

# The Center on Philanthropy & Public Policy

## **HOW FOUNDATIONS USE COMMUNICATIONS TO ADVANCE THEIR PUBLIC POLICY WORK**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A growing body of research makes clear that more and more foundations are seeking to leverage their assets – money, knowledge and connections – to have a greater impact on public policy. At the same time, there are clear signs from the field that foundations are paying greater attention to the role of communications in their work in ways that go far beyond the annual reports, press releases, and grant lists of yesteryear. The forces driving these more robust communications activities include the desire to achieve impact; the commitment to transparency; and the need to respond to the increasing scrutiny from policy makers and the media around the value of foundation activities (Breindel, 2008).

This study speaks explicitly to the question – we believe for the first time – of how foundations that wish to engage public policy are using communications to expand the reach and impact of their work. Based on the experience of senior communications officers in eighteen of the country's largest foundations, it explores the rationale and strategies for bringing communications to bear on policy work; describes the organizational models that foundations have adopted for communications; and suggests some of the issues and challenges most on the minds of communications leadership in foundations as they build communications capacity into their work.

This study reveals that communications, far from being an afterthought or occasional add-on, is at the very center of successful policy engagement for these foundations. The foundations interviewed make use of ten distinctly different strategies to boost their policy engagement through communications, and their activities clearly suggest that the days when foundations “spoke only through their grantees” are over.

The study also reveals the emergence of three structural models for communications staff: the advisory model, the embedded model, and the communications department. The majority of foundations studied (11 of 18) use the advisory model where the communications team advises the program staff both formally and informally throughout the grantmaking process. The interviews show that communications staff sizes are small, but that the full communications force for foundation policy work, including what consultants, partners and grantees do, is much larger than their core staffs. The study also reveals that communications strategy in support of policy engagement has become a highly senior position, with many of those holding the top jobs recruited from either corporate communications or policy advocacy settings. Seniority notwithstanding, the visible backing of the CEO for communications is perceived as a prerequisite for achieving both program participation and results.

Despite the emergence of more structured communications models and support from foundation leadership for these activities, communications directors discussed several ongoing challenges in their work. The interviews demonstrate widespread agreement that the most pressing challenge is integrating communications into the program work, especially at an early and strategic level. At the same time, limited in-house communications resources drive the focus on effective team building and constant relationship management. Beyond these internal structural issues, most of the foundations are wrestling with questions about the appropriate role and use of social media outlets and how to measure the success or impact of communications in policy work.

## **HOW FOUNDATIONS USE COMMUNICATIONS TO ADVANCE THEIR PUBLIC POLICY WORK**

A growing number of foundations have become involved in public policy in recent years. This trend is fueled by discussions to become more strategic in order to increase impact; increasing recognition of the wide range of legally permissible options for policy work; and the expanded opportunities for foundations as public decision making is devolved and decentralized. As more foundations have become engaged in public policy, there is an increasing recognition that foundation assets are more than mere dollars for grantmaking, but include knowledge and connections. This is evident in the growing body of research on foundation strategies and tactics for public policy engagement, and an increasing number of toolkits for public policy grantmaking and foundation evaluation and assessment of public policy work (Ferris, 2009).

At the same time, there has been an increasing interest in the role of communications in foundation strategies for greater impact. Communications has come to be much more than traditional activities such as publishing annual reports, press releases, and grant lists. Today, communications is about strategy. As one communications officer put it: “When I came (to the foundation) 18 years ago, communications was the stepchild down the hallway. And communications officers were basically people who hoped the phone wouldn’t ring and have a reporter on the other side.” This transformation of the role of communications in foundations is attributable to: a desire by foundations to achieve impact; a commitment to transparency; and a need to respond to the increasing scrutiny from policy makers and the media around the value of foundation activities (Breindel, 2008). As such, foundations are increasingly working to bring communications strategies to the forefront and build their internal capacities as well as their grantees capacities for communications. There are an increasing number of guides and other resources that are emerging to help foundations think about and, perhaps more importantly, implement communications strategies.<sup>1</sup>

This paper examines how these two trends are intersecting so as to “accelerate” the policy work of foundations based on interviews with senior communications officers in eighteen of the larger foundations with a keen interest in public policy and strategic communications. First, we explore the nexus between public policy and strategic communications as foundations move from a passive posture to a more active one in their policy work. Then we examine the range of communication strategies that foundations utilize to advance their work. We then investigate how foundations incorporate communications into their organizational structure and staffing. In addition, we discuss some of the key issues and challenges for these communications leaders as they integrate strategic communications into the work of their foundations.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see: Asibey (2008), VanDeCarr (2009), and Spitfire Strategies (2009).

## Methods

In order to examine how foundations use communications to further their public policy work, we chose to interview the lead communications officers in a set of foundations that are known to be substantially engaged in public policy work. As a starting point, we identified foundations that were engaged in public policy. The foundations were selected from those mentioned in *Power in Policy: A Funder's Guide to Advocacy and Civic Participation*;<sup>1</sup> winners of the Council on Foundations' Paul Ylvisaker Award for Public Policy Engagement from 2002-2008; and other foundations known for their interest in public policy work. We were particularly interested in those foundations that were known to have a commitment to communications in their policy work. We then considered an additional set of foundations that are viewed as thought and practice leaders in foundation communications. This yielded a list of 25 foundations.

The specific individuals that we contacted to be interviewed were chosen because of their central role to the communications function at the foundation; they included executive-level communications staff and communications managers and directors. Individuals from eighteen foundations agreed to participate in the study. They were the highest-ranking communications staff person in all but three cases.<sup>2</sup> These individuals have broad responsibility for communications in their foundations, which includes and also goes beyond what they do to support policy work. Their comments in this study are focused on communications in the policy arena. The participating foundations and the individuals interviewed are listed in Box I.

### Box I. Foundations Included in the Study

Atlantic Philanthropies (Kate Bullinger, Director, Communications)  
The California Endowment (Robert Phillips, Director, Health and Human Services)  
California HealthCare Foundation (Spencer Sherman, Director, Publishing and Communications)  
The California Wellness Foundation (Magdalena Beltrán-del Olmo, Vice President of Communications)  
Carnegie Corporation of New York (George Soule, Manager of Strategic Communications)  
The Ford Foundation (Marta Tellado, Vice President, Communications)  
The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (Eric Brown, Director of Communications)  
The James Irvine Foundation (Daniel Olias Silverman, Director of Communications and Corporate Secretary)  
The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (David Morse, Vice President, Communications)  
The Joyce Foundation (Charles Boesel, Director of Communications)  
The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation (Matt James, Senior Vice President for Media and Public Education)  
W.K. Kellogg Foundation (Joanne Krell, Vice President for Communications)  
Lumina Foundation for Education (Juan (Kiko) Suarez, Senior Vice President, External Affairs)  
The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation (Andrew Solomon, Vice President, Public Affairs)  
Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation (Genny Biggs, Communications Manager)  
The David and Lucile Packard Foundation (Chris DeCardy, Vice President and Director of Programs)  
The Pittsburgh Foundation (Grant Oliphant, President and CEO)  
Rockefeller Brothers Fund (Gail Fuller, Director of Communications)

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<sup>1</sup> See Arons, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> One interviewee was the CEO, and two reported to more senior officers for public affairs and public policy.

Eleven of the foundations are national grantmakers and seven of the foundations are focused on specific states or regions. The programmatic interests of the foundations cover the full spectrum of issues that foundations address from education to health and human services, to the environment and science and technology, to arts and culture and international affairs.

Due to our interest in foundations that had a substantial interest in public policy and a deep involvement in communications strategy, the foundations included in this study are some of the larger foundations in the nation. Yet, there is considerable variation even within this set in terms of assets, giving, and staffing. Foundation assets within this group range from \$639 million to \$11.1 billion, for fiscal year 2008; twelve of the foundations have assets over \$1 billion. The giving of these foundations range from \$1.1 million to \$528 million annually; eleven foundations in the group had total grantmaking in excess of \$100 million in 2008.<sup>1</sup> The foundations vary in terms of their staffing levels: seven of the foundations have between 20 and 50 staff members; six have staffs that range from 51 to 150; and five have over 150 staff members.

The interviews inquired about four broad areas: the foundation's approach to public policy engagement in general; the foundation's communications strategies and tools; the foundation's choices about organizing and staffing for communications and public policy work; and the challenges that the foundations face in their communications work. All interviews were conducted in one-hour sessions via telephone between July 2009 and October 2009. The findings presented in this paper are based on an analysis of these interviews.

This is an initial effort at exploring the communications capacities and practices that support foundation work in the public policy arena. It is not a study of communications strategies of foundations in general. While the nature of the study design limits its generalizability, we believe that the findings suggest how communications can be used to increase the impact of foundations, of varying size, as they seek to engage public policy.

### **The Policy-Communication Nexus**

As foundations attempt to achieve greater impact with limited resources and strive to bring about social change, there is an increasing interest in public policy (Ferris, 2009). As noted, all of the foundations interviewed in this study commit significant philanthropic resources – dollars, knowledge and networks – in an explicit intent to engage public policy, in at least some of their work. The interviews revealed that each foundation has a clear working definition of policy. While these definitions may vary slightly, there is broad concurrence with the view that “public policy” means the laws and regulations of government, at all levels, that affect how society, communities, institutions, and people operate or behave.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Data on foundation assets and total giving was taken from The Foundation Center's online profiles accessed on October 30, 2009. Numbers represent assets and giving for each foundation's fiscal year ending in 2008.

<sup>2</sup> This mirrors the experience of a related study that focused on how foundations approach public policy and how they organize and staff differently when they seek to engage public policy in their work. See: Ferris and Harmssen (2009).

Recognizing that philanthropic dollars are a mere fraction of public dollars, foundations are motivated to engage public policy as a means to achieve greater impact. One respondent expressed it this way: “we need to leverage our relatively small funds in the best way we can and the way we do that is to influence policy.” Moving beyond influence in the policy realm, many foundations describe their role as changemakers. “Social change can only happen if you engage in advocacy and create change in policy.” These foundations strive to play a role in the larger changemaking process by both participating in and shaping the policy dialogue to bring about sustainable change for the people and causes they care most about.

Foundations pursue a variety of strategies to influence public policy and create social change (Ferris, 2009). Among the foundations interviewed, three key activities emerge: 1) grantmaking for advocacy and outreach campaigns and policy research and analysis; 2) convenings of key stakeholders; and 3) engaging in a variety of communications activities. All the foundations in the study engage in grantmaking activities to pursue their public policy goals. This grantmaking includes funding advocacy campaigns, grassroots organizing, and policy research and analysis, often by think tanks and universities. In addition, many of the foundations discussed the use of convenings to further their policy work, such as workshops, seminars, community forums, and other forms of gatherings that include grantees, nonprofits, community groups, policymakers, and other key decision makers. Finally, all of the interviewees highlighted the use of a variety of communications strategies including: media campaigns, publications, websites, blogs, public relations, and press releases.

All of the foundations in this study acknowledged that they consciously support their policy engagement through communications efforts. For foundations, developing communications strategy requires asking and answering questions that get to the very heart of any policy engagement initiative: what are the goals?; who needs to be reached and engaged?; what change is the project looking to achieve?; and what leverage does the foundation have? One respondent captures the strategy contribution succinctly, in describing what can happen when program and communications staff come together on those questions: “I have had people at the end of a meeting say ‘I think we need to go back and reconsider our approach.’ And to me that is the biggest communications win you can have.”

### **Communication Strategies to Advance Policy Engagement**

Across the interviews, the respondents asserted the central role of communications, calling it an enabler, an accelerant, a lever for results, or, as one respondent expressed it: “a supercharger.” This is not surprising given the approach that we used to select the set of foundations to study. But what is interesting is the range of communication strategies that are used to advance the policy work among these foundations. We identified ten distinctly different strategies foundations use to boost their policy engagement through communications. Five of these strategies are within the grantmaking component of foundation work, and five go beyond it. These strategies are listed and described briefly in Box II.



## **Box II: Ten Communications Strategies to Boost Policy Impact**

(Number of foundations that identified their use of strategy in parenthesis)

### **Five Strategies Within the Grants Program**

1. **Build communications support into the budget for a larger program (18)** – includes funding communications components of larger project grants related to public policy engagement.
2. **Give grants or contracts specifically for communications (18)** – includes stand-alone communications grants for strategy development, implementation, or messaging as well as companion grants to projects or research studies with significant policy implications.
3. **Provide expert consulting support to grantees (12)** – includes expertise provided by consultants or networks or directly by foundation staff to further an organization’s skills and expertise in strategy development, messaging, social media, polling, and other general communications tools.
4. **Offer communications capacity building to grantees (12)** – includes programs to build grantee skills and knowledge in organizational development, advocacy, strategy, and social media.
5. **Train program officers (6)** – includes programs on funding advocacy and communications, the role of communications in policy engagement, basic communications strategies and tactics, and legal issues related to advocacy and policy engagement.

### **Five Strategies Beyond the Grants Program**

1. **Sponsor convenings (9)** – includes community forums and other forms of gatherings that bring together key actors and influences on an issue.
2. **Do direct media outreach (14)** – includes activities conducted in the name of the foundation as well as on specific policy issues such as op eds, press releases, blogs, etc.
3. **Use the CEO’s bully pulpit (8)** – includes speaking, writing, or blogging on particular policy issues or topics, and calling meetings and conducting relationship building with important stakeholders.
4. **Establish communications departments within the foundation (3)** – includes publishing, creating news services, producing public education campaigns, creating media partnerships, and running awards programs.
5. **Build a cause brand (3)** – includes creating favorable/trusted name recognition for the foundation as well as consciously developing a cause brand around a particular public problem or issue.

### ***Five Strategies Within the Grants Program***

All eighteen foundations identify grantmaking for communications efforts as part of their strategy. These grants take two forms: communications as a budget line item in a larger project grant, or as a stand-alone grant. Both grantmaking strategies are utilized on a selective, rather than across-the-board basis. For example, The Joyce Foundation communications officer “gets involved from the get-go when we are awarding the grant – what are your communications needs,

what is your capacity, what are your goals ... and then how best can we support, compliment, or acknowledge what's there." In the case of making discrete communications grants, all eighteen foundations acknowledged their use of this strategy on a program-by-program basis. Following are examples of stand-alone communications grants.

*The Carnegie Corporation of New York awarded a contract to support communications strategy and rollout of the "Opportunity Equation" study, conducted in partnership with the Institute for Advanced Study (IAS), as part of a Carnegie-IAS initiative to transform teaching of math and science in K-12 education.*

*The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation uses this approach for communications efforts in support of its digital media and learning initiative.*

Beyond each foundation's direct grantmaking activities, the interviews reveal that the communications strategies directly work to support grantees and increase their communications capacity. Twelve of the eighteen foundations provide grantees with access to communications expertise. The foundations that utilize this strategy do so through the use of outside consultants or firms, or directly through foundation staff. One particularly interesting dimension of this strategy that emerges from the policy perspective is consulting support that provides common strategy and message development to a cluster of grantees working on a single foundation initiative. Several foundations reported using this approach and below are two specific examples.

*The Rockefeller Brothers Fund provided direct assistance of its communications director to the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, to provide support for communications capacity initiatives, including a communications audit, strategic plan, and the hiring of a communications director. The foundation also provided similar communications capacity-building support to the Right Questions Project in Boston.*

*The California Endowment requires that all of its grantees in childrens' health coverage work with a consortium of communications firms that it has created, as a way to establish a common communications framework, language, and narrative – and thus enable the grantees to speak with one voice.*

In addition, twelve of the eighteen foundations studied provide capacity building support to grantees to build their skills in organizational development, advocacy, strategy, and using social media, among others. One respondent noted that "capacity building is a very high priority for the foundation because of our spend down (policy), and one of our goals is to leave the field stronger than when we came along." For example, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation has put upwards of 75 grantees through an intensive communications and leadership institute for NGOs, that features both in-residence and electronic learning, over several months.

Finally, foundations look to build their own internal communications capacity and knowledge base through program officer training. Training topics identified by six foundations include: funding advocacy and communications; the role of communications in policy engagement; and basic communications strategies and tactics. For example, the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation held an institute for program staff on funding and engaging in advocacy, developed

by the legal team, with a presentation by the communications manager on the role of communications. Several other foundations mentioned working informally to bring program officers up to speed on communications issues.

### ***Five Strategies Beyond the Grants Program***

Half the foundations (9 of 18) reach beyond the scope of their own grantees to bring together nonprofit organizations, public officials, policymakers, community leaders, and other stakeholders through convenings. The intent of these convenings is highly varied, but can take place at one of several stages including: when an area for possible action is being assessed; when a new initiative is taking shape; or when a grant program is already underway.

For example, when the Ford Foundation was shaping the development of its new Metropolitan Opportunity initiative, it convened policy makers, advocates, community leaders, journalists and thought leaders as a way to begin to generate discussion and awareness of key ideas. Another example is from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, where the Senior Vice President wrote a blog post in the *Huffington Post* explaining why the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) should “score” costs of and savings from health prevention programs over a 20-year period rather than its standard 10 years. CBO had long been dug in to 10-year time frame. The blog was widely read and re-tweeted, resulting in interviews with and quotes in the *Wall Street Journal*, Bloomberg and AOL Financial News and many discussions with CBO. Several weeks later, CBO announced it would score prevention sections of health reform legislation using a 20-year window.

A vast majority of the foundations (14 of 18) do direct media outreach in their own name on particular policy issues. Almost all the foundations support efforts where the grantees speak out on specific issues. However, the interviews revealed a distinction whereby the foundation will put its name on press releases, reports, and op eds directly. For example, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation utilized its communications staff to develop an extensive communications outreach program in three target states where one grantee, Viewpoint Learning, had conducted research and community dialogue around health care reform. This outreach strategy included the development of a press release for Viewpoint including quotes from the Kellogg CEO, as well as the promotion of op eds and interview opportunities for the CEO.

In a related vein, several interviews touched on the importance and growing use of the CEO bully pulpit through public speaking, writing or blogging as a means to impact public policy and social change issues. One respondent described it this way: “He has the ability to move issues in his own very remarkable way. That’s a huge asset for this organization, and we leverage that when it is appropriate to do so. When he can, he focuses his efforts and he is just an amazing communicator, and that’s something that we take full advantage of.” This comment illustrates how participation in these types of communications activities is highly dependent on the temperament and inclination of the individual.

The following examples support this point. Gara LaMarche (Atlantic Philanthropies) speaks and writes often on social justice issues. Paul Brest (The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation) and Robert Ross (The California Endowment) blog on a variety of philanthropic and policy issues. Grant Oliphant (The Pittsburgh Foundation) tweets to point people toward important

conversations. And Vartan Gregorian (Carnegie Corporation of New York) quickly assembled a group of higher education representatives in an effort to ensure that the stimulus funding did not bypass higher education, and later signed on, as an individual, to a *New York Times* advertisement making that same case.

Three of the foundations studied described the creation of separate communications departments within the foundation with their own resources. The purpose of these departments is to do such things as publish reports, create news services, produce public education campaigns, create media partnerships, and run awards programs, all to help to increase awareness and discussion of policy issues, shine a spotlight on policy actors or issues, and create and move research, information, and analysis of approaches and options. See the following section on organizational structure for more discussion of this model.

Aside from the individual personalities that are often associated with foundations, several study participants referred to their foundation's brand in a way that was synonymous with favorable or trusted name recognition. In three instances, however, the foundation is consciously developing a "cause brand" around an issue where progress forward will be significantly impacted by developments in public policy. Following are two examples that emerged from the interviews.

*The Lumina Foundation for Education is organized around one cause - high quality degrees and credentials for 60 percent of Americans by 2025. The approach is to organize the foundation's entire strategic plan around this goal, in a way that makes the Lumina name stand for the cause.*

*The California HealthCare Foundation (CHCF) developed CalHospitalCompare, a website that rates hospital quality in California. The foundation sees itself as "going into the transparency business in statewide healthcare," and this website is one of the strategies to build a cause brand for CHCF in health care rating and evaluation.*

## **Summary**

The interviews clearly demonstrate that communications is at the very center of successful policy engagement for these foundations. And the multitude and complexity of the communications strategies employed by foundations supports this finding. These foundations make use of a broad array of strategies to apply communications to their policy work both within their grantmaking programs and beyond. All the foundations in the study include communications support as a budget line item in grants and make discrete communications grants. In addition, the foundations utilize a mix of strategies that include: communications expertise and capacity building for grantees, convenings, staff training, direct media outreach, CEO communications, and cause branding.

For many years, the assumed role of foundations has been to work and speak only or primarily through their grantees. But patterns are changing and the issue of whether and how to speak in their own name, as a positive step in policy engagement, is an important, and evolving issue for most of the foundations in the study. The majority of foundations interviewed cite instances where they very deliberately put the foundation's name and credibility into play, and most have

developed at least a loose set of filters for when and why. Attitudes on this issue come largely from the foundations' boards. For some foundations, using the name is a rarely taken step, with others; it is increasingly a standard action.

## **Organizing for Communications Work**

Given the central role of communications activities in the foundations' public policy engagement activities, the issue arises as to how foundations create an organizational structure to support this work. We asked the interviewees to discuss their role within the foundation and how it relates to the organization's overall structure; their background and areas of expertise; and their management responsibilities.

### ***Organizational Models***

We found three broad organizational arrangements for communications in the foundations studied: the advisory model, the embedded model, and the separate communications department.

The advisory model is most common among the foundations studied with eleven of the eighteen foundations organized this way. In this model, the communications team is advisory to the program staff. Most often, this advisory connection is voluntary and interviewees described it as highly dependent on comfortable working relationships between the communications director and the program staff. One person discussed meeting with program directors after each board meeting, sitting down with the docket, and talking through how communications can help. Another described "regular systematic meetings with the programs to try and help articulate their communications strategies," adding that, "if you can help them and they can see the value of it, then you get them coming back for more." Another respondent described it this way: "It's more of an influence internally rather than an actual mandate. Hopefully, rather than being a big stallion here, what I like to be is a real catalyst."

The second arrangement, the embedded model, is where communications officers are embedded in each of the foundation's major program teams or initiative areas. Four of the foundations in the study use this model, either by making permanent assignments or, in some instances, detailing a communications staff member to a specific initiative over the short term. To support the embedded approach, foundations described setting up dual reporting lines, where the communications officers have solid line, or "leader one" relationships to the communications director, and dotted line, or "leader two" relationships to the program team. One director described the relationship this way: "They (communications officers) report to me, but they must please their program director because if the director is not happy, then I am not happy." The aim is to keep communications perspective and strategy in the mix from the outset of a program or initiative.

We also identified a third model where the foundation has created a separate communications department that produces its own products and programs in addition to acting as an advisor as in the first model. Three foundations in the study have taken this route. Activities include creating news services, producing public education campaigns, creating media partnerships, and running awards programs. The purpose of this model is to increase awareness and discussion of policy

issues; shine a spotlight on policy actors or issues; or to create and move research, information, and analysis of policy approaches and options. Following are two illustrations of this model.

*The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation built a partnership with MTV to create advance buzz and then launch “WTH is GYT?” – a social media campaign aimed at young people to encourage AIDS testing (What the Heck is Get Yourself Tested?).*

*The California Wellness Foundation runs a full multi-platform communications department in parallel with its grantmaking programs. This side of the house functions as “journalistic storytellers,” gathering and publishing lessons learned, putting out news features and stories in a print and on-line magazine, and maintaining a robust web site.*

### ***Skill Sets for Communications Work***

Despite the fact that twelve of these eighteen foundations have assets in excess of \$1.1 billion, and the majority grant over \$100 million a year, staffing for communications is very small except in two instances. Two foundations in the group have made a very substantial investment in communications staff – with 70 and 41 staff members. But the median staff size for communications is five, and the median number of communications staff members who work, at least some of the time, on policy communications is three.

Because communications staff tends to be limited in the foundations studied, developing and maintaining the appropriate in-house skill sets is vital. Through analysis of the interviews, we identified four categories of essential attributes and skills for communications staff: basic communications skills, relational skills, work attributes, and issue expertise. Box III below provides more detail.

#### **Box III. Skills, Attributes and Expertise Needed for the Communications Team**

##### **Communications Skills**

Media relations  
Public education  
Website development  
Advocacy communications  
Content development  
Branding  
Advertising  
Social media  
Cultural/ethnic awareness  
Polling  
Writing/storytelling  
Strategy and message development

##### **Issue Expertise**

Philanthropy  
Policy  
Advocacy  
Political context

##### **Relational Skills**

Working with coalitions and collaborations  
Working with experts  
Working with grantees  
Working with program officers  
Working with contractors  
Coaching

##### **Work Attributes**

Agility/nimbleness  
Strategic thinking  
Creativity  
Risk tolerance  
Bias toward execution  
Project management skills  
Ability to understand complex issues

For communications skills, writing, advocacy communications, content development, and social media skills were among the most frequently mentioned by interviewees. But significantly, the relational skills and work attributes were mentioned just as often, including working with experts, program officers, and grantees as well as the attributes of strategic thinking, creativity, and risk tolerance.

### ***Using External Resources***

While core communications staff sizes remain small, the total communications firepower that these foundations focus on policy engagement objectives is much larger, and includes the work of grantees, individual consultants, firms under contract, and media or other partners, as well as program officers and foundation executives. All the foundations studied use a combination of these approaches to expand on the work of their in-house communications staff. To understand the full scale of the communications activity that foundations bring to bear in the policy arena would require mapping the action and expenditures of the grantees, individual consultants, and media and communications firms that are involved. This mapping may represent an important inquiry for further work. A related inquiry would explore how the strategic responsibility for this expanded communications activity is parceled out among communications and program staff.

### ***Leadership Support for Communications***

Given the central role of communications in the policy work of the foundations studied, it is not surprising to find that responsibility for communications is a highly senior position at almost all of these foundations. Fourteen of the eighteen communications leaders report directly to the CEO. Ten are either vice presidents or senior vice presidents. Half are officers of the foundation. More than two thirds sit on a formal or informal management team, headed by the CEO. Some are frequent strategy advisors to the CEO and, in some cases, the board.

The emergence of these senior communications positions is a fairly recent phenomenon at these foundations. Half of those interviewed are the first to hold the communications position at the present level of seniority, and more than half of them have been in their positions for 5 years or less. This finding suggests that communications has come to serve a more central role in the foundation's efforts in public policy engagement specifically, and the foundation's mission more generally. In addition to these positions being fairly new, the interviews also revealed that three quarters of these directors came from either corporate communications backgrounds or from the policy and advocacy realm. Only two respondents stated they came from journalism or public relations/marketing positions.<sup>1</sup>

Regardless of their backgrounds and tenure at the foundation, the vast majority of those interviewed stressed the importance of support from the foundation's top leadership. Most respondents described the CEO as actively supportive of their work, and deemed that support vital to their ability to deliver the results and impact they seek:

*“You need to have the leadership backing, and that’s absolutely key. If you don’t have the leadership backing, communications really can’t do anything.”*

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<sup>1</sup> Two respondents did not discuss their prior experience during the interviews.

*“An astute CEO will constantly be asking: “how does this affect how we are perceived, how does this affect what we are trying to get done, what is the role of various audiences in helping us to advance our agenda, and how are we reaching them?”*

*“My advice to anybody considering the top communications job? Number one, if you are going to take a job, make sure you report to the CEO. Number two, invest the time necessary to help your CEO understand strategic communications.”*

With support from the top, communications directors and their staff take on a variety of roles and responsibilities. They provide leadership on communications strategy for significant grants or grantmaking initiatives (12 of 18), as well as for foundation-wide communications strategy (12 of 18) that goes well beyond the arena of policy engagement. This wider scope includes foundation identity, public information and brand issues, communications for grantmaking outside the public policy arena, and often website and IT functions.

### ***Summary***

Analysis of the interviews reveals three working models for foundation communications: the advisory model, the embedded model, and the communications department. The most common model among these foundations is the advisory model, followed by the embedded model and the communications department. Regardless of which communications model is utilized, the communications staff of the foundations interviewed is relatively small given the asset size of the sample. In all but two instances, the communications staff employed at these foundations is less than ten, with a median staff size of five, and a median staff size of three for policy communications. As such, developing and maintaining the appropriate mix of communications skills, relational skills, work attributes, and issue expertise is vital. Beyond the skills and expertise of their in-house staff, all the foundations studied also use communications consultants and contractors to some extent.

As communications emerges as a central component of these foundations public policy work, the responsibility for communications strategy is a highly senior position. Fourteen communications leaders report directly to the CEO; ten are either Vice Presidents or Senior Vice Presidents; and eight are officers of the foundation. Most of these positions have been created in the past five years and foundations are bringing on individuals that have backgrounds in either corporate communications or policy advocacy, rather than in journalism, which has been the more traditional source for foundation communications officers. Despite their backgrounds and position in the foundation, the vast majority of those interviewed stressed the importance of support from the foundation’s top leadership. Most respondents described the CEO as actively supportive of their work, and deemed that support vital to their ability to deliver the results and impact they seek.



## **Challenges of Communications Work**

Beyond inquiring about the communication strategies and organizational arrangements for communications work, we probed communication leaders about the challenges that they see in doing their work. Four significant issues emerged: integrating communications and programs; building the communications team; effectively using social media; and measuring the impact of communications work.

### ***Integrating Communications and Programs***

The interviews suggest widespread agreement that the thorniest challenge faced by these leaders is how best to integrate communications into program planning and execution. In the respondent's views, communications is a horizontal function in a vertical world. Its place and points of intersection with other foundation activity are still somewhat ambiguous, in spite of growing levels of activity and support from the top leadership levels. The challenge stems from the basic facts of foundation culture. "Program is king" in foundations: grantmaking programs are vertically organized silos, presided over by program directors, initiative directors, and program officers. Communications is not seen as program, at least not yet, in all but a very few foundations.

Communications leaders are actively seeking to have communications be integral to the program planning process. They want to get communications considered earlier and earlier in the overall process of their policy engagement activity. They hope to implement organizational processes to assist in deciding what projects or initiatives should get communications support, and to increase the likelihood that there is a foundation-wide perspective, where appropriate, in communications work. In the case of the most senior chief communications officers in the study – those who are corporate officers and/or sit on a management team with the CEO – some of this integration happens naturally and quite far upstream. But not all lead communication officers are involved at that level. Regardless of the organization chart, the challenge is how to work within the foundation culture to integrate communications down through the program areas.

### ***Building the Communications Team***

As discussed above, the communications staff size for the vast majority of the foundations studied is quite small. As such, these respondents need to pick and choose the projects on which they advise or engage. Small staff size also drives the focus on building a team with the requisite combination of skills and attributes. The required communications skill set is evolving rapidly, but remains a critical combination of technical and relational skills and temperamental attributes. The changing media environment and rise of social media are also contributors to the challenge.

The larger contributor, however, is the complexity of relationships involved for a core communications staff that works on a daily basis with individual grantees, coalitions and collaborations, program officers, contractors and consultants, and content experts. Finding candidates that fit the following description is truly a challenge: "You want to have people who understand the business; who have good acumen toward what we are trying to achieve and can find the opportunity to tell the story; who understand the value of strong identity and that know

how to help build that through a variety of tools; and who can provide really good counsel to the teams that they sit with. Then they need to be able to turn around and execute.”

### ***Using New Media Tools***

With the emergence of Web 2.0 tools, foundations have the opportunity to foster better communications with their grantees, policy makers, thought leaders, and the community at large. These tools are inexpensive, broad reaching, interactive, and an effective story-telling medium (Brotherton, 2008). However, much uncertainty regarding their application in the foundation realm remains on the part of many of the communications leaders we spoke with. It is clear that all of the foundations in the study are engaged in discussions about the emergence of social media and its real or potential use for their policy related work. These communications leaders recognize that “the way we communicate with the rest of the world has changed dramatically from the time when I would talk to one reporter at the *Wall Street Journal* and he or she then tells the story.”

Despite this acknowledgement of the dramatic shift in foundation communications, the appropriate role and use of social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook is still unclear for most of the foundations in this study. Overall, about half characterize themselves as still experimenting, and several noted that their practice in social media was evolving very rapidly. Less than a third are serious sponsors of social media strategies, either for their own foundation activity or as a component of grantee activity. The rest described themselves as “not there yet.”

Several respondents shared the belief that social media will dramatically change the way they do their work over the next several years. One interviewee stated directly, “We wouldn’t fund a campaign today that didn’t have a social media component.” Another says, “It’s the core of what we do now on virtually everything.” In contrast, many respondents were wary of jumping on the social media bandwagon just for the sake of doing so. And for one interviewee, the prospect of opening up a public dialogue about the foundation’s activities is too risky. He put it this way: “When you are in the social media space, you have to be able to relinquish control (of the distribution and the management of information). We are not yet comfortable as an organization doing that.”

### ***Measuring the Value Added***

The foundations in the study do not have an easy answer to the question: “How do you measure the success of communications work in the policy arena?” For several, the response starts with the belief that assessing the marginal impact of communications on policy-related outcomes is impossible: “The key thing about measuring success is that the causality on communications is impossible to prove.” The interviews did not uncover significant discomfort with this view, on the part of either the communications officers or, as described by them, the CEOs and boards of the foundations. The majority of respondents indicated that, for their foundations, the significant assessment is whether the program that includes communications is meeting its goals and objectives: “You don’t try to measure it separately, you measure whether you have reached your program goals, and our job is to help programs reach their goals and if that is working and communications is involved, then you are succeeding.”

Beyond the larger question of the impact of communications, there are some discrete activities in communications work around policy engagement that can be and are measured. Examples include: evaluating the success and outcomes of a communications capacity building program for grantees; evaluating media outreach activity by tracking placements and conducting content analyses; or evaluating the success of a given public education campaign by any one of several measures including hits on a website, or direct actions taken by members of the target audience.

A small number of foundations in the study that are consciously building a brand identity that connects their foundation name to a particular policy theme or cause also describe measures to track patterns and changes in their foundations' reputation. Respondents recognize that these attempts to measure the impact of communications are small steps forward toward the larger and more complicated question about assessing and attributing "success" in the policy engagement arena to specific foundation activities.

### *Summary*

Integrating communications into the program work of these foundations – especially at an early and strategic level – is both a challenge and a high level responsibility that sits with every chief communications officer. The challenge stems from what they recognize and describe as the basic facts of foundation culture. "Program is king" in foundations, and grantmaking programs are often vertically organized silos, presided over by program directors, initiative directors, and program officers. As a result, these communications leaders are actively seeking the strategies and structures that can make communications an integral part of the program planning process.

Small communications staff size drives the focus at these foundations on building a team with the requisite combination of skills and attributes. The changing media environment and rise of social media are contributors to the challenge. But perhaps the largest challenge is managing the complexity of relationships involved for a core communications staff that works on a daily basis with individual grantees, coalitions and collaborations, program officers, contractors and consultants, and content experts.

Another significant challenge facing these foundations is the appropriate adoption and use of new social media tools. Although all the foundations in the study are engaged in discussions about the emergence of social media and its potential use for their policy-related work, a consensus view of how and to what extent new media tools will change the way foundations engage public policy has not yet emerged.

And finally, foundations are attempting to measure the impact of communications work on policy engagement activities in a variety of ways. However, the larger question remains unanswered as to how foundations measure the success of communications work in the policy arena. The majority of respondents indicated that, for their foundations, the significant assessment is whether the program that includes communications is meeting its goals and objectives.

## Conclusion

This study speaks explicitly to the question of how foundations that wish to engage public policy are using communications to expand the reach and impact of their work. We found that communications is at the very center of successful policy engagement for these foundations. And the range of communications strategies that are used both within the grantmaking component of foundation work and beyond it, is highly complex and varied. These strategies are allowing foundations to move beyond the traditional role of only speaking through their grantees to employing strategies that allow the foundation to speak in its own name through explicit leadership communications, convenings, and co-branding or cause branding activities.

To accomplish this work, the communications staff is structured along one of three models: the advisory model, the embedded model, and the communications department. The advisory model emerged as the most common arrangement among the foundations we studied. Regardless of the structural model used, the size of communications staff remains small, even though their responsibilities are broad reaching and varied across program areas. Therefore, developing and maintaining the appropriate mix of skills, attributes and expertise is vital to the success of a foundation's communications endeavors. Although the communications directors we spoke to tend to manage small staffs, they hold top executive positions within the organization and tend to report directly to the CEO. Most of these positions have been created in the past five years and these managers bring corporate communications or policy/advocacy experience. All respondents strongly agreed that the visible backing of the CEO for communications is a prerequisite for achieving buy-in from program staff and greater impact.

Despite the emergence of more structured communications models and support from foundation leadership for these activities, communications directors discussed several ongoing challenges in their work. The interviews demonstrate widespread agreement that the most pressing challenge is integrating communications into the program work, especially at an early and strategic level. At the same time, limited in-house communications resources drive the focus on effective team building and constant relationship management. Beyond these internal structural issues, most of the foundations are wrestling with questions about the appropriate role and use of social media outlets and how to measure the success or impact of communications in policy work.

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