

# Who is Having Success with Learning?

## Bruner Foundation

*Family foundation advances the cause of evaluative thinking among nonprofits through support for capacity building and knowledge sharing.*

### Quick Grantmaker Stats

Type of funder	Family Foundation
Geography/Issue Area	Cambridge, Massachusetts
When founded	1963
Total assets (as of FY 2013)	\$6,000,000
Annual giving (as of FY 2013)	\$300,000
Number of staff	1
Website	<a href="http://www.brunerfoundation.org">www.brunerfoundation.org</a>
Brief description of the program/ practice being discussed	Supporting organizations and grantmakers to build evaluative capacity.

### 1. Describe the situation or practice.

Since 1996, the Bruner Foundation has focused on initiatives and partnerships that seek to increase nonprofit effectiveness by strengthening the evaluative capacity of organizations. The Bruner Foundation defines evaluative capacity as:

“[T]he integrating of evaluation skills and evaluative thinking into everyday organizational practice to ensure not only stronger programs, but also stronger, more effective organizations better able to deliver on their missions.”

The Bruner Foundation works directly with grantees to help them build their evaluative capacity, while contributing to the field of evaluation and effectiveness by providing resources and tools for both grantmakers and nonprofits to use.

### 2. What have you tried to do differently?

The Bruner Foundation launched the Rochester Effectiveness Partnership in 1996 with the goal of building understanding and use of evaluation as a pathway to improved organizational results for nonprofits. The idea behind the

partnership, according to Director of Effectiveness Initiatives Beth Bruner, was that it's not enough to try to make grantees better at evaluation; rather grantmakers and grantees can learn to “think evaluatively” and can even do it together.

The Rochester Effectiveness Partnership included training and consulting for all participants, coached evaluation projects for nonprofit participants, and numerous community wide convenings. The foundation refers to the initiative as “a self-governing partnership” of more than 150 people, including two evaluation professionals and representatives of 14 funding organizations and 32 social service provider organizations.

An evaluation of the Rochester Effectiveness Partnership, which concluded its work in 2003, found that a substantial majority of participating nonprofits and funders believed it had a positive impact on the evaluative capacity of participants. More than three-fourths of the social service providers agreed that the partnership was important because it helped their organizations get instruments in place to measure outcomes they valued, incorporate evaluation into their daily practice, look at programs from different perspectives and conduct better evaluations. More than 10 years later, 20 former trainees from 16 of the 32 organizations completed follow-up surveys confirming they still use what they learned and continue to incorporate evaluative thinking into their regular work.

Building on the success and the lessons of the Rochester Effectiveness Partnership, the Bruner Foundation launched a variety of other initiatives to broaden understanding of what it takes to build organizations' evaluative capacity. For example, its Evaluative Thinking in Philanthropy (E-TIP) initiative provided funders in Rochester and Hartford, Connecticut, with training and resources in evaluation and evaluative thinking. In addition, the Evaluative Thinking in Organizations Study (ETHOS) engaged two evaluation partners and 12 Rochester-area social service provider organizations in a yearlong process to develop assessment tools for promoting evaluative thinking in their organizations.

### **3. What has been the result?**

The Bruner Foundation's work has advanced understanding of evaluative thinking among nonprofits and funders alike while supporting and growing the evaluative capacity of a range of organizations. Beth Bruner noted the broad array of resources and training manuals that are available for download at the foundation's website [www.evaluativethinking.org](http://www.evaluativethinking.org). The manuals are frequently updated and new resources are continuously added.

In addition, a 15-year retrospective assessment (using both survey and interview data) of the foundation's impact on individual trainees and their organizations will be available on the website in the summer of 2014.

The Bruner Foundation's work has also prompted a number of other funders to launch similar projects. For example, the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving used the Rochester Effectiveness Partnership model to launch an ongoing project to provide comprehensive evaluation training and coaching to nonprofit leaders and staff. In addition, the leaders of MetroWest Health Foundation in Framingham, Massachusetts, funded two six-month Evaluation Institutes to provide in-depth training in evaluative design and evaluative thinking for selected grantees.

Bruner Foundation also continues to support discrete projects that seek to build evaluative capacity. Levitt Pavilions, the YMCA of the USA and Jewish Family Service of Rochester are examples of grantees.

## Bruner Foundation Model Inspires Other Grantmakers

The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving modeled its Building Evaluation Capacity initiative on the Bruner Foundation's Rochester Effectiveness Partnership. BEC began in the fall of 2006 and has involved 34 nonprofit organizations in four cohorts of trainee organizations, with the class of 2015 now underway. Evaluations of the initiative show that participating organizations have achieved multiple outcomes, including: enhanced knowledge about evaluation, enhanced skills to conduct evaluation and use evaluation findings, extension of evaluation skills to other projects and personnel, and enhanced knowledge about evaluative thinking. For more information:

<https://www.hfpg.org/nsp/IdLikeTo/Learn/TrainingSeries/BuildingEvaluationCapacityDetails/tabid/947/Default.aspx>.

## 4. What are your key insights from doing the work?

Beth Bruner said that supporting organizations to build their evaluative capacity requires "a lot of preassessment" to get a handle on a grantee's readiness for this work. "If there is no capacity in place, you are going to have a heck of a time," she said. In addition, she noted that building evaluative capacity works best when the support is tailored to a grantee's specific needs. In other words, generic training sessions and one-size-fits-all webinars, while they can provide good and useful information, are not enough. "You really

have to know your grantees and where they are so you can assist them with the kind of focused support they need,” she said.

One other challenge for grantmakers in this work, Bruner noted, is a lack of qualified evaluation consultants who can work on smaller scale projects with small to mid-sized nonprofits. She said that the best consultants combine an understanding of quantitative, qualitative, participatory and developmental evaluation, as well as nonprofit management but “there are not enough of those people out there.” She recommended that grantmakers reach out to colleagues in philanthropy to find recommendations and, those involved in recruiting and training evaluators, do more to develop this array of skills.

*“Grantmakers across the sector are reluctant to invest in evaluation beyond compliance, and especially in evaluation for learning. This is why we need to talk about it in terms of evaluative thinking and working to build the evaluative capacity of organizations so that they can be more effective and better serve their clients. Evaluative thinking is about bringing evaluation capacity not only to program staff but to all aspects of how an organization does its work. Not only is it imperative for program development and improvement, but it is also a way of thinking to inform HR, technology, governance and other practices.”*

*— Beth Bruner, Director of Effectiveness Initiatives*