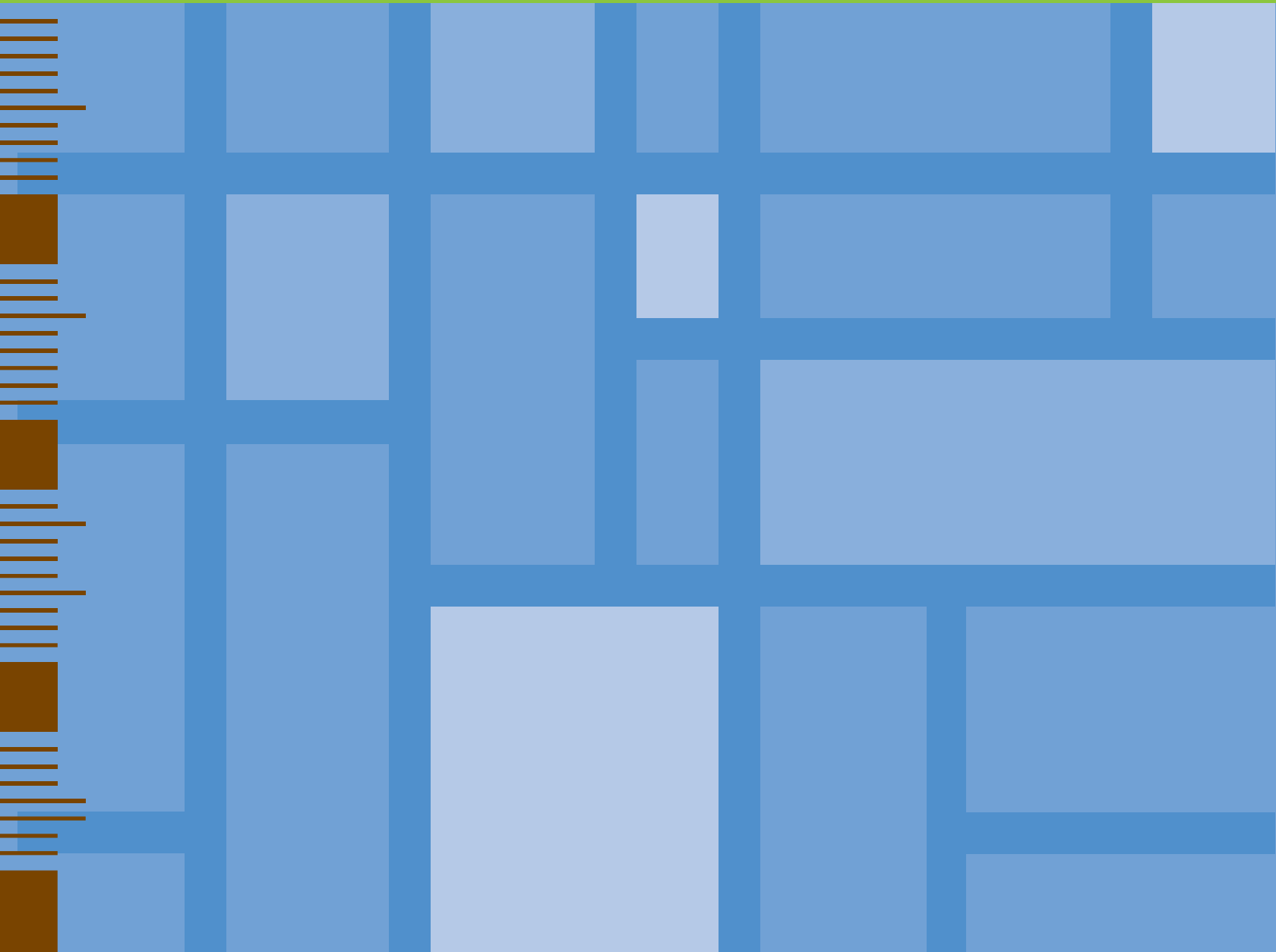




THE CENTER FOR  
EFFECTIVE PHILANTHROPY

THE STATE OF FOUNDATION PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT  
A SURVEY OF FOUNDATION CEOs



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## About the Center for Effective Philanthropy

### MISSION

To provide data and create insight so philanthropic funders can better define, assess, and improve their effectiveness—and, as a result, their intended impact.

### VISION

We seek a world in which pressing social needs are more effectively addressed. We believe improved performance of philanthropic funders can have a profoundly positive impact on nonprofit organizations and the people and communities they serve.

CEP seeks to contribute to the achievement of this vision through the data—primarily comparative data—we develop and draw on in our research, our assessment tools, and programming and communications. This data help funders understand how they can improve their performance and provide insight on key elements of foundation effectiveness. We recognize that many other institutions and organizations dedicated to improved funder effectiveness must also play a role for the vision we seek to become a reality—and we seek partnerships with these organizations when they will help us to better achieve our shared goals.

Although our work is about measuring results, providing useful data, and improving performance, our ultimate goal is improving lives. We believe this can only be achieved through a powerful combination of dispassionate analysis and passionate commitment to creating a better society.

For more information on CEP, please visit [www.effectivephilanthropy.org](http://www.effectivephilanthropy.org).

### Acknowledgments

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This report is based on CEP's independent data analyses, and CEP is solely responsible for its content.

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# Introduction

**FOUNDATION LEADERS WANT TO KNOW HOW THEY ARE DOING IN THEIR EFFORTS TO IMPROVE THE LIVES OF VULNERABLE POPULATIONS, STRENGTHEN COMMUNITIES, PROTECT OUR ENVIRONMENT, AND INFLUENCE CRUCIAL SYSTEMS IN OUR SOCIETY.** Yet, despite the desire to gauge foundation performance over the decades, this understanding remains elusive.

It was clear in 2001–2002, when the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) conducted its first research study on how performance is assessed at larger foundations, that few foundation leaders felt comfortable with the state of practice or with their ability to answer that deceptively simple question: How are we doing? In our 2002 report on findings from that study, *Indicators of Effectiveness: Understanding and Improving Foundation Performance*, we described the assessment challenge in these terms:

*In theory, the ideal way to assess performance is to calculate the total social benefit achieved in relation to the resources expended, but putting this model into practice is difficult at best. Often, the complexity of social phenomena renders it virtually impossible to prove a causal connection between the foundation's grant and the social outcome. Furthermore, although the social benefit of some grants and programs are easily quantifiable in dollars, many objectives—such as preserving biodiversity or promoting civic engagement—are not.<sup>1</sup>*

At that time, we reported that program evaluation was a frequently tapped source of data but was seen as insufficient for gauging overall foundation performance. We found, further, that few other data sources were systematically used by foundations in their efforts to understand their effectiveness.

<sup>1</sup> Center for Effective Philanthropy. *Indicators of Effectiveness: Understanding and Improving Foundation Performance*. Center for Effective Philanthropy (2002).

## Is Assessment a New Concept for Philanthropy?

Although the press and even some within philanthropy often suggest that a focus on results is a new concept in philanthropy, the earliest American philanthropists cared deeply about results. In their book, *Give Smart: Philanthropy that Gets Results*, Thomas J. Tierney and Joel L. Fleishman imagine Andrew Carnegie and Bill Gates having dinner:

*Rigorous, disciplined, and deeply strategic, the industrial baron and the software tycoon would be highly compatible. If Gates were to mention “strategic philanthropy,” “social entrepreneurs,” or “scaling what works” in the course of the conversation, Carnegie might not recognize the phrases, but he would immediately understand the concepts: the need to think hard about your giving, bet on talented people, and pay careful attention to results.<sup>i</sup>*

Similarly, William Schambra of the Hudson Institute has noted (although in his case it is a lament) that the effort to understand results—what he calls the “mania to measure”—dates back to the earliest days of the mega-foundation in the United States.<sup>ii</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Thomas Tierney and Joel Fleishman. *Give Smart: Philanthropy that Gets Results* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011).

<sup>ii</sup> William A. Schambra. “(Bad) Habits of (In)effective Foundations,” *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, February 9, 2006.

Since then, there have been significant changes in the world of larger foundations. New organizations, such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, have burst onto the philanthropic scene, emphasizing data-driven approaches. A number of consultants and organizations have focused resources and attention on foundation performance assessment.<sup>2</sup> In the nonprofit sector more broadly, efforts to assess have intensified. Organizations such as GuideStar have grown—expanding dramatically the types of data available about nonprofit organizations’ operations. New journals such as *Stanford Social Innovation Review* and *The Foundation Review* began publishing. Even federal policy has been directed toward increasing the effectiveness of philanthropy. Recently, the Obama administration created the Social Innovation Fund, which includes among its objectives influencing philanthropy to work in a more data-driven way.<sup>3</sup>

Given all of this activity and the resources that have been devoted to these topics, we wanted to take a fresh look at how foundation CEOs approach performance assessment. **What are the current attitudes and practices with respect to foundation performance assessment at larger foundations?**

To explore this question, we sent surveys to CEOs of 537 grantmaking foundations with annual grantmaking of at least \$5 million.<sup>4</sup> The survey was conducted in January and February 2011. We received 173 responses, for a 32 percent response rate (see Appendix: Methodology for more details).

<sup>2</sup> In addition to CEP’s work, examples include: Kristen Putnam. *Measuring Foundation Performance* (prepared for California HealthCare Foundation), Putnam Community Investment Consulting (2004); James Irvine Foundation. *Foundation-wide Assessment: An Overview* (2005); McKinsey & Company. *Learning for Social Impact: What Foundations Can Do* (2010).

<sup>3</sup> “The Social Innovation Fund’s Challenge: Helping Nonprofits Survive Failure,” *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, August 12, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> According to 2008 990 PF data.

# Key Findings

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- >> CEOs place great importance on assessing their foundations' effectiveness. Although they believe foundations have improved their practices in recent years, they also feel that further progress is needed.
  - >> Foundations appear to be using a broader range of information to assess their financial, operational, and programmatic performance than a decade ago, and many are combining this information to assess their overall performance.
- >> Board involvement in assessment is a challenge: Most CEOs want their board members to be more involved and point to several reasons they believe that is not already happening.

**KEY FINDING:** CEOs place great importance on assessing their foundations' effectiveness. Although they believe foundations have improved their practices in recent years, they also feel that further progress is needed.

**OUR SURVEY RESULTS SHED LIGHT ON THE ATTITUDES OF CEOs TOWARD PERFORMANCE**

**ASSESSMENT:** Nearly three-quarters of foundation CEOs say assessment of foundation effectiveness is among their highest priorities. Although most CEOs believe great progress has been made in assessing foundation effectiveness in the past decade, more than 60 percent say that too few foundations understand their overall performance today (see figure 1).

Grantmaking foundations pursue their goals largely through the nonprofits they fund, so the effectiveness of their grantees is a significant concern for foundation leaders. A majority of CEOs believe that nonprofits should be held to higher standards of evidence than they are today, and 70 percent believe that foundations should be placing a greater emphasis on understanding the effectiveness of the grantee programs and organizations they are considering funding (see figure 1). While 73 percent report their foundation provides financial or other support to assist some grantees in this effort, only 9 percent do so for all of their grantees.

**Attitudes about Foundation and Nonprofit Effectiveness**

**Figure 1**

Item	1 = Lowest Priority				7 = Highest Priority		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Among the many priorities you have as a CEO, how much of a priority to you is assessing the foundation's effectiveness?	0%	1%	4%	7%	16%	50%	23%

Item	1 = Strongly Disagree			4 = Neutral	7 = Strongly Agree		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Compared to where the sector was a decade ago, foundations have made great progress in being able to assess their effectiveness	2%	2%	4%	24%	41%	22%	5%
Today, too few foundations understand their overall performance	1%	2%	3%	33%	26%	18%	17%
Foundations should be placing a greater emphasis than they currently do on understanding the effectiveness of the grantee programs and organizations they are considering funding	1%	1%	7%	21%	32%	26%	12%
Nonprofits should be held to higher standards of evidence than they are today to demonstrate the effectiveness of their work	5%	4%	11%	24%	29%	19%	8%

The recent focus on foundation performance assessment has provoked some backlash, however. Some have raised questions—in op eds, blogs, and on the conference circuit—about whether there should be greater emphasis on “intuition” and less on data in philanthropic decision-making.<sup>5</sup> Few of the CEOs who responded to our survey seem to agree with this way of thinking. Only a small minority, 19 percent, believe that more emphasis should be placed on intuition (see figure 2).

### Attitudes about Data and Innovation

Figure 2

Item	1 = Strongly Disagree 4 = Neutral 7 = Strongly Agree							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Foundation staff rely too much on data—more emphasis should be placed on intuition	9%	14%	26%	31%	12%	6%	1%	
The Social Innovation Fund (SIF) has the potential to have an important positive influence on foundation practices <sup>1</sup>	7%	13%	9%	42%	18%	8%	3%	38% not familiar enough with SIF
There is an inherent tension between foundations focusing more on assessment and the freedom to take risks on innovative ideas	7%	9%	9%	17%	24%	21%	12%	

<sup>1</sup> Respondents were asked, “To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The Social Innovation Fund has the potential to have an important positive influence on foundation practices.” Respondents were also provided the option, “I am not familiar enough with The Social Innovation Fund to respond to this item.”

One of the highest profile initiatives trying to influence philanthropy to be more data-driven and evidence-based in recent years is the Obama Administration’s Social Innovation Fund (SIF). But when asked to what extent they agree or disagree with the statement that the SIF “has the potential to have an important positive influence on foundation practices,” 38 percent of CEOs say they were not familiar enough with the SIF to respond (see figure 2). Of those who were, almost one-third disagree with the statement and more than 40 percent neither agree nor disagree.

Some critics of SIF have argued that its data-driven approach works against its stated focus on innovation, and that if foundations focus too much on data and evidence, innovation will suffer. That tension seems to be felt broadly by CEOs in philanthropy. A majority see tension between the freedom to take risks on innovative ideas and a focus on performance assessment (see figure 2).

Still, the overwhelming sentiment of CEOs who responded to our survey is clear: They see assessing the effectiveness of their foundation’s performance as among their highest priorities. This finding underscores the question, what is the state of practice today when it comes to performance assessment?

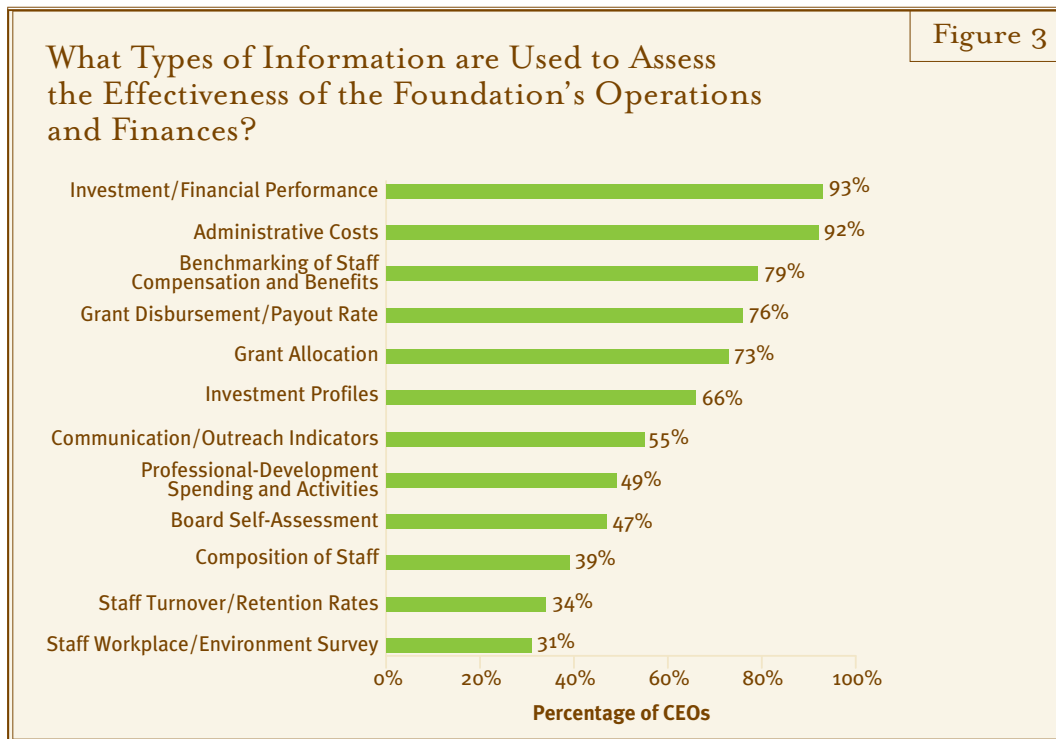
<sup>5</sup> For example, Cynthia Gibson, Ph.D. and William M. Dietel. “What Do Donors Want?” *The Nonprofit Quarterly*, Fall 2010. In “True Empathy Holds Key to More Effective Philanthropy,” *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* (April 18, 2010), Kathleen Enright and Dev Patnaik wrote that more emphasis in decision-making should be put on “empathy” that “grows into an informed intuition for how other people see the world.” They argued for more “intuitive, gut-level understanding” over “getting too caught up in the data.”

**KEY FINDING:** Foundations appear to be using a broader range of information to assess their financial, operational, and programmatic performance than a decade ago, and many are combining this information to assess their overall performance.

**IT APPEARS THAT FOUNDATION CEOs ARE DRAWING ON AN INCREASINGLY BROAD ARRAY OF PERFORMANCE INDICATORS.** In our 2001–2002 survey, we asked CEOs to list the specific information their foundation used to assess foundation performance.<sup>6</sup> In this survey, we listed a range of response options from which CEOs could select. Although the two data sets are not directly comparable because of the differences in the response method, our data does seem to indicate that foundations are now taking advantage of a wider variety of assessment approaches.

### Assessing Effectiveness of Operations and Finances

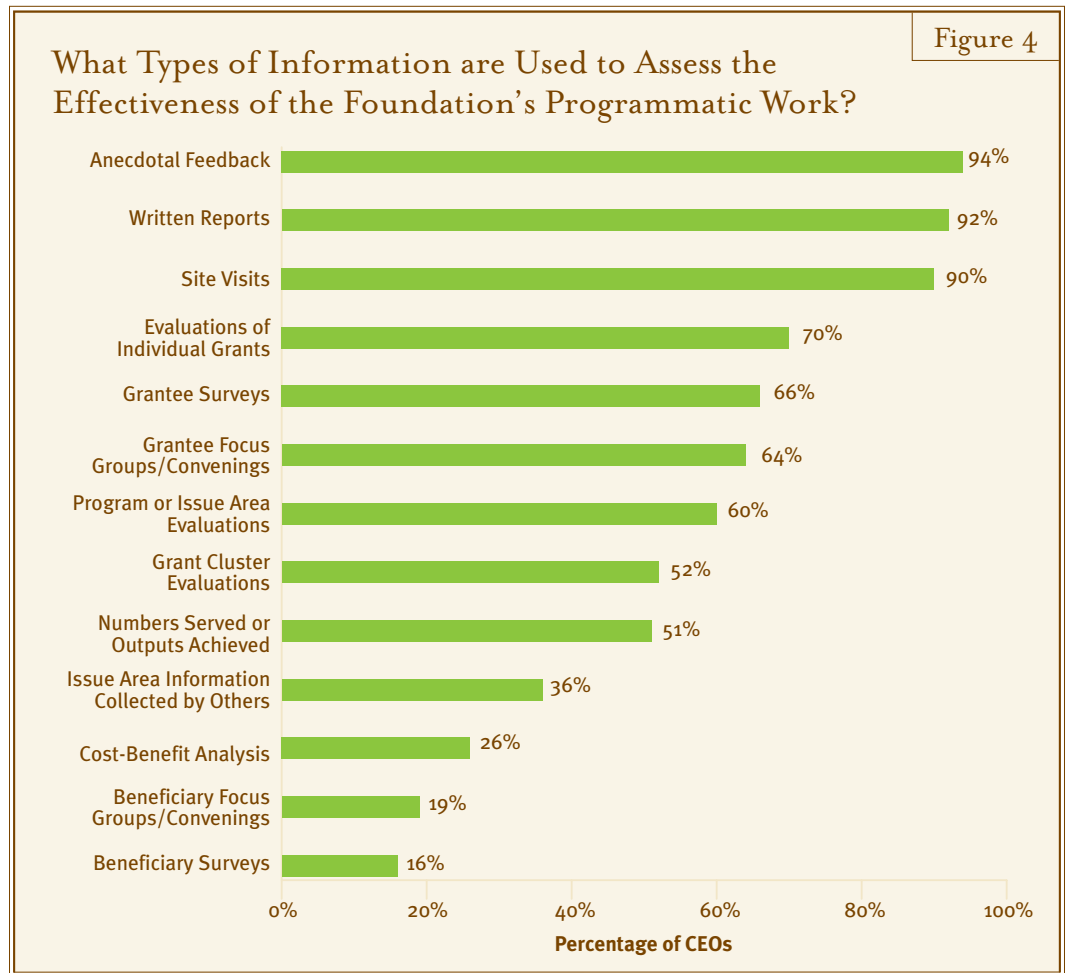
On average, CEOs today report using eight types of information to assess the effectiveness of their foundations’ operations and finances. Among the most common are information about investment/financial performance, administrative costs, benchmarking of staff compensation and benefits, and grants disbursement/payout rate. The types of information foundations are least likely to review to understand their operations and finances are related to foundation staff: composition (e.g., gender, race) of staff, staff turnover and retention rates, and staff workplace/environment surveys (see figure 3).



<sup>6</sup> Center for Effective Philanthropy. *Indicators of Effectiveness: Understanding and Improving Foundation Performance*. Center for Effective Philanthropy, (2002).

## Assessing Effectiveness of Programmatic Work

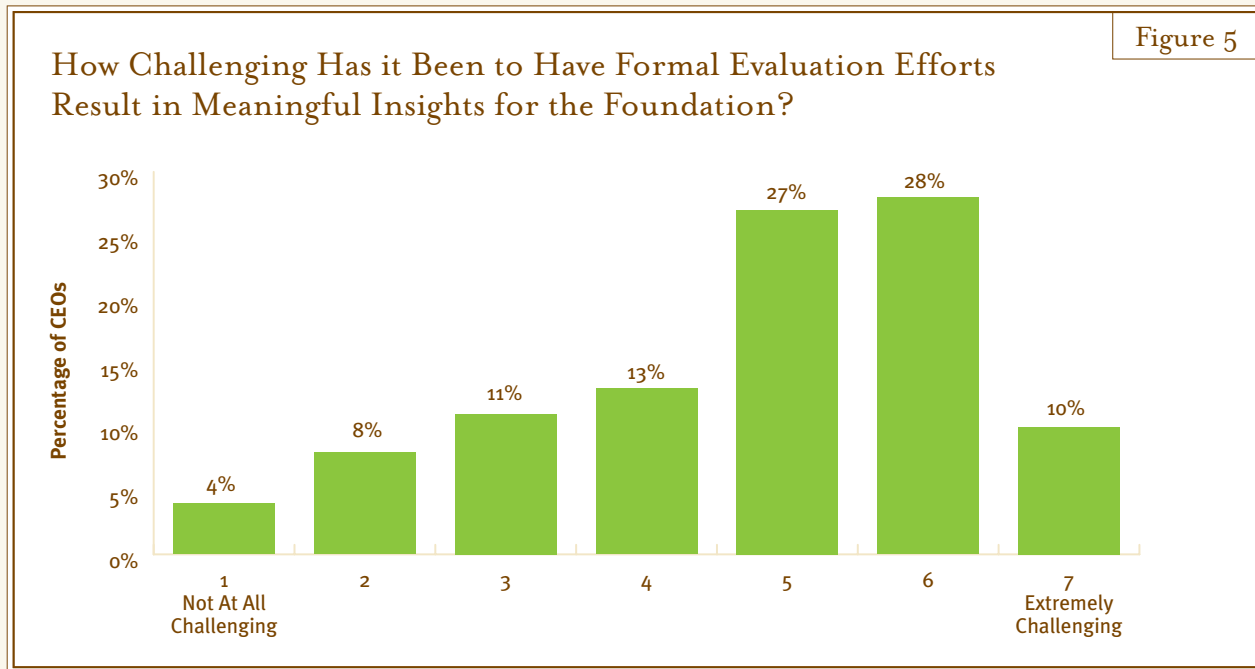
On average, CEOs report using seven types of information to understand their foundations' programmatic effectiveness (see figure 4). CEOs report that the information collected to understand the effectiveness of programmatic work is most useful for strengthening grantee organizations' future performance, understanding the foundation's programmatic impact, holding grantees accountable, and deciding whether to renew grantees' funding.



To assess programmatic effectiveness, almost all foundations are using anecdotal feedback, written reports from grantees, site visits and on-site assessments of grantees, and the evaluation of grants, clusters, or program areas.

## Evaluation

More than 90 percent of CEOs report that their foundations conduct formal evaluations of their work, and a majority turns to third parties to conduct that work. Most, however, are conducting formal evaluations for half or fewer of their grants. The median spending on formal evaluation is two percent of a grantmaking budget. A large majority of CEOs report that formal evaluations have helped their foundations understand the effects of their programmatic work. Yet using evaluation well is not easy: fully 65 percent report that having evaluations result in meaningful insights for the foundation is a challenge (see figure 5).



Foundations seem to be going beyond evaluation to embrace additional, indirect indicators of effectiveness. The majority of CEOs in this survey report using additional indicators to understand the effectiveness of their programmatic work, including surveys of grantees, focus groups or convenings with grantees, and tracking of numbers served or grantee outputs.

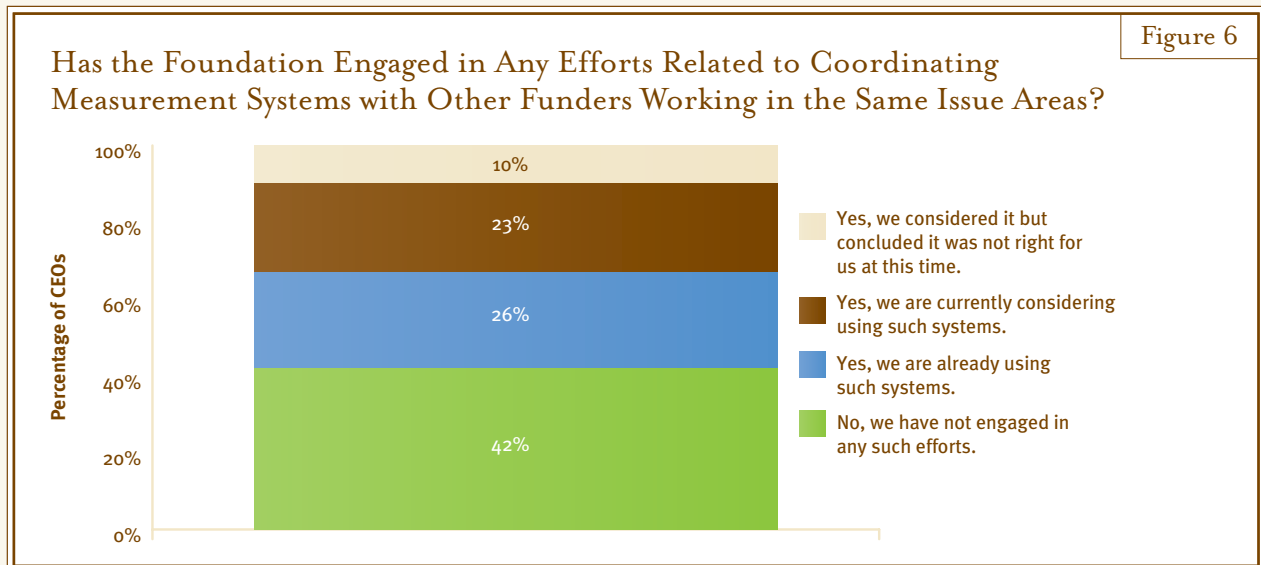
## Shared Measurement

Our survey focused on assessing individual foundation performance. However, because foundations are typically working as one of many actors seeking to achieve shared goals, there has been significant interest in the development of shared measures.

The majority of CEOs report their foundations are already using, or have considered using, shared measurement systems (see figure 6):

- » 26 percent said they are using coordinated measurement systems with other funders.
- » 23 percent said they are considering using such measurement systems.
- » 10 percent said they considered such systems but decided not to use them.

In addition, 36 percent of CEOs cited the tracking of data collected by other organizations as a source of information for assessing programmatic performance. (See figure 4.)



One kind of information that few foundations collect to understand the effectiveness of their programmatic work is feedback from beneficiaries, including surveys, focus groups, or convenings of the people whose lives foundations are ultimately trying to affect. But those who do collect this kind of information are more confident in their ability to assess performance. CEOs who report that their foundation collects beneficiary feedback rate themselves as having:

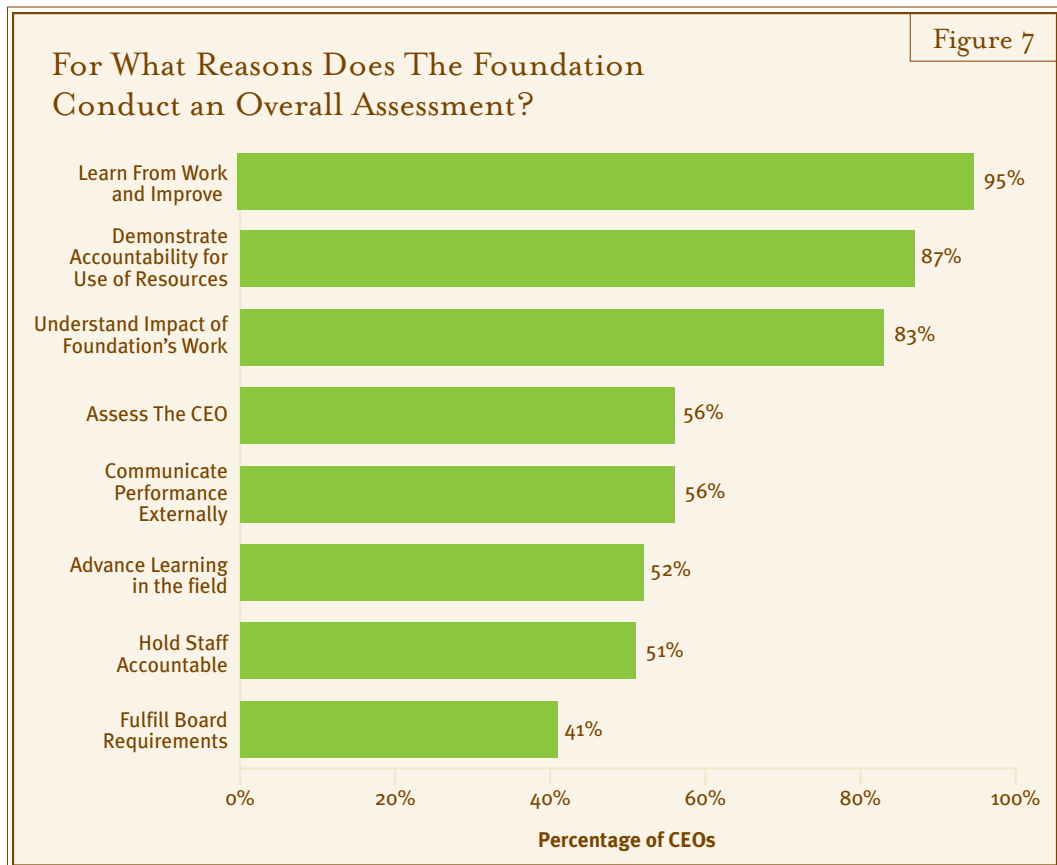
- » a better understanding of the progress their foundation is making against its strategies; and
- » a more accurate understanding of the impact the foundation is having on the communities and fields in which it works.

## Overall Assessment

In our research nearly a decade ago, we found that:

*A few foundation leaders believe they are successfully measuring overall foundation performance through evaluation .... However, the majority of those with whom we spoke believe that there is a need for new thinking about measures combined with additional data that can be summarized to the overall foundation level.<sup>7</sup>*

Today, almost half of foundation CEOs (48 percent) report that they combine information across functions into a foundation-wide performance assessment. The most frequent reason cited for doing so is to learn and to improve the foundation's future performance (see figure 7). Other frequently cited reasons are demonstrating accountability for the foundation's use of resources and understanding the external impact that can be attributed to the foundation's work.



CEOs working at foundations that combine information into a foundation-wide performance assessment differ from those who do not on a few dimensions:

- » They tend to collect more types of information to understand effectiveness.
- » They find the operational data they collect more useful in understanding how effective they are.
- » They report having a better understanding of the progress their foundation is making to realize its strategies.

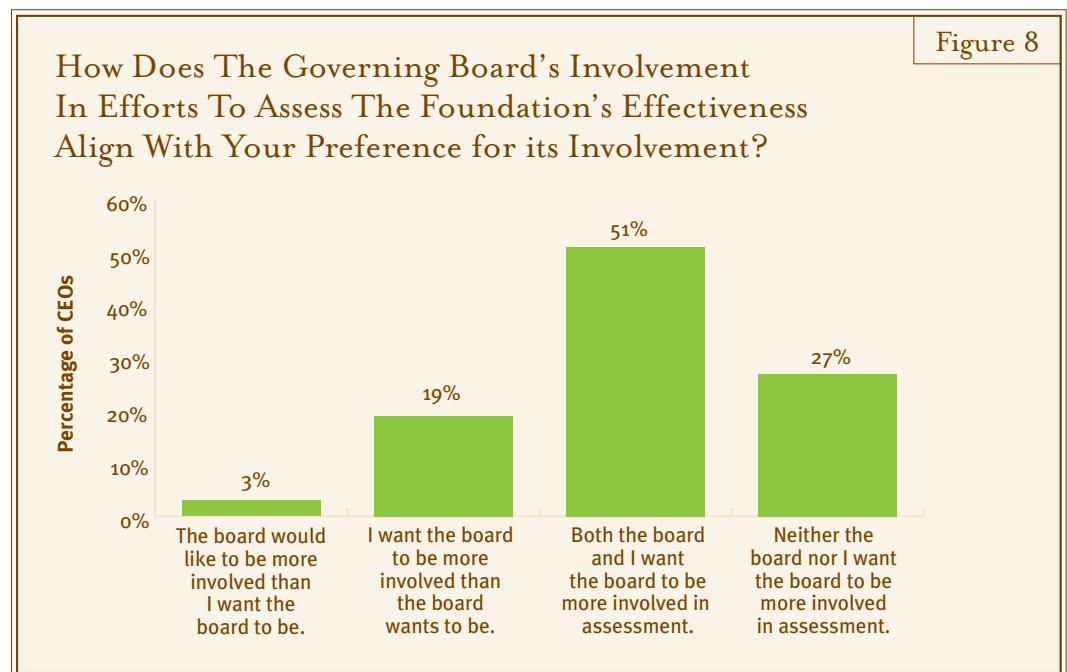
<sup>7</sup> Center for Effective Philanthropy. *Indicators of Effectiveness: Understanding and Improving Foundation Performance*. Center for Effective Philanthropy (2002).

**KEY FINDING:** Board involvement in assessment is a challenge: Most CEOs want their board members to be more involved and point to several reasons they believe that is not already happening.

**A CENTRAL RESPONSIBILITY OF A FOUNDATION BOARD IS ASSESSING THE PERFORMANCE OF THE FOUNDATION AND THE CEO.** In previous research studies, CEP has documented the desire of CEOs and trustees to have more board involvement in assessment of foundation performance. Indeed, this is consistently the one area in which CEOs and trustees want greater board involvement.<sup>8</sup> Over the years, we have seen little change in this pattern. In this latest survey, we see an overwhelming desire on the part of foundation CEOs for more board involvement in assessment (see figure 8).

»70 percent say they want more board involvement—and the majority say they *and* their board want more board involvement in assessment.

»27 percent say that neither they nor their board want the board to be more involved in assessment.



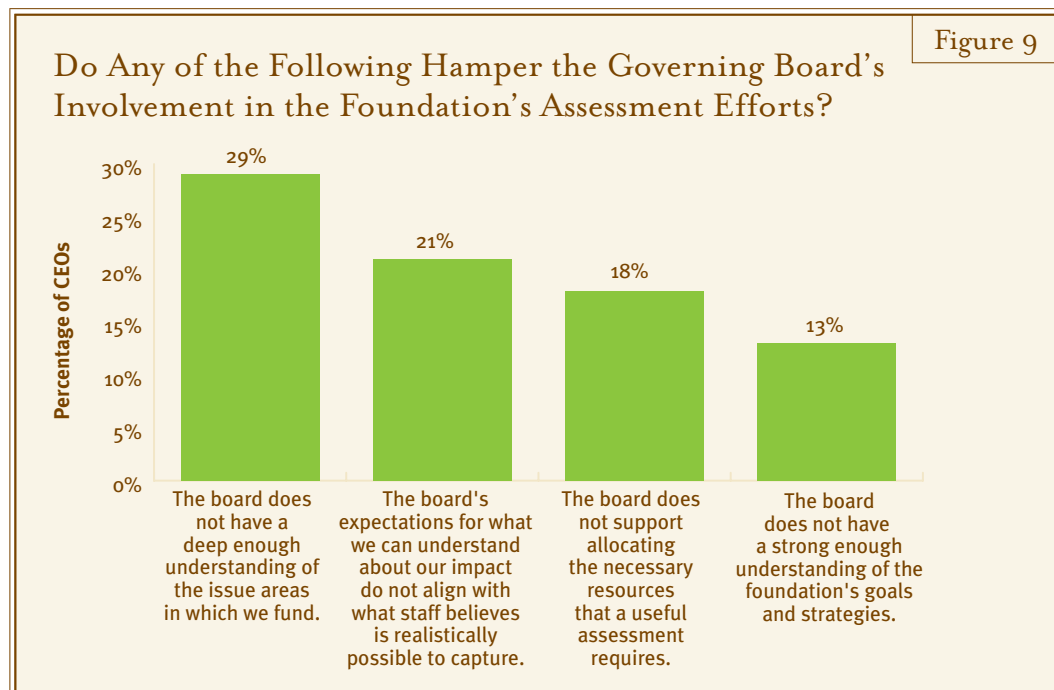
<sup>8</sup> Center for Effective Philanthropy. *Indicators of Effectiveness: Understanding and Improving Foundation Performance*. Center for Effective Philanthropy (2002); Phil Buchanan, Ellie Buteau, Ph.D., Sarah DiTroia, and Romero Hayman. *Beyond Compliance: The Trustee Viewpoint on Effective Foundation Governance*. Center for Effective Philanthropy (2005); Ellie Buteau, Ph.D., Phil Buchanan, and Andrea Brock, *Essentials of Foundation Strategy*. Center for Effective Philanthropy (December 2009).

We asked CEOs what stands in the way of more board involvement (see figure 9):

- »29 percent say the board does not have a deep enough understanding of the issue areas in which they fund.
- »21 percent say the board's expectations for what can be understood about impact do not align with what staff believes is realistically possible to capture.
- »18 percent say the board does not support allocating necessary resources that a useful assessment requires.
- »13 percent say the board does not have a strong enough understanding of the foundation's goals and strategies.

The challenge of how best to engage boards in the important work of performance assessment is not simply about involvement for the sake of involvement. CEOs who report impediments (other than resource allocation) to board involvement in assessment tend to believe that their boards have a less accurate understanding of the impact the foundation is having on the communities and fields in which it works.

Our past research has shown that CEOs are also less confident of the impact the foundation is creating when their boards are less involved in assessment. Our research also indicated that boards are more likely to be involved in assessment when there is a shared understanding among CEO, staff, and board about goals and strategies. In other words, the difficult challenge of assessment cannot be separated from the difficult challenge of clarifying goals and strategies.<sup>9</sup>



<sup>9</sup> Ellie Buteau, Ph.D., Phil Buchanan, and Andrea Brock, *Essentials of Foundation Strategy*. Center for Effective Philanthropy (December 2009).

# Conclusion

Foundations work on some of the most difficult and pressing challenges facing our society and so the question of their effectiveness is not trivial. Foundation CEOs believe in the importance of assessment, placing it among their highest priorities. And our survey results suggest that they are undertaking more assessment activities than was the case a decade ago.

In 2002, we discussed the tension that can exist between the desire to understand impact precisely and the need to go beyond evaluations.<sup>10</sup> “There is a sense that additional measures are needed,” we noted. “This will require indirect indicators that can be helpful in demonstrating progress even though they do not provide absolute proof of social benefit created.”

While evaluation remains an essential component of how foundations approach assessment, our latest survey results suggest that the adoption of more indirect—or proxy—measures that speak to foundation performance has intensified. Almost half of CEOs are combining these indicators in an effort to assess overall foundation performance.

Many challenges remain, however. A majority of CEOs still see a conflict between assessment and innovation. Furthermore, despite the progress, several potentially important sources of assessment data are used by only a relatively small proportion of foundations. Feedback from the intended beneficiaries of foundations’ work are among the information sources that are used by only a minority of CEOs in their efforts to assess performance. Yet we see that those CEOs who do collect feedback from beneficiaries perceive themselves to have a better understanding of progress their foundations are making against strategy and a more accurate understanding of their foundations’ impact.

Another challenge in assessing performance is how to engage foundation boards in ways that give them greater confidence in the impact created by the foundations for which they are, ultimately, responsible.

Our survey results suggest a shift in foundation assessment practices over the past decade. Yet, we still do not understand the degree to which foundations’ efforts to assess their effectiveness results in genuine changes that lead to heightened foundation impact. Other CEP research suggests that recent efforts by foundations to seek feedback have resulted in positive change for their grantees.<sup>11</sup> But more research is needed to better understand the links between performance assessment and increased impact.

<sup>10</sup> Center for Effective Philanthropy. *Indicators of Effectiveness: Understanding and Improving Foundation Performance*. Center for Effective Philanthropy (2002).

<sup>11</sup> Phil Buchanan, Ellie Buteau, Ph.D., and Shahryar Minhas. *Can Feedback Fuel Change at Foundations: An Analysis of the Grantee Perception Report*. Center for Effective Philanthropy (2011).

## Appendix: Methodology

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### Sample

Surveys were sent to CEOs of foundations in the United States that give \$5 million or more in grants annually, according to the most up-to-date 990 PF information available at the time this survey was fielded.

Only those foundation staff with a title suggesting they were the president, CEO, executive director, or equivalent (executive vice-president or chairperson who leads the daily operations of the foundation) and for whom an email address could be located were considered for inclusion in this sample. In total, 537 CEOs were sent surveys in January 2011.<sup>12</sup> Completed surveys were received from 173 CEOs, for a response rate of 32 percent.

### Response Bias

Foundations from which CEOs did and did not respond did not differ by asset size. Giving by these two groups of foundations differed only slightly.<sup>13</sup> But CEOs of foundations that had used CEP's Grantee Perception Report<sup>®</sup> (GPR) were more likely to have responded to the survey than CEOs of foundations that had not.<sup>14</sup> It is also possible that those less interested in assessment were less likely to respond to the survey, although we have no data with which to test this hypothesis.

### Demographics of Respondent CEOs and Foundations

Of the survey respondents, 57 percent were CEO at their current foundation for fewer than 10 years. Women comprised 43 percent and 7 percent self-identified as persons of color.

The median number of full-time equivalents at foundations for which CEOs responded was 10.5. Overall, 65 percent of CEOs reported that the foundation at which they work has program staff members who are specialists in the foundation's areas or fields of interest; 55 percent of foundations had some portion of staff time dedicated to evaluation; and 42 percent had one full-time equivalent dedicated to evaluation.

### Method

The survey was fielded online. CEOs were sent an email including a description of the study, a statement of confidentiality, and a link to the survey. A postcard was mailed in advance to notify all CEOs that they would be receiving an email invitation from CEP to participate in this survey. Over three weeks, four reminder emails were sent to CEOs who had not yet responded; at the end of the survey period, telephone calls were made to CEOs who had still not completed the survey announcing a one-week extension.

The survey included a total of 39 items, most of which were closed-ended. The survey included items about 1) the types of information foundations collect to understand the effectiveness of their operations, finances, and programmatic work; 2) how useful that information is to helping them understand their effectiveness; 3) whether or not, and why, an overall foundation performance assessment is conducted; 4) the work of the board in assessing foundation performance; and 5) attitudes about a host of issues related to assessment.

### Quantitative Analyses

To analyze the quantitative survey data from CEOs, descriptive statistics were examined and a combination of independent samples t-tests, paired samples t-tests, chi-square analyses, analysis of variance tests, and correlations were conducted. An alpha level of 0.05 was used to determine statistical significance for all statistical testing conducted for this research. Effect sizes were examined for all analyses. Unless otherwise noted, only findings reaching at least a medium effect size are discussed in this report.

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<sup>12</sup> Surveys had originally been sent to 567 CEOs. We removed 30, leaving a starting sample of 537: 27 email invitations to participate in the survey bounced back, two foundations were undergoing executive transitions, and one foundation had closed.

<sup>13</sup> A chi-square analysis of giving deciles was conducted. A statistically significant difference of a small effect size was found, with foundations giving more being slightly more likely to respond to this survey.

<sup>14</sup> A statistically significant difference of a moderate effect size was found.



## Funders

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CEP's funders are crucial to our success, supporting research initiatives and the development of new assessment tools. Funders (listed by level of annual support) include the following:

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