

EVALUATION CAPACITY BUILDING AND ORGANIZATION CHANGE: Voices from the Field

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Evaluation is an active, dynamic process. It is **evaluation capacity**, the ability to do evaluation—to assess what is taking place with a program, a strategy, or an initiative—that allows an organization to use data to inform its decision making. It has been a tenet of the Bruner Foundation that evaluation capacity used well, supports programs, strategies, and initiatives that in turn lead organizations to better deliver on their missions and better meet the needs of those they serve. The Foundation has long invested in or partnered with others to help organizations build evaluation capacity. Despite positive project-based findings regarding evaluative capacity development, and consistent evidence that training to develop evaluation capacities could be delivered using a variety of strategies¹ in a variety of settings, two key questions remained regarding the broader usefulness of evaluation capacity development:

First, the Bruner Foundation wanted to know in a systematic fashion whether former trainees continued to use the capacities they developed. Second, the Foundation wanted to ascertain whether enhanced evaluation capacity had organizational benefits and challenges and to determine what unmet needs persist.

To investigate this, the Bruner Foundation commissioned a two-part study. The initial work was accomplished through surveys with former ECB participants. Respondent feedback was very clear and uniformly positive. All former ECB trainee respondents reported that the comprehensive training they received was worthwhile for them individually. Further they: continued to use what they learned; valued evaluative capacity and its importance in their organizations; avidly use evaluation capacities and evaluative thinking for key organizational benefits; and extended the training to others. Although respondents acknowledged challenges to continued evaluation use, most notably time to work on evaluation projects, financial support for evaluation, turnover of trained staff, and unmet technology needs, the former trainees were also clear that ECB had helped their organizations do better evaluation, use evaluative thinking and commission evaluation. Please see [\[Understanding Evaluation Capacity Building Training Results: Findings from the 2013 Former Participant Survey\]](#) for additional details.

Evaluation Capacity is the ability of staff and their organizations to do evaluation.

Because evaluation is systematic, it involves proficiency in: asking questions, determining what data are required to answer questions, collecting data using appropriate strategies, analyzing collected data and summarizing findings, using and sharing the findings.

Evaluative Thinking is a type of reflective practice that uses the evaluation skills listed above, in areas other than programs or initiatives such as human resources, technology, and fund development. It is an approach that fully integrates systematic questioning, data collection and analysis, and action into an organization's work practices.

Evaluative Capacity is the combination of evaluation skills and evaluative thinking. It requires a commitment to doing and using evaluation in programs, strategies, and initiatives *as well as* other aspects of organization work.

¹ The Bruner Foundation has directly invested in or partnered with others to help organizations build evaluation capacity since 1996. As part of its work to help organizations build evaluation capacity, The Foundation has developed and posted an interactive site containing detailed information about its comprehensive strategies (click here to visit the [Bruner Foundation Evaluation Capacity Building Program Clearinghouse](#)).

Retrospective Study Interviews

This component of the work was completed through interviews with organization leaders who had participated in ECB training delivered through various strategies. Leaders whose organizational exposure to ECB varied were selected to acquire a variety of perspectives. *The goal of the interviews was to obtain the perspectives of leaders on the importance of evaluation capacity and to hear descriptions of current commitment and capacity for evaluation and evaluative thinking in nonprofits that have participated in ECB training. In brief, the voices of these select leaders with varying ECB experience further illuminate the Foundation's understanding of the organizational benefits and challenges associated with ECB.*

Who Participated in the Interviews?

Interviews were conducted with individuals from organizations with ongoing connections to the Bruner Foundation's commitment to evaluation capacity building. Respondents included: Ann Marie Cook, Lifespan; Nicki Eastburn, Assabet Valley Collaborative (AVC); Patricia Harrity, NW Connecticut Area Health Education Center (AHEC); Tracy Hobson, Center for Anti-Violence Education (CAE); Johanna Plummer, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art; Janet Sunkin, Jewish Family Services, (JFS); and Deborah Ulman, YWCA Hartford Region. Five of the respondents were Executive Directors, two with long ECB histories (>10 years). Two respondents were leaders with shorter ECB histories (<2 years) and two were leaders with moderate exposure to ECB (between 2 and 4 years). The respondents came from organizations with varying numbers of total staff and sizes of annual budgets, and various service focuses. All respondents have worked closely with Bruner Foundation Evaluation Consultant Baker (please see the appendix for additional details).

Projects Represented by Interview Respondents

- **Rochester Effectiveness Partnership** (REP – Rochester New York, 1997 – 2003, Bruner Foundation and other area funders).
- **Building Evaluation Capacity** (BEC – Hartford, Connecticut 2006 – 2013; Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, project is ongoing).
- **MetroWest Evaluation Institute** (MWEI – Framingham, MA 2011, MetroWest Community Health Foundation, project is ongoing).
- **Participatory Evaluation Essentials: Key Staff Training** (Conducted on-site for NW Connecticut Area Health Education Center, Center for Anti-Violence Education and Rochester Jewish Family Services).

What Were Interview Respondents Asked?

Informed by the framework of Cousin et al. 2014, and review of other literature about evaluation capacity building, we set out to learn more about how and whether organizations use their enhanced capacity, what benefits result and what challenges are faced. With the expectation that organizations with enhanced evaluation capacity to do evaluation will continue to ask important questions and use their evaluation skills to produce results that will in turn be used and integrated into regular organization work, we inquired about the following.

Interview Questions

1. Why do leaders get involved in ECB and what other related training do they receive?
2. How important is evaluation capacity building to leaders?
3. How have evaluation and evaluation capacity changed at the organization level?

Interview Questions (Continued)

4. What are the key benefits of evaluation capacity building for nonprofit leadership?
5. How has evaluation capacity informed program design and improvement?
6. How does evaluation capacity support key organization tasks?
7. Is evaluation capacity sustainable within organizations?
8. How do respondents intend to continue their ECB and evaluation work?

Summary of Findings

Analysis of interview results helped illuminate several key findings. **Each organizational leader could identify change that had happened at the organization level**, such as: improved internal and external communication about evaluation, changes in structural systems and instruments for collecting data, and better ability to identify questions of substance. **The respondents could all identify key benefits for leaders and for organizations**. These included increased individual knowledge and skills related to evaluation, increased demand for evaluation, increased ability to know when outside help is needed and for what, and more regular use of evaluation as part of program planning and revision. **The interview respondents also agreed that as a direct result of ECB training there is ongoing evaluation activity, there are stronger grant proposals, better communication with boards about what has and has not been accomplished, and most importantly an increased organizational focus on results for clients.**

Organization leaders also shared insights and concerns regarding sustaining evaluation capacity. Primary among these were worries that: technology was not keeping pace with increased evaluation capacity; organizations still need to work to ensure enough people at the right levels in the organization are trained or involved in evaluation; funders' demands are not always in alignment with organizational evaluative approaches. Further organization leaders reported they are always struggling to find resources to help cover the costs of staff involvement in evaluation (with or without an outside evaluation partner) and to balance funds for evaluation work within program budgets.

Lastly, interview respondents were in very different places in their efforts to build and sustain evaluative capacity. A seasoned Executive Director talked about how routine use of evaluation was for all their programs (although staff still had to be prodded initially), and how they were able to both inform their own program models and respond to the requests/demands of some of their funders. Other organization leaders talked more about evaluation skill development (e.g., developing and analyzing surveys); adding evaluative approaches such as surveys, interviews or systematic record reviews, one program at a time; continuing to work to integrate evaluation in day to day organization work (e.g., conducting program planning and evaluation development together); and even running into stumbling blocks when other key organization staff were not all on board. Detailed responses from the interviewed leaders follow. (See appendix for descriptions of organizations).

Why do leaders get involved in ECB? What other training has complemented Bruner's investment in ECB?

Most interview respondents became involved with evaluation capacity building in response to funder requirements or advice, and took advantage of available ECB training or funds for ECB training. Three leaders discussed ECB as part of a larger strategic planning process where data collection was tightly tied to organizational mission, community priorities, and resulting program goals and outcomes.

Continued training for these leaders and their organizations has been limited. Only one interview respondent indicated she had participated in comprehensive ECB training since the work her organization did with the Bruner Foundation consultant. Some respondents reported participation in "one and done" evaluation skill sessions via webinar or during annual professional conferences. Interview respondents discussed training experiences that included outcomes tracking, logic model development, and aligning indicators with program goals or outcomes, all useful for specific skill training but far from comprehensive. One respondent described these opportunities as 'fragmented'.

How important is ECB to non-profit leaders?

Regardless of years of involvement in ECB, all respondents identified evaluation capacity as very important.

[Evaluation capacity] is so important to me as CEO. I meet with every single program director and program manager about their outcomes right now...as we go into a new program year, engaging in a conversation with a team of folks about how to do it better. If we're not measuring what programs are effective and what work, everything else I do as CEO seems insignificant.

In contrast, another respondent qualified her response by noting that while ECB may be very important to her personally, this was not true of the larger organization. Another leader wryly noted that at her organization, ECB was "always important, but not always urgent."

All seven respondents indicated they are currently involved in evaluation projects with the assistance of professional evaluators. For some organizations like Lifespan and The Wadsworth, there are numerous evaluation projects in progress with different evaluation consultants.

How have evaluation and evaluation capacity changed at the organizational level for the respondents?

Respondents offered evidence of change in both uses for and approaches to evaluation. They characterized their organization's evaluation capacity as expanded through ECB training and commented further that organizational change included asking meaningful questions about programs, and increased internal and external communication about program outcomes. Some respondents shared evidence of improvements to structural supports for evaluation, namely, information systems to support standardization and alignment of data collection and reporting.

How have evaluation and evaluation capacity changed at the organizational level for the respondents? (continued)

ECB encouraged nonprofit leadership to **ask meaningful questions** about programs. One respondent acknowledged that prior to her participation in ECB, evaluation was mainly driven by *“...what would a funder want to hear?”* *But now it is about making the questions more about evaluating the programs. This whole process helped us all think in a different way.* Another respondent emphasized a change in the frequency and quality of conversations about evaluation and program goals, encouraging staff to ask questions and collect data about client outcomes rather than client satisfaction.

Another organizational level change is an **increase in internal communication of evaluation work** and results that expand beyond program staff to other departments, from interns to Program Directors, or across organizational functions. *“It’s been very helpful to have ECB training across departmental teams. The Development person has been part of our team, and that person is helping people across the institution to help staff answer the questions that our funders are looking for.”*

Over the years, the Director at Lifespan has emphasized the importance of data-based decision-making and her expectations are communicated to other staff, *“Now when folks come in to talk with me about a particular program, they know what I’m going to focus on. I think there is an understanding of how this data helps direct our program throughout the agency, not with just a couple of people.”* Respondents with far less time invested in ECB also discussed **improved external communication** with important stakeholders outside the organization. Respondents cited improved reporting to their executive boards and other stakeholders, as well as standardizing and condensing summary data for reporting: *“We know how to categorize qualitative comments and report on them – that is one thing that has really helped us. Now we have one page, with pictures, quotes, and a small chart with demographics. That distillation is what we send to funders every year.”*

Two respondents focused on their **improvements to structural systems** designed to collect key information about client outcomes. *“How are we actually using our data on families to improve outcomes? We’re setting up a better system now. We’re retraining and reconsidering how we use the CANS² data collection instrument– cross validating it with case studies to see how it matches up with the goals we have for families.”* One respondent with years of evaluation experience, but who is new to evaluative thinking noted that although evaluation responsibilities existed in her organization prior to her exposure to ECB, *“...now we have a responsibility to complete and use the evaluation...We’ve improved accountability. We’re better at follow-through.”*

² The Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths tool (CANS) is a document that organizes clinical information from a behavioral health assessment in a consistent manner, to improve communication among those involved in planning care for a child or adolescent.

What are the key benefits of ECB for non-profit leadership?

When asked, leadership reflected on the key benefits from sustained evaluation capacity building and two themes emerged. One major benefit acknowledged by all respondents was related to key organizational tasks and processes. This includes straightforward improvements in staff knowledge and evaluative skills, an improved ability to decide if and when evaluations should be contracted out, and an appreciation for evaluation support in the form of coaching, mentoring, and peer networks. The other significant benefit related to consequences for the organization. Leaders with longer ECB histories reported increased organizational focus on results for clients, and wider organizational participation in evaluation (see following page for additional details).

Key benefit: Improvements in evaluation knowledge, skills, and decision-making

Evaluation expertise: Individual knowledge, skills or behavior. All but one interview respondent provided examples of evaluation skills or knowledge spreading through their management structure over time. For example,

- YWCA reported that staff now use the same language and have standardized tools
- JFS reported that training prompted the entire leadership team to discuss the role of evaluation for the organization
- Lifespan reported that evaluation reports create internal demand for similar evaluation analyses from other program leaders

Leadership examples of the specific evaluation capacities and skills resulting from ECB are discussed in further detail in the following sections.

Evaluation expertise: Internal vs. External Evaluation Decisions. After participating in comprehensive evaluation capacity building, interview respondents are more confident deciding whether to conduct program evaluation activities with internal staff, pursue participatory strategies with an evaluation consultant to build capacity and implement evaluation work, or search outside the organization for externally conducted program evaluations. **They were clear however that although it changed their approaches to the work, building evaluation capacity did not lead directly to ability to conduct evaluation un-aided.**

Leaders interviewed for this report discussed their improved ability and confidence to:

- assess when an outside evaluation expert is needed for specific tasks,
- be clear about what evaluation tasks they could or could not do themselves,
- define measures that are used to describe success, and
- be clear about how they want evaluation work conducted (e.g., data collection strategies to use, timelines, staff involvement, reporting plans).

CAE is an illustration of an organization where leadership has been integrally involved in ECB, particularly connecting organization goals with outcome measure specification. The Executive Director shared clear evidence of and commitment to evaluative thinking that has been enhanced through ECB training, yet she reports that her organization's capacity to conduct

evaluation internally without assistance has not increased substantially as a result of working with the Bruner Foundation consultant. CAE is a small, organization with very lean staffing. *“We are realistically not going to be able to continue working on evaluation at this level. How can we own pieces of this? We need to be clear about what pieces we WILL do, and be consistent across programs. That is my goal.”* Leadership reports that some evaluation support (particularly data analysis) is difficult to sustain and may frequently be sourced from outside the organization to feed into strategic decision-making and programmatic change.

In contrast, the YWCA has a long history of evaluative thinking, and the Executive Director clearly stated her preference to use evaluation consultants to build internal staff capacity: *“Bringing in expert consultants is helpful, but my goal is that the experts come in with us and leave behind pockets of knowledge, which ultimately accumulate so that our people get smart and really good at what they are doing.”* Leadership from CAE and the Wadsworth indicated their preference is to give careful thought to which evaluation tasks might be best contracted out. *“We are trying to decide what’s a priority for us to maintain on our own and what we should contract out. We’ve become better at knowing what we want when we solicit assistance.”* In a few short years, leadership asserts that they have become better evaluation consumers. Another respondent who recently contracted out for data analysis and evaluation stated, *“I felt better about what to ask, asking for certain expectations. In the past, I’d taken a more ‘How can you help us?’ approach and maybe the resulting reports weren’t that great.”*

Evaluation Coaches and Peers with Benefits. Non-profit leaders unanimously value access to an evaluation coach or mentor with deep practical experience in the field and knowledge of their organizational needs and unique programs. *“We are all just working hard to deliver programs. To have a live person look over what we’re doing and give us feedback, and bring us the latest thinking...a coach to give us this kind of feedback has been really valuable.”* Respondents also valued building a network of peers with ECB training: *“The networking component is really important. If I get stuck on a piece of this, having access to outside evaluators and other participants from the class, is really important. It builds a support network.”*

One respondent said the most helpful aspect of ECB is a new sense of confidence and the ability to rely on data not just intuition. *“[We are] able to know that our programs are serving people’s needs, and where programs need correction.”*

Key benefit: Increased organizational focus on results for clients and wider participation in evaluation

Increased organizational focus on results for clients. Interview respondents reported that evaluation capacity building activities with staff lead to a tighter connection between their program goals, outcomes, and organizational data collection strategies. All interview respondents could cite examples of evaluation results that precipitated program improvement conversations among staff, funders, or board members. These conversations directly contribute to strategic planning for the future, including changes in staffing, strategic investments in

technology, and, of course, program development. All respondents discussed an increased focus on client outcomes.

It used to be 'what kind of an answer can we get from folks to tell a funder so they know this program is important?' Now, it's more like if we're going to do evaluation, what are the 6 things that we think our participants need to come out of this program? What are we holding ourselves accountable to? Let's figure out how we're going to evaluate that. That is a very different way of thinking.

Several respondents discussed how ECB has resulted in **wider organizational participation in evaluation**. For some respondents, knowledge of evaluation is no longer limited to leadership. *"If I were gone tomorrow, the [evaluation] work could continue. . . . other people feel more comfortable with this work."* Interview respondents mentioned 'widening the circle', 'up and down the organizational structure' when discussing participation in evaluation capacity building.

Every time we do something like that, even getting that outside evaluator, ...it piques peoples interest internally, keeps stirring the pot...when a slick and accurate report is done, that program director is sharing it with other program directors, the program grows, attracts more funding, gets attention....the word spreads. I hear the staff saying, 'My work is valuable, this program is replicable, we need to have the data.'

Over time, when successful evaluation work is shared internally, staffers start to demand the same level of evidence and findings about program success in their areas of responsibility. The extent to which evaluation results are shared within the organization is linked to sustainability (Cousins, et al. 2014).

How has evaluation capacity informed program design and improvement?

The most direct and immediate result of participating in evaluation is program development and improvement. Respondents provided examples of using participant feedback and outcome data to make midcourse corrections, realigning data collection with program outcomes, and connecting program service delivery with client success.

One respondent reported immediate program improvement from participant data, *"When we did midterm reviews for the program we changed the curriculum based on participant feedback. We saw a marked change in outcomes."* Using ECB to reconsider existing data collection systems or tools was a common process among respondents.

With the new knowledge, we revamped our data collection and how we talked about it. We are also looking at the CANS [data collection tool] in a different way...how to apply it to the desired outcomes and goals we have for families. In the past, it wasn't related. The CANS was just 'that thing we did.' Now we can show a direct association between CANS assessment and family outcomes.

Most respondents had clear examples of how systematic data collection routines had improved the quality of their program data and enabled them to connect program activities with clear stories of client success.

We collected the best baseline data we could obtain from participants and their families. We coordinated their care. Each year, we can compare these data and we're seeing dramatic increases [in access to screening and prevention]. We can see people who were freefalling before who didn't know how to navigate the health care system. I'm going to use these data to say, 'this one LPN is helping people who are struggling and can truly decrease costs in the long term...a big message for us.

[Once the evaluation is completed], I think I will have evidence that the program makes a difference to youth. We've always had data on how the program makes them feel. We will soon have data [that confirms youths' actions] ...that number where we say of 100 grads from last year, X% are in college pursuing a health career (the key desired outcome of the program).

How does evaluation capacity support key organizational tasks?

On a very practical level, respondents cited examples illustrating how participating in evaluation training supported **development of evaluation designs, data collection instruments, and strategies for managing information**. Leaders talked about the logistics of data collection and improved confidence in the quality of the evidence they present to stakeholders. At least half of this group of leaders specifically talked about 'starting at the end', or using evaluative thinking 'up front' when program design takes place:

The best illustration here is in program design. We started two new programs, and I think evaluative thinking applies because we stop to think up front about the data collection, the evaluation, how did we reach the point where this program was needed? For us, it is indoctrinated in the culture that you need to assess need, stop and think about data ahead of time...set up our measures ahead of time so when we start we are not playing catch up.

Five of the interview participants directly cited the role of ECB in their process for **writing strong grant applications and proposals to funders**. "I received another round of funding for three years. They would not have accepted my application if I didn't have a well thought out and executable plan," noted one respondent. "We now create a one-pager that we give to donors...with some of the statistics," commented another respondent.

It's been a huge help as we're writing proposals. I feel that we now have the right data to write a strong proposal, and more funders are requiring it. We've been in a great position to get more money. Since our REP days, the agency has grown tremendously. Using data to prove our worth has huge funding implications.

Leaders at non-profits often describe the struggle to plan and execute thoughtful evaluation activities while delivering quality services to their clients. Sometimes ECB has brought them

only part of the way along. They can muster the organizational resources to develop a data collection plan, but the capacity to analyze and learn from the data is an ongoing challenge. A few leaders specifically credit ECB with helping them **analyze data** with confidence:

Since I now have a different approach to and comfort level with evaluation, then I feel more comfortable with it, I feel more comfortable sharing those skills and modeling that for my staff.

We've made a significant investment in our technology systems to be able to collect meaningful data...and made a significant investment of funding into data systems.

Almost every interview respondent discussed how evaluation capacity building has directly resulted in greater **interactions and communication with their boards or other stakeholder groups**. *“What we did with the Evaluation Consultant was reported back to my strategic planning group which includes some board members and staff,”* said one respondent. *“I can speak to the board more comfortably about numbers, not just stories,”* noted another.

The results from the Community Alliance Against Violence (CAAV) project that I brought to the board had a huge impact. It helped inform our decision to pilot a similar program model in schools. We did an offsite meeting to talk about where we want to go with our focus. I started it off with results from the CAAV project, and they were blown away. They were absolutely blown away.

A few respondents talked about educating board members so that this group understands, *“...how we measure things in the nonprofit world. We have to help them understand what our core evaluation questions are at this time, right now, and stay focused on those data.”*

The board wants to know: how did we make a difference in people's lives? How do you measure that? We highlight that, and at the end of the year we create a report that presents data by program with desired outcomes, analysis of that data, the progress we've made toward program goals, and what our goals for the coming year.

Is evaluation capacity sustainable within organizations?

When non-profit leaders were asked about whether evaluation capacity building resulted in sustainable change, they answered with a guarded “Yes.” They were clear about the value of evaluation capacity, but several respondents expressed concern about the difficult, resource-related choices that are necessary to sustain evaluation capacity.

What would the future of evaluation be here? I don't know. There is a certain level of data collection that absolutely would keep moving forward. There are key people who are really interested in these questions, or who want it to move forward. But until evaluative thinking comes from a higher [management] level, what is the core commitment?

Leaders discussed choosing between investments in information systems and outside evaluation expertise and guidance. *“We are going to have to figure out how to get funding for a database, and*

we are going to have to figure out how to keep working with the Evaluation Consultant. We are definitely not going back to where we were -- we've learned too much." Funding and support from leadership were the two most frequently mentioned ingredients for sustained change:

More than ever, you really need to be disciplined to have the evaluation piece, or you won't be able to sustain the organization because you won't be able to show your worth.

How do respondents intend to continue their ECB work?

All respondents were committed to continuing evaluation work. Managers from two organizations with less ECB experience (AVC, JFS) noted they would work to continue developing their capacity. Sharing skills across departments and extending evaluative thinking was a common strategy.

Most respondents intend to continue evaluation capacity building by investing in information systems that support program evaluation, and integrating evaluation into cyclic strategic organizational planning. Leaders with fewer years of ECB are taking an incremental approach (*"I am hoping to tackle little projects within our program, try data collection methods and using different tools in a different way"*) whereas the two organizations with the deepest evaluation experience talked about ECB as an integral part of their work (*"I have no doubt that this thinking is part of our culture."*)

When we asked respondents how they might use additional resources to help build or sustain evaluative capacity, half of the respondents said they would invest in more training, while other leaders emphasized a need to disseminate evaluation results, build technology infrastructure to support evaluation, or obtain technical assistance to help integrate evaluation into organizational strategic planning processes.

I would use a small grant to help people implement our strategic plan, including the evaluation process for these big program ideas. We'll need to design programs, and designing programs and evaluation go together. I would use the grant to work with program managers as they take the next step with detailed program design and evaluation. Develop the system, but design the financial controls and measurement at the same time rather than after the fact.

Respondents with less time invested in ECB talked about basic evaluation skills-building (e.g., program design and logic model development, data collection strategies, data analysis and reporting skills). Respondents from Lifespan, the YWCA, CAE and the Wadsworth emphasized that ECB had to be tailored to fit their organizational culture in order to be successful. *"It is not one-size-fits-all,"* said one Director. These leaders were more interested in figuring out how evaluation capacity was enmeshed in everyday work and planning. *"[Evaluation] can't be done in a vacuum. It has to be part of a change and a thought process about the organization."*

What are key challenges for leaders?

When nonprofit leaders reflected on their investments in evaluation, we found them to be cautious cheerleaders for evaluation capacity building. They emphasized tenacity – repeatedly going back to the same conversations around program data, continued efforts to keep staff engaged in evaluative thinking, and staying focused on data-driven management. “*The only way the organization can meet its mission is through data – through showing that what we’re doing is making a difference,*” noted one seasoned Director. “*It is highly rewarding and really worth the effort,*” said another respondent. “*But it does take effort, it is hard to get staff engaged initially, and you have to put aside resources for it.*”

All of the leaders interviewed for this report shared more benefits of ECB and evaluation thinking than challenges. But two challenges seemed shared across our sample of respondents. (1) Nonprofit leaders described a disconnect between lessons learned from evaluation capacity building and the program data requested by their funders. (2) Leaders described a tension common to evaluation: balancing funds for program services with evaluation budgets.

Streamlined data collection balanced with increasing funder requirements: Good evaluation practice includes collecting data that is closely aligned with program goals and judiciously collecting only those data that staffs have the capacity to analyze. Respondents felt this is often at odds with many existing government and private funder requirements:

Despite the fact that we choose to collect meaningful data, we are still required to collect meaningless data for the government. Other funders are more reasonable in terms of working with what’s meaningful for both them and us. Government funding is just insane...all they do is pile on reports rather than take anything away. They talk a good game – ‘we’re only going to support programs with a good outcome, but don’t even collect the data that will tell you that.’ Their staff don’t even have time to read the reports.

Almost all of the leaders interviewed for this study provided evidence of growing evaluation capacity, yet one director pointed out that funders are sending her mixed messages with the kinds of questions and data required for grant proposals:

*I wonder if there were requirements about the percent of budgets going towards evaluation...because we got a request from the foundation for **more** documentation while they **reduced** the amount of funding we thought we were going to get. So I guess, overall, on what level do they support evaluation?*

Balancing funds for program services with evaluation budgets: Resources are needed to cover staff time dedicated to evaluation, to help pay for additional training and coaching, and to help organizations engage evaluation consultants when needed.

It’s rough. You have to make a decision every time you put a budget together, whether or not you are going to put evaluation money in that program line. You know when you do that, it takes away from programming. There is only so much

funding for a program. You have to be disciplined about it. It is difficult, but we have to figure out a different way to do it.

At least two respondents discussed a challenge introduced by evaluation capacity building: raised expectations without the corresponding funds to support new practices:

It [evaluation training] has supported our funding. It helped the institutional thinking about the value of evaluation, which increased the institutional demand for evaluation without the capacity of staff or funding to support it.

Other Voices from the Evaluation Capacity Building Field

Increasingly, the concept of Evaluation Capacity Building/ECB is an important focus in the Evaluation world. In reviewing Bruner's *Voices from the Field* Interviews and the 2013 *Former Participant Survey*, it should be noted that findings from both studies offer support to current thinking and thereby shed light on approaches Grantmakers may consider when deciding to fund ECB projects or initiatives (see next section for considerations and recommended actions).

The following writings and studies have been particularly relevant in making recommendations for the field which integrate what the Foundation has learned with current field thinking:

When studying ECB among Center for Disease Control and Prevention grantees, **Millstein et al. (2002)** surfaced two critical lessons that serve as reminders of the complexity of the challenges of ECB: They note that the "gains in evaluation capacity are fragile" and that "apparent progress is always vulnerable to staff turnover, setbacks and other kinds of disruptions. Even with commitment and will, change will most likely be gradual."

Cousins and Bourgeois (2014), in a review of 8 organizations, determined nine themes to consider regarding ECB efforts:

- Administrative commitment and leadership, identification of an evaluation champion
- Organizational culture of learning
- Resident expertise (non-evaluators familiar with/having experience with systematic inquiry)
- Organizational structure that raises the profile of evaluation and works to develop relationships within the organization
- Partnering with external agencies, organizations and/or consultants in evaluation work
- Direct ECB training
- Cycle of evaluation use and valuing
- Evaluation tools and mechanisms
- External stakeholder involvement and relationship building

These themes help describe and differentiate evaluative capacity in organizations and help define what context and capacities are needed, what good practice looks like and how evaluation can add value to organizational work.

Leviton (2014), Senior Advisor for Evaluation at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation explained that “evaluation will continue to be the orphan and the guest in organizations” without a clear value proposition. Further she pointed out that “one-shot, day-long workshops on evaluation are inadequate to introduce organizations to the issues” and that “funder requirements could encourage ECB by considering the fit between evaluation technical assistance and organizational needs.”

Regarding next steps in Evaluation Capacity Building research to move the field forward, **Preskill (2014)**, took a slightly different tack describing four challenges:

- Engaging foundation and non-profit staff in ECB efforts (specifically identifying what skills are needed and how to embed them in organizations with high staff turnover).
- Building organization leaders’ evaluation capacity (role of boards, leadership, program staff).
- Focusing on learning transfer (specifically what happens when training ends).
- Evaluating ECB activities including organization readiness and sustainability.

Recognizing that organizations are at different levels of readiness for ECB, **Taylor-Ritzler et al. (2013)**, developed a 68-measure Evaluation Capacity Assessment Instrument (ECAI) to look at 1) individual factors such as motivation and competence, 2) organizational factors such as leadership, organizational climate and resources devoted to evaluation/learning and 3) evaluation capacity outcomes including mainstreaming evaluation practices and using evaluation findings

The entire spring 2014 edition of *New Directions for Evaluation* is dedicated to research and considerations regarding organizational capacity to do and use evaluation. Bruner’s work to follow-up with former ECB trainees and to hear the voices of organization leaders involved with ECB work was devised to contribute to that discussion.

Considerations for Successful Work in ECB

From these and other resources as well as its own work and findings, Bruner Foundation offers the following considerations for successful work in the area of Evaluation Capacity Building:

- A strong commitment by leaders (who are also able to harness resources for evaluation and learning)
- Skill development that leads to a different way of thinking in the organization (which most likely involves more than one-shot training sessions on discrete skills and may be time consuming)
- Understanding where the organization is before attempting to build its evaluation capacity
- Clear strategies for embedding evaluation in the organization after the initial training

And, perhaps most important for the field, it is also critical that evaluation capacity building efforts be evaluated both in terms of skills built, but also sustainability and impact on the organization.

Recommended Actions

In light of Foundation's study, the information it has gathered in its [Clearinghouse](#) and the above references, the following recommended actions are offered for consideration by other funders:

- 1) Review and align Foundation evaluation requirements so grantees are asked only for information that is to be used. Make sure there is agreement in advance regarding expected program outcomes, indicators of the outcomes and selected evaluation strategies.
- 2) Commit to building AND sustaining the evaluation capacity of grantees (including pre-assessment of need, quality ECB programming, a plan for embedding learnings and assistance for continuing to conduct and use evaluation).
- 3) Provide support for leaders who are passionate about evaluation and change in organizational culture. Earmark resources to be used by internal staff involved in evaluation work.
- 4) Provide financial resources for staff training, coaching/consultation and technology to support evaluation work.
- 5) Provide support for evaluation of ECB projects/initiatives.
- 6) Share results of ECB evaluation and contribute to the national dialogue on why building evaluation capacity is important, what operational models have impact, how capacity can be sustained.

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