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Front Matter

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Foundation Learning

Tools

Strategic Learning in Practice.....	7
Building a Culture of Learning.....	22
Reflective Practice for Learning From Experience.....	35
Knowledge Translation to Enhance Evaluation Use.....	49

Sector

Challenges and Opportunities in Philanthropic Organizational Learning.....	62
--	----

Reflective Practice

Meaningful Accountability Systems.....	81
Evaluators as Conduits and Supports.....	95
Building Principle-Based Strategic Learning.....	107

Executive Summaries.....	119
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Call for Papers.....	123
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The Foundation Review is the first peer-reviewed journal of philanthropy, written by and for foundation staff and boards and those who work with them implementing programs. Each quarterly issue of *The Foundation Review* provides peer-reviewed reports about the field of philanthropy, including reports by foundations on their own work.

Our mission: To share evaluation results, tools, and knowledge about the philanthropic sector in order to improve the practice of grantmaking, yielding greater impact and innovation.

The Foundation Review is a proud product of the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University.



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We believe that the forthright sharing of information among foundations and nonprofits builds a knowledge base that strengthens their ability to effectively address critical social issues. We encourage foundation donors, boards, and staff to honor this transparency in their own practices and to support others who do so.



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Editorial

Dear readers,

In the philanthropic sector, learning is a frequent topic of conversation, but often it is not clear what we mean by “learning” and even less often is it clear how to do it. Foundation staff are admonished to evaluate, reflect, and learn about past efforts — but to also keep up-to-date on emerging issues and opportunities. What was learned about prior work that can be applied in a new setting, scaled up, or used with a different population? In a multi-year initiative, how does the foundation make mid-course corrections?



Teresa R. Behrens, Ph.D.

As we all know, the social problems that foundations address are complex, with many interacting parts. Poverty, homelessness, poor health — these inter-related outcomes have equally inter-related causes. Particularly in place-based change work, where understanding context is critical, learning IS the key strategy for creating change (Patrizi, Thompson, Coffman, and Beer, 2013).

While foundation staff need a theory to guide action, they must also be willing to deviate from the plan when there is evidence that it isn't working or when a better way emerges. (As science fiction writer Robert Heinlein said, “Belief gets in the way of learning.”)

Many in the philanthropic world are grappling with the challenges of learning by developing tools and frameworks to support it. Authors in this issue share their approaches to internal foundation learning. Our next issue will focus on collaborative learning — how foundations learn with communities, other funders, and networks.

Carr, Hembree, and Madden and **Clarke, Preskill, Stevenson, and Schwartz** describe how two foundations developed intentional learning strategies. **Carr et al.**, provide a case study of the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation's approach of cultivating staff “learning champions.” They also created simple tools and processes to capture lessons generated internally and externally, and provided training in facilitation techniques to ensure insights are connecting back into strategies to drive decision-making.

Clarke et al., describe the work of Kaiser Permanente Community Health to develop and implement a system called Measurement and Evaluation for Learning and Outcomes. The system includes starting with learning questions and developing learning plans.

One of the often-stated reasons for the lack of systematic learning in foundations is a lack of time. **Jaffe** argues that foundation leadership and staff can put their own experience and expertise into play as a learning strategy through reflective practice.

Rogers and Malla address how essential information about monitoring, evaluation, and lessons learned can be made available to foundations. The Fred Hollows Foundation introduced participatory, real-time monitoring, evaluation, and learning bulletins grounded in the principles of knowledge translation. They suggest that this approach may be particularly suitable for foundations that have limited resources.

Chubinski, Adcock, and Sprigg interviewed learning, evaluation, and research officers in philanthropy across the country to identify points of struggle and opportunities for improvement in organizational learning, as well as what can be learned from mistakes in the process.

Holley and Parkhurst explore what is often seen as a tension between learning and accountability. They identify perspectives that can hold foundations back from full engagement in internally driven accountability initiatives, and offer practical guidance on how to shift these mindsets to more productive practices.

Many foundations rely on external consultant to assess the impacts of their work. **Nolan, Long, and Pérez** argue that these evaluators play a critical role in supporting philanthropic learning, programming, and strategy. However, most philanthropic evaluation is focused on the needs of individual foundations. These authors argue that evaluators and funders can do more to build the collective capacity of evaluators working in philanthropy in order to enhance their contributions to community change.

Editorial (continued)

Price, Reid, and Kennedy Leahy offer three principles for strategic learning, informed by the field and insights from practice across three foundations. Each principle is explored in terms of what it means and why it is important, along with examples from how it could look in practice.

In an oft-cited quote, the philosopher Eric Hoffer said, “In times of change, learners inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.” The articles in this issue have created and tested in their own work tools, frameworks and — perhaps most importantly — shifts in mindset that can promote learning. The shift from the foundation as expert to foundation staff as learners is the first step toward developing a deep learning practice that can foster deeper impact and relevancy.

We are grateful to the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, the McKnight Foundation and the Kauffman Foundation for their sponsorship of this issue, which allows us to make the entire issue open access.



Teresa R. Behrens, Ph.D.
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Contents

VOL. 11 ISSUE 1

Tools

7

Strategic Learning in Practice:
A Case Study of the Kauffman
Foundation

*Matthew Carr, Ph.D., Brett Hembree, M.P.A.,
and Nathan Madden, Ph.D., Ewing Marion
Kauffman Foundation*

22

Building a Culture of Learning:
Teaching a Complex Organization
How to Fish

*Tiffany Clarke, M.P.P., M.P.H.,
Hallie Preskill, Ph.D., and
Abigail Stevenson, M.B.A., M.P.H., FSG; and
Pamela Schwartz, M.P.H., Kaiser Permanente*

35

Reflective Practice for Learning
From Experience: Navigating the
Back Roads at Work

Jan Jaffe, M.B.A., Philanthropy Northwest

49

Knowledge Translation to Enhance
Evaluation Use: A Case Example

*Alison Rogers, M.P.H., M.Eval., and
Catherine Malla, M.I.P.H.,
The Fred Hollows Foundation*

Sector

62

Challenges and Opportunities
in Philanthropic Organizational
Learning: Reflections From Fellow
Grantmakers

*Jennifer Chubinski, Ph.D.,
Kelley Adcock, M.P.H., and
Susan Sprigg, M.P.H., Interact for Health*

Reflective Practice

81

Shifting Mindsets: How Meaningful
Accountability Systems Can
Strengthen Foundation Learning
and Improve Impact

*Marc J. Holley, Ph.D., and
Marcie Parkhurst, M.C.P.,
Walton Family Foundation*

95

Evaluators as Conduits and
Supports for Foundation Learning

*Clare Nolan, M.P.P., Engage R+D;
Meg Long, M.P.A., Equal Measure; and
Debra Joy Pérez, Ph.D., Simmons University*

107

Building Principle-Based Strategic
Learning: Insights From Practice

*Kelci M. Price, Ph.D.,
Colorado Health Foundation;
Chera Reid, Ph.D., Kresge Foundation; and
Suzanne Kennedy Leahy, Ph.D., Episcopal
Health Foundation*

Plus

119

Executive Summaries

123

Call for Papers

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