Excerpt from *A Guide to Evaluating Asset-Based Community Development: Lessons, Challenges, and Opportunities* by Tom Dewar, 1997

ASSET-ORIENTED GUIDELINES AND REPORTING: EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

A number of things can be done to help set the stage for good evaluation. Funders can do some of this, as can local practitioners. For funders, one important tool is the set of guidelines to prospective grantees. These guidelines often identify key issues and questions, thus helping to frame the evaluation approaches.

This chapter offers four examples of guidelines developed by researchers and funders. The first set was published in *Building Communities from the Inside Out* (1993) and then revised as a discussion piece for the September 1996 Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute conference, "Funding Community Capacity." The other three were used by funders forging ahead with asset-based community development projects. Their guidelines are examples of best practices from the field. Their stories show how creativity, sensitivity, and concern for appropriateness in the design of guidelines produces a powerful tool for ongoing communication between funder and grantee.

A Guide to Funding Asset-Based Community Development (The ABCD Institute)

In keeping with the spirit and practical implications of the work reported on and anticipated by their book, *Building Communities from the Inside Out*, Kretzmann and McKnight have developed a useful set of possible guidelines for funders of asset-based community development. Similar guidelines have been developed by numerous community foundations as well as other funders.

Clearly, each of these seven suggested guidelines requires follow-up information that would report on the work as it develops. The value of clear guidelines is that they focus the process on certain key questions. By knowing these in advance, the likelihood increases that relevant information will be gathered, discussed, and reported. Strategies can be developed that increase the quality and variety of information, and tools for getting information can be tried out and improved.

A Guide to Funding Asset-Based Community Development
Prepared for the Asset-Based Community Development Institute by
John Kretzmann and John McKnight

We support proposals from community-based groups that:

1. **Clearly identify the skills, abilities, capacities, and assets that local residents will contribute to the proposal. How will local residents' capacities be used to address the issues identified? Have you developed an inventory of the capacities and skills of local residents to help guide this process?** We are particularly interested in how you will discover and use the gifts and abilities of the "strangers" in your community — those people who have been marginalized and overlooked because of labels such as disadvantaged, underclass, elderly, developmentally disabled, ex-offender, physically disabled, mentally disabled, mentally ill, etc.

2. **Clearly identify the capacities of your community's citizens associations, and indicate how they will be involved in both governance and problem-solving in your proposal.** We are interested in the involvement of groups such as arts organizations, business associations, church groups, organizations of the elderly, organizations of men or women, ethnic associations, health groups, self-help groups, outdoor organizations, block clubs, school groups, political organizations, unions, service clubs, youth groups, veterans organizations, etc.

3. **Indicate how this proposal will mobilize, utilize, enhance, and expand these local capacities.** How will local citizens and groups be stronger at the end of this proposal? How will they be better able to develop local assets?

4. **Clearly identify**:

   o **the major institutions in the community** (e.g., schools, hospitals, human service agencies, parks, libraries, etc.)

   o **the many different resources, or "treasures," held by each of these institutions** (e.g., people, space, equipment, budgets, etc.)

5. **Clearly indicate how these local institutional resources can be mobilized to solve problems in the local community, and to enhance the capacities of local residents and their associations**.

6. **Contribute to building the local economy by**:

- **Identifying and mobilizing the enterprise and job-related skills of local residents.**

- **Identifying and directing local consumer spending toward enterprise development and support of local businesses.**

- **Mobilizing the savings of local residents to reinvest in neighborhood economic development.**

- **Involving local citizen associations and institutions in business and economic development efforts.**

- **Identifying and mobilizing local businesses for economic development efforts.**

7. **Show evidence of significant investments of resources and time by local residents and organizations before our funding is initiated.** We are particularly interested in projects that local residents design, carry out, and control themselves.

The Community Capacity Building Fund (Cincinnati, OH)

In addition to framing the evaluation process by presenting clear guidelines, funders and other community-building supporters can design reporting strategies that encourage mutual learning. Here, for example, is a set of questions developed by Cincinnati's United Way to track the success of neighborhood projects that have been funded by the Community Capacity Building Fund.

Tracking the Success of Neighborhood Projects
Funded by the Community Capacity Building Fund

The United Way and Community Chest and the Greater Cincinnati Foundation are honored to be able to support your neighborhood's community building project. We join you in wanting to make sure that the project is a success and helps to build "citizen spirit" in your community. During the year, we ask that you spend a little time with your Community Capacity Building Fund liaison person and discuss how the project is going. Your liaison person will be interested in your answers to questions like the following:

- When you applied for the grant, you told us that there were some specific things you wanted to accomplish during the year. Do you feel you're on track for getting those things done? Are you finding it difficult to accomplish some

of the things in your plan? If so, do you think it will still be possible to accomplish them?

- Now that you're involved in the project, what do you think are the most important benefits it's bringing to your community? Which situation or situations in the neighborhood are changing as a result of the project? Please give us some facts that show how you know these changes are happening.

- How much of the project's work is being done by people who live in the neighborhood? How many neighborhood residents actually are working on the project? About how many of the neighborhood people who are working on the project are newcomers to neighborhood building work? Do you think they'll stick with your group after this project is finished?

- Have you been able to persuade some of the other groups in your neighborhood to work with you on the project? (This can be any type of group, even small and informal ones.) How many groups have you been able to involve in the project? Do you think those groups might want to work with you again on projects for the neighborhood?

- Have you been able to get some of the institutions in your neighborhood (e.g., schools, churches, social agencies, businesses, the police, the fire department) to give you some help on the project? What kind of help are they giving you? Is this the first time some of these institutions have worked with your group? Do you think they're likely to work with you again in the future?

- Have you been able to get some other money to help with the project? Where did it come from? Has any money for the project been donated by people who live in the neighborhood or has it come from some fundraising work they've been doing?

- Has doing this project given your group other ideas for things you might do to improve the quality of life in your neighborhood? Please tell us some of these ideas.

The Mile High United Way (Denver, CO)

A number of evaluations take care to feature the kinds of success and outcomes that are most valued by residents or participants themselves. They avoid imposing additional expectations other than those agreed to by participants and funders at the outset of funding.

The Mile High United Way in Denver has developed several strong programs that embody the assets approach. One of these is the Denver Neighborhood Partnership, which is governed by a board of neighborhood residents. These people are really peers of those seeking support, rather than experts or professional funders. Thus, they can credibly ask projects what they are learning that could be passed on to others, like themselves. In their requests for information to funded projects, they are careful to ask for these lessons, along with information that corresponds to the guidelines under which the partnership operates and by which grants are made. Among other things, they specifically ask, "How did you (or your project) utilize the assets, skills, people, or organizations in your neighborhood?"

Interestingly, Mile High United Way Vice President Chuck Shannon reports that since "evaluation" is such a charged term, the partnership prefers to ask funded projects for "Project Observations." In requesting this information, they also ask participants to "take a few moments to answer the following questions," thus hoping to further lower the anxiety or perceived burden of providing responses. Specifically, they ask:

Project Observations

1. In concrete terms, how did the project have a lasting positive effect on the neighborhood? How did you define success?

2. How did you (or your project) link people and resources within your neighborhood?   If appropriate, how did your project link neighborhood resources to outside resources?   How did you (or your project) utilize assets, skills, people, or organizations in your neighborhood?

3. What have you learned from your experience with the project?

4. Describe what you can do better now than you did before? What has the project given you?

5. Based on your experience, what changes would you make if you did this project again? What advice would you give other people who would like to be more involved in their communities and start a project like you have? Are there any other people who were involved with your project that we may contact?

The Community Partnership Fund of Greater Memphis (TN)

Another rich and community-sensitive example of reporting comes from the Community Partnership Fund of Greater Memphis, which has a recommended format for its final reports. This format expresses great interest in the opinions and experience of participants. It demonstrates faith in them. It asks a series of very

straightforward questions that can be answered without special expertise or preparation. Items specified in it correspond closely to the foundation's stated mission, and to questions asked in the original proposal each group submitted.

Format for Final Reports

Please help us better understand the impact of our Community Partnership Fund investment in your organization and how we can help your organization build on this investment in the future. We are particularly interested in your thoughts on the following questions. Please answer these questions on your own paper, attach a financial report for the funded project, and send to Janis Foster at the Community Foundation, 5210 Poplar, Suite 150, Memphis, TN, 38119. Feel free to call if you need clarification on any question.

1. Please describe the activity or project that your organization undertook with support from the Community Foundation's Community Partnership Fund.

2. What do you believe was the most important outcome of this work for your organization?

3. What do you believe was the most important outcome of this work for your organization's community?

4. What relationships or partnerships did your organization form with community residents, program participants, and other organizations or institutions through this project? Please indicate what others contributed to the project.

5. What do you believe were the most important "lessons learned" through this work? How has your organization used these lessons learned to enhance other areas of your work?

6. What have you done or do you plan to do to insure that this project or activity continues or to insure that the learning that was associated with the project is passed on to others?

7. What do you see as the next steps your organization can take to build on the successes of this project or activity and enhance the role you can play as a catalyst for positive action in your community?

8. Would you be willing to share your insights and experiences relating to this project with others? If yes, would you be willing to help the Community Foundation organize an information-sharing meeting with others that may have similar experiences? Are there any particular topics that you would most like to discuss with others?

9. What can the Community Foundation do — in ways other than to provide additional money — to help you in your work?

10. Do you have any suggestions for how we might improve our grant process (information received prior to application, the application itself, procedures for site visits, notification procedures, interaction after the grant award, etc.) Please help us make our process more useful to you!

In sum, and as the examples illustrate, good evaluations are focused. They check in with key audiences early to determine what their questions are. They are confident that by being systematic and "user-friendly" their intended audience(s) will be informed — and in the process, some unintended audiences may be impressed as well.

In addition to being focused, good evaluations are also flexible. One size does not fit all. To be useful, they must be responsive to what the intended audience is looking for, and they should plan and execute the process in a way that is realistic.

Asset-oriented guidelines can help set the stage for focused and flexible evaluation by identifying issues of continuing importance around which some data-gathering ought to be planned from the outset. Good questions often follow directly from these guidelines. By following through on these questions, trust is built among participants, funders, and third-party evaluators. With clear guidelines, project participants report having greater clarity about what to keep track of (and what the funder wants to know), as well as having to deal with fewer surprises or imposed questions. And finally, reporting formats that respect community wisdom, but challenge everyone to learn and grow, can only serve to enhance the creative energies and intelligence already evident in community-building efforts.