small-grant facility.
- **Learning partner:** In its work with public and community systems, the foundation has moved from partnering with a "first circle" of leaders to a distributed model in which those leaders are themselves generating partnerships within their agencies and communities. This is a network approach; to support it, the foundation has created a new staff position – a full-time network manager.

Meanwhile, the synthetic thinking encouraged by the theory-of-philanthropy work has enabled the foundation to better "connect the dots." For example, they reported that their enhanced clarity in articulating their distinctive role has generated interest from leaders outside the province, federally and internationally, which has in turn improved the prospects for Alberta policy initiatives. Within the province, whereas in earlier eras the foundation had focused its grantee and partner accountability work in individual, person-by-person feedback, it is now looking across people and projects to understand what it is calling cumulative impact.

Feedback we have received from the foundation's leadership, about the response of others in the philanthropic community to the foundation's presentations of its theory of philanthropy, suggest that the model being developed by the Palix Foundation is intriguing and of potential value to philanthropists working in other areas as well. It is too early to fully assess these more general implications, but it is clear that the way the foundation has been playing its three roles is grounded in its philanthropic capacity. The foundation's "knowledge entrepreneurship" work, for



example, depends on its ability to fund research and knowledge-translation projects and would look, at best, very different if attempted from outside the philanthropic sector. This suggests that philanthropists in fields beyond family wellness may have unique opportunities to leverage their giving by applying aspects of the Palix model.

At this writing, we are completing a second round of stakeholder interviews intended to help the AFWI further deepen its theory of philanthropy. It is exciting to see the points noted here coming out not only in the internal AFWI interviews, but also in our discussions with “distributed” leaders at the public agency and community level. The learning journey continues.

### Concluding Thoughts

A spirit of exploration, discovery, and adaptation, under the direct leadership of the patron, have been central to the Palix Foundation’s approach to philanthropy since its founding. From the start of our own work with the foundation, it was clear that the flexible and intuitive style of the foundation’s leadership reflected anything but an absence of intent and strategy: They were working with a road map, but it was implicit rather than explicit. Thus, our theory-of-philanthropy work with the foundation largely became an effort to help it make the implicit explicit. We never felt we were developing a theory of philanthropy for the foundation; rather, we were reflecting back the theory embedded in its own work, and providing tools for the foundation and its stakeholders to develop that theory further.

In fact, we found we weren’t “reflecting” just one theory of philanthropy, but rather three – one for each of the three strategic eras we identified in the foundation’s evolution. Each time the foundation changed direction or strategy in important ways, it had (implicitly) re-aligned its operating procedures and philanthropic approach – its theory of philanthropy – to match. What, then, in the 2015 transition to a fourth strategic era, was the value to be gained from the effort to make the implicit explicit? What is the practical

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use of all the theoretical talk and writing? We look forward to the foundation’s own reflections on these questions, to be included in a separate article in this section of *The Foundation Review*, as we together try to understand this better. But we have already observed clear value. At the heart of the matter, it seems to us, is that three main leadership groups are applying the explicit theory of philanthropy in practice:



- the foundation's leadership, staff, and advisors;
- its external "distributed leadership" or "change agents"; and
- external players, in Alberta and beyond, whom the foundation is seeking to influence or inform and who in turn inform and influence work in Alberta.

All three groups, we have seen, have gained a clearer understanding of the distinctive nature of the foundation's collaborative work, and of their respective actual and potential roles in the effort to improve the performance of public and community systems. This increasingly clarity about roles and possibilities in turn offers an exciting model for scaling impact, a model in which local and global actors increasingly learn how to adopt, propagate, and apply insights from science to yield better outcomes for the children and families they serve.

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