



# **EVALUATIVE THINKING IN PHILANTHROPY PILOT**

**SUMMARY REPORT  
WINTER – SPRING 2010**

Submitted To:  
**BRUNER FOUNDATION  
EFFECTIVENESS INITIATIVES**

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## What About the Funders?

*Evaluative Thinking* is a type of reflective practice that incorporates use of systematically collected data to inform organizational decisions and other actions. The Bruner Foundation has invested in enhancing evaluation capacity and promoting evaluative thinking within nonprofit organizations for more than a decade. After years of hearing directly from funders and indirectly about them, the Foundation decided to tackle the challenge of learning more about how and what would really help promote evaluative thinking and learning for grantmakers. Designed by Beth Bruner, Director of Effectiveness Initiatives at the Foundation and Anita Baker, evaluator and evaluation trainer, the Evaluative Thinking in Philanthropy (ETIP) training pilot involved two mid-sized,<sup>1</sup> place-based funders in a brief multi-session training process focused on evaluation and evaluative thinking. Through the experience, the Bruner Foundation gained some important insights about what funders need, what does and doesn't work regarding training, and why what's required of grantees isn't always practiced by grantmakers in their own organizations. These findings and a description of other ETIP products are presented in this report.

### Indicators of Evaluative Thinking

1. Asking questions of substance
2. Determining data needed to address questions
3. Gathering appropriate data in systematic ways
4. Analyzing data and sharing results
5. Developing strategies to act on findings

## ETIP Concept and Project Design

ETIP was designed to provide an opportunity for funders to access current and useful information about evaluation and to address strategies for enhancing evaluative thinking in their own work and at their organizations. Specifically, the operating **Theory of Change** stated the following:

- If mid-sized, regional grantmakers<sup>2</sup> know more about evaluation and evaluative thinking, and
- If they have access to quality training which helps them use their knowledge, then
- They will be more likely to use evaluative thinking across multiple organizational areas.

<sup>1</sup> Mid-sized grantmaking organizations were defined as those with more than 8 and less than 50 staff members. The project was designed for organizations that were **large enough** to have multiple staff in multiple organizational areas (ie: grantmaking, program management, HR, marketing/communications) and **small enough** to have an organizational structure that would allow for learning and practice change in and between these areas.

<sup>2</sup> It was assumed that regional grantmakers would be more likely to have a simpler, more direct grantmaking/program management structure than grantmakers funding in multiple locations.

It was further posited that the increased use of evaluative thinking would inform the efforts of grantmaking organizations to:

- Commission and participate in better external evaluations
- Guide or assist their grantees more effectively in the area of evaluation
- Do better evaluations of their own grants and grantmaking strategies
- Use evaluative thinking skills for planning, asking key questions throughout the organization, systematically gathering and analyzing necessary data, converting data to useful action plans that strengthen not only grantmaking, but the organization

Because this was a pilot project, the project designers looked to grantmaking organizations that fit the criteria, had existing evaluation capacity and were known to Bruner through other evaluation work. Specifically, the United Way of Greater Rochester, Inc. and the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving were invited to participate, and both identified key staff for the pilot (N=11 in Hartford, N=8 in Rochester).<sup>3</sup>

### **Logistics of the Project**

The ETIP pilot was conducted via four 2-hour sessions plus/minus one month apart between January and June.<sup>4</sup> All sessions were lead by Anita Baker and facilitated by Beth Bruner. Each included didactic material from the Bruner Foundation's *Evaluation Essentials for Funder's Manual* as well as additional sources from the field (see following). Each session was designed to address a specific question and included hands-on activities, discussions and formal assessment of the training and materials.

<sup>3</sup> Hartford Foundation for Public Giving participants, including two vice-presidents, came from Planning and Strategy, Programs, Non-profit Support Program, and Philanthropic Services departments. Participants from the United Way of Rochester, Inc., came from Grantmaking, Evaluation, Marketing/Communications, Senior Administration.

<sup>4</sup> The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving participants experienced a longer delay between sessions and always experienced the sessions after a first effort in Rochester.



The United Way of Greater Rochester works to identify critical community issues and uses donor gifts to fund a combination of programs best positioned to address those issues. The United Way not only looks at the results of each funded program, but also at the overall impact of how their work moves Rochester in a positive direction. The United Way was a full supporter of the Rochester Effectiveness Partnership (REP) conducted by Bruner and Baker, 1996 - 2003. They are located at 75 College Avenue, Rochester, NY 14607-1009  
[www.uwrochester.org](http://www.uwrochester.org)



As Greater Hartford's community-wide charitable endowment, The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving is permanently committed to improving the quality of life for residents throughout the region. To achieve this goal, they provide financial and other support that enables people and institutions to serve the community effectively; promote informed charitable giving in order to expand the region's philanthropic resources; and participate actively in efforts to identify important community needs and opportunities, as well as the means to address them. Since 2005, the Foundation has engaged the services of Anita Baker to provide evaluation training to Nonprofit organizations through the Building Evaluation Capacity (BEC) Initiative. The Hartford Foundation is located at 10 Columbus Boulevard, 8th Floor, Hartford, CT 06106  
[www.hfpg.org](http://www.hfpg.org)

After the four training meetings, a comprehensive survey was administered to capture feedback and a final session was conducted to facilitate assessment of the project and to clarify ways that participants could continue incorporating evaluative thinking into their ongoing work. In addition, each grantmaking organization was invited to decide on an evaluative thinking project, the cost of which would be underwritten in part by the Bruner Foundation who offered to contribute up to \$10,000 to the funding of the project in exchange, for tracking both the process and the final product. (Due to competing priorities, timing and other organizational factors, neither organization elected to do this.) Final feedback was also requested from participants six-months following their participation.

### **ETIP Training Curriculum**

<b>Session</b>	<b>Content</b>
<b>1) What is evaluation and how is it used by grantmakers?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Definitions and Terminology Review</li> <li>• Evaluation Questions, Purposes and Designs</li> <li>• Evaluation Stakeholders</li> <li>• Organizational Evaluative Thinking</li> </ul>
<b>2) How can solid program evaluation – a first building block of Evaluative Thinking – be useful to grantmakers and what’s involved in getting it done?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Logic models/Theory of Change</li> <li>• Outcomes, indicators, targets</li> <li>• Data collection and analysis (the basics of surveys, interviews, observations and record review with attention to multi-cultural relevance, and practicality)</li> </ul>
<b>3) What is Evaluative Thinking? How do you apply it at grantmaking organizations?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluative thinking revisited</li> <li>• Assessing Evaluative Thinking</li> <li>• Specific indicators of evaluative thinking in multiple organizational areas</li> </ul>
<b>4) How do you get Evaluation done?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporting good evaluation and evaluative thinking within grantee organizations</li> <li>• Commissioning evaluation, assessing evaluation designs, budgets and reports</li> </ul>

**All participants were asked to attend and fully participate in all sessions, read materials in advance, fill out survey forms at the conclusion of each session, and participate in all assessment activities including the final survey and final discussion at the conclusion of the pilot, and completion of the electronic follow-up survey.**

## Project Results

At the end of the pilot project, the participants engaged in a thorough assessment of the effort including response to comprehensive surveys, a 1.5 hour focused discussion, and response to a follow-up survey six months after the project ended. Key results include the following:

- By its conclusion, participants from both cities found the ETIP project worthwhile to both themselves and their organizations.
- Some participants indicated that the training caused them to change their thinking about evaluation and a few even indicated the project helped them change some evaluation-related practices (e.g., remembering to document implementation, planning for what is needed and why, thinking about targets for progress).
- Participants found most of the training topics important to their work, and they were even clearer that the selections would be important to other grantmakers.
- Participants were positive about the powerpoint presentations, handouts and activities.
- Most feedback was positive about the content presentations and facilitated discussions (especially in Hartford), but participants from both organizations indicated more activities would have been welcomed.
- Feedback about the logistics was quite varied and the topic of considerable deliberation during the final discussion sessions. Most agreed that the length of the sessions was about right, but that the number of sessions should have been greater, and the timing between sessions should have been shorter (3 weeks or less).

Participants acknowledged that a specific group project, or activities focused on application of the content (which would have required more sessions), would have enhanced learning. They also acknowledged the obvious conundrum: they would likely have refused participation if they had been informed on the front end that more sessions, more homework and a project would be required. **It is hoped that the advice and experiences of this first group might make others more willing to consider a more involved process.**

Participants commented on projected ETIP outcomes and offered suggestions regarding next steps.

- At both organizations, almost all respondents reported they expected that participating in ETIP would help them commission better evaluations the next time they had to do so. (Note that one participant indicated the project had already helped *some*, and two others indicated they did not need any help regarding commissioning evaluation.)
- All but one participant indicated they thought ETIP had already helped them *some* or would help them, as future requests arose, to guide or assist their grantees more effectively in the area of evaluation
- A few respondents indicated they expected their participation in ETIP to help them do better evaluations of their own grantmaking when the need arose, and all others indicated it had already helped them *some* or *a lot*
- The area with the clearest response involved use of evaluative thinking skills in multiple aspects of their work (i.e., *asking questions of substance, determining data needed to address questions, gathering appropriate data in systematic ways, analyzing data and sharing results, developing strategies to act on findings*). By the end of the project, all but two responding participants indicated that ETIP had helped them, and most reported it had helped *a lot* (one of the two who declined indicated they expected the project would help in the future, and the other indicated she had not needed any help)

Participating grantmakers also reported several "Aha" revelations resulting from ETIP. For example, one participant said:

*"Our [evaluation] model is so focused on client-based outcomes, it was good to hear focus on implementation through these sessions. It's not just about end results, but how you get there."*

Another indicated that *"all organizations need evaluation and evaluative thinking professional development,"* while still another stated that evaluative thinking made sense given the focus of grantmaker work, clarifying that ETIP had also given evaluation and evaluative thinking an "academic frame." Several participants identified specific tactics and strategies from the project that were immediately usable such as:

- being selective about what gets evaluated on what schedule, and
- recognizing that you can't just add up results from diverse projects to get an overall result without forethought

One participant indicated however that ETIP had not been about "Aha" moments at all, more like *"checking ourselves, getting tools and certainly learning about some things to build on."*

In both organizations participants were clear in focused discussions that the project had been valuable to them. For example one grantmaker said:

*"Evaluative Thinking is a way of thinking and looking at your work differently. It's got some immediate and strategic applications. It's always there."*

Another described evaluative thinking as a "core capacity," and indicated the ETIP project had "helped connect Evaluative Thinking to organizational capacity and personal skills."

Participants also offered other observations and cautions. They acknowledged that a significant portion of the ETIP training focused on learning effective evaluation practices, but not everyone agreed that was necessary. They also warned that really applying evaluative thinking might be challenging.

*"Evaluative Thinking cannot be moved into the organization without knowing about evaluation,"*

*"I think you need evaluative thinking to do good evaluation, but I don't think you need so much evaluation specifics to be a better evaluative thinker."*

*"[Evaluative Thinking] sounds good, makes perfect sense. But, I'm going back to my office and do the same thing I was doing before."*

Participants from both cities clarified that two modifications would help address the cautions:

- leadership participation (including the board); and
- opportunities for practical examples from other grantmaking organizations.

Multiple suggestions were offered regarding how to enhance the hands-on options. These included:

- more sessions, longer sessions
- review of case study materials
- cross-departmental and even cross-organizational study
- guided projects with real and leader-approved application potential)

Participants acknowledged again the conundrum of how to make those enhancements without discouraging participation by grantmakers already stretched thin by current obligations.

### **Follow-up Feedback**

Six months after the ETIP pilot ended, participants were asked to complete a follow-up survey regarding the project. Most responded, and their answers both verified the potential for a lasting value and highlighted the challenge to continued efforts. For example:

- Almost every respondent agreed that when needed, what they learned through ETIP had helped them ask key questions, determine what data they need to answer questions related to their work, gather appropriate data in systematic ways, analyze data and share results, and develop strategies to act on findings

However, about one-third of the participants (in both organizations) indicated they had not had any need to analyze data and share results or to develop strategies in response to findings.

When more specific questions about using evaluative thinking in philanthropic work were asked, there were more mixed results. For example:

- When asked about developing a program/project or initiative, all but one respondent indicated they were *likely* to use evaluative thinking (most said they were *very likely* to do so).
- All but one of those who were *likely* to use evaluative thinking agreed that participating in ETIP had helped them think evaluatively about program development (the other respondent said she already thought evaluatively about it).
- When asked about making decisions about grants, again almost everyone agreed they would use evaluative thinking, but most indicated they would be only *somewhat* rather than *very likely* to do so.
- Among those who indicated they were *likely* to think evaluatively about making grant decisions, most indicated ETIP had helped them to do it. The others said they already thought evaluatively about grant decisions.
- Similar responses were seen for questions about commissioning evaluation and interacting with grantees around evaluation: those who were likely to think evaluatively indicated ETIP helped them do it; the others reported they already thought evaluatively about both.

- Many fewer respondents said they were likely to use evaluative thinking when addressing marketing or communications issues, thinking about or planning staff development or making choices regarding technology acquisition. Additionally, several respondents indicated these never related to the work they did.

Almost all respondents to the follow-up survey indicated there had been barriers to their continued use of evaluative thinking in their organizations. In brief, evaluative thinking was not identified as either mainstream or high priority in either organization, and there were ongoing concerns that it was not part of important dialogues involving organization leadership. Efforts to develop a project specifically focused on cross-departmental use of evaluative thinking and evaluation of grantmaking practice at one organization were stalled as insufficient time and resources were committed to getting the project launched. Still after some time to attempt applications, most participants indicated the training, group involvement and especially the materials had been worthwhile.

### **Next Steps**

Findings from the reflection sessions and the follow-up survey clarified important questions to continue pondering. These include the following:

- How much knowledge about evaluation is needed before participating grantmakers can delve into evaluative thinking?
- How can the conundrum of time limitations vs. the desire for more applied learning opportunities be addressed so ETIP can maintain its relevance and facilitate practice change? What are the optimal balances of direct instruction, pre-session preparation, hands-on assignments, projects and post-session study?
- How flexible must the ETIP design be to provide consistent content and application opportunities without creating a “one size fits all” approach?
- How can/does ETIP support the work of grantmakers, especially as they commission evaluations, help grantees with evaluation and program modifications based on evaluation findings, do evaluations of their own work?
- What happens when participants take what they learn in ETIP back to their regular work? How can learning be sustained and applied to real needs?
- What organizational/structural conditions are needed to promote use of evaluative thinking and effective evaluation practice? What can grantmakers do if those conditions cannot be achieved?

## **Current and Proposed Actions for the Field**

In addition to the questions identified above and the issues discussed in the final section, three specific actions resulted from the ETIP pilot:

- Based on data from the assessment, the ETIP Pilot informed the development of accessible materials about evaluation and evaluative thinking for grantmakers. These materials were summarized into five guidebooks (Basic Concepts for Grantmakers, Using Logic Models, Evaluation Data Collection, Evaluative Thinking for Grantmakers, Supporting Good Evaluation) and posted on the Bruner Foundation Effectiveness Initiatives website ([www.brunerfoundation.org/ei/](http://www.brunerfoundation.org/ei/)).
- The Bruner Foundation plans to distribute this summary report through its website and a variety of evaluation-related and other networks, and to publicize the availability of the afore-mentioned materials.
- The Foundation will continue to look for grantmaking partners who want to build their own evaluative capacity or that of their grantees through a systematic, guided approach.

*“Evaluative Thinking is a reasonable, logical thoughtfulness that just moves forward and makes sense to me. The evaluation basics are helpful but the reasonable, logical thought-fulness is the thing that makes you more effective in your organization. That is what has been interesting and perplexing.” – ETIP Pilot Participant, 2010*

## **Issues for Further Consideration**

The number of participating organizations in this study was very small and at the same time, the learning very large. The following deserve continued attention:

- 1) The Bruner Foundation did not do any formal pre-assessment of the pilot participants. As a result, the training was provided to participants with a wide range of knowledge about evaluation and evaluative thinking, a variety of expectations about the project and a lack of clarity about the commitment of leadership to change. While this was not specifically harmful, it would have been helpful (both for the session design and for follow-up use of evaluative thinking) to enter the training with that information.

- 2) The Foundation's theory of change, in retrospect was over-ambitious, not unlike what often happens in philanthropy. Bruner believed that grantmakers would be ready, willing and able to learn about evaluation, apply that knowledge to evaluative thinking and turn the knowledge into organizational practice change.

The amount of time it takes for practice change to take place, the imperative of focused application of new learning and the realities of resource constraints (both time and money) were underestimated. At the very least, this provides a *caution to those in the field looking to change organizational practice based on discrete training sessions* (even those that include hands on work and occur over a period of six months).

Ideas for the field to study further might include:

- expanding the training to include work on a "real-life" evaluative project after the training
- identifying skilled evaluation professionals with experience in training and application of evaluative thinking to serve as organizational "evaluative coaches," -- consultants on contract for a limited time (e.g, 1 year) to assist in implementing practice change in specific areas

- 3) The Foundation's long history with building evaluation capacity led it to develop a project which included a substantial amount of information about evaluation and used evaluation to set the stage for evaluative thinking. Follow-up responses revealed that the skills most used (or expected to be used) by participants are those related to evaluation (commissioning evaluations, assisting grantees with evaluation, evaluating own grantmaking).

Ideas for the field to study further might include:

- determining whether grantmaking organizations first need a crash course in evaluation and then, those that have the interest, resources and capacity, have the opportunity to participate in a second project which deals with evaluative thinking and its implementation across areas of the organization
- continuing to develop content and training applications that focus on evaluative thinking as a "way of doing business"/ a systematic way of thinking for grantmakers (without developing skill in evaluation per se)