

Guiding Principles for Advocacy Grantmaking

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As more funders turn to advocacy and policy change strategies, they want to know what works. Instead of starting from scratch, people want to know what approaches and principles show promise. In the past year alone, four helpful resources were written to advise funders on issues related to advocacy and evaluation. These four complementary resources have been synthesized and streamlined to provide a holistic reference for what makes an effective advocacy funder.

1. *Get buy-in from organizational leadership for advocacy—acceptance of risk-taking and of learning-focused evaluation (especially interim outcomes and contribution).* Without this support, advocacy strategies may not be given enough time to flourish, and advocacy progress may be judged as failure if it doesn't produce highly visible wins within a year.
2. *Align advocacy goals and evaluation expectations among funders and grantees.* Since advocacy wins may take a while, funders and grantees must be on the same page regarding how much can be accomplished how soon. And since strategies can take many forms, both parties should agree to the general path that advocates will pursue. Funders and grantees must also agree to what the evaluation can realistically demonstrate given the timeframe.
3. *Accept flexibility/adaptability of strategies and goals.* In advocacy, uncontrollable external factors wreak havoc with carefully laid plans. To be effective, advocates must be nimble and adaptive to make progress. Work with advocates to revise plans as necessary, and revise grantmaking agreements to reflect course corrections.
4. *Communication is paramount. Maintain communication—within the foundation and with grantees.* Within the foundation, facilitate dialogue among everyone who is involved with advocacy grantmaking. Keep leadership, program staff, policy staff, and evaluation staff informed and knowledgeable about the work's purpose, status, challenges, and successes. With grantees, keep open lines of communication to discuss the progress of the work and the evaluation findings, and to discuss mid-course corrections.
5. *Capacity building—in advocacy, evaluation, and other technical skills—is important for funders and grantees.* Since this is an area of work in which many funders and grantees have less experience, capacity building is important. Provide the expertise, time, and support to foundation staff and grantees to build skills necessary to effectively engage in advocacy.

6. *Field-building and capacity-building outcomes are important.* While policy change is often the primary goal of advocacy work, field-building and capacity-building outcomes should be valued, recognized, and trumpeted as success. Since advocacy work takes a long time, and strategies may be set aside or picked up along the way, outcomes that have the possibility to strengthen a variety of strategies are highly valuable. Also, by broadening the assessment lens to include field- and capacity-building outcomes, the evaluation can continue to show progress even when a policy outcome has yet to occur.
7. *Focus evaluation on learning, and design the inquiry to include to prioritize interim outcomes and acknowledge contribution.* External factors strongly influence the success and course of advocacy. Learning about the environment and how strategies are working is often the best chance advocates have of being successful. Evaluation data that show progress (or lack thereof) towards interim outcomes enable real-time assessment of strategies, and make possible mid-course corrections. A true learning focus—among grantees and the foundation, and in an environment that is comfortable learning from failure—builds the field of advocacy and lays a strong underpinning for future successes. And structuring the evaluation to show contribution—not attribution—bolsters the focus on improvement, not proof.
8. *Sequence the evaluation start-up: use a staged approach to gain foundation support and understanding, and pilot evaluation with respected grantee “early adopters.”* Evaluation in this area is still relatively new, and many people have questions about how it works, what it takes, and what it can provide. Start small with the evaluation, get a few wins under the belt, gain support and momentum, and then enlarge the scope. In this way, the evaluation is more likely to be successful, which in turn makes success in advocacy more likely.
9. *Restructure grantmaking: core support, extended grant cycles, flexible reporting requirements/timelines.* Many of the hallmarks of advocacy—unruly external influences, long time horizons, shifting strategies, and periods of intense activity—run afoul of traditional grantmaking. Providing core support, providing multiyear support, and/or introducing flexibility around reporting requirements/timelines can dramatically improve conditions for advocates and directly lead to improved advocacy success.

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