

Engaged Americans Want Philanthropic Foundations to Be Innovative and Speak Up About It

Courtney Spalding-Mayer 10 May 2010

Should philanthropic foundations focus more on innovation? A new survey¹ by Harris Interactive, commissioned by the Philanthropy Awareness Initiative, shows that engaged Americans think so. They are increasingly looking to foundations to find and fund new ways of solving society's problems. And they prefer to hear about the innovative work of foundations over all other roles those foundations play. For foundation leaders interested in engaging critical stakeholders and building greater support, speaking up about the innovative work they do appears to be key.

These findings represent the viewpoints of active citizens, serving in leadership, committee or board-level roles in organizations working on community or social issues, who make up 12 percent of the American adult population. It is not the general public but a far narrower slice that serves as important constituents to the social sector.

So just how much do engaged Americans support innovation? The last three years have seen a dramatic rise

in the number of citizens and potential donors who think private foundations² should focus their grants on finding new and better ways of solving problems. In 2006, 48 percent held this belief. By 2009, that number had jumped to 79 percent. Perhaps in light of the nation's economic challenges over the past three years, more engaged Americans are looking to foundations to be gardeners—both finders and funders—of innovation.

Americans have also expressed greater interest in how foundations support innovation than in any other aspect of foundation work. Survey respondents were given statements about foundations that captured five different dimensions of their work and roles: *innovation* ("foundations fund innovative projects that others won't fund"), *opportunity* ("foundations provide an opportunity for individuals to take private action in the public interest"), *time* ("foundations are able to commit to supporting projects over the long term"), *impact* ("foundations have the expertise to invest in projects with the greatest chance of success") and *independence* ("foundations are able to decide which are the best projects free from political influence"). By far, the statement about innovation was selected over and above the others as making the respondent want to learn more about foundations.

Today there is real opportunity for foundations and their partners to speak up about the innovative role they play in society. Foundations, at times, have taken a step forward

to frame and communicate their work as society's research and development arm—how they can often generate and test new and sometimes risky ideas that, if the approach pays off, government or nonprofit entities or even the private sector can replicate and take to scale. This survey supports that step and, in fact, shows that engaged Americans want to hear more. Over half think foundations have too little influence in public discussion about social issues and solutions in American society at all levels—national, state and community. The time is ripe for foundations to speak up about their successes and lessons when it comes to social innovation.

1. ^To learn more about these survey results, visit www.philanthropyawareness.org for the latest *PAI Digest: High Expectations, High Opportunity: In a Time of Crisis, Engaged Americans Look to Foundations to Find Solutions, Speak Up, and Stand Apart*.
2. ^Because the research firm Harris Interactive was originally commissioned in 2006 by the Council on Foundations to ask engaged Americans about their perceptions of private foundations, several questions in the 2007–2009 survey for the Philanthropy Awareness Initiative also focused on private foundations to measure any changes.

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PAI is a short-term research and development project that works with foundations and philanthropy associations to improve communications and outreach to influential Americans. It aims to accomplish this purpose primarily by tracking how influential leaders see foundations and identifying, developing and sharing ways foundations can communicate about their unique role, work and impact in American society. Better connecting with leaders in government, business, nonprofit and media for greater mutual understanding and impact is a critical opportunity for U.S. philanthropy today. It will help the foundation sector build necessary political support, take promising programs to scale, invite new ideas, and encourage more philanthropy.