BRIEFING PAPER

Evaluation Use in Arts Grant-Making

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This briefing paper, based on interviews with both evaluation and arts program staff at each of three foundations, explores how grant-makers can use evaluation to assess and improve the effectiveness of their arts philanthropy. Of all the areas in which foundations work, the arts have been perhaps the most insulated from a results-oriented approach. In part this is because of a reluctance to question the value of long traditions of charitable support for cultural institutions. There is also a resistance on the part of both grant makers and recipients to measuring what they see as the unique, intrinsic value of the arts. It is almost as if the arts and evaluation are seen as mutually incompatible value systems. The practices of the foundations interviewed for this paper suggest, however, that not only is it possible for the creativity of the arts and the analytical rigor of evaluation to coexist, but that the learning generated by evaluation can add value and vibrancy to the arts.

The paper begins by presenting five themes that emerged throughout foundation staff's discussion of how they use evaluation in arts grant-making. These are themes that cut across the specific aspects of evaluation practice explored by the interview guide and were consistent among all interviewees. They are:

(1) Greater opportunity/need for evaluation in arts than in other fields where foundations work
(2) Lack of analytical capacity in the arts
(3) Failure/fear of narrowing/operationalizing the expected outcomes of the arts
(4) Importance of a focused purpose/audience for evaluation
(5) Value of building evaluation into initiative design

The second half of the paper follows the original interview guide and summarizes interviewee comments about how their foundations use each of six aspects of evaluation practice with relation to arts grant-making:

(1) Allocating resources for evaluation
(2) Setting evaluation priorities
(3) Selecting evaluation personnel
(4) Defining outcomes in arts grant-making
(5) Using evaluation information
(6) Learning from evaluation

The paper also includes an appendix presenting the interviewees and interview guide.

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I. KEY THEMES

Five themes emerged that cut across specific questions and were consistent among interviewees. These could also be construed as "lessons learned" through experience in using evaluation in arts grant-making or advice to others in the field.

(1) Greater opportunity/need for evaluation in arts than in other fields where foundations work

Interviewees argued that of all the areas in which foundations operate, the arts have the greatest need for effective evaluation practices. Put more positively, they suggested that because of a current deficit of evaluative thinking in the arts there is a greater opportunity for evaluation to add value in this area of grant-making than in others. Staff located in the evaluation unit of foundations, who had comparative perspective across grant-making areas, made this case particularly strongly, but arts program staff saw the void and the opportunity as well. Interviewees pointed to two specific aspects of evaluation infrastructure that are particularly weak in the arts compared to other program areas:

- A failure to do basic conceptualization of expected outcomes and how activities are linked to them
- A dearth of basic descriptive and context data about arts organizations and activities that could be incorporated into evaluations of specific programs and used to monitor trends.

The general lack of these basic building blocks presents a challenge to evaluation in the arts, but it also means that foundations that can put them in place can add enormous value.

(2) Lack of analytical capacity in the arts

As noted above, interviewees argued that arts grant-makers and grantees were often far behind those in other areas in what one interviewee called "Evaluation 101": spelling out what outcomes they are seeking, how their activities will lead to those outcomes, and how they will measure success. Most argued, however, that it is not so much a lack of skill preventing arts organizations and their patrons from doing this conceptual work as a lack of will. They used words like "insular" and "inbred" to characterize the arts community and pointed to a high number of "taken-for-granteds" and "questions not asked." Many in the arts community, they suspected, believe that to talk about results and outcomes is to demean the inherent value of the arts. More instrumentally, the "art-for-art's-sake" approach and arguing that the value of the arts can't be measured gives the arts a special status and protects them from competition with other funding priorities. These attitudes present a major challenge to evaluation in the arts, but interviewees suggested that a growing results orientation throughout the non-profit and philanthropic world means the arts will be increasingly unable to hide behind them. For now, many are hoping to build analytical capacity in the field by reaching beyond what they described as a narrow cadre of arts consultants to bring in broader and more diverse analytical perspectives (See #3- Selecting Evaluation Personnel- in the next section).

(3) Failure/fear of narrowing/operationalizing the expected outcomes of the arts

At the core of the conceptual void in the arts noted by interviewees is the failure to specify outcomes. Interviewees suggested that talk of outcomes tends to drive arts advocates to one of two extremes: either insisting on the inherent value of the arts (with the implication that talk about outcomes is an insult) or claiming that the arts benefit every aspect of human and social life from academic achievement to self-esteem to community cohesiveness to economic development.

Interviewees felt that the expansive claims of the latter strategy were risky and were setting the arts up for failure. Several specifically mentioned that their foundations had recently focused the strategic goals of their arts giving to areas where their resources could reasonably be expected to have leverage (for example, participation, diversity, and organizational capacity). Most felt the arts were better served by sticking with an art-for-art's sake justification, but measuring it. Several mentioned the recent work on "measuring joy" (National Arts Stabilization Journal, Fall 2000) as a creative example of getting beyond the "we know it when we see it" approach to outcomes in the arts. (See #4- Defining outcomes in arts grant-making- in the next section for more detail.) As one interviewee put it, "If these are important outcomes, it is lazy to say they can't be measured. If you know joy when you see it, you can measure it."

(4) Importance of a focused purpose/audience for evaluation

Several interviewees cautioned that an "evaluation-for-evaluation's" sake approach is no more productive of learning than a know-nothing "art-for-art's" sake mentality. Rather than rushing to join other program areas on the bandwagon of results-oriented philanthropy, arts programs should make sure they know why and how they want to use evaluation information before investing in it. They identified four major constituencies for evaluation data (grantees, program staff, board, and the policy community) and noted that the information needs of each can be quite different. Even within this small set of interviewees there were strong contrasts in who foundations were targeting as the key audience for evaluation (see #5- Using evaluation information- in the section below). Interviewees recommended tailoring evaluation designs to the decision-making needs of a particular audience to maximize their utility. Evaluation unit staff in particular emphasized the importance of program area staff buying into the value of evaluation and seeing it as a useful tool in their own work rather than a hoop to be jumped through. While this theme is hardly unique to arts evaluation, it is an important one for arts programs to bear in mind as they scale up evaluation capacity.

(5) Value of building evaluation into initiative design

Interviewees consistently emphasized that evaluation cannot start too in a foundation's grant-making process. Evaluation and arts program staff alike recounted the frustration and low learning value of post-hoc "gotcha" evaluations where evaluation was not even considered until a program had been in the field for several years. They emphasized that going back at that point to do the tough conceptual work of defining outcomes and indicators is far more painful, if not pointless. As these foundations have increased the role of evaluation in their arts grant-making they have found that rather than "retrofitting evaluation thinking to existing programs" they should build in that kind of thinking upfront. Interviewees at all three of these foundations said evaluation personnel were playing a greater role in strategic planning and initiative design. They cited a number of benefits to upfront evaluation planning, including:

- Building on an existing base of research about challenges to be expected and best practices;
- Ensuring that an initiative has attainable goals given the resources committed;
- Establishing a common language for communicating about strategies and outcomes among grantees within a portfolio aimed at a common goal;
- Enabling the building of a baseline of data on agreed-upon key indicators; and
- Making the relationship between program and evaluation staff more collaborative than confrontational.

II. EVALUATION PRACTICES IN ARTS GRANT-MAKING

The interview guide explored specific aspects of evaluation practice as they are being used by arts grant-makers. This section of the briefing paper follows the guide (see the Appendix for specific questions and prompts), presenting each aspect of the evaluation process in turn.

#1 Allocating resources for evaluation

None of the three foundations interviewed has a set or target percentage of arts evaluation spending relative to the arts grant budget. All three said that not all grants are evaluated and that they tend to do more initiative or cluster-level evaluation than focusing on individual grants. The level of evaluation spending varies depending on the learning potential of the initiative. One foundation cited a current arts evaluation that is "well over 15% of the grant budget because of its high learning potential" while another said that "there could be a 50/50 split of program and evaluation spending if we see it as a real learning opportunity, a model with potential for replication." One of the foundations mentioned that not all of their evaluation spending is tied to grants- they sometimes do "pure research" and see this kind of "knowledge generation" for the arts field as being at least as important an intervention strategy as traditional direct grants.

All three foundations said their evaluation spending in the arts was about on par with the level of evaluation resources devoted to other program areas. However, evaluation unit staff at two of the foundations continued that although the level of spending is the same as in other programs, they do not feel evaluation is as well used in the arts as in their other grant-making areas, because of the prevailing "arts can't be measured" attitude.

#2 Setting evaluation priorities

The key word that every interviewee used in describing how their foundation targets evaluation resources in the arts was "learning." Every interviewee talked about the importance of using precious evaluation resources in a way that goes beyond traditional monitoring and "did this particular program work" to generate learning that will be of more general use to the foundation and/or to the field at large. The guiding questions that the three foundations use in setting evaluation priorities were as follows:

(1) Are we getting leverage in this goal area? Did we make the right choices of grantees and strategies to reach the goal?

(2) What do field leaders need to know to make a difference in how they do their work?

(3) Who needs what information to do what?

It is interesting to note that although all three questions are focused on generating learning, they imply a different audience, with #1 focused on internal learning to improve the effectiveness of the foundation's grant-making, #2 clearly focused on generating useful knowledge for external audiences to improve practice in the field at large, and #3 possibly implying both audiences.

Within the general strategy of focusing evaluation resources to generate useful knowledge, interviewees mentioned a number of specific situations in which an initiative might be deemed as having "high learning potential" and therefore meriting evaluation:

- To learn more about best practices in the early stages of an initiative
- When a decision needs to be made about expanding or discontinuing an initiative
- When there is a change in the environment: a new model or new learning has emerged and the foundation may be missing opportunities

- When the board has been skeptical about a particular grant or sees it as "high risk"
- When a model appears to have high potential for replication
- When the foundation has received a number of requests from grantees with similar needs
- To test a theory of change

#3 Selecting evaluation personnel

There was a surprising level of consensus among arts and evaluation staff in the foundations interviewed that evaluation in the arts has suffered from insularity and needs an injection of new analytical capacity. Specifically, interviewees felt that too many arts consultants "speak in shorthand" that can't be understood outside of their discipline and "tend to end up saying that the arts can't be measured anyway." To bring more conceptual rigor to arts evaluation ("making it evaluation, not celebration") these foundations have increasingly turned to evaluation experts rather than arts experts. One interviewee noted that arts experts tend to "assert the transcendental value of the arts and stop there" while "outsiders are more likely to dive in and look for original indicators of that value." These foundations hope that by bringing in people with expertise in research techniques and tools like logic modeling they can contribute to the arts by building what they see as a low level of analytical capacity in the field. Several argued that a lack of deep substantive expertise in the arts can actually be an advantage if it helps evaluators "ask fresh questions or challenge taken-for-granted assumptions" and "step back from the detail to ask what we know about effective organizational practices generally."

Obviously, however, all evaluations must be informed by specific context knowledge about the field, so foundations sometimes try to blend the two kinds of expertise. Arts program staff were more likely than evaluation unit staff to insist on the importance of having arts experts on the team in order to frame issues appropriately and facilitate communication with grantees. In addition to evaluation experts and arts specialists, interviewees mentioned using other types of professionals such as accounting firms (particularly for studies of the organizational capacity of grantees), journalists on the arts beat ("they have a good meta-perspective on the field and objectivity"), and experts in non-profit management.

#4 Defining outcomes in arts grant-making

Although several interviewees emphasized that all philanthropy should ultimately aim at "social impact" or "influencing the quality of life in the community," all three of these foundations spoke of recent efforts to focus their arts grant-making strategy on outcomes that are more (a) attainable given the level of resources invested and (b) measurable. As one interviewee put it "we want to go where our resources can have leverage…and we want to be able to define upfront a specific numerical indicator that we want to see move. We want to be able to define performance expectations, even when the grant is for operating support." Given those goals, these foundations are targeting their investments in the arts, with varying degrees of emphasis, on three legs of a triangle:

(1) Organizational capacity of arts institutions;
(2) Artistic quality; and
(3) The infrastructure of political and social support for the arts, including participation in the arts and the diversity of that participation.

Interviewees at two of the three foundations explicitly spoke of this as a triangle, with one of them mentioning that it is analogous to the cost/quality/access triangle often used as an analytical

framework in health care policy. One of the foundations using this framework said that through their grant-making they are trying to "generate knowledge about best practices that changes how these issues are discussed and shows how all three sides can be raised simultaneously, rather than seeing it as a tradeoff." Specifically, to challenge the common assumption in the arts community that there is a tradeoff between quality and participation, they are working on developing standards for arts participation.

Even with strategic frameworks in place, the challenge for all of these foundations is to operationalize those broad goals into indicators. Although everyone (foundation and grantees) can probably agree on a general level that all three sides of the triangle are good goals, conflicts can surface when defining how to measure success on each one and how to balance among them. One interviewee spoke of "the hard but critical work of conceptualization," emphasizing that it "may reveal that people are working at cross-purposes. And evaluation can't solve the problem if people disagree on what outcomes they are working towards."

Interviewees agreed that there has been more progress made on reaching a consensus about how to measure organizational capacity and participation than on artistic quality. An arts program officer lamented that "proxies for quality are really not satisfying- ultimately you have to experience the work. Here is where I would like evaluation to be more useful than it has been." Another arts program officer doubted that evaluation experts could solve the dilemma on their own and urged the "need to get artists to use their creativity to think creatively about how to measure what they do," suggesting that evaluation experts could be helpful in framing such an exercise. This program officer also suggested that the key to defining quality may be in relation to another leg of the triangle: audience participation: "Critical acclaim is not adequate if no one is there. The joy or the shining eyes in the audience show that there is meaning in relation to that audience. So I don't see (quality and participation) as separable- you can't define quality in a vacuum."

#5 Using evaluation information

Interviewees cited four distinct audiences for evaluation information:

(1) Foundation staff
(2) Foundation boards
(3) Policy and/or field leaders
(4) Grantees

Interviewees emphasized strongly that each of these audiences has distinct information needs, so the first step in evaluation planning should be to be very clear on which audience the evaluation is targeting, what information they need, and why. While interviewees saw frequent overlap between the information needs of staff and board members, and some overlap between those two internal audiences and the needs of policy or field leaders, serving those audiences with evaluations that are also useful to grantees was seen as problematic. As one interviewee cautioned, "If an evaluation is focused on generating broad field knowledge, it may not always be aligned with what specific grantees want to know about their project." In general they felt that the kind of strategic information needed by foundations and field leaders was broader than the kind of "did my project work and how can I tweak it" information that grantees may be looking for.

While there was general consensus that the information needs of foundations and grantees are "not congruent but also not mutually exclusive," there were varying levels of optimism about how possible it is for an evaluation design to take those different needs into account upfront and generate useful knowledge for both. One program officer felt that the best hope for serving both audiences was to "strengthen the connection between grant monitoring and evaluation- make monitoring a better baseline that at least speaks the same language as evaluation." Another of the

foundations, however, recently made an explicit decision to keep monitoring and evaluation separate, by "getting the evaluation unit out of the business of grant monitoring," arguing that "unless program staff are fully responsible for monitoring, the incentives are all wrong."

While all of these foundations agreed that is important to define the audience for evaluation, each made different choices about which audience to emphasize. Perhaps because each of these foundations has a formal evaluation unit, these strategic decisions about evaluation audience are made at the foundation level and then shape how each program, including arts, uses evaluation:

- At one foundation, evaluation was clearly board-driven, with their overriding question being whether the foundation's grant programs are having "social impact." This foundation conducts program-wide "strategic reviews" of each of its programs on a regular cycle. The arts program has now been through two such reviews and gone through a major re-focusing in response to the first and a "course correction" in response to the second (see #6: Learning from Evaluation). This foundation also conducts portfolio-specific evaluations of initiatives where there is a particular learning opportunity. These initiative-level evaluations are driven more by the information and decision needs of program staff, although they are also expected to feed into the broader strategic review. The strong results or judgment orientation of evaluation of this foundation is best revealed by the fact that the evaluation unit staff has sole responsibility for evaluation contracting because "we have the objectivity to be credible with the board- the program staff are seen as advocates." This foundation was very clear about its internal orientation for evaluation, with an evaluation officer pointing out that "information that is useful internally can be too sensitive to share externally...it is hard to blend a research and a results orientation."
- At a second foundation, the audience is also an internal one, but the emphasis is more on program staff. In fact, the press to add an evaluation unit to the foundation came from program staff who "wanted better information about whether their grants were adding up to anything" while the board was actually skeptical that it would "turn into a big expensive auditing process that would end up limiting risk-taking." This foundation also tries to serve the information needs of grantees ("keeping up an ongoing conversation with grantees to take advantage of teachable moments") and the field ("doing jargon-free dissemination"), but those audiences are secondary, served if possible by translating findings generated for the internal audience.
- By contrast, the third foundation has a clear external orientation: "Our goal is learning that can produce field change. We begin by asking field leaders what they need to know." They refer to their approach as "practice and policy evaluation," which is designed to "create and disseminate valuable information about our work, its results, and its lessons for practitioners, policymakers, and other leaders." This orientation shapes not just evaluation but grant-making strategy: part of the role of evaluation here is to do "market research among field leaders" to gauge their information needs and build that into initiative design. The arts program officer at this foundation noted that in the arts program they emphasize the term "field leaders" rather than focusing on "policy" which in the arts tends to connote the highly politicized federal level of NEA activity. He specified that they are focusing particularly on the audience of state arts agencies, which although they receive less attention have five times the budget of the NEA and are more receptive to research and information.

It is interesting to note that none of the three foundations interviewed described grantees as their primary audience for evaluation. One interviewee cited the Kellogg Foundation as a grant-maker who uses evaluation primarily for the purpose of grantee capacity-building.

#6 Learning from evaluation

Interviewees were asked to reflect on arts evaluations that had been particularly valuable learning experiences and significantly influenced foundation practice. Although as many shared lessons learned from negative evaluation experiences, all pointed to important learning from arts evaluations:

- **Making strategic course corrections**: At one foundation a strategic review of the arts program revealed that the common practice of making grants for operating support was having the unintended effect of increasing grantee dependency, actually diminishing their capacity. As a result of this review, the program refocused on defining performance expectations for building grantee's organizational capacity. The next strategic review, however, suggested that they had gone too far in this direction, with reporting requirements becoming burdensome hoops for grantees rather than learning tools. As a result of this evaluation, the foundation began working more collaboratively with grantees to define performance expectations to ensure that they were useful for grantees as well as the foundation. Thus in combination these two evaluations helped the foundation steer a middle course on the tough issue of accountability.
- **Focusing on practical lessons for dissemination:** Another foundation learned from evaluations that were less useful than they hoped the importance of crafting evaluation products to be accessible to the field. Since their goal for evaluation is "to stimulate a conversation with field leaders," they have learned that "there is a big difference between a well-written technical report and a document that shares key lessons with a leadership audience." Their solution is to build a writer/editor into the evaluation team from the outset, so they can "learn the context issues and see how the thinking evolves" rather than simply trying to translate a finished research product. They believe that this strategy helps them provide "concrete, usable information" about the things practice leaders need to know such as "planning, operations, and management topics."
- **Integrating evaluation into program development:** The evaluation officer at another foundation learned from "frustrating experiences" with arts evaluations that using evaluation well takes "a big culture change among the program officers." When an evaluation was launched after an initiative was well underway, the conceptual work necessary to define outcomes and indicators was seen as "tacked on" and "hoops to jump through" and was therefore resented. The lesson learned was that only if evaluation is involved upfront in conceptualizing an initiative will program officers see how the information generated will be useful to them rather than used to judge them.
- **Defining models for replication:** When the arts program of one of the foundations interviewed noted that numerous grantees were requesting assistance with audience research, they decided to fund a pilot marketing services agency to assist performing arts groups throughout a community. Because this was a need the foundation saw in many communities, they invested in careful documentation of the pilot and establishment of baseline data. Because of this, the evaluation was able to identify the core elements of the model that were needed for replication, separating "the things that have to be in place for this to work" from "pieces that communities can adapt to their own circumstances." The arts officer notes that this evaluation enabled the foundation to fund replication of the model in a way that was "focused, not random."