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End-Game Evaluation: Building a Legacy of Learning In a Limited-Life Foundation

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Introduction

What impact are we having? How should we refine our approach? What are we learning that could inform related efforts? These are among the fundamental questions all foundation leaders confront. But for a limited-life foundation, there is another pressing and unavoidable question: What will we leave behind?

Of course, every foundation hopes that its legacy will be comprised of program outcomes achieved. But many of the problems philanthropy seeks to address are complex, deep-seated, and pervasive. Few, if any, can be solved within a brief, defined time frame. Limited-life foundations addressing these problems cannot expect to declare victory when they sunset — they can only strive to move the ball down the field, and then enlist and prepare others to carry the work forward. Given this reality, it would be foolish — perhaps even irresponsible — for these foundations to exit the game without making a deliberate effort to share what they have learned with the players who remain.

Purposeful, focused evaluation seems critical in this context. As will become clear, the authors believe that systematically capturing and sharing knowledge — about programs, as well as social-change methods and grantmaking practices — can increase a foundation's influence and impact during its final years and beyond. This article shares the emerging hypotheses of two foundations, The Atlantic Philanthropies and the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, each four years from sunset as of this writing, about the opportunities and challenges for evaluation in the limited-life context. (See Figure 1.)

Key Points

- This article shares the emerging hypotheses of two foundations, The Atlantic Philanthropies and the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation — each four years from sunset — about the opportunities and challenges for evaluation in the limited-life context.
- Few, if any, of the problems philanthropy seeks to address can be solved within a brief, defined time frame. Limited-life foundations can only strive to move the ball down the field before they sunset, and then enlist others to carry the work forward. Given this reality, these foundations are obligated to make a deliberate effort to share what they have learned with the players who remain.
- The article argues that systematically capturing and sharing knowledge — about programs, as well as social-change methods and grantmaking practices — can increase a foundation's influence and impact during its final years and beyond.

Hypothesis 1: Urgency Is Evaluation's Best Friend and Worst Enemy

As the dark-witted Samuel Johnson once said, "When a man knows he is to be hanged ... it concentrates his mind wonderfully." Indeed, impending deadlines have a way of bringing work into focus. As a limited-life foundation approaches closure, with the sound of the countdown clock ever present, the sense of urgency can be both exhilarating and overwhelming — and it can advance or hinder evaluation.

Reflective Practice

FIGURE 1 The Atlantic Philanthropies and the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation

The ATLANTIC Philanthropies

About The Atlantic Philanthropies

The Atlantic Philanthropies were founded by entrepreneur Chuck Feeney, who decided in 1982 to devote his wealth to the service of humanity. A champion of "giving while living," Feeney has long maintained that people of wealth should use it to better the world during their lifetimes. That belief led trustees to decide in 2002 to limit Atlantic's life to a fixed term.

Chuck Feeney felt a connection to each of the eight regions where Atlantic has made major investments. With grantmaking and partnerships in the United States, Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, South Africa, Vietnam, Australia, Bermuda, and Cuba, Atlantic has sought to advance opportunity, equity, and well-being. Culminating grants aim to address 21st-century problems and achieve significant, lasting results in the following areas:

- Aging
- Children and Youth
- Health
- Reconciliation and Human Rights

S. D. BECHTEL, JR. FOUNDATION
STEPHEN BECHTEL FUND

About the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation

In 1957, Stephen D. Bechtel, Jr., former chairman and CEO of the Bechtel Corp., created the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation as a personal commitment to the prosperity he envisioned and desired for California.

The foundation's vision is pursued through two programs:

- The Education Program focuses on helping young people develop the knowledge, skills, and character they need to become productive, engaged citizens. The foundation supports STEM education and character development, and encourages effective education policy.
- The Environment Program concentrates on the management, stewardship, and conservation of the state's natural resources by supporting organizations and partnerships that inform, demonstrate, implement, and advocate for improvements in water management and land stewardship.

In 2009, the foundation decided to invest all of its assets by 2020 in order to spur significant progress in these areas sooner rather than later.

The decision to sunset makes imminent the question of what a foundation can and should seek to learn — as well as the need to decide how that information will be gathered, and with whom and how it will be shared. At both Atlantic and the S. D. Bechtel Foundation, Jr. Foundation, this urgency has helped generate demand and attention for evaluation, ensuring that it is adequately prioritized, resourced, and concentrated in areas where the opportunities for learning and influence are greatest.

But urgency creates challenges, too. We worry that the drive to move quickly may cause mistakes that will cost time and resources later. On the other hand, moving too slowly may restrict what we can accomplish. After all, the scope of evaluation efforts can only be as expansive as time permits. Deadlines cannot be extended, meaning work that is delayed may never be completed. And there will come a point when it is simply too late to initiate anything new. Finally, enlisting the attention of program staff is difficult; no matter how well they understand and believe in the importance of evaluation, the time-sensitive demands of their grantmaking responsibilities can hamper their ability to focus on it.

In this context, we have found that a proactive approach to evaluation planning and implementation is essential. Because time is short, it is a consideration in every aspect of the planning process — from what to prioritize (see Hypothesis 4), to which methods to use (see Hypothesis 6), and even how to prepare for contingencies, knowing that time will limit the range of course corrections at our disposal. At both foundations, we do our best to keep evaluations on track by anticipating and mitigating potential obstacles, exercising disciplined project management, and frequently recalibrating our plans to reflect what is feasible within the time remaining. These may be sound practices in any setting, but in ours, they are absolute necessities.

Building the Right Team

A thoughtful organizational structure can help keep evaluation top of mind. At the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, most evaluation activities are embedded in program work and funded by program budgets. As a result, program leadership must be truly committed to evaluation in order for it to occur. However, program staff are supported by a separate organizational effectiveness team, including an evaluation and learning officer who serves as an advocate and internal consultant for evaluation. While program staff are understandably focused on grantmaking, evaluation staff can gently and continually raise questions about what is being learned and how that learning can be leveraged. This structure has the additional benefit of enabling program staff to seek "free" in-house evaluation expertise whenever they need it. When time and money are limited, the ability to walk down the hall for advice is proving to be a real asset.

Hypothesis 2: Big Programmatic Bets Create Big Opportunities for Learning — and Accelerating Impact

By definition, when a foundation spends down it liquidates and distributes all of its assets, and, as a result, it typically operates with a far larger grantmaking budget during its final years than it would if it remained perpetual. With these resources, a limited-life foundation may be able to place "big bets" to advance solutions to societal problems within a defined time frame.[1] Big bets play a central role in Atlantic's grantmaking; a Bridgespan study found that Atlantic has directed 50 percent more of these investments to social-change causes than other U.S. philanthropies, on average (Powell, Huang, Foster, Boyd, & Sakaue, 2016).[2] Similarly, at the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, a small number of large, multiyear initiatives constitute the majority of the foundation's work in its final decade.

This increase in resources creates significant programmatic opportunities. But if our foundations fail to document and share what is learned through these investments, we will leave organizations and fields inadequately informed when we go out of business. If, however, the big programmatic bets are accompanied by strategic investments in evaluation, our foundations may be able to propel grantees and fields forward by accelerating their learning.

For example, the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation is currently supporting two cohorts of California school districts to implement new academic standards in math and in science. The foundation's decision to sunset created an opportunity to invest significant resources in this work at a critical time in education reform. On its own, this investment would have paid dividends for participating school districts. But in order to spur broader impact, the foundation made a

[1]Bridgespan defines "big bets" as investments of $10 million or more to an organization or defined initiative, and suggests that investments of this nature have been instrumental to the success of some of the most effective nonprofits and social movements in the U.S. (Foster, Perreault, Powell, & Addy, 2016).

[2]Between 2000 and 2012, 20 percent of philanthropic big bets in the U.S., by dollar value, were allocated to "social-change causes," as defined by Bridgespan. (The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation was treated as an outlier and excluded from this analysis.) Comparatively, a review of Atlantic's 1989-2015 grantmaking found that 30 percent of its big bets were directed to social-change causes.

complementary and substantial investment in evaluation — and in many ways, this evaluation will be the true legacy of the work. WestEd — a nonpartisan, nonprofit education research, development, and service agency — is conducting formative and summative evaluation of the foundation's math and science initiatives. By extracting lessons learned and actively disseminating this knowledge to education policymakers and other school districts across the state and the nation, the foundation seeks to support system-wide change.

Hypothesis 3: Going Out of Business May Erode Some Traditional Barriers to Learning in Philanthropy

A central barrier to learning in any institution is our natural reluctance — as human beings and as organizations — to admit failure. Employees have an obvious incentive to appear successful in order to advance their careers and, in the case of foundation program staff, to protect their grantees. Cultivating an environment in which staff feel safe enough to speak openly about mistakes is hard. Building this kind of trust with the organizations we support — in spite of what often feels like an inescapable power dynamic between grantmaker and grantee — is even harder.

For this reason, one of the most interesting implications of going out of business is the way in which it disrupts the usual incentives and dynamics of the philanthropic environment, potentially to the benefit of evaluation and learning. As a grantmaker, would you be more willing to own your mistakes if you knew your job had a short shelf life? As a grantee, would you feel more comfortable reflecting on what went wrong with a funder if you knew your relationship with that funder was coming to an end? We see evidence that, for our foundations, the answer might be "yes."

On an institutional level, our impending sunsets have triggered some shifts in the way we think about the purpose and audience for evaluation. We are looking outward and forward, thinking most about how we can generate useful knowledge for grantees, funders, policymakers, and others who will carry on vital work after we exit. We are investing in few, if any, evaluations where our foundations are the only audience. (See Hypothesis 4 for a full discussion of where we do invest.)

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And because our institutions are now arguably less concerned with brand building, we are becoming more candid, particularly about failure. Challenges and surprises — along with what they mean and how they were addressed — can, should, and will be celebrated. Early on, Atlantic publicly committed to sharing a "top 10" list of lessons learned, including instructive examples of where and how it fell short. Likewise, the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, at the encouragement of trusted colleagues and partners, is making a deliberate effort to communicate more openly and more often about its learning during its final years.

Although each of our foundations is at a somewhat different stage (as of this writing, Atlantic has made its final grant commitments and the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation still has several years of intensive grantmaking ahead), we both see shifts in staff behavior as well. As the sunset approaches and staff find that they are no

[T]he limited-life context seems to create an opportunity to disentangle learning from accountability — to focus evaluation on building knowledge that will advance our fields of interest, and to speak more honestly than ever before about failure and lessons learned from it.

longer competing for promotions or persuading the board to fund their work, some feel less pressure to deliver glowing evaluation findings, and more comfortable pointing to where things went wrong. We hope that grantees will become increasingly candid, too — in reflecting on their own work and in providing feedback to us on our performance — especially after their final grants have been received.

In other words, the limited-life context seems to create an opportunity to disentangle learning from accountability — to focus evaluation on building knowledge that will advance our fields of interest, and to speak more honestly than ever before about failure and lessons learned from it.

Hypothesis 4: Focus is Imperative, But It Requires Difficult Choices and Clear Criteria for Decision-Making

It's axiomatic that translating insight into impact requires focused learning at both the level of the grantee and the foundation. But we have found that setting priorities for evaluation — not to mention setting priorities generally — is a major challenge in a limited-life foundation. Not everything can be evaluated; and the more a foundation takes on, the greater its risk of being spread too thin, spending time and money on low-yield efforts at the expense of activities that hold greater promise for learning.

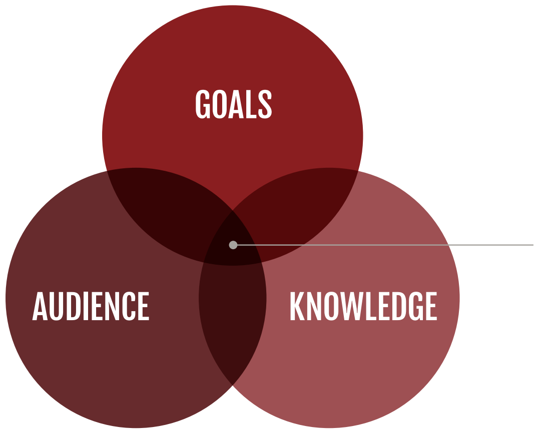
At both Atlantic and the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, some form of reflection is required of every grantee. At minimum, we require grantees to clearly delineate their intended outcomes at the outset and then reflect on progress against those outcomes in grant reports. In some cases, a light-touch retrospective by staff or an evaluation partner is also expected. At Atlantic, retrospectives on concluding lines of work focus not only on progress made but also on challenges remaining; the aim is to advance grantee sustainability by helping inform and attract other funders (e.g., a synthesis of U.S. comprehensive immigration reform highlighted unfinished business for stakeholder groups; profiles of aging and economic-security advocacy organizations were potential fundraising tools for these entities).

At the other end of the spectrum, for some program areas or initiatives, evaluation is central to the theory of change. For example, Atlantic's strategy for prevention and early intervention services for children in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland hinges on rigorous evaluation. The primary goal of this work is to identify successful, evidence-based practices through evaluation, so that Atlantic's government agency partners will be more informed and disciplined about investing in effective services. Thus, a significant commitment to evaluation is nonnegotiable.

But what about the messy middle — all those cases where there may be something to learn through evaluation, but where evaluation is not central to strategy? Making such choices is hard. In our experience, it is important to establish agreement internally about how these decisions will be made, and by whom.

The criteria used by our foundations to determine where to invest in evaluation converge around several dimensions. To maximize our remaining years, we have both focused on areas in which (a) there is an opportunity to be influential in service of foundation goals; (b) there is an

FIGURE 2 Setting Priorities



The greatest potential for influence occurs here, where the foundation's goals align with an opportunity to generate relevant knowledge and deliver it to key audiences.

GOALS

Understanding our goals and potential to advance them

- Based on our mission and values, what influence do we hope to have on the organizations, fields, or systems with which we are working?
- How do these "influence goals" manifest in this potential project?
- Will an investment in evaluation help us achieve these goals?

AUDIENCE

Identifying our target groups, and opportunity

- Who is our target audience—the foundation, the grantee(s), the field, other funders—and how much does that audience care about this work?
- Is there currently an opportunity to influence our target audience?
- Are there partners that can help us influence this audience and ensure the durability of the learning after we exit?

KNOWLEDGE

Assessing our ability to deliver meaningful learning

- Are there gaps in knowledge in the field that our work could help address?
- Is there something particularly valuable or interesting to be learned from our experience?
- Will we be able to deliver knowledge products to our standards of quality, given the time, resources, and staff remaining?

identifiable audience with corresponding dissemination opportunities; and (c) the foundation has relevant, informative experience to bring to bear on existing gaps in knowledge, as well as the ability to generate knowledge products that are appropriate to the audience and opportunity.[3] (See Figure 2.)

[3]In some circumstances, accountability emerges as a fourth consideration, as there may be unusually high-stakes accountability concerns at play that require an investment in evaluation.

Regardless of the human resources strategy employed, a limited-life foundation's staff might well shrink toward the end. As a result, evaluation staff must grapple with the reality that institutional memory may be slowly drained, since some information is carried in the minds of staff and not formally documented. In a perpetual organization, information can be orally transmitted across generations of staff. But in a limited-life foundation, information is at risk of disappearing when staff do.

In both foundations, evaluation priorities are established through a highly collaborative process that includes program, evaluation, and communications staff, senior leadership, and, in some cases, the board. Decisions about where to invest are never made by evaluation staff alone.

As our foundations prepare to close, evaluation of some grants, initiatives, or lines of work may need to be set aside or scaled back in order to devote adequate attention to the most pressing priorities. These decisions come with some sense of disappointment in lost opportunities for learning, but when time and other resources are finite, it is important to look for the most significant points of leverage — and if necessary, decline opportunities that are less likely to bear fruit.

Hypothesis 5: Staff Transitions Complicate the Work, and Institutional Memory Is No Longer a Given

Based on our experiences and those of other limited-life foundations we have studied, it seems that staffing levels may diminish as sunset approaches, whether through design, attrition, or some of each. Meanwhile, staff who remain will likely see their roles evolve and often expand, in ways that may or may not suit their interests and abilities. These realities can make it difficult to keep evaluation efforts adequately staffed, and to extract the institutional memory needed for meaningful learning.

Atlantic has implemented a human resources strategy in which the foundation's staff has gradually but steadily decreased over a five-year period. Although the foundation will not officially close its doors until 2020, grantmaking drew to a close at the end of 2016. By then, most program staff had moved on, while staff focused on evaluation and communications modestly and temporarily increased. As bandwidth constricted, staff began to wear multiple hats, including an increased emphasis on learning and dissemination — regardless of their interest or expertise in such work. In some cases, this created a mismatch between the organization's needs and the staff's capabilities, but it also created opportunities for individuals to grow. Some staff — primarily impassioned by their grantmaking responsibilities — self-selected out of the organization, while others embraced the new activities to build and broaden their professional skill sets.

The S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, on the other hand, is not planning to reduce its workforce prior to sunset. The foundation has ambitious goals for its last few years and is hoping that most of its roughly 35 staff will choose to stay until the end, in order to shepherd final grants to completion, prepare organizations and fields for the foundation's departure, and document and disseminate learning. But even in the best-case scenario, it is possible that some staff will decide to move on before sunset. And since there will likely come a time beyond which departing staff are no longer replaced, bandwidth may become a challenge in the final years.

Regardless of the human resources strategy employed, a limited-life foundation's staff might well shrink toward the end. As a result, evaluation staff must grapple with the reality that institutional memory may be slowly drained, since some information is carried in the minds of staff and not formally documented. In a perpetual organization, information can be orally transmitted across generations of staff. But in a limited-life foundation, information is at risk of disappearing when staff do. This makes it more and more difficult to engage in reflective practice as sunset approaches.

At both foundations, we are working to mitigate this problem through deliberate and proactive efforts to capture staff knowledge. We have established protocols, processes, and tools for extracting important information from staff, as well as systematic ways to store that data so it can be easily retrieved when needed. Atlantic developed a program review protocol that was completed by current and former program staff, in concert with evaluation and communications staff. After taking inventory of relevant documentation for each program area, staff developed a consensus summary of each program's goals, salient strategies and investments, impacts, and lessons learned.[4] The S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation expects staff to complete a written analysis of every grant at key inflection points.

Hypothesis 6: A Limited Window for Data Collection Presents Technical Challenges

We are finding that the end-stage environment also poses technical challenges for evaluation design and implementation. Both Atlantic and the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation are investing in complex program areas — human rights, education reform, sustainable water management, and others — where change does not occur overnight. Perpetual foundations have the ability to track progress on issues like these longitudinally if they choose, or to postpone evaluation until the time is right. Limited-life foundations may not have these options.

Foundations such as ours may be forced to evaluate the impact of investments within a much shorter time frame than might be ideal. For example, the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation's STEM-education work includes efforts to help K-8 teachers shift their instructional practice to align with new academic standards in math and science. Enabling this kind of behavioral change at scale will take many years, and it will take even longer to see measureable improvements in children's academic performance resulting from these shifts. In this case, the optimal window for conducting summative evaluation will not open until after the foundation's doors have closed.

Since limited-life foundations may be out of business before it is feasible to measure direct indicators of impact, at times we instead must use leading indicators — measureable factors that are predictive of outcomes and likely to change before outcome indicators change — to determine whether we are on the right path. Finding valid, timely, and accessible measures can be difficult. Many leading indicators are imperfect proxies, but they may be the only option when the window for data collection is closing.

For example, Atlantic's board will make final investment decisions for far-reaching funding of its social-change fellowships[5] based on early assessment of organizational development, initial implementation performance, and leading indicators for much longer-term systemic impacts. Key-informant interviews may be held with knowledgeable community leaders (e.g., advocates, public health leaders, policymakers, and policy analysts) who are positioned to recognize early systemic changes, but it may take many years for the fellows to facilitate broader improvements in health and/or racial equity. For this reason, one of the most anticipated

[4]See, e.g., www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/subtheme/school-discipline-reform

[5]See http://www.atlanticfellows.org

evaluation criteria concerns evidence of strong grantee capacity, including a culture of learning and adaptation, which is considered to be essential for long-term success.

Hypothesis 7: Influence May Wane in the Final Years if It Is Not Actively Cultivated

It is a well-known joke in philanthropy that when you leave the field, you will suddenly discover that you are not as good-looking, smart, or funny as you used to be. There is an underlying truth in this humor: When you have the power to affect how philanthropic dollars are allocated, you have influence; people pay attention to you and your messages. If individuals lose influence when they exit philanthropy, it seems likely that institutions may as well. With four years until sunset and grant commitments declining during this period, each of our foundations is asking whether — in terms of influence — we will be finished before we are done.

This may be a hurdle for us and for other limited-life foundations that have ambitious goals for their final years. Our influence may dwindle at precisely the time that our opportunity to build and disseminate knowledge may be peaking. Mindful of this risk, we are experimenting with several strategies designed to help us retain a voice until the end.

Engaging End Users From Start to Finish

At both foundations, we strive to include important stakeholders in evaluation activities early on, to ensure that research questions and methods are relevant and responsive to stakeholder needs and that stakeholders feel invested in the project and its findings. We consider this to be sound evaluation practice generally, but particularly important in the limited-life context.

Atlantic sees its diverse experience with advocacy grantmaking — spanning time, topics, strategies, and geography — as one of its most valuable yet underdeveloped learning assets. Approaching sunset, the foundation sought to produce relevant syntheses of lessons learned from this work that would complement the existing literature on advocacy, in formats that would be useful to the field. To pursue this goal, Atlantic partnered with the Center for Evaluation Innovation on the Atlas Project, building a learning agenda through ongoing reconnaissance of other funders, advocates, and government representatives. Several funders and advocates expressed hopes that Atlantic would share successes, failures, and lessons concerning collaborative financing and strategic application of 501(c)(4) funding. Throughout the process, on these topics and many others, key internal and external stakeholders provided critical insight, institutional memory, and assistance — from identifying audiences and defining evaluation questions, to developing data-collection approaches and interpreting findings, to supporting targeted dissemination of actionable lessons.

Stakeholder engagement is proving critical for the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation as well. For instance, a key stakeholder in the foundation's science education initiative is the California State Board of Education. To ensure that the external evaluation of the initiative is responsive to the needs of this audience, the foundation encouraged the evaluator to create a technical working group to advise on the project, including prominent members of the board. Early on, the technical working group's input informed the research questions and evaluation design. Now midway through the initiative, the group remains active, helping to interpret and prioritize findings for publication. By engaging this audience in the work so directly, the foundation aims to ensure that the evaluation findings are useful to state policymakers.

Working With and/or Through Partners

Partnerships are an especially important asset for limited-life foundations and serve multiple purposes. During the final years, they may help attract and retain the attention of target audiences; for example, if a foundation's influence begins to wane, it may be able to rely on the influence of its partners. Following closure, partnerships may enable the ongoing application of lessons learned by transferring leadership to the field and creating permanent "homes" for the knowledge that was built.

But there is a dynamic tension in play with respect to partnerships. We urgently need partners in order to ensure that our learning is widely disseminated and productively used. And yet, the reality is that we have very little time or bandwidth with which to forge or sustain partnerships. Given the many nonnegotiable constraints of the limited-life context (e.g., time, money, staffing), we cannot always accommodate other institutions' timelines or needs in the name of partnership building (and vice versa). And we worry that potential partners may not be willing to invest time and resources in collaborating with us, knowing that the relationship will not endure. In other words, we are learning that partnership building — for both programming and learning — can be at its most difficult when it is most needed.

Atlantic has pursued a number of partnership approaches in order to ensure that learning is applied during and after the foundation's culmination. Scaling of several initiatives that embed lessons learned has been achieved through carefully cultivated partnerships with government; in Vietnam, for example, investments in epidemiological data collection and professional education led to a stronger, data-driven public health system.

Atlantic is also cultivating leaders who are poised to apply learning, and commissioning work with long-term evaluation partners. A constellation of Atlantic Fellow program grants reflects both strategies. Anchor institutions are funded to pilot new leadership-development efforts for emerging social-change leaders, incorporating learning from Atlantic's experience as well as other sources. And, evaluators selected in concert with corresponding program grantees support a "learn while doing" approach that combines developmental features to inform fellowship program design, formative assessments to refine program components and build quality improvement capacity, and summative evaluation to inform the Atlantic board's final 10- to 20-year investment decisions.

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The S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation is building funder collaboratives to support several major program and evaluation efforts. For instance, the foundation is a founding member of the Water Funder Initiative, a collaborative effort to identify and activate promising water solutions through strategic philanthropic investments. The foundation's aim, with respect to evaluation, is for participating funders to invest in learning as a collective, ensuring that its reach extends well beyond any individual funder's scope of influence.

Convening

Approaching sunset, both of our foundations are increasingly bringing grantees, funders, and others together to exchange knowledge and identify opportunities to work together toward shared goals. Particularly as our grantmaking tapers off, we may be able to leverage our role as conveners

An external communications strategy seems essential at this time if our foundations hope to remain influential and helpful to the organizations and fields we support. This means that for each of our major evaluations – especially those associated with our big bets – we are developing a corresponding communications plan.

to retain the attention of key stakeholders, while simultaneously creating opportunities for those stakeholders to digest evaluation findings together and forge relationships that may live on after we exit.

In some cases, we have taken advantage of existing convenings to disseminate knowledge. For example, lessons learned from a jointly conducted evaluation of our capital grants have been shared at national philanthropy conferences hosted by Grantmakers for Effective Organizations and the Center for Effective Philanthropy. Atlantic has also made use of standalone funder meetings in the United States, Ireland, Belgium, and Australia to share findings.

In other instances, our foundations have hosted convenings to bring target audiences together. Atlantic and the Center for Evaluation Innovation hosted a meeting in 2015 to examine cutting-edge advocacy evaluation methods, as well as an international conference in September 2016 on public interest law and strategic litigation. Meanwhile, in July 2016, the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation brought its National Character Initiative grantees together for a two-day workshop on youth character-development research. The workshop, led by the National Research Council, was immediately followed by a one-day convening of the grantees to reflect on the research and identify opportunities for collaboration.

Developing a Strategic Approach to Communications

An external communications strategy seems essential at this time if our foundations hope to remain influential and helpful to the organizations and fields we support. This means that for each of our major evaluations — especially those associated with our big bets — we are developing a corresponding communications plan.

The S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation is currently working through this process for several of its education initiatives. In close collaboration with communications consultant Williams Group, the foundation is bringing stakeholders together to clarify learning and influence goals, identify target audiences, and specify — for each audience — the information that audience needs, the product or format it will find most useful, the message and messenger it is most likely to respond to, and the channels through which it can best be reached. In many cases, the most suitable format in which to convey evaluation findings will not be a tome-like report, but rather a policy brief, handbook, presentation, webinar, or any number of other knowledge products. And the best messenger and dissemination channel may not involve the foundation at all, but will instead leverage the voice of a key partner in the field.

At the same time, the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation has been working to strengthen its own communications capacity, so that tools, resources, and lessons learned — for which the foundation is the appropriate messenger — can be widely shared in real time. In 2016, the foundation launched a new section of its website to house knowledge products, and began to actively disseminate information and resources to external audiences via email campaigns. For many of the foundation's initiatives, summative evaluation findings will not be available until the last year or two of the foundation's life or even post sunset, but by sharing interim learning along the way, the foundation seeks to engage the field now and build anticipation for future publications.

Hypothesis 8: Post-Hoc Evaluation Is Challenging, But of Tremendous Benefit to the Field

A key question for limited-life foundations is whether, when, and how they should assess the ultimate impact of their work. At Atlantic and the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, we are placing big bets during our final years of grantmaking. What will become of these investments? What will become of our grantees and the gains they have made? Will these organizations and their progress endure? The potential for meaningful and beneficial learning does not end when a foundation's lights go out. Yet there is very little existing research on the impact of exiting, and we believe there is a need for more limited-life foundations to commission post-hoc evaluation.

The question we face is: Who will do it? Since the foundations will be closed and our entire staffs will have moved on to other endeavors, a third party must lead the work. But who should be entrusted with this responsibility? How do you vet an organization for this unusual role? Who will manage the contract, holding the evaluator accountable to the intended level of rigor and quality, course correcting when things get off track, and helping to interpret the findings? How will the findings be disseminated and applied? When is the right time to conduct this type of evaluation?

Atlantic has been working into its sunset with collaborators like the Center for Evaluation Innovation to look at advocacy lessons over time, and Bridgespan to look at lessons about big-bet grantmaking. Other external partners are positioned to gauge and share the results of final efforts as they become available. Each of these partners has a vested interest in the knowledge being built. At the same time, Atlantic chose to articulate its most "personal" institutional learning on its own, finding the process of reflecting with past leaders and staff helpful and satisfying as a way to mark the impending transition.

A key question for limited-life foundations is whether, when, and how they should assess the ultimate impact of their work. At Atlantic and the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, we are placing big bets during our final years of grantmaking. What will become of these investments? What will become of our grantees and the gains they have made?

For grantmaking initiatives that require coordinated evaluation and dissemination post sunset, Atlantic has identified like-minded partners to oversee the work. For instance, Atlantic has asked the James Irvine Foundation to assume management of Atlantic's investments in Linked Learning, a career pathways-based education model. Irvine is well suited for this role because the foundation actually initiated and supported the development of the Linked Learning model. In general, such relationships seem to work best when the partner has similar values and goals related to its own mission, a deep knowledge of the grantmaking approach and context, and a commitment and capacity to help grantees adapt to changing conditions.

The S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation is still wrestling with the question of whether and how to assess final impact. Because organization and field building is central to its work, the foundation may conduct a longitudinal study of the capacity and resiliency of a sample of grantees. Such an effort might involve one or two interim reports during the foundation's lifetime, followed by publication of a final report a few years after sunset (e.g., 2023). The goal of such a study would be to assess the impact of the foundation's

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capacity-building investments, as well as the impact of its exit, on the strength of grantees.

In addition, the foundation may consider commissioning an impact evaluation to assess the attainment and/or durability of program outcomes for select lines of work. As of this writing, further exploration is needed to determine who would be entrusted with this work and how it would be managed.

Hypothesis 9: Knowledge Needs a Home and a Caretaker in Order to Be Made Useful

When all is said and done, limited-life foundations like ours face the question of what to do with the knowledge we have built. This pertains not only to the direct products of evaluation and learning efforts, but in an even broader way to the entire "paper trail" of the foundation.

Every institution amasses a huge amount of documentation that may help to tell a story. But what do you do with it all when you close? When does it make sense to establish an archive? It may not be necessary in every case, especially if strong partners are poised to become stewards of the foundation's knowledge. If you do establish an archive, how do you ensure that it is not just a storage facility, but rather that the information is accessible and productively used to inform decisions, drive continuous improvement, or catalyze shifts in policy or practice? Our assumption is that making information available is rarely enough; it will need to be curated, repackaged for different audiences, and actively promoted in order to get uptake.

Atlantic has elected to create an archive at Cornell University, which will encompass the organization's paper and digital records. The foundation has done its best to try to understand and predict the priorities of potential audiences for this archive. Program, evaluation, and communications staff have tapped grantees and other funders to help determine who might be interested in the archive, how they would learn about it, and what they would do with it.

However, it simply is not possible to fully anticipate the future interests and needs of every potential audience. Atlantic's leadership team is thinking hard about how to make the archive as flexible and responsive as possible. For example, by including raw data (not just final research products) and by making the archive easily searchable, Atlantic hopes to accommodate the uncertain and potentially wide-ranging research needs of coming decades.

In addition, the contents of Atlantic's archive will be actively curated and disseminated. The website will be regularly updated for 10 years following the end of grantmaking in 2016, and outreach efforts will help make other materials available to philanthropic, nonprofit, and academic communities with interests in topics including "giving while living," limited life, big bets for social change, and leadership. Modest grants to infrastructure organizations like the Center for Effective Philanthropy, the Foundation Center, and Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors will support new data collection and syntheses, resulting in tailored materials that address emergent information needs and highlight opportunities to use the archives.

The S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, aware that establishing an archive of this scope and nature requires years of careful planning is, as of this writing, considering a wide range of approaches to synthesizing and sharing insights, including but not limited to preserving foundation documents in a formal archive.

Conclusion

In the experience of our two foundations, the decision to sunset has advanced evaluation in many ways. The focus and urgency it brings is refreshing and energizing. There are opportunities to "go big" on evaluation during the final years and to leverage learning for grantees, peer funders, and field leaders. And the ability to shift from "evaluation for accountability" to "evaluation for learning and influence" has helped break down many of the barriers that typically stand in the way of meaningful reflective practice.

But there are challenges, too, and unique considerations. We face difficult choices about what to evaluate. Staff capacity and attention are strained. Institutional memory may be gradually drained unless efforts are made to preserve it. Time constraints introduce methodological limitations. Our influence may diminish with our grantmaking budgets, even as our abilities to build and disseminate knowledge are peaking. Partnerships are essential but more difficult to forge than ever. Decisions must be made about whether to commission post-hoc evaluation as well as whether and how to archive all or parts of a mountain of information.

There is no guidebook to help limited-life foundations navigate these challenges. As S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation President Laurie Dachs is fond of saying, "We're building the plane as we're flying it — and soon we'll have to start disassembling it." But in the spirit of interim learning, the combined reflections of our foundations have been offered here in hopes of encouraging other limited-life foundations — or those considering a sunset — to make the most of evaluation.

Our advice?

- Put an evaluation and learning plan in place early, including a strategy for capturing institutional knowledge.

- Resist the temptation to evaluate everything. Don't invest unless your research questions have relevance and value to external stakeholders.

- Make sure you have partners in the field at every stage — from scoping and designing evaluations to curating and diffusing knowledge — so that everything you do will have its own legs after you exit.

- Commission a post-hoc evaluation of your work. There is a dearth of research on what happens to program outcomes, grantee organizations, and fields following the departure of a major funder.

- Commit to publishing findings — good, bad, and ugly. Long after your grant dollars stop flowing, the lessons learned from your experience — what you tried, and how others can build on your work or avoid repeating missteps — will continue to have impact. In a way, the knowledge you generate through evaluation will be your final, parting gift to the field.

Our foundations are eager to continue documenting and disseminating learning — leading up to but also following our sunsets. Over time, we hope others will join us in this journey.

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Reflective Practice