

# The California Wellness Foundation

*Grantmaking for a Healthier California*

# Reflections

On Evaluating Our Grants



The California Wellness Foundation

*Our work at The California Wellness Foundation (TCWF) revolves around our mission to improve the health of the people of California by making grants for health promotion, wellness education and disease prevention. Naturally, we want to know if our grants are making a difference in forwarding our mission and whether the organizations we fund are effectively using the Foundation's grant dollars. Because of this, TCWF has had a strong commitment to evaluation since its inception, evidenced by our practice of assessing every individual grant and funding sophisticated, independent evaluations of our major grantmaking programs.*

*We have learned several lessons along the way. At first, TCWF embraced the scientific method for evaluating our grants. But we often found a striking mismatch between the community programs we funded and this type of evaluation. The controlled experimentation typical of academic evaluation was virtually impossible — and often undesirable — in the community settings where the Foundation made grants. As a result, the knowledge gained from these evaluations was often small in comparison to their costs. This prompted a move to explore a broader band of evaluation approaches.*

*In 2000, the Foundation's Board of Directors made the decision to shift from an emphasis on proactive grantmaking — with substantial funding allocated to TCWF-initiated projects and large-scale evaluations — to an increased focus on grantmaking characterized by responding to unsolicited letters of interest. This shift in grantmaking created an opportunity for a change in our approach to evaluation. In addition to continuing to evaluate every grant based on the funded organizations' stated objectives, a major evaluation focus in the next several years will be on examining clusters of grants as they relate to the Foundation's grantmaking goals: (1) to address the particular health needs of traditionally underserved populations, including low-income individuals, people of color, youth and residents of rural areas; (2) to support and strengthen nonprofit organizations that seek to improve the health of underserved populations; (3) to recognize and encourage leaders who are working to increase health and wellness within their communities; and (4) to inform the development of public policies that support health promotion, wellness education and disease prevention.*

*This issue of Reflections is authored by Ruth Tebbets Brousseau, our Foundation's director of evaluation and organizational learning. "Reflections On Evaluating Our Grants" is intended to add to the increasingly lively dialogue among foundations about how to evaluate the work of philanthropy. We hope that this document, which chronicles TCWF's evaluation experiences, will provide valuable information to our philanthropic colleagues as they consider the best methods of assessing the impact of their grantmaking. We encourage your comments and feedback.*

**Gary L. Yates, President and CEO**  
The California Wellness Foundation

# Reflections On Evaluating Our Grants

By Ruth Tebbets Brousseau

When The California Wellness Foundation (TCWF) first started making grants in 1992, evaluation was just emerging as a topic of widespread interest in philanthropy. In the preface of the first book on the topic, published in 1993 by the Council on Foundations (Council),<sup>1</sup> it was pointed out that “it was unlikely that more than 100 U.S. foundations and corporate giving programs were pursuing serious or sustained evaluation of their own programs or of grantee projects,” and that there were “fewer than 30 corporate and foundation program officers who felt sufficiently comfortable in their knowledge of evaluation practices to volunteer specific training or consultation to others.”

The story is different today. Growing numbers of foundations have staff and departments dedicated to evaluation; more and more academic research centers and contract evaluation firms specialize in working with foundations; all Council meetings have several well-attended sessions devoted to evaluation; and the American Evaluation Association — the largest national organization of evaluators — has a membership subset of more than 720 philanthropy evaluators. Yet the increased interest in evaluation doesn’t signal agreement about where evaluation fits within the philanthropic mission or which tools and approaches are most appropriate for it. In fact, these are topics of considerable debate.

One node of controversy has to do with the value attached to evaluation in philanthropy. Are evaluations and the knowledge they create central to a foundation’s philanthropic mission, or is their value minor or even insignificant? Questions relating to value include: Is evaluation necessary? How much funding should be allocated to evaluation? Should we ignore, encourage or mandate evaluation among grantees? Where does evaluation fit within the spectrum of grantmaking that we do?

A second node of controversy about evaluation in philanthropy has to do with the methods we use in evaluation research. This debate touches basic epistemological questions of *how* we know what we know and raises such questions as: What are our standards of evidence? Can we make causal arguments that our funding led to specific results? Should we? By studying interventions, do evaluations shape and change them? Should they? Can evaluations adequately capture the magnitude and subtleties of social change that grantees and foundations accomplish?

The question of methods often turns around models and metaphors imported from other fields. For many years, science was the principal metaphor for knowing — and its questions centered on whether the scientific method was applicable to philanthropy. In his article “Philanthropy Wars,” William Schrambra<sup>2</sup> provides an interesting historical perspective on the movement among foundations to embrace the scientific method and the resulting debate between “*charity and scientific giving*.” In more recent years, business practices for assessing performance

have come into prominence.<sup>3</sup> Questions of value and method often are conflated, so that proponents of the scientific method or business metaphors assume that those who do not embrace their metaphors and models of assessment also do not value evaluation.

Two articles exemplify the poles of these debates. A short article by Ira Cutler,<sup>4</sup> “Generosity Without Measurement: It Can’t Hurt,” makes the case that the science of measurement is, at best, a costly approach to learning the obvious. “*Despite the presence of a large and vibrant program evaluation industry,*” he argues, “*trying to prove ‘what works’ leads to a dizzying and complex world of cause and effect, participant selection, control groups, Hawthorne effects, losing track of participants over time, margins of error, and inevitable informed guessing. Ironically, this enormous effort and expense is often intended to prove things that are generally believed.*”

At the other extreme, in “Philanthropy’s New Agenda: Creating Value,” Michael Porter and Mark Kramer<sup>5</sup> argue that philanthropies should fund far more in evaluation because production of knowledge is one of the central ways foundations can justify their tax-advantaged positions. “*Without evaluation, a foundation will never know whether or not it has been successful. The most basic premise of strategy — striving for superior performance — is violated if performance is not measured.*”

In the sections that follow, we discuss the experiences of The California Wellness Foundation and how we have placed ourselves in relation to both the value of evaluation and methods of knowing. We also turn to some of the issues and questions in front of us and highlight organizational milestones for evaluation, as well as some specific grants that exemplify aspects of evaluation grantmaking. Finally, we share some general conclusions from our observations and experiences at TCWF — and relate them to the field of evaluation for philanthropy.

## WHERE WE’VE BEEN

*The question for TCWF has been how to position and balance evaluation within our grantmaking to best achieve our mission of improving the health of the people of California.*

### **The Early Years: A Scientific Approach**

As a new foundation created in 1992, The California Wellness Foundation made a strong commitment to evaluation. Both the Board and staff drew from experiences of similar foundations as they designed TCWF’s approaches to accomplishing its mission. A number of those foundations that influenced us were considered serious evaluators of their grantmaking. Their belief in rigorous evaluation found receptive ears on the founding TCWF Board, where several members were academic social scientists who used evaluation research extensively in their own work.

In this first era, every grant made by the Foundation had a formal evaluation — and the funding allocated for evaluation was frequently as large as, and sometimes even more than, the portion allocated to services. The scientific method was firmly embraced, and the general rule of thumb for evaluations was that the more scientifically rigorous, the better. Random assignment,

controlled experimentation was considered the gold standard. Our hope was to make definitive statements about the interventions we funded: whether they were effective, the magnitude of their impact and what caused the effect. We intended for the knowledge that would result from this investment to be one of the most important results of our philanthropic investment.

From the outset, the question for TCWF has been how to position and balance evaluation within our grantmaking to best achieve our mission of improving the health of the people of California. From TCWF's inception, service has been an important value for our funding. This fact is signaled in our charter, which mandates that at least half of all of the Foundation's annual grant funds be directed to the provision of preventive health services for underserved populations. In our early aspirations, we aimed for a harmonious marriage of service and research in which our funding would simultaneously provide important health services to underserved populations and advance the knowledge about how to provide the best, most effective services possible.

Overall, although we funded some extremely strong programs with excellent evaluations, this model of investment for fulfilling our mission failed to meet our aspirations for a smooth marriage between science and service. A cluster of grants TCWF made to prevent child abuse is summarized in the following Capsule Case Study One, which provides an example of some of the challenges we encountered.

#### **Capsule Case Study One - Preventing Child Abuse**

Between October 1993 and March 1995, the Board committed \$3.4 million to prevent child abuse and neglect in low-income, vulnerable populations in California. Each grant was based on an experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation design. Three of the grants were made to universities that were mounting new programs in communities, and one grant was made to a community agency that contracted with a community-based evaluation firm to evaluate the research design they would implement. Two of the four grantees were not able to implement the research designs they had proposed because recruitment and randomization in community settings turned out to be far more difficult than anticipated. One of the projects that failed to fulfill the study design did, however, successfully create a new countywide approach to serving at-risk families of young children — though this outcome was serendipitous to the original grant. Although unable to implement the designs as intended, two of the researchers wrote prolifically about their studies but neither was able to sustain services past the study period or interest other agencies in picking up their models. Only one project came close to meeting its original service and knowledge goals.

As this case study shows, we found that programs using the scientific model were difficult and expensive to implement in community settings. The increment of knowledge gained was often small in comparison to the cost of the grant. In many of the grants that funded academic researchers to evaluate community programs, we heard vociferous complaints from communities about the ways

in which the demands of the evaluators were at odds with the needs of agencies and service providers. Also of concern to us was that a science base didn't offer programs an advantage in sustaining their services past Foundation funding. Although we undoubtedly made many mistakes in this phase of our grantmaking and could, over time, have improved our ability to fund more effective grants of this nature, we came to suspect that such large investments in evaluations whose designs were so heavily focused on impacts, were tipping the Foundation too far from our mandate to fund health service programs.

### **The Middle Years: Evaluating Initiatives**

Beginning in 1993, TCWF invested \$180 million in five initiatives to improve the health of Californians. Two of the initiatives (Violence Prevention and Teen Pregnancy Prevention) were designed to last 10 years, and three of the initiatives (Population Health Improvement, Children and Youth Community Health, and Work and Health) for five years. All of these initiatives — except for the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiative — have concluded, and each was thoroughly evaluated, with the costs of evaluations ranging from \$900,000 to \$8 million.

Each of the initiatives was based on a theory of change. Although there was some variation from initiative to initiative, the general theory of action was that social change could be accomplished through funding a series of interrelated programs. In the majority of the initiatives, these programs included a series of grants to fund community collaboratives and coalitions whose role was to plan and implement intervention programs; a policy program to focus on promoting policy changes to support and enhance the work of the community action groups; and a public education campaign to educate and influence the broader community to support the achievement of the initiatives' health goals. All of the initiatives also included a technical assistance component to support the work of local collaboratives and integrate the different components of the initiatives.

The earliest of the initiative evaluations was funded when TCWF still placed a premium on the scientific model, aspiring for the evaluations to help “prove” the initiative's theory of change and demonstrate impact. Illustrative of this was the evaluation of the Violence Prevention Initiative's community action grants. After five years and millions of dollars, the evaluation could not identify any community-level impacts or effects attributed to the interventions. At about the time these five-year results were coming in, TCWF hosted a national conference of evaluators engaged in assessing community initiatives, from whom we gleaned that our experience was common. There was no accepted methodology for assessing community collaborations, and relatively few evaluations of them had been able to identify a measurable impact that could be exclusively attributed to the activity of the grantees. These difficulties for this type of evaluation of grant investments are still true today (as can be seen, for example, in Wandersman<sup>6</sup>).

These experiences marked a turning point for TCWF. In subsequent evaluations, our overarching goal evolved from one of wanting to “prove” the impact of theories and models to “improve” the capacity of grantees to achieve their goals. The role of evaluator shifted from one of

objective outsider, whose role was to deliver the good or bad news about whether a program had achieved its impact, to one of evaluator, whose role as coach was to help design measurement systems and data tools to provide ongoing, continuous feedback to be used in program improvement. Although subsequent evaluations still attempted to measure impacts — successfully so, in some cases — the Foundation de-emphasized this in favor of building evaluation capacity among grantees through evaluations that fall under the methodological umbrella of empowerment evaluations.

We have evolved away from the belief that TCWF should play a major role in funding the most rigorous application of the scientific model or supporting basic research in evaluations. However, we continue to believe there is a very important role for TCWF and other foundations in advancing knowledge; promoting the use of programs that have been scientifically evaluated; contributing to the creation of information-rich environments in the nonprofit sector; and using science-based information to influence social policies. An example of a grant that accomplished this is included in the following Capsule Case Study Two.

### **Capsule Case Study Two - Synthesizing Research on Early Childhood Interventions**

TCWF made a grant to a research organization to synthesize information from major, rigorously evaluated programs attempting to improve outcomes for young children by intervening in their development early in their lives. The questions posed in this synthesis were framed to be relevant to policymakers:

- Do early interventions targeted at disadvantaged children benefit participating children and their families?
- Might government funds, invested early in the lives of some children, result in compensating decreases in government expenditures?

This synthesis was published in a book titled *“Investing in Our Children: What We Know and Don’t Know About the Costs and Benefits of Early Childhood Interventions”* (Karoly et al.<sup>7</sup>) that has been widely distributed and used by policymakers.

Also, when marking the evolutionary step away from the scientific model of evaluation as our template, TCWF articulated its organizational values about evaluations to guide future funding. These values emphasize that TCWF’s evaluation approaches and methodologies will be respectful of grantees and reflect the Foundation’s belief in building the sustainability of the organizations we fund. Important among the principles is a commitment to communicate what we learn from evaluation. In these values, we also stated the general guideline of investing no more than five percent of our grantmaking budget to evaluations, a substantial decrease from amounts we had previously allocated to them.

Four of the five initiatives and their evaluations have now concluded. TCWF's overall experience with these empowerment evaluations was positive. These efforts were generally effective at: building capacity among grantees to understand evaluation; designing systems for capturing information; providing feedback; and serving as the basis for continuous program improvement. Annual reports from the evaluators to the Foundation were provided throughout the initiatives' grant periods. These were essential to help us track progress among individual grantees and programs; to know where to allocate technical assistance resources; and to learn how to better synthesize and integrate the initiatives' programs to achieve maximal impact. Significantly, some of the evaluations enabled grantees to document the effectiveness of their services, which helped them successfully secure funding from other sources. An example of how one empowerment evaluation built evaluation capacity among grantees in the Children and Youth Community Health Initiative is included below in Capsule Case Study Three.

### **Capsule Case Study Three - Empowerment Evaluation of the Children and Youth Community Health Initiative**

The Children and Youth Community Health Initiative<sup>8</sup> funded 10 sites in low-income communities in California that empowered youth to identify and address issues they felt were important to improve their community's health. The evaluation placed a major focus on building capacity in the funded communities to evaluate their own projects. One of the innovative features of this empowerment evaluation was the creation of a summer institute that brought 33 youth — mostly in middle or high school — to a university campus for a weeklong training session on principles of evaluation research. Youth participants learned research design and statistics; were introduced to software to analyze their data; and worked in groups to design, implement and present their own original, data-based research projects. They brought these skills back to their communities.

There were also challenges associated with these evaluations. In initiatives with many moving parts, it was sometimes difficult to distinguish the roles of the evaluators in the large cast of characters involved. In some cases, the role of the evaluators seemed to overlap and blur with the technical assistance providers and, in other cases, with the Foundation itself. Grantees reported to TCWF independently on their grant progress. At times it was difficult for them — and the evaluators — to understand that the evaluators' reports were just one of several sources of information that the Foundation would use in making an overall assessment of its grants. Finally, some grantees — despite the Foundation's and evaluators' best intentions to make the evaluation process useful and user-friendly — still experienced it as an onerous and extraneous demand that had been placed upon them.

Because TCWF intended that many of the programs funded through the initiatives would continue after their funding ended, we believe it is important to develop an understanding of what

the legacy of these initiatives is. For this reason, we have begun funding evaluation projects that ask: What has endured from each initiative three years after the Foundation's funding has ended? A prototype for these evaluations was conducted for the Health Improvement Initiative one year after the Foundation's funding concluded, providing us with an important look at which services and programs remained in place. The full set of "footprints in the sand" evaluations will provide the Foundation with information about the sustainability of our investments in these initiatives and, hopefully, contribute to developing knowledge about sustaining community-based social change.

A limitation of the empowerment evaluations is that they had not been funded to tell the initiatives' stories. Though rich in data and useful in developing and implementing systems to capture information, these evaluations were, at best, loosely connected to context and history. The view they provided was like that seen under a microscope, when what we also needed was the kind of vision that a camera and telescope would provide to create the rounded, vivid picture of the initiatives that we sought. In the case of the Violence Prevention Initiative, we made a series of grants during the last two years of the Initiative to capture anecdotal information, personal stories and historical context woven together with the detail and statistical information that the formal evaluations had provided. We were pleased that the results gave us a more vivid, wider-angle look at the Initiative as a whole and at its various components. An example of this is included in Capsule Case Study Four.

#### **Capsule Case Study Four - Evaluating Policy Grantmaking in the Violence Prevention Initiative**

The evaluation of the Violence Prevention Initiative (VPI)<sup>9</sup> was historical and contextual. It detailed the work of TCWF grantees, who were the catalysts of a movement that gained momentum in California throughout the 1990s to prohibit the easy availability of handguns and to fund programs to reduce violence against youth. The evaluation describes the activities of grantees throughout the 10 years of the VPI and the significant advances made in California that resulted in many local and statewide policy changes. Although the evaluation makes it clear that some grantees were influential to the achievement of a number of the policy successes, it is not possible to precisely measure to what extent the policy successes were due to the work of the TCWF grantees and to what extent due to the other organizations and individuals who had joined the building violence prevention movement.

#### **The Shift To Responsive Grantmaking**

During the years in which TCWF made large investments in initiatives, a number of factors contributed to our questioning whether this type of philanthropic program was the best grantmaking vehicle to achieve the Foundation's mission. The funding environment had changed considerably since the initiatives were designed, and we saw increasing numbers of funders focusing on short-term projects. In many cities, for example, the United Way had changed from providing core operating support to providing more short-term support of particular programs. And even the government

was funding more pilot projects and initiatives. We heard from nonprofits in an increasingly loud crescendo that they were being pushed and pulled in too many directions by dozens of funding sources — including TCWF — with no funder attending to their basic organizational needs.

Within the Foundation, we saw some of the downsides — as well as the successes — of initiative funding, and captured them in the “lessons learned” documents written by the Foundation’s program directors and published on the Foundation’s website.<sup>10</sup> Prominent among these lessons is that those most successful in implementing initiative programs were grantees whose missions were closely aligned to the funded projects. The lure of grant dollars caused many organizations to design projects outside their core missions. We found that among the grantee organizations that had stretched from their core competencies, over time their projects tended to drift away from initiative goals and to shift back to the organization’s core mission. This was certainly understandable, but in many cases it meant that the initiatives’ theories of change were less than fully implemented.

Even within those organizations whose missions were in closest alignment with the initiatives, the sustainability of initiative-funded projects was an ongoing question. We believed we could maximize the chances of sustainability by offering early, high-quality technical assistance to ensure that the best steps were taken to make programs sustainable. But even with a great deal of attention and effort, sustainability was far from a slam-dunk. As thoughtfully crafted and well researched as the initiatives’ theories of change may have been, without their taking root in agencies and communities their benefits would be evanescent.

These external changes and internal lessons combined to result in a shift from funding primarily through initiatives to responsive grantmaking, a decision adopted by the TCWF Board in December 2000 and first implemented in June 2001. The responsive grantmaking program prioritizes eight health issues (diversity in the health professions, environmental health, healthy aging, mental health, teenage pregnancy prevention, violence prevention, women’s health and work and health) and also responds to timely issues or special projects outside the priorities. The grantmaking program is organized by four grantmaking goals:

- **Sustainability.** To support and strengthen nonprofit organizations that seek to improve the health of underserved populations.
- **Leadership.** To recognize and encourage leaders who are working to increase health and wellness within their communities.
- **Public Policy.** To inform the development of public policies that promote wellness and enhance access to preventive health care.
- **Underserved Populations.** To address the particular health needs of traditionally underserved populations, including low-income individuals, people of color, youth and residents of rural areas.

These four goals summarize much of what we learned in prior years about effectiveness and set the context for what should come next.

## WHERE WE'RE GOING

*We seek to understand more about the essential building blocks of high-quality, sustainable services and advocacy: organizational health, effective leadership and sound public policies.*

Our trajectory with evaluation at TCWF has taken us back to basics — from testing theories of change initiated within the Foundation and implemented through complicated structures of interlocking granting programs, to trying to understand more about the essential building blocks of high-quality, sustainable services and advocacy: organizational health, effective leadership and sound public policies. We believe there is a great deal more that we, and the field, should know and systematize

about these core ingredients of sound grants. To accomplish evaluation in this next phase of our evolution, the Foundation made the decision to create a position whose role would be to provide leadership in evaluation and organizational learning. This will allow the Foundation to build upon what we have learned in the past and, in hiring staff with grantmaking experience, to make a close connection between evaluation and the grantmaking perspective.

The amount of information that the Foundation works with as part of reviewing letters of interest and proposals, grant monitoring and final reporting is considerable. In their requests, applicants tell us what they need and we listen — trying not to impose the needs of the Foundation on the applicant organization. Our knowledge also comes through reports in which the grantees share their experiences with TCWF funding. A constant challenge is to create an environment in which there is enough trust between grantees and the Foundation — and within TCWF — for candid discussions about what we have learned through closed grants. A rigorous look at descriptive numbers will continue to be a centerpiece of understanding our work, but we have found a need for better ways of integrating the more qualitative methods of journalism, anthropology and history to better reflect the full picture of our grants. Some of the questions guiding future evaluation activities are described below.

### **Individual Grants**

From its inception, TCWF has evaluated every grant by having the program director who made and monitored the grant write a closeout report based on the final report received from the grantee. A summary paragraph of the closeout report for each grant is provided to the Board, and because the number is large — typically about 75 in each docket — a summary memo accompanies them. We are trying to use the closeout reports as a more frequent source of staff discussion to sharpen our collective thinking about the elements that contribute to or hinder a grant's progress, and more fundamentally, to identify the factors that contribute to what we designate as successes and failures.

## Clusters of Grants

A major focus of evaluation in the next several years will be on clusters of grants with a chief focus on the four grantmaking goals:

**Sustainability.** As a means of sustaining the organizations we fund, at least half of our grants currently provide core operating support. As Paul Brest<sup>11</sup> noted in his article “Smart Money: General Operating Grants Can Be Strategic — For Nonprofits and Foundations,” there is some skepticism in the field of philanthropy as to whether core operating support grants can even be assessed, and for some, the assumption that they cannot is a deterrent for making core operating support grants. We believe that grants for core operating support can be evaluated and that there is a lot to learn. Overall, our core operating support grants average slightly over \$50,000 per year and account for seven percent of funded agencies’ budgets. Our grant agreements with funded agencies are focused on no more than three objectives negotiated between program directors and applicants. It will be useful to know how agencies use our funds, how successful the grantees are in meeting their objectives, and to what degree these funds are perceived as important in sustaining programs and agencies. We are interested in knowing how these factors vary with respect to agency size, stage of organizational development and length of grant.

**Leadership.** TCWF leadership grants focus on recognizing and building the skills, commitment and staying power of people who are important to agencies, organizations and communities in achieving the Foundation’s mission. We see developing indigenous leadership as a counterweight to the emphasis sometimes articulated in venture or highly engaged philanthropy, where the model has been for foundations or their designees to assume the leadership presumed to be missing in the nonprofit sector. Because leadership programs focus on people, evaluations of them also focus on individuals, their experiences and perceptions of causality. Hence, such evaluations typically employ critical analysis without case controls that allow one to make definitive statements about causality. Evaluations of leadership programs may be where some of the tools and examples needed for qualitative evaluation in philanthropy can be found. At the same time, these assessments are especially vulnerable to the infusion of values, beliefs and untested assumptions that — if not handled carefully — can diminish their credibility.

**Public Policy.** A focus of TCWF grantmaking from our earliest days has been on making grants that aim to effect public policies. Grants such as those mentioned in Capsule Case Study Four fall into our policy category: public education; policy analysis and research; and advocacy. Some

of the questions we will ask about these grants include: What policies were changed? What is the role of the different types of grants we make in influencing policies? Are some strategies more effective than others or is a combination most effective? For all grants, timing is a critical issue that affects success and failure, and this is especially true of policy grants. Can we be more strategic in timing our grants effectively? As foundations become more focused on influencing public policies and make more grants for this purpose, it is important for us to develop and share our knowledge about the factors that can influence the success of policy grants.

**Underserved Populations.** TCWF has a grantmaking commitment to improve the health of California’s underserved populations. Questions we want to address about underserved populations include: Which underserved populations are served by TCWF grants? How do the populations served by TCWF grants compare to the demographic data of the state, to its populations in poverty, and to groups known to be most at risk? With this big picture of demographic information, cluster analyses will focus on specific underserved populations addressed by the Foundation’s funding. Many grants, for example, address the health of immigrants in some way, shape or form. A cluster analysis could identify the extent of TCWF funding to improve access to health care for various immigrant populations; the approaches our grantees are taking; which populations we may be serving well or overlooking; and the strategies that may be especially successful.

## CONCLUSION

*We believe that we have made significant progress in terms of learning to use our evaluation resources wisely and look forward to continuing to learn ways to better understand, assess and communicate the work we do.*

In this chronicle of evaluation at TCWF, several aspects of our experience may also be relevant to the field of evaluation in philanthropy. These are highlighted in the sections below.

### **A Framework for Evaluation in Philanthropy**

Much of our early work in evaluation at TCWF was influenced by diffusion of the scientific model to the social sciences and into the world of social programs. Our sense of philanthropy is that — compared with a decade ago — we now share with many other foundations a more refined understanding of the limitations of the scientific method rigorously applied, and of the circumstances under which experimentation is the best choice.

Currently, business models of understanding philanthropy and its work are holding sway in our corner of the philanthropic world, with considerable fanfare about measuring double and triple bottom lines. Some are useful and some — in our estimation — entirely miss the mark when applied in nonprofit settings. The models, metaphors and language of both science and business are

important because they provide structures and language through which we can articulate and enhance what we know. Yet these same models and metaphors can also constrain and distort what we know.

In an article written by Dr. Steven Schroeder<sup>12</sup> as he was leaving philanthropy after 12 years with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, he accurately points out that unlike business (which has its bottom line), government (which is periodically evaluated through election returns) or academia (which is assigned an annual rating in the *U.S. News & World Report*), there is no common yardstick of success in philanthropy. This is true, and in lieu of having our own framework for evaluation, we will continue to import and use approaches borrowed from other fields. This works to some degree, but it also leaves us, and our grantees, unduly influenced and sometimes whiplashed by new models and approaches as they enter our field of vision. It would be good to develop a more “philanthropicentric” framework for our field, and central to such an understanding will be some agreement about the “common factors” in the work of philanthropy.

Many in philanthropy will bristle at the idea that there could be a framework and language shared across our wondrous diversity. Yet we do share in common that foundations make grants, and that all grants, to some degree, succeed or fail. What are the common factors that affect these outcomes? An interesting example of common factors research is found in the literature on the effectiveness of psychotherapy, where researchers have conducted a meta-analysis of thousands of studies to identify four common factors related to outcomes.<sup>13</sup> They found that 40 percent of the variance in the effectiveness of psychotherapy was related to factors outside the client-therapist relationship; 30 percent was related to the relationship between client and therapist; only 15 percent to the model of therapy (the fulcrum of most of the debate in the field); and 15 percent was related to placebo, hope and expectancy.

What would such a meta-analysis of the common factors for outcomes of grants and grant-making programs show? The finding that 40 percent of the variance in psychotherapy outcomes is outside the client-therapist relationship is a humbling one. Yet it also rings true for philanthropy that the outcomes of many grants have at least as much to do with factors outside the purview of the grant itself — such as economic factors, historical events and changes in leadership — than we would generally care to admit. How about program models and strategies of change? Although a great deal of emphasis in philanthropy is placed on identifying models and strategies, would they account for more than the 15 percent of the variance found in psychotherapy research? It would be interesting for the field of evaluation in philanthropy to attempt to identify a framework and common factors that influence the success of our work.

## **Causality**

Much of our evolution in grantmaking and our assessment of it at TCWF has revolved around questions of causality; and in philanthropy, it generally appears that determining if a grant resulted in an anticipated outcome is commonly seen as the gold ring to reach for. A great deal of our collective

energy, and that of our grantees, is spent in the reach. Even when we admit that assigning causality is hard or even impossible to determine, this admission is often followed by the self-admonition that we should keep trying.

What if we were to simply admit that for many foundation grants, assigning causality and identifying outcomes are either impossible to assess or simply not worth the cost? The desire to measure outcomes, and to know precisely how much of an effect results from a grant or grantmaking program, stems from a positive motivation for funders to look critically at the work we fund — and the current emphasis on accountability is continuing to fuel this movement. As well motivated as the quest for outcomes is, it often backs us into a corner that results in disappointment, defensiveness and inability to see other positive effects. This single-minded emphasis on causal attribution assuredly serves to dampen creativity for other methods of understanding, assessing and communicating the work accomplished through grants.

Here, also, a philanthropic framework would help identify those grants for which it is reasonable to expect that outcomes can be attributed to grantees' work and those for which it is not. One positive result would be to remove the stigma associated with not finding outcomes where none could reasonably be expected, and it might also kindle creative efforts to develop other methods of understanding the large portions of many foundation portfolios that do not lend themselves well to causal analysis.

### **Tacit Knowledge**

It is interesting to note that the major pivot points in the evolution of TCWF's grantmaking have resulted not from formal evaluations, which are our most organized form of learning, but from information we have gleaned from our constant interaction with nonprofits and other foundations. Good learners in philanthropy develop a great deal of tacit knowledge about grants and good grantmaking opportunities, and — as important as it is in shaping the work of philanthropy — there is little recognition of the importance of this informal knowledge and its influential role. As a field, we also need to know more about the qualities of effective grantmakers and their professional development. There are some attempts to articulate qualities that go into effective grantmaking past the point of mastering basic grantmaking skills (see, for example, Brousseau<sup>14</sup>), but it is an area of much-needed growth for our field.

### **Sharing What We Know**

Finally, we see a challenge for our Foundation and the field in terms of sharing what we know. This is a glass half full and half empty. On the one hand, there are more venues for sharing information about both formal evaluations and informal means of knowing than there were a decade ago. The rapid growth of many affinity groups, including Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, which includes a major focus on knowledge and evaluation for both foundations and nonprofits, attests to this. The Annie E. Casey Foundation broke the candor barrier with its publication of "The Path of Most Resistance"<sup>15</sup> when it described a major initiative that hadn't met its expectations, and other

foundations are slowly sharing more of the stories that have caused predicaments for them, as well as those they are proud of. This is all good, but is not yet at the level of the sustained and systematic attention that would enable us to create a common framework for evaluation in philanthropy.

Over the past 12 years of grantmaking at The California Wellness Foundation, we have changed considerably in our approach to evaluation. While we believe that we have made significant progress in terms of learning to use our evaluation resources wisely, there are some interesting frontiers ahead of us. We look forward to continuing to learn with foundation colleagues who are also looking for ways to better understand, assess and communicate the work that we do.

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## ENDNOTES

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