

ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION: FREQUENT CHECKUPS MAKE FOR HEALTHIER FUNDING RELATIONSHIPS

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About Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

- » An independent, private foundation founded in 1972 that is the largest philanthropy in the United States devoted solely to the public's health
- » Mission: To improve the health and health care of all Americans
- » Program areas:
 - *Childhood Obesity*: Helping children and families eat well and move more—especially those in communities at highest risk for obesity
 - *Coverage*: Developing policies and programs to expand health coverage and maximize enrollment in existing coverage programs
 - *Human capital*: Investing in preparing health professionals for leadership; enhancing the skills and careers of frontline health workers; training scholars to conduct health policy research; encouraging youth to pursue health careers; and aiming to boost the diversity of people working in health and health care
 - *Pioneer*: Supporting innovators whose bold ideas push beyond conventional thinking to explore solutions at the cutting edge of health and health care
 - *Public Health*: Promoting prevention, wellness and preparedness; protecting Americans from health threats, and making staying healthy less costly
 - *Quality/Equality*: Helping communities improve the quality of health care, reducing ethnic and racial disparities, and providing models for nationwide quality improvement
 - *Vulnerable Populations*: Investing in health where it starts – in our homes, schools, and jobs
- » Commissioned GPRs in 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, and 2009

	2004	2009
No. of active grants	2755	2148
No. of staff (FTEs)	245	232
Assets (Billions)	\$8.98B	\$8.49B

FEW FOUNDATIONS HAVE BEEN AS VIGOROUS AS THE

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) in assessing and communicating whether its work is making an impact.

The foundation had been surveying its own grantees for years, but it wasn't until RWJF commissioned a Grantee Perception Report® (GPR) in 2004 that leaders say they had truly meaningful information about their grantees' perspectives on the foundation. Unexpectedly low ratings in comparison with other, similar foundations provided RWJF's leadership the motivation that it needed to take action, leaders said. These steps have resulted in significant changes and improved ratings.

The foundation's first GPR included responses from more than 200 grantees. When CEP compiled RWJF's 2004 results, the foundation received poor ratings on several key indicators. For example, RWJF

- » Rated below two-thirds of funders for how well it understood its grantees' fields;
- » Received relatively low ratings on quality of interactions (i.e., fair treatment of grantees and the responsiveness and approachability of staff), and clarity of the foundation's communications of goals and strategies;
- » Received the second lowest rating in the sample on impact on grantees' organizations.

One of the remarks grantees made in the report was that "Some staff tend to show favoritism...This is human nature and I understand, but it did make it more difficult to approach the foundation with needs as they arose."

Another wrote, "We received inconsistent messages from the foundation about future funding. This lack of clarity left the organization in a difficult situation."

On the positive side, RWJF grantees rated the foundation comparatively well on several field-related dimensions, especially the foundation's ability to advance knowledge and affect public policy in its fields.

"It Was Really Stunning"

Still, RWJF leaders remember their reaction when they saw how their foundation compared with other, similar foundations.

“It was really stunning,” said RWJF President and CEO Risa Lavizzo-Mourey. “It was like we were getting As and Bs on all of the surveys before, and we didn’t realize that the curve was right around A-minus.”

“Or a gentleman’s B,” added David Colby, vice-president of research and evaluation at RWJF.

Lavizzo-Mourey said, “B was not where you wanted to be. [With the GPR] we felt like we had much better data to motivate our improvements.”

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In a 2004 letter to grantees about the GPR findings, Lavizzo-Mourey said that the foundation’s own grantee survey may not have provided the most objective or comparable results. Because getting a grant is a positive experience, without comparative data it was hard to truly understand what constitutes a high grantee rating, she said.

And, she said in an interview with CEP, an accurate understanding of grantee perceptions is vitally important.

“We understand that the social change we seek cannot occur without grantees, and without a strong relationship with them,” Lavizzo-Mourey said. “So if our relationship with our grantees is wanting, then it’s going to impact negatively our ability to accomplish the kinds of goals we want to accomplish.”

The findings from the GPR provided a motivation to change that RWJF had not had before, Colby said.

“Our [own] survey of grantees never affected any change within the foundation,” he said. “We had good scores, but it was only when we saw our scores in comparison with others that we were able to motivate people.”

Interpreting the Reasons Behind Low Scores

Still, it wasn’t easy to make changes. RWJF leaders listed several challenges they faced after receiving the 2004 GPR scores.

First, it was difficult to tease out the reasons behind some of the foundation’s low scores, said Lavizzo-Mourey. To help them better understand the grantee perceptions, RWJF contracted

with an independent evaluator to interview grantees and learn more.

Another major challenge was in realizing that some of the areas RWJF was trying to affect are difficult to change, Lavizzo-Mourey said.

“You don’t want people to get discouraged if the numbers don’t move dramatically in one year,” she said. “At the same time, we do want to continue to see improvement. So sometimes, that is the big challenge—putting a program in place that you think is working and will improve things over time and then having the patience to stick with it.”

A third challenge was to make a connection between the findings and action steps that a foundation could take in response, Colby said.

Taking Steps in Response to GPR Findings

RWJF leaders knew that they could not address every less-than-positive finding in the GPR. So they used a variety of criteria to determine the areas to focus on.

“The first step for us is to decide which of the results we need to focus on because you can’t change everything at once,” Lavizzo-Mourey said. “Some of the areas need higher priority for any number of reasons: the score was particularly low, it aligns particularly well with our guiding principles, or we think that it’s an area that will compromise our effectiveness if we don’t jump right on it.”

The foundation’s leaders put a premium on maintaining its relationships with its grantees. To track the quality of those relationships, they paid particular attention to GPR measures related to relationships: the clarity with which the foundation communicates its goals and strategy, the fairness with which it treats its grantees, and the responsiveness of foundation staff to grantees.

After receiving and discussing the 2004 results, RWJF undertook a number of changes to improve its communications and relationships with grantees.

“We set benchmarks for ourselves that we want to achieve, and we’ve shared those with the field so that our grantees hopefully can see not only the kinds of objectives we have but also how we’re measuring them – and be better able to align with those,” Lavizzo-Mourey said.

Additionally, the foundation sought to be more transparent with the field about how it was measuring its performance. One of the ways in which RWJF has done this over the past few years is through the publication of its *Assessment Report*, which

includes performance data from a variety of sources including the GPR.

Also, since 1996, the foundation has produced close to 200 reports each year on the results of its individual grants and national programs to share the results and lessons learned from its past grantmaking.ⁱ

RWJF undertook all of these efforts in hopes that grantees could see not only RWJF's objectives but also how the foundation measured those objectives.

The foundation also sought to improve its communications with grantees through streamlining the process of notifications on proposals. RWJF set benchmarks for how quickly staff must respond to grant proposals, for example. Staff also sought to better keep grantees informed of the status of their applications. "We monitor these, and we have clear messages about keeping informed of their status," Colby said. "This was not something we were doing prior to 2004."

Recession Prompts RWJF Communications to the Field

In line with RWJF's commitment to keeping its grantees informed, during the 2009-2010 financial downturn Lavizzo-Mourey sent messages to the field about how the foundation was being affected by the economic recession.

"In the course of the economic downturn, we, like many other foundations, had to make some changes in our budget and ask our grantees to make changes," Lavizzo-Mourey said. "As part of that, we really were very intentional about trying to communicate in a proactive way the kinds of changes we'd be making, how we would make them, and the time frame we would use. So I think that particularly as you look at the 2009 results, that approach probably factors into why we're seen as improving on the clarity of our communications."

What's Happened Since 2004

Since that first GPR in 2004, RWJF has repeated the GPR process with CEP four times, most recently in 2009. Over time, it has seen statistically significant improvement on a variety of dimensions in the grantee survey. The foundation is now

- » Rated above the median for how well it understands its grantees' fields (in the 2004 GPR, RWJF had ranked below two-thirds of funders on this measure);
- » Rated higher on quality of interactions, and higher than the median for the clarity of the foundation's communications of goals and strategy;
- » Rated higher on both impact and understanding of grantees' organizations.

Why Continual Assessment Is Important

Although CEP has had around 60 funders repeat the GPR since 2003, RWJF is one of only three foundations to have used the GPR five times. For RWJF, its continual use of the GPR is a part of a larger yearly foundation performance assessment process.

The annual assessment helps RWJF to track continuously how clearly and effectively it is communicating, how quickly it is processing grants, and how grantees perceive the direction being taken by the foundation. Lavizzo-Mourey noted that the GPR helps to set priorities at RWJF and helps her to keep the foundation focused on those priority areas.

"[Getting GPR results] helps me to continue to motivate internally," Lavizzo-Mourey said. "When we're consistently getting better, I am able to say, 'Look at what we put into place, it's paying off.' It's not easy to move these numbers when you've got a long history with us, and yet we are. We can see when we've put in a program to improve our performance and whether we've actually improved. I wouldn't feel nearly as effective in trying to motivate that ongoing change [without the GPR]."

ⁱ "Grant Results." The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (Fall 2010). Web. <http://www.rwjf.org/files/publications/GRRFramingDoc.pdf>.