

GEO Member Spotlight



MARIN COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

HOW CHANGE HAPPENS

How the Marin Community Foundation is strengthening grantees through streamlining its evaluation approach

As one of the largest community foundations in the U.S., it comes as no surprise that the Marin Community Foundation is eager to evaluate grants efficiently, effectively and with the least burden possible on grantees.

GEO's latest field study, released in March 2012, revealed that a majority of grantmakers still view evaluation as an accountability exercise instead of a learning exercise, and 30 percent of respondents don't evaluate the work they fund. While these figures may sound discouraging to advocates of effective philanthropy at first, the Marin Community Foundation (MCF) is one of a number of foundations paving the way for better evaluation practices that contribute to organizational learning and improvement.

"More and more grantmaking foundations are developing evaluative techniques," said Dr. Thomas Peters, president and CEO of MCF. "The basic conundrum that any grantmaking organization faces is that we want to increase evaluative data, but we don't want to break anybody's back to get it."

In June, GEO highlighted MCF's innovative approach to evaluation in our newest publication, [Four Essentials for Evaluation](#). In short, the foundation's program staff worked closely with grantees to identify the best outcome metrics for their grants, and the foundation convened grantee cohorts to discuss common metrics they are tracking and to interpret the data across grants.

Today, each of the more than 200 discretionary grants that the California-based foundation makes in a year is connected to a discrete set of impact metrics.

"The reason is not just to track the impact," Peters said. "It's also to help grantees to be more effective in their own work and to be in an even better position to reach out to prospective donors."



Dr. Thomas Peters, President and CEO,
Marin Community Foundation

A Portrait of Marin

The Marin Community Foundation released a report in January revealing the disparities in longevity, education and income among the residents of Marin County.

[A Portrait of Marin](#) was developed by the American Human Development Project, and while it has been used to analyze the well-being of the entire U.S. and several individual states since 2008, this is the first report to analyze a specific county.



"It helped stimulate a very broad and multifaceted community conversation on the basic theme of prosperity and inequality," Peters said.

Many of the disparities in Marin County are within reach of repair, Peters said.

"It doesn't take tectonic plate shifting to do that. It takes awareness," he said.

The convenings of grantees to analyze the shared metrics also proved effective. Many knew they were grappling with similar problems, but now they could identify the shared challenges, coordinate and strategize.

“There were really both earnest and candid exchanges about what the data told them and, to the surprise of some, what was really not effective,” Peters said.

Peters offered the following advice for grantmakers who would like to practice more meaningful, effective evaluations that don’t place an added burden on grantees — but might not know quite how to start the process. First, contact MCF’s Vice President for Research and Evaluation, Dr. Julie Absey; second, find other grantmakers who are also interested in improving evaluation and create a peer learning group.

For community foundations, even basic impact statistics “are like gold to many perspective donors and members of the community,” Peters said.

“My bottom line recommendation is to start basic, to start simple,” Peters said. “Get three or four top-line metrics that really capture at least the main measures and answer the basic question that nearly every one of our donors as well as the members of the community ask, that is, ‘Is this work really changing the lives of those students, those children or those families in some measureable way?’ “

About **Marin Community Foundation**: The foundation was founded with one simple aspiration: to make a difference in the lives of others through thoughtful, effective philanthropy.

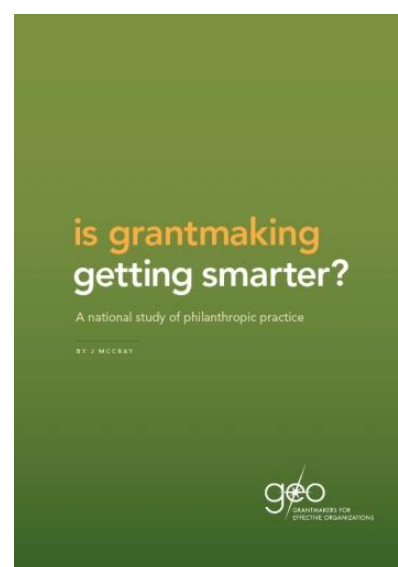
Its mission is to encourage and apply philanthropic contributions to help improve the human condition, embrace diversity, promote a humane and democratic society, and enhance the community’s quality of life, now and for future generations.

GEO resources that relate to the topics covered in this member spotlight:

[*Four Essentials for Evaluation*](#)



[*Is Grantmaking Getting Smarter?*](#)



[*Evaluation in Philanthropy*](#)

