The Communications Supercharge

How Foundations are Using
Communications to Boost
Policy Engagement

The Center on Philanthropy & Public Policy
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

ABOUT THE CENTER ON PHILANTHROPY AND PUBLIC POLICY

The Center on Philanthropy and Public Policy promotes more effective philanthropy and strengthens the nonprofit sector through research that informs philanthropic decision making and public policy to advance public problem solving. Using California and the West as a laboratory, the Center conducts research on philanthropy, volunteerism, and the role of the nonprofit sector in America's communities.

In order to make the research a catalyst for understanding and action, the Center encourages communication among the philanthropic, nonprofit, and policy communities. This is accomplished through a series of convenings and conversations around research findings and policy issues to help key decision makers work together more effectively to solve public problems and to identify strategies for action.

The Center has devoted much attention to the role of foundations in the public policy process, with a particular focus on foundation strategic choices for engaging public policy. Two of the Center's most recent research studies focus on foundation practices for doing public policy work. "Foundation Practices for Public Policy Engagement" explores the strategies that foundations which choose to engage in public policy use to organize and staff for such efforts. "How Foundations Use Communications to Advance their Public Policy Work," conducted by James M. Ferris, Marcia Sharp, and Hilary Harmssen, focuses on the role of communications and the implications for foundation practice. Based on an exploration of the experience of senior communications officers in 18 of the country's largest foundations, it provides a set of findings rich with implications for current communications practice. Both papers can be found on the Center's website.

The Center has issued this discussion paper in an effort to make this work more accessible to a wide range of foundation leaders. A set of questions to support discussion of the findings, and the issues they may raise for foundations, is included at the end of the paper. This discussion paper was written by Marcia Sharp. It is also available on the Center's website.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Communications Supercharge

How Foundations are Using
Communications to Boost
Policy Engagement

A growing body of research makes clear that more and more foundations are seeking to leverage their assets—money, knowledge, and connections—in order to have a greater impact on public policy. At the same time, there are clear signs from the field that foundations are paying increasing 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.[1]

This study speaks explicitly to the question—we believe for the first time—of how foundations that wish to engage in public policy are using communications to expand the reach and impact of their work. Based on the experience of senior communications officers in 18 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.

> —
> **My focus is transitioning ...to the larger strategic communications needs of the program areas and the foundation, and asking this question: how does communications really supercharge what we are doing?**
> —

While its findings apply most directly to larger foundations with communications expertise, it nevertheless suggests practices and raises issues that will likely be applicable to foundations of varying size with a policy focus as they seek to tap the power of communications to boost their impact in the policy arena.

From the perspective of organizational strategy, the study finds 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

---

[1] Breindel, Howard. (2008). *Foundation Communications: The State of the Practice.* Communications Network.

the days when foundations "spoke only through their grantees" are over. Social media, while a topic of conversation and experimentation in all the foundations, plays an integral role in policy communications at only a few of these foundations. And for all foundations in the study, adequately measuring communications results remains a challenge.

From the perspective of staffing and organizational structure, the study makes clear that communications strategy in support of policy engagement has become a highly senior function, with many of those holding the top jobs recruited from either corporate communications or policy advocacy settings. That seniority notwithstanding, the visible backing of the CEO in support of communications is perceived as a prerequisite for achieving both program participation and results. 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. Getting the right structural model for integrating communications, program, and policy is a continuing challenge, as is building the right communications team.

Findings Related to Foundation Strategy

FINDING 1

Communications is at the very center of successful policy engagement for these foundations.
It is neither an add-on nor an afterthought, and it serves a dual purpose. As an accelerant or "supercharger," communications activity works to raise the visibility, reach, and saliency of the stories, data, and ideas that foundations inject into the policy arena. At the level of strategy, communications planning is a fine tuner, by relentlessly seeking clarity on who needs to be reached in policy engagement, what the message is, and what the desired outcome is.

All of the foundations consciously support at least some of their policy engagement with communications. In different ways they assert the central role of communications. As one interviewee expressed it: "We have over the years, like a lot of foundations and others, come to learn that you can have the best information and best approach and the best answer in the world and shout it into the wilderness if you don't have communications as part of your plan."

Interviewees also point to the strategy role of communications. Developing communications strategy requires, they say, asking and answering questions that get to the very heart of any policy engagement initiative—what the goals are, who needs to be reached and engaged, what's the action/behavior change the project is looking for, what leverage does the foundation have. One respondent captures the strategy contribution succinctly, in describing what can happen when program and communications people come together on those questions: "I have had people at the end of that meeting say 'I think we need to go back and reconsider our approach.' And to me that is one of the biggest communications wins you can have."

> —
> **We recognize the power of communications to influence behavior, influence opinion. We do our best to figure out when and how to apply that—to help our grantees succeed, to move the needle on the issues we care about, and to influence policy makers in appropriate and legal ways.**
> —

THE GOLDEN QUESTIONS

Questions posed to one foundation's program staff by its communications team, as they work together to sharpen strategy:

1. What are you trying to do?

2. Who do you need to engage?

3. What do you want the person or institution to do? How do you want them to change behavior?

4. What leverage do we have? Does the foundation have the ability to engage and promote that change with a high level of success?

5. What kind of communications do we need to get that done?

FINDING 2

Foundations make use of ten distinctly different strategies to boost their policy engagement through communications. Five of these strategies are within the grantmaking component of foundation work, and five go beyond it.

Within grantmaking, foundations build communications support into the grant budget for a larger program; give grants or contracts specifically for communications; provide expert consulting support to grantees; offer communications capacity-building to grantees; and train program officers on communications so they can better work with their grantees.

Beyond the grants program, they reach out directly to the media in many ways including pitching stories and op eds; they co-brand and promote research studies and other products; they speak out directly by blogging, tweeting, giving speeches and getting feedback consistently; they convene in ways that bring a mix of leaders, practitioners, advocates, researchers, experts, and consumers to the table; and they consciously build brands to help support policy goals.

The two charts on the following pages give thumbnail examples for the use of each of these strategies.

Five Strategies to Boost Policy Impact within the Grantmaking Work of the Foundation

1 **BUILD COMMUNICATIONS SUPPORT INTO THE BUDGET FOR A LARGER PROGRAM.**
All foundations in the study do this, most on a selective basis and a few more
comprehensively. The communications piece may come from conversation and
analysis before the grant is awarded or after.

*Example: The Joyce Foundation, typical grant: "We get 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, complement, or acknowledge what's there."*

2 **GIVE GRANTS OR CONTRACTS SPECIFICALLY FOR COMMUNICATIONS.** All the
foundations do this, again some case-by-case, some more comprehensively. Often
done, for example, when an award is made for a research study with significant
policy implications, and the foundation makes a companion grant or contract to
roll out the report.

*Example: Carnegie Corporation of New York 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.*

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

3 **PROVIDE EXPERT CONSULTING SUPPORT TO GRANTEES, BEYOND THE GRANT.**
All the foundations provide this support, in some degree. The support may be
provided by an outside consultant or firm, or the foundation staff. One particularly
interesting dimension of this, from the policy perspective, is consulting support
that provides common strategy and messaging to a cluster of grantees working on
a single foundation initiative. Several foundations reported this approach.

*Example: Rockefeller Brothers Fund, for a single grantee: foundation 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.*

*Example: The California Endowment, for a cluster of grantees: 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.*

4 **OFFER COMMUNICATIONS CAPACITY-BUILDING TO GRANTEES.** About a third of the foundations offer organized programs to build grantee skills in organizational development, advocacy, strategy development, messaging, and social media. Most also speak of informal relationships with grantees that work toward capacity.

Example: *Atlantic Philanthropies recently offered workshops in Ireland for grantees on social media and polling. "Capacity building is a very high priority for the foundation, because of our spend down... and one of our goals is to leave the field stronger than when we came along."*

Example: *The David and Lucile Packard Foundation has put upwards of 75 grantees through an intensive communications and leadership institute for NGOs, which features both in-residence and electronic learning over several months.*

5 **TRAIN PROGRAM OFFICERS** on communications, on the role of communications in policy engagement, and on basic communications strategies and tactics, and sometimes also on funding advocacy and public policy and the related legal issues. About a third of the foundations in the study have offered programs to do this; most others work informally to bring program officers along on communications issues.

Example: *The Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation has 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.*

Example: *The James Irvine Foundation and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation have sent selected program officers to communications leadership institutes for both NGOs and foundation staff.*

Five Strategies Beyond the Grants Program to Boost Policy Impact

1 **SPONSOR CONVENINGS.** Several foundations cited instances where they bring together key actors and influencers on an issue. This can take place at any one of several stages—when an area for possible action is being assessed; when a new initiative is taking shape; or when a grant program is already underway.

Example: The Ford Foundation, while shaping development of its new Metropolitan Opportunity initiative, convened a meeting that included policy makers, advocates, community leaders, journalists and thought leaders as a way to begin to generate discussion and awareness of key ideas. The initiative supports smart new regional approaches to key issues like housing, transportation, and land use to build prosperous and equitable metropolitan communities.

2 **DO DIRECT MEDIA OUTREACH** in the foundation's own name on policy issues. Almost all the foundations support efforts where the grantees speak, but the distinction here is the foundation name on the release, report, op ed, or other form of outreach. This is done by most of the foundations in the study on a case-by-case basis.

Example: W. K. Kellogg Foundation, in support of a research and community dialogue initiative on health care reform conducted by its grantee Viewpoint Learning. The foundation's media team has done extensive outreach nationally and in the three target states of the research. They have developed a release for Viewpoint including quotes from the Kellogg CEO, and are also pushing op eds and interview opportunities for the CEO.

Example: Senior VP at Robert Wood Johnson Foundation 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 a 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.

3 **USE THE CEO'S BULLY PULPIT.** There are many possibilities for CEO activity in ways that relate to policy issues. Acting on any of them depends on the temperament and inclination of the CEO.

Example: Gara LaMarche (Atlantic Philanthropies) speaks and writes on social justice issues. Paul Brest (The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation) and Bob 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. 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.

4 **ESTABLISH COMMUNICATIONS DEPARTMENTS WITHIN THE FOUNDATION** with their own resources to do such things as publish, create news services, produce public education campaigns, create media partnerships, and run awards programs—any or all of which may 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.

Example: The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, as one of many activities of this operating foundation, built a partnership with MTV to create advanced 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)?

Example: The California Wellness Foundation runs a full multiplatform 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 magazines, and maintaining a robust web site.

5 **BUILD A CAUSE BRAND.** Foundations in the study quite often referred to their brand, but in a way that was essentially synonymous with favorable/trusted name recognition. In a few 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.

Example: Lumina Foundation for Education: The cause is high quality degrees and credentials for 60% 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.

Example: 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.

FINDING 3

The days when foundations "spoke only through their grantees" are clearly over. Every participating foundation employs at least some strategies that involve speaking directly in the name of the foundation, and not just through the grantees.

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 names, 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.

There are several ways foundations use their name and reputation to support policy goals:

◆ **The President speaks out.** "We have a pretty outspoken CEO, who speaks a lot and writes a lot on the advocacy issues he cares about," says one. The CEO of another foundation in the study blogs regularly, including on some fairly high profile policy issues; another CEO tweets "to draw people to conversations that are important."

◆ **The foundation convenes leaders.** One CEO assembled leaders to ensure that the stimulus conversation did not leave higher education out of the planning; the conversation led to a full page signed advertisement in the *New York Times*, for which the CEO was a signer. Another convened a group of leaders around housing issues, shaping the composition of the group as a deliberate way to "bring voices to the table."

◆ **There is a decision to co-brand a product or initiative.** In the words of a foundation that put its name on a major study, along with that of the research institute that conducted the study: "We have done a lot of testing of our brand and our reputation, and we have found that we have a pretty good brand and reputation, and that when we are associated with a product like that it has more credibility."

◆ **There is a decision to brand the foundation itself in relation to a policy cause or issue.** This is done to stand behind an issue where there is not another powerful voice or player. One foundation, active in higher education states it this way: "We can't come at this ambitious goal in higher education from the traditional philanthropic idea of 'I don't want our name to be there because this needs to be about our grantee.' It's about us, the foundation, if we want influence in public policy."

FINDING 4

Only a few of these foundations are using social media as a significant component of their policy communications. 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. Most of these foundations make use of Facebook and Twitter and several sponsor blogs. They are well aware, as one interviewee put it, 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."

Many believe that social media will dramatically change the way they do their work over the next several years. One interviewee stated flatly that "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." At the same time, many are wary of jumping on the bandwagon just for the sake of doing so, and some see deep cultural reservations, captured well in this comment: "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."

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."

Among those foundations that are active with social media in the context of policy engagement, these five areas were cited as particularly promising:

◆ Move to a new level of connecting and engaging in conversation with the different players—grantees, their partners, policy makers and other key publics—who are part of large-scale foundation initiatives.

◆ Create social media campaigns that reach young people through their "medium of choice" and engage them on issues that are part of a current policy conversation.

◆ Push foundation-generated content out through the blogosphere for distribution and discussion there, and as a route to mainstream media coverage.

◆ Put foundations' early stage thinking out for discussion as a means to improving the ideas or plans.

◆ Support grantees to use social media in ways that advance the grantees' (and the foundation's) policy interest.

> ——
> Are you ready to engage with audiences in a conversation, listening back and forth? Are you willing to actually let the messages and priorities develop from the edges of networks and move through the networks?
> ——

FINDING 5

Measuring communications results effectively is extremely difficult. 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 virtually impossible, typified by this comment: "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 foundation CEOs and boards. That said, several specific strategies for tracking results do exist.

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. As one respondent noted: "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."

There are also discrete activities in the 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 number of downloads on a website, number of retweets, or direct actions taken by members of the target audience.

> We do measure, but what I think we really believe here is that when it comes right down to it in communications, it can be a bit of a fools errand to try and put sharp measurement tools around this in a classic foundation sense.

> I think ultimately the right answer is you don't try to measure it separately. You measure whether you have reached your program goals. Our job is to help our programs reach their goals and if that is working,... If we are showing progress there and communications is involved, then you are succeeding.

Findings Related to Communications Staffing and Structure

FINDING 6

Responsibility for communications strategy in support of policy engagement is a highly senior function. Communications is a senior function in the foundations interviewed and one that sits close to the CEO—often literally as well as structurally. 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.

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 five years or less. The career tracks for these players also suggest that foundations active in the policy arena are reaching to a different skill set for their communications leadership: three quarters of the interviewees have backgrounds in either corporate communications or policy advocacy, rather than in journalism, which has been a traditional source of foundation communications officers.

FINDING 7

The visible backing of the CEO for communications is perceived as a prerequisite for achieving both program participation and results. 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, as evidenced in the box, "The Coin of the Realm" below. 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. The CEO influence is described as going both ways—up the foundation to the board, which is especially important when communications initiatives have substantial price tags, and down and across the program staff.

THE COIN OF THE REALM

◆ Endorsement by the leadership is the coin of the realm, as everybody knows. Otherwise I don't know how you could be effective.

◆ You need to have the leadership backing, and that's absolutely key. If you don't have the leadership backing, from the Board and the CEO, communications really can't do anything.

◆ 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.

FINDING 8

No structural model appears to represent the full answer to the challenge of integrating communications and programs. Integrating communications into the program work of the foundation —especially at an early and strategic stage—is both a challenge and a high level responsibility that sits with every chief communications officer. Several models exist, with little sense that any of them represents the definitive solution.

The challenge stems from what interviewees recognize and describe as the basic facts of foundation culture. "Program is king" in foundations: grantmaking programs are often vertically organized silos presided over by program directors, initiative directors, and program officers. Communications is seen as an integral part of program in only a very few foundations. In the respondents' 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.

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, and—most importantly —contribute most powerfully to overall impact. 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 small management team with the CEO—some of this integration happens naturally and quite far upstream. But not all the interviewees sit at that level. And for all, whatever their role in the foundation, the challenge is how to work within the foundation culture to bring the integration of communications down through the program areas.

We found three structural models for communications in the foundations studied:

- ◆ **Advisory model**: The communications team is set up as advisory to the program staff. Eleven of the eighteen foundations are organized along this structural model. Most often, this advisory connection is voluntary and interviewees describe it as highly dependent on comfortable working relationships between the communications director and the program staff. One person describes going to meet with the program heads after each board meeting, sitting down with the docket, and talking through how communications can help. Another describes "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."

◆ **Embedded staff model:** 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 a solid line, or "leader one" relationship to the communications director, and a dotted line, or "leader two" relationship to the program team. The aim is to keep communications perspective and strategy in the mix from the outset of a program or initiative.

◆ **Separate department:** A third model, which functions alongside the advisory model, exists when foundations set up and support an entire communications shop that functions as its own producer of communications products and programs. 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.

> —
> **High on my priority list when I arrived was organizing our team for successful relationships internally to influence better communication outcomes. How are we going to work across the organization in a way that can bring some focus and discipline to what we want to achieve on behalf of our mission, to speak with one voice and to build one brand?**
> —

FINDING 9

Communications staff teams are small; the much larger communications enterprise in these foundations is largely unmapped. In spite of the fact that 12 of these 18 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. 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. (These numbers include the two foundations in the group that have made a very substantial investment in communications staff—with 70 and 41 staff members.) This small staff means that all of these respondents need to pick and choose the projects on which they advise or engage. Small staff size also drives the focus (discussed in the next finding) on building a team with the requisite combination of skills and attributes.

All of these foundations give grants for communications, and also use communications consultants and contractors, however, so there is much more communications activity than what can be accomplished by the staffs. 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 also 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.

FINDING 10

Building the right communications team is cited as a significant challenge. Because communications staffs are small, developing and maintaining the appropriate in-house skill sets is vital. 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 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. Regarding communications skills, writing, advocacy communications, content develop-ment, and social media skills were among the most 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.

The box below shows four categories of essential attributes and skills for communications staff: basic communications skills, relational skills, work attributes, and issue expertise.

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

Relational Skills
- Working with coalitions and collaborations
- Working with experts
- Working with grantees
- Working with program officers
- Working with contractors
- Coaching

Issue Expertise
- Philanthropy
- Policy
- Advocacy
- Political context

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

Study Design

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 work. The foundations were selected from those mentioned in *Power in Policy: A Funder's Guide to Advocacy and Civic Participation;*[2] 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 engagement. 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 considered as active 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 18 foundations agreed to participate in the study. They were the highest-ranking communications staff person in all but three cases.[3] 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 below.

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)

---

[2] Arons, David F. Ed. (2007). *Power in Policy: A Funders Guide to Advocacy and Civic Participation.* Fieldstone Alliance.
[3] 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.

Because of 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 ranges from $528 annually to $1.1 million; eleven foundations in the group had total grantmaking in excess of $100 million in 2008.[4] 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.

[4] 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.

Questions for Discussion

1. Integrating Communications and Program

   ◆ Where does your foundation fit in terms of the advisory or the embedded model for communications staff? What works well about the way you do it? What doesn't? What are the big questions for you about the structure you have?

   ◆ What are the primary issues to unpack in your foundation around "Program is King," and the view that communications isn't program?

2. Range of Strategies

   ◆ Which of the ten broad strategies does your foundation employ? Which have worked well in support of policy engagement? Which have not?

   ◆ Are there some you could employ but haven't yet? Are any of these strategies used in particular combinations?

3. Scope of the Communications Work in Policy Engagement

   ◆ What is the full extent of communications activity that your foundation brings to its policy engagement—including work done by grantees, contractors and consultants? Has this ever been mapped?

   ◆ Who has strategic oversight of this larger body of policy communications? Is this optimal, from a results perspective?

4. Branding

   ◆ Foundations are getting more active in the policy arena, and many are also moving to co-brand some products or program initiatives with grantees, and in some cases consciously develop foundation brands. What is your foundation's stance on this?

   ◆ What do you think are the implications of the convergence of these two trends —more policy work and greater likelihood of co-branding or branding activity—for program impact? for public perception of your foundation? for formation of public policy views that are favorable to foundations generally?

5. Right Sizing Staff Resources

◆ Communications has traditionally been a small and low-powered function in foundations. Today it is clearly becoming a more high-powered function—but staff sizes remain small in all but a very few foundations, even when both grant volume and ambitions for policy engagement are large. What are the driving forces in your foundation that shape the size of communications staff generally, and the amount of staff time that supports policy engagement?

◆ What are the issues for you in selecting which policy-related programs or initiatives should receive communications support?

6. Social Media

◆ There has been substantial discussion in recent months of foundation use of social media, generally reaching the broad conclusion that while there are a very small number of early adopters, most foundations are still in an experimental mode. Where is your foundation on the use of social media, and in particular, its potential contribution to policy engagement?

◆ What are the major issues and questions at play in your foundation about a bolder use of social media strategies to support policy engagement?

◆ Are you interested in lessons learned from those foundations that have been early and significant adopters?

7. Measurement

◆ What is your foundation's approach to measuring the impact of communications in policy engagement? What works? What are you left wondering?

◆ Are you satisfied that the measures you get are sufficient for you to determine the best use of resources to achieve results?

◆ Is the board engaged on this issue? Satisfied?

8. Communications Plan

◆ Do you have a strategic communications plan for your foundation? If so, what is your planning timeframe? How is the plan integrated with an overall strategic plan for the foundation?

USC
SCHOOL OF
POLICY, PLANNING,
AND DEVELOPMENT