

## Counting What Counts

It's relatively easy for stakeholders of a commercial venture to know how well it is doing. A quick look at the balance sheet and operating statements will give them a pretty good idea.

Measuring the performance of a not-for-profit organization is less clear. Of course nonprofits have to be fiscally sound ... but as the name implies, making money is not the goal. So how can one measure the effectiveness of a social benefit organization or its programs?

The question is especially important for community foundations. Beyond a need to assess our own performance, we have a vested interest in making sure the programs and initiatives we fund represent the "highest and best use" of the dollars we have available for grantmaking. What investment will yield the greatest return?

Your Wayne County Foundation gauges its progress by a number of measures. We track current gifts, of course, and planned gifts, too. We watch our investment performance closely. And we have a number of metrics to assure our own operational sustainability.

Perhaps most importantly, we review the results of our grantmaking and attempt to assess effectiveness of our grantees.

Oftentimes, this involves specific counts of the number of people involved or the quantity of materials purchased. We know the number of scholarship awards we provided last year (over 300) and the increase in the number of students signed up for the 21st Century Scholars program due, in part, to our funding of Communities In Schools and its Cruising Into Your Future program.

The quest to quantify effectiveness even extends across area organizations. Our Impact Grant in 2008 was given in support of a cutting edge program between Richmond Community Schools, the Boys and Girls Clubs, Girls Incorporated, Communities In Schools, and the United Way to develop an integrated system of assessing the impact of nonprofit organizations in support of individual academic achievement.

Even so, it's difficult to quantify success relative to a mission rather than a goal. Not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted.

Who can really quantify the benefit of helping a third-grader improve her ability to read? Or measure the results of an oral history project? Or assess the benefit of a community center? Or judge the value of a lemonade stand?

Was it money well spent? Could we have done better? In some cases we'll never know. But in the same way that the Foundation honors its donors' intent, we'll always take into account what matters most to the people we serve ... because that's what counts most to us.

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