

Exiting Responsibly:  
Best Donor Practices in Ending Field Support

A Study for the  
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

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## *Executive Summary*

Exiting fields is common to philanthropy. It is often spurred by foundations' continuous quest for innovation, new leadership, or a decline in their assets. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation commissioned this report of best practices for foundations as they exit fields in their interest to continually improve their work through learning. The study sought to answer the question: *How can foundations help build the possibilities for field strengthening, even as their support ends?*

This report identifies effective practices to promote the sustainability of fields as donors exit. Information was gathered from a variety of sources, including available literature and confidential telephone interviews with thirty-one grant seekers and grant makers. Their joint perspectives provide a picture of the impact of field exits and a handle on how funders can manage them more responsibly.

This study is *not* about exiting fields when a foundation has no concern about the survival of that field. If for example, a foundation has concluded that a field in which it is investing is having no impact, a quick exit may be preferred. The report looks at situations where exiting donors retain an interest in the field's continued success. Some of the report recommendations may apply to donors wishing to exit responsibly, whether or not they intend for the field to survive once they exit.

A **field** is defined as a *branch of knowledge, policy and practice composed of a multiplicity of actors in relationship with each other*. It involves both knowledge and action. Actors in a field produce facts, problem solutions, models of good practice, and messages to help people grasp the dimensions of a problem and promote desired changes. Field actors form a community whose members play different and complementary roles in solving social problems – advocates, program developers and implementers, communicators, leaders, organizers, researchers, policymakers, funders, and others.

Building a field takes time since their purpose is often a change in the way societies and people behave. Field-building is a non-linear, complicated process. Funders help build fields by targeting some of the various **elements of a field** -- policy research, advocacy, strategic communications, program development and assessment, leadership development, incorporation into academic curriculum, organizational capacity-building, coalition-building, mobilization, and long term funding.

The majority of study participants acknowledged that exits are difficult, and often painful processes for donors, their grantees, and the larger field. Participants agreed that there are ways to help soften the blow. **A successful field exit involves the implementation of a process that is respectful of the relationship between donors and field actors, and that promotes the sustainability of the field.** *Effective donor practices for a responsible field exit process include:*

- Use various forms of communications to inform field actors clearly, early and often.
- Involve the foundation's chief executive in the communications with the field.
- Ensure that all foundation staff is informed of the field exit and able to respond effectively to questions.

- Invite questions from field actors regarding the exit, and involve them in assessing their impact on the field.
- Publicize the successes, needs and opportunities of the field and its actors.
- Involve field actors in determining their capacity-building needs and provide support for these opportunities.
- Attract other donors into the field by signaling continued interest through matching and tie-off grants.

To increase the likelihood that a field is sustained, the exiting donor can assess the relative strength of the field's elements and put in place strategies to build up the weaker components. If an assessment concludes that the field is strong, a donor should still exit responsibly to increase the field's potential to continue to operate effectively.

The study lists a series of questions and indicators to help to assess a field's strengths and needs. They are meant to be a guide to donors and can be used to inform exiting decisions, including how to target final support. Answering the questions requires gathering information through a variety of means: using existing data and reports, conducting interviews, formal evaluations, etc.

The study concludes by pointing to a number of tendencies in philanthropy that work against building and strengthening fields. These are identified below as trends that funders should *resist* as they build, strengthen and exit fields:

- *Avoiding risk* – runs counter to philanthropy's quest for innovation.
- *Focus on the short term* – curtails the long-term investments required to create lasting change.
- *"Obsessive measurement disorder"* - the growing trend to support only programs designed to deliver easily measurable results, limits the possibility of achieving transformative processes and sustainable changes.
- *Survival of the fittest* – providing support for only the strongest field actors rules out the engagement of newer, emergent groups that may be vital to the field's innovation and sustainability.
- *Expect that other funds will fill the gap* – is unlikely in the current economic environment, and particularly at the time when a funder is ending support for a field.
- *Total field disengagement* – inhibits the ability to stay in touch with the field after significant investments, and to step in again if needed.
- *Thin out the files and close down the web page* – is too common when donors exit fields with the result that field knowledge is lost, as is the ability to build on past knowledge.

Responsible and respectful field exits require careful and deliberate procedures. It is quite usual for foundations to exit fields, and disconcertingly common for them to do so with little advance notice and unclear rationales. The findings and recommendations of this study are intended to offer a degree of rationality to an often arbitrary and inconsiderate process of field exits, because exiting responsibly is essential to achieving the compelling and far-reaching goals that foundations set out for themselves.

## Section 1

### Introduction

In 2011, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation commissioned this report of best practices for foundations as they exit fields. RWJF's interest stemmed from its longstanding efforts to increase transparency in their operations, and to continually improve their work through learning. The study's principal question was: **How can foundations help build the possibilities for field strengthening, even as their support ends?** RWJF staff requested this study with no particular field exit in mind but aware of the fact that foundations, including theirs, periodically shift priorities.

This study is *not* about exiting fields when a foundation has no concern about the survival of that field. If for example, a foundation has concluded that a field in which it is investing is having no impact, a quick exit may be preferred. This report looks at situations where exiting donors retain an interest in the field's continued success. Some of the report recommendations may apply to donors wishing to exit responsibly, whether or not they intend for the field to survive once they exit.

### Background and Methods

The effects of the economic crisis of 2008 are still being felt around the world in many sectors, including philanthropy. Some small foundations have closed with little warning to grantees and other field actors because of dramatic declines in assets. Other larger foundations that had planned to spend out, decided to do so in shorter time frames. And most of the remaining foundations exited some fields and refocused grant-making priorities.

While the number of foundations forced to make hasty exits may have increased in the last few years, ending grant relationships is common in philanthropy. Anyone who is familiar with this sector knows that foundation priorities change periodically. Even donors with long-term commitments to a field do in time, modify their strategies or end their support.

Whether the trigger for a donor to exit a field is a decline in assets, a quest for innovation, a change in leadership, a loss of novelty, or some other reason, more foundations seem to be looking for ways to manage the exit process more effectively.

Those working in philanthropy often say that the quest for innovation drives foundations' desires to move on to other fields. Other observers note that new leadership most often drives exits, or that foundations tire of particular fields that lose their appeal when they are perceived as less newsworthy, exciting or novel. Whether the trigger for a donor to exit a field is a decline in assets, a quest for innovation, a change in leadership, a loss of novelty, or some other reason, more foundations seem to be looking for ways to manage the exit process more effectively.

Various foundations have commissioned studies, engaged consultants, reflected on their practices, and documented

their experiences in ending relationships with grantees. Many of the foundations that are spending out, such as the Beldon Foundation, the French American Charitable Trust (FACT), the Tubney Foundation in the UK, and Atlantic Philanthropies (or “spending up”-- the term used by the Quixote Foundation), are documenting and describing candidly their lessons learned. Leaders of these “spend down” foundations are also in conversations with each other and the larger donor community through conferences, workshops, publications and their web pages. Their stated purpose is for those in philanthropy to learn from their experience.

*Exiting Responsibly: Best Donor Practices in Ending Field Support* adds to a growing body of work on foundation exits. The report differs in two important ways from most others. First, the emphasis on exiting *fields* is not yet a common study topic, as most reviews examine strategies for ending grant relationships with individual grantees. Secondly, most of the studies on exiting grants are written from the point of view of the grant maker. This is one of the few studies that include interviews with *grant seekers* as well as grant makers. Their joint perspectives provide a fuller picture of the impact of field exits and a better handle on how funders can manage them more responsibly. As the study title suggests, **the purpose of this report is to identify effective practices to promote the sustainability of fields as donors exit.**

Through this review, the author has come to understand that all exits, whether hasty or planned, can provide lessons and employ best practices. Study participants unanimously agreed that exits that provide ample advance warning are preferable. Even so, many of the best practices identified are also applicable in the case of hasty field exits.

All exits, whether hasty or planned, can provide lessons and employ best practices.

Information for this report was gathered from a variety of sources, including available literature and confidential telephone interviews with thirty-one key informants. Interviewees were diverse in terms of gender, sexual preference, race and ethnicity, and represented a wide variety of fields including LGBTT, human and women’s rights, health, arts, immigrant rights, and education. They included current and former RWJF staff and grantees, leaders from the philanthropic and non-profit sectors, researchers and experts in philanthropy. Study participants had experience with different types of foundations: large and small, individual and family, private and corporate, those that had exited particular fields, others that had entirely ceased operations or planned to, and foundations established to make grants in perpetuity.

The document review comprised topics related to foundation exits, and the development and sustainability of fields, including internal and published reports produced for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The lists of references and interviewees appear at the end of this report.

This report summarizes the opinions of researchers and key foundation and non-profit leaders, and reflects their and this consultant’s personal judgments as shaped by our own experience, knowledge and perceptions.

## Supporting and Building Fields

The focus of this study is on foundation exits from *fields*. Foundations help support and build fields in their quest to find solutions to social problems. Foundations have both supported existing fields, and helped stimulate work in new fields.

### What is a field?

There is no uniformly accepted definition of a field in the world of philanthropy but in the academic world, a field refers to a branch of knowledge, a discipline. Foundations often name fields around their articulation of a problem's solution: education reform, immigrant rights, economic development, civic engagement, LGBTT rights, tobacco cessation, etc. These fields do not always coincide with the names of academic disciplines although in the process, foundations often support academic work in related disciplines. Occasionally, a new academic specialty is created as the result of the field-building work of foundations. One example is palliative care, a field that was developed with significant support from RWJF, and became a medical subspecialty.

The following definition draws upon the literature on fields in philanthropy: A field is a branch of knowledge, policy and practice composed of a multiplicity of actors in relationship with each other. It is important to highlight several essential parts of this definition.

A field is a branch of knowledge, policy and practice composed of a multiplicity of actors in relationship with each other. The foundations that support a field are vital players and part of the institutions and people that attempt to develop programs, influence public opinion, change policies, generate new knowledge, coordinate efforts, and train leaders.

- First, a field involves both understanding and action. Actors in a field produce facts, problem solutions, models of good practice, and messages to help people grasp the dimensions of a problem and promote desired changes.
- Second, a field requires people and organizations that play different and complementary roles in solving social problems – advocates, program developers and implementers, communicators, leaders, organizers, researchers, policymakers, funders, and others.
- Third, the actors in a field form a community; they know about and connect to each other. Foundations are part of that community. As one study participant noted, the foundations that support a field are vital players and part of the institutions and people that attempt to develop programs, influence public opinion, change policies, generate new knowledge, coordinate efforts, and train leaders.

### **How do funders build and strengthen fields?**

A field is built through the efforts of people and organizations engaged in a variety of different activities in pursuit of a set of social change goals. Foundations fund the development of fields by supporting a diverse set of players and outcomes. The Bridgespan Group's Strong Field Framework asserts that field building involves "coordinating the efforts of multiple organizations and individuals around a common goal and creating the conditions necessary for them to succeed." A funder who participated in this study affirmed, "Getting lots of partners is vital or you can't build a field. You look for people and organizations that have a commitment to the problem that you are trying to solve. Sometimes they are strange bedfellows."

Field building takes time. Grant makers recognize that most social problems do not lend themselves to easy solutions or quick fixes. There is, for example, no vaccine or immediate intervention to get people to quit smoking, eat healthily or improve schools. A field in development needs long-term support because the changes sought require shifts in values and behaviors, policies and funding, and multiple interventions that tackle environmental factors and generate viable models of success. As one grant maker observed, "One needs to understand that a ten-year investment is a long time. But sometimes field-building takes longer than that."

Field building is a messy activity. The complexity of social change means that there are many moving parts and entry points for donors. A funder's strategies are often not entirely articulated at the outset; they grow and evolve. As Risa Lavizzo-Mourey noted in the preface of RWJF's retrospective review on their investments to improve care at the end of life, "Strategy emerges, and it is not perfect."

Funders build and strengthen fields by targeting its various elements or components. Funders often support different approaches at the same time because they recognize the need to address the multiple dimensions of the problem that they are trying to solve. For example, the Center for Public Policy Program Evaluation's (CPPPE) study on RWJF's tobacco campaigns (2011) found that RWJF's most successful tactics were implemented through a range of actions -- policy research and advocacy, strategic communications, program development and assessment, leadership development, incorporation into academic research and curriculum, organizational capacity-building, coalition-building and collaboration, mobilization, and long term funding. CPPPE concludes that RWJF's "...combination of tactics was as important as, if not more important than, individual tactics." Thus, implementing a range of strategies together in a coordinated and concerted fashion is what makes a field successful.

Funders' most successful field-building tactics address the multiple dimensions of the problems that the field is trying to solve by concurrently supporting a range of actions over a long period of time. The combination of tactics is as important, if not more important than, individual tactics.

Box 1 lists the key elements of a field that donors tend to support and is assembled from references that include the Academy of Educational Development (2007), The Bridgespan Group (2009), Patrizi, et.al (2011), and this consultant's experience. All of these elements together constitute a strong field. Like a *movement*, a strong field engages a broad array of constituents who can mobilize effectively to pursue needed changes. The focus of foundations on supporting simultaneous work on multiple fronts helps to build fields and movements.

Box 1

### Elements of a Field

- **Shared identity** and affiliation among the field actors around a common purpose.
- **Research evidence** that builds new knowledge and generates public attention.
- **Effective leaders** who articulate a field's concerns and inspire an emotional response.
- **Proven programs** that serve as examples of practice.
- **Quality standards** for accountability and to establish legitimacy.
- **Knowledge exchange** that maintain the actors in a field informed and current.
- **Structures for collaboration** that facilitate and build democratic relationships between the multiple actors.
- **Diverse and steady funding streams** over a long period of time.
- **Diverse and interconnected constituencies** that ensure broad reach.
- **Policy advocacy** to institutionalize change through laws and regulations.
- **Strategic communications** that frame policy debates and form public opinion.
- **Constituencies that can mobilize** to take large-scale, concerted action.
- **Assessment of progress** and a feedback loop to adjust tactics.

Strong fields contain all of the above elements. Reports including RWJF's retrospective assessments of fields inform two additional conclusions regarding the components of strong fields:

1. **Fields are strong when its members share a common set of goals and work in a complementary and collaborative manner to achieve them.**
2. **The wider the variety of players in a field, the greater its strength and its possibilities for making lasting change.**

## Exiting Fields Successfully

It is evident that foundations exit fields for many reasons. This study's purpose is not to examine in detail the multiple reasons that drive foundation withdrawals from fields, but rather to identify how the process can be respectful to the field's actors and how it can promote the sustainability of the field.

Leadership changes at foundations and decline in assets were the two reasons for foundation exits that participants mentioned most often. One non-profit leader remarked, "When a new leader comes, they have to establish their 'bona fides,' so they leave their predecessor's work half finished." A donor observed that some exits are due to a type of funding fatigue: "We rarely exit because the problem has been solved. When we get tired of paying attention, we either declare the problem solved, or we give up." Yet another donor commented on the frequently subjective nature of decisions to exit: "Sometimes change is driven by careful review; sometimes its arbitrary."

Various interviewees spoke harshly about foundation field exits. One contrasted foundation investments with those of venture capital: "Venture capital begins investing in a range of hopeful ideas. If the idea catches hold, or the leader is good, they put more money in. Foundations do the opposite. They pull out."

One donor who has had a long-term career in foundations indicated that he was comfortable with exiting fields: "That is what we do. Foundations have the obligation to make decisions that advance their mission. They have power and their decisions have consequences. The issue is the correct exercise and use of this power."

### **What is a successful field exit?**

When asked if they had witnessed "successful field exits," the majority of participants acknowledged that exits are difficult, and often painful processes for donors, their grantees, and other field actors. Various nonprofit leaders expressively conveyed, "There is no such thing as a successful field exit." They indicated that most exits have devastating impacts.

Grant seekers and grant makers did express some contrasting points of view. By and large, grant makers viewed foundation exits as an integral and expected part of philanthropy. Some donors observed that exits are often done poorly because they don't provide advance warning and are communicated ineffectively. One asserted, "most (exits) have been in the worst traditions of philanthropy." By and large, donors agreed that the exiting process could be managed to "soften the blow" and help the field "become sustainable."

All participants noted that there are things that funders should do to deal responsibly with ending their grant making. Their ideas illustrate that **to achieve a successful field exit a funder needs to consider both the process that is implemented and its impact on the field**. They identified effective practices regarding the way the exit is announced to the field actors, including actual and prospective donors; and the structure of final grants and other technical and capacity-building assistance. Interviewees also offered comments on the impact of exits on the sustainability of a field. Their responses illustrate that how the donor handles the exit can have a positive or a dampening effect on a field's future sustainability.

The majority of study participants observed that **a field exit was successful when the exit process was respectful of the relationships between the donor, its grantees, and other field actors and when key components of the work of the field continued after the funder ended their support**. Indicators of a successful field exit appear in Box 2.

Box 2

### Indicators of a Successful Field Exit

- Field actors had a **clear understanding of the timing and reasons** for the funder's exit.
- The donor **involved the field actors in shaping the structure** of final grants and other support (technical assistance, assessment, communications and capacity building).
- **Key organizations continued to operate** because they found other donors to support their work.
- A **pipeline of new leaders** continued to be created through academic training and mentoring.
- **New knowledge** continued to be produced and shared.
- **Effective practices** continued to be developed and improved.
- **Changes in institutional cultures** that support the field goals were sustained.
- Field leaders continued to **exchange information and mobilize** to make change.
- **Relationships and connections** between field actors remained robust.
- **Policies** to advance field goals continued to be enacted and strengthened at local, state and/or national levels.
- **Strong public support** for the solution of the problems of concern to the field was maintained.

## **Effective foundation practices to achieve a responsible field exit processes**

Funders use many tools to help moderate difficulties when ending funding relationships, whether they are exiting a field or ending grants to a single organization. These tools can be grouped into a set of categories that are interconnected -- assessment, timing, communications, capacity- building and funding. These tools reinforce each other. For example, the successes identified by an assessment can be used to strengthen the funding possibilities of a field. And providing ample forewarning of the end of a funding relationship can help a field build its capacity for future sustainability.

### ***Assessment***

A donor participant advised that foundations should assess the impact of the fields they support: “You need to do a candid report that explains what you learned. Have you achieved the goals you set out? If it is a reasoned review, the decision to move on can be better understood.” Assessment is part of a responsible field exit because it can provide different types of worthwhile information for the field and its funders.

Assessments can:

- Measure the impact of a foundation’s support for a field as a way to document the value of their investment.
- Document the successes of the field and that of key field actors, making them potentially attractive to other donors. Funders are attracted to what works.
- Evaluate how large an impact the donor’s exit is likely to have relative to each field actor to better structure final support.
- Identify gaps and areas of opportunity in the field to attract new funders.
- Equip field actors with information to improve their work and the impact of the field.
- Enable self-assessment and reflection among the field actors to derive lessons that may be shared.

A number of foundations, especially those that are spending down, are engaged in different types of self-assessments to document lessons learned. RWJF’s retrospective reviews provide important and uncommon examples of independent field assessments that are publicly available. They offer a combination of qualitative and quantitative information and provide a rich and nuanced picture of the field and its impact. Interviewees who were familiar with the RWJF retrospective studies agreed that the analyses and lessons learned were significant contributions to the fields that were reviewed, and to philanthropy as a whole.

### ***Timing***

Part of a responsible process is to announce the planned exit as early as possible to provide the field with the maximum lead-time. A donor comments, “A responsible exit takes three to four years. We need to start early and have frank conversations.” Informing grantees and other field actors expeditiously demonstrates respect for their work, besides giving them time to plan.

### ***Communications***

The majority of study participants agreed that: “The more transparency, the less rocky the process.” Most interviewees noted the importance of clear and frequent communications as vital piece of the exiting process, and they offered many specific suggestions for donors:

- Announce the exit plans in a way that demonstrates awareness of implications for the recipients. “The priority is to acknowledge the deep and mutual relationship that has existed and that the communications process reflects this,” explained one non-profit leader.
- Communications should be planned carefully so that people don’t interpret the exit as damaging to the field. Many participants felt that foundations did a poor job of explaining why they are exiting. This can create the perception that the field did not merit continued support and that the funder’s expectations were somehow, not met. “The minute that a foundation says that they are exiting, they lose credibility. It’s like when you say that you are leaving a job and people don’t listen to you anymore,” said one interviewee.
- Help grantees and other field actors publicize their successes through different venues.
- Diffuse the results of research on the field using mechanisms including foundation web pages, op-eds, field conferences, and briefings with government officials. Knowledge informs the creation of effective policies and helps to institutionalize and sustain a field’s outcomes.
- Share broadly the results of field assessments. Funders should be clear on what has been achieved and what remains to be done. Affinity groups are a good venue to share lessons learned.
- The foundation’s leader (President, CEO, Executive Director) should lead the effort to announce a field exit. All foundation staff and leadership need to be aware of the field exit and be prepared and trained to deliver the same message. This avoids situations where grantees attempt to circumvent their program officer and go to foundation leadership in an effort to change the funding decisions.
- Foundation staff should invite questions and make themselves available to field actors.
- Contextualize the exit as part of the foundation’s strategy and mission. Foundation staff should explain, “this is what the foundation wants to become and this is what we need to do to become it.”
- Articulate the reasons for the exit to other donors in the field so that they do not think it is because the field actors aren’t performing well.
- Communicate often about the exit with the field and its actors. Interviewees noted that grantees can sometimes be “in denial” about the end of the funding relationship, and that it can take a long time to “get through.”

### ***Capacity-building***

Many funders offer capacity-building opportunities to the field actors as they exit. The Center for Effective Philanthropy identified fourteen different kinds of assistance “beyond the grant.” These typically take the form of technical assistance provided by experts in the areas of

board development, fundraising, leadership development, management, strategic planning, evaluation, and communications.

The rationale underlying capacity building strategies is to leave the field with strong organizations. Foundations sometimes offer a set of consultants that grantees and other field actors can call on, or they cover the costs of a consultant they select. One donor observed, “Grantees need to be hand held about the infrastructure stuff. Saying that they need board development doesn’t work if it doesn’t come from them. You often have to sit down with them and tie the technical assistance to final grants.”

### ***Funding***

Foundations have developed a wide range of options through which they provide funding and help organizations and fields secure other support. Some funding strategies are more appropriate to exiting fields, although all of them may help particular field actors.

Various interviewees expressed skepticism regarding foundations’ attempts to attract other donors to support a field that they are exiting noting, “it’s musical chairs.” “Getting other funders is just for bridge. Every funder is going to leave.” Funders should not wait until they are leaving the field before trying to find donors to pick up the slack. Establishing funding partnerships up front is a better strategy for attracting other donors.

A common funding strategy is to provide [multi-year or “tie-off” grants](#). “The problem with tie-offs is that there is no plan for how the money will be sustained,” cautions one funder. For that reason, many donors are now wary of going into a field solo, and they get other funders aligned to fund jointly from the outset. Another donor describes their funding strategy: “Building a field requires bringing a lot of foundations on board so that we don’t own it.”

One national donor established deliberate [partnerships with local foundations](#) that provided 50 percent of funding so that the local work of a field could continue when the national funder exited. Another made grants to community foundations so that they in turn, would make the grants to the field. “Community foundations will stay in the community and if they become interested and involved in a field, they are likely to continue to support it after we leave,” reasoned one funder.

[Funders’ collaboratives](#) have become a popular approach among donors. Sometimes administered through [affinity groups](#) as a mechanism to inform foundations about the fields’ issues, collaboratives recruit local and national donors to pool funds and make grants to particular fields. The Beldon Foundation recommends that donors [convene funders](#) and establish peer-to-peer networks to encourage partnerships. Another tactic is to provide [matching grants](#) to encourage other donors to partner. An advantage of these strategies is that they signal continued funder interest in a field, even as they are in the process of exiting.

[Government support](#) has been a traditional source of funds for sustaining and scaling up fields. With the ongoing economic crisis, government funds have become harder to come by,

prompting one interviewee to assert, “People think that foundations will develop a field and have public money follow, but this is not the case anymore.”

Some donors provide [multi-year grants](#) that diminish over the years so that the field becomes used to “replacing their funds.” To give field actors flexibility during an exit process, a study participant suggested, “Sometimes the most straightforward funding such as [multi-year general operating grants](#) is the most logical to do.”

Foundations may also consider granting [endowments, reserve funds, program-related investments, capital depletion grants, and loans](#) to select field actors. If an organization has marketable skills, funders may support some sort of [enterprise development](#) through the expert guidance of nonprofits such as Community Wealth Ventures. All of these tools may strengthen the fiscal health of organizations, but need to be considered in light of the needs and possibilities of each.

Box 3 summarizes the top ten effective donor practices to achieve a responsible field exit process, as identified through this study. Most of these practices also apply in the case of ending funding relationships with single organizations, and of an “emergency exit.”

#### Box 3

### Top Ten Effective Donor Practices For A Responsible Field Exit Process

1. Communicate clearly, early and often with all field actors including funding partners, regarding the timing and reasons for the exit.
2. Use different modes of communication to deliver a consistent message: personal conversation, public announcements, personal letters, emails, conferences, seminars, meetings, affinity groups, etc.
3. Involve the foundation’s chief executive in the communications with the field.
4. Ensure that all foundation staff and leadership are informed of the field exit and able to respond effectively to questions.
5. Invite field actors to comment and react to the exit announcement.
6. Involve field actors in assessing their impact on the field.
7. Publicize broadly and particularly to other potential donors, the successes of the field and its actors, and its needs and opportunities.
8. Involve field actors in determining their capacity building needs and provide support for these opportunities.
9. Signal continued interest and attract donors into the field through partnerships, matching grants, donors’ collaboratives and affinity groups.
10. Provide three or more years of support once the exit is announced.

### Effective donor practices to promote field sustainability

Donors achieve a successful field exit when they implement a process that is respectful of the mutual relationships between themselves, their grantees, and other field actors, and when they help ensure that key components of the work of the field continue. The previous section describes essentials of a respectful exit *process*. This section focuses more specifically on how exiting donors can help *sustain* the work of the field. Undoubtedly, a respectful exit process is part of sustaining the work of a field.

Some study participants expressed concerns about the sustainability of fields when key donors exit. “Exiting is extremely wasteful. It could be viewed as the survival of the fittest.” In contrast, a seasoned funder reflected on the resiliency of fields noting that foundations may think of themselves as more important than they are: “I have never seen a field collapse even with irresponsible behavior. Fields are responsible for their own sustainability. By and large, funders are fickle and erratic.”

One way that donors promote sustainability is to begin planning for the exit even as they are building a field.

One way that donors promote sustainability is to begin planning for the exit even as they are building a field. A purposeful approach can help to build strong fields that are more likely to survive when the foundation exits. For example, one interviewee noted that RWJF has identified a set of field elements that it seeks to fund when they develop Requests for Proposals:

- Establish a research base.
- Build an interdisciplinary field.
- Communicate findings effectively.
- Share the stage and sense of responsibility with other funders because “For lasting influence, one cannot come in a top gun.”
- Establish strategic alliances with organizations that can lobby.
- Partner with other donors through funders’ collaboratives and by complementing the funding priorities of others such as government agencies.
- Establish trust and good communication with funding partners and other field actors.

Not all fields are alike and their differences should be taken into account when planning successful exits. The problems that the field seeks to tackle may be broader, such as public health reform, or narrower, such as substance abuse prevention. A lot or a little may be known about the problems that the field addresses. The field may contain few or many strong institutions and leaders. The field problems may have high public appeal or there might be little public interest. The field may be new or existing. It may have many donors or very few.

As funders consider their engagement in and disengagement from fields, they should consider where the field sits along the continua listed in Box 4. The far left of the continua point to characteristics of fields that have a lower likelihood of being sustained when a major funder exits. The far right of the continua describe those that are more likely to be sustained.

Box 4	
<u>LIKELIHOOD OF FIELD SUSTAINABILITY</u>	
<u>LOWER</u>	<u>HIGHER</u>
New field	Existing field
One major funder	Many funders
New organizations	Established organizations
Broad problem area	Specific problem area
Little knowledge base	Significant knowledge production
Few actors	Multiple and diverse actors
Low public awareness	High public appeal
Scattered practices	Institutionalized practices
Unchanged policies	Policies enacted and implemented
Disconnected actors	Highly interconnected actors

Greater time and financial commitments are more likely required when a donor provides major support to build a new field that has few established actors; there is little knowledge about and low public interest in the problems that the field is trying to address; and there are few actors to tackle the problems. To strengthen the likelihood that a field is sustained as a donor exits, the foundation can put in place strategies that try to “move” the field further along to the more sustainable side of the continua. For example, a strategic communications campaign can create awareness of the problems in a field; regularly convening field actors can help increase their ability to connect and work effectively together; and incorporating the knowledge built in a field into certification programs creates an incentive for its sustainability.

One way that exiting donors can make field sustainability more likely is *not* to support emerging fields. Donors may choose to support some elements of existing fields. In these cases, a donor’s exit may not be felt as dramatically by the field as a whole, even though it may still be

destabilizing to its specific actors. But avoiding emerging fields is contrary to the risk-taking character of philanthropy and its ability to support change agents and innovation. In the words of an experienced philanthropy expert, “It is important to recognize that risk is part of what a foundation should do; jump in to a promising area.” A study participant recounted how George Soros “would come into a field with a big footprint and no partners. But some of the things would not have been done if there were partners. It is important to do some things that are bold and even if it means to go in without partners. Sometimes you have to jump into the pool by yourself and others will follow, if it works.”

Funders have an interest in the survival of a field as they exit, both because of the field’s value to the larger society, and because it demonstrates the value of their investment. The likelihood of field sustainability is greater if a funder helps to build a strong field, and exits it as responsibly as possible.

### **Is there a right time to exit a field?**

The problems that a field sets out to solve are complex. The work is probably never done. “We rarely exit because the problem has been solved,” explains one donor. A former foundation executive asserted: “When a foundation stimulates work in a new field, their exit is likely to cause the most damage.” Another seasoned funder expressed the view: “When we create an institution, we need to be engaged for about twenty years with tapering support for the last five years.”

If a foundation sets out very specific goals and measures progress towards them, it may have a clearer sense of when to exit (once the goals are met). But most times, fields and goals evolve based on opportunities and challenges. Adjusting goals to changing situations is part of effective field development. For example, a frequent goal of many fields is to change policies. But it is hard to predict the timing or extent of policy wins.

The donors that participated in this study mentioned a number of indicators that they look for in deciding to exit a field. One of them explained, “The foundation has done well in those areas where the conversation and the way that people think about the problem has been changed. It is through research and communications that people change the conversation. You need innovative people, organizations, sometimes state or local government, change in norms, leaders, and to be willing to adapt as you go along. Some of this is trial and error. It requires a combination of grants that go to policy thought leaders, workforce preparation of the providers, and evaluation. It’s about demonstrating a new way of doing things and getting research that backs you up. I don’t think anyone ever feels it is a good time to step out. But you can see these things in place, you do feel more comfortable.”

Study participants also mentioned the importance of institutionalizing changes through revisions in university curricula and credentialing programs and tests. “Embedding the change in the culture of an organization” was mentioned as another way to sustain the knowledge built by a field. These examples demonstrate how the timing of an exit can be informed by an assessment of the strength of the field’s elements and its likelihood of sustainability.

### **Assessing field sustainability.**

The indicators of a successful field exit that appear above as Box 2 reflect a strong field's outcomes. The questions that follow are related to these indicators and can help to assess a field's strengths and needs. They are meant to be a guide to donors as they assess a field's likelihood for sustainability, and can be used to inform exiting decisions, including how to target final support. These same questions can be used to assess the strength of the field some years after a donor exits. Answering the questions requires gathering information through a variety of means: using existing data and reports, conducting interviews, formal evaluations, etc. Foundation staff and/or consultants may analyze the resulting information.

### *Questions for donors to assess field sustainability*

**Consensus on goals.** Field actors may work on different dimensions of the problems such as research, curriculum development, advocacy, policy development or leadership training. Their ability to articulate and agree upon a set of goals for the field helps to focus their joint efforts to make sustainable changes. Donors should ask: Do field actors have clearly articulated and agreed upon set of goals for the field?

**Diverse funding.** A field's problems are complex and require long-term attention and funding. Multiple and diverse funding helps ensure field sustainability. Unfortunately, it is unusual for funders to deliberately and planfully collaborate in helping to build a field, or coordinate their field exit. Donors should ask: Who provides funds to support the field? Which foundations are involved in the field? Do they have plans to continue to support the field? Are they informed of the reasons for the planned exit? Does the local, state or national government provide support? Are there anticipated sources of new funds for the field? What is the impact of the exit on the finances of the field as a whole and of the key actors? (Note: The Monitor Institute's Strategy Landscape Tool may be a useful way to gather information on the impact of a funder's exit.)

**Public awareness and support.** If the problems of a field are relevant to people, a field remains important. Are the goals of the field recognized and embraced by the general public? Are there strategic communications tactics in place to keep the issues on the public agenda? Are there policy makers and thought leaders who can speak effectively about the issues?

**Effective programs.** Programs that address the problems of the field need to incorporate new research knowledge and to be assessed to examine their effectiveness. Is there evidence of programs that work to address the problems of the field? Do programs continue to seek improvements based on assessment data on what works?

**Knowledge building and diffusion.** New knowledge helps to improve the work of the field's practitioners and helps promote appropriate public policies. Does the field have a strong body of research? Do the field's problems continue to attract new expert researchers? Do research findings effectively inform policy, practice and communications? Are there knowledgeable and credible spokespersons for the field?

***Institutionalized practice.*** The field's contributions are sustained when institutions such as universities, hospitals, schools, government agencies, credentialing groups, and foundations, have incorporated changes derived from the field's research and programs. Do credentialing systems for the field's practitioners incorporate current field research? Have university curricula changed as a result of the field's work? Are there institutional practices that have changed?

***Policy change.*** Policy changes that address a field's goals can occur at the level of national, local and state government and at the level of institutions such as universities, schools, hospitals. Are there policy changes that have been instituted as a result of the work of the field? Are field actors that monitor and report on the implementation of relevant policies?

***Key institutions.*** Not all field actors are equally strong or established. Often the newer, smaller and more fragile actors provide innovative ideas and represent underserved constituencies that that help advance the work of the field. What is the relative importance of field actors to the field's ability to be effective and timely? Do key institutions have the ability to successfully weather the exit irrespective of their size and years of existence?

***Connections and collaborations.*** The connections between the field actors build strong and effective fields and lead to collaborative efforts. Are there venues where field actors get together for mutual learning and strategizing? Are there opportunities for collaboration among field actors? Have collaborations between field actors led to changes in policies or practices? Do field actors have diverse ways of communicating and sharing knowledge including journals, web pages, newsletters, conferences, field convenings, etc.?

***Mobilization.*** Change often requires field actors to take collective action. Have field actors worked together to achieve a collective goal using strategies such as email and telephone campaigns to key policymakers, mass demonstrations, obtaining signatures on petitions, lobbying legislators, concerted media campaigns, ballot initiatives, etc.?

The impact of a donor's exit can certainly affect the answers to the above questions, particularly if it is a major funder. Thus, if an assessment concludes that the field is strong, a donor should still implement practices that promote successful field exits to increase the field's potential to continue to operate effectively.

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## Section 4

### Concluding Thoughts

#### On Promoting Sustainability: Seven Trends to Resist

A recent (2010) essay by Andrew Nastios, former head of USAID, criticizes international development agencies for supporting only programs that have a high probability of short-term results. Nastios argues that this notion prevents transformative results, crowds out creative work and stifles innovation:

*Undertaking development work in poor countries with weak institutions involves a high degree of uncertainty and risk, and aid agencies are under constant scrutiny by policy makers and bureaucratic regulatory bodies to design systems and measures to reduce that risk. In practice, this means compromising good development practices such as local ownership, a focus on institution building, decentralized decision making and long-term program planning horizons to assure sustainability in order to reduce risk, improve efficiency (at least as it is defined by federal administrative practice), and ensure proper recordkeeping and documentation for every transaction.*

Although Nastios writes about development work in poor countries, his analysis is relevant to field building and sustainability in the United States. The comments by Nastios, study participants and other experts point to a number of trends in philanthropy that work against building and strengthening fields. These are identified below as **seven trends that funders should resist as they build, strengthen and exit fields**:

1. Avoiding risk. The push for quick results undermines the best purposes of foundations: to be pioneering, risk-taking supporters of causes that other social institutions overlook or are unable to undertake. Funders should be aware that risk avoidance is counter to the quest for innovation.
2. Focusing on the short-term. An historical strength of foundations has been their ability to be a constant presence over a significant period of time, building up institutions, and allowing them to mature and weather the hard times. Strong fields and institutions are built through what former Ford Foundation President Susan Berresford calls “patient philanthropy.” She explains that advances “...don’t come on a schedule, and they don’t come as a result of a tight business plan. They require patience, donor flexibility, and a belief in the core function that takes time

Box 5

#### SEVEN TRENDS THAT FUNDERS SHOULD RESIST

1. *Avoiding risk*
2. *Focusing on the short-term*
3. *“Obsessive measurement disorder”*
4. *The survival of the fittest*
5. *Expecting that other funds will fill the gap*
6. *Total field disengagement*
7. *Thinning out the files and closing down the web page*

to gain traction.” Donors should resist the temptation of only supporting programs that are time limited and focused on achieving measurable outcomes. Focusing on short-term outcomes curtails the possibilities of understanding the change process and building institutions that can have a policy impact over the long term.

3. “Obsessive measurement disorder.” This term, coined by Anthony Nastios, describes the growing trend to support only those programs designed to deliver easily measurable results rather than transformative processes of positive and sustainable changes. “Too rigid metrics at the beginning, limit growth,” affirmed a knowledgeable foundation leader who is a critic of rigid indicators that concentrate on outcomes that can be counted. “Metrics need to be looked at as a continuum. It is hard to think of what you want in year ten. Opportunities get opened up and closed off.” Another interviewee explained, “It is a naïve perception of social change to check off a set of outcomes and think that you are done. It is much more complex than that. It just means we have a toehold.”

Interviewees agreed that sometimes metrics are useful. For example, if a foundation wants to achieve a small and defined set of objectives, such as diversifying audiences of arts institutions that “are things you can count.” However, foundations should be careful in trying to predict and control outcomes because social change strategy is not always clear at the outset. It emerges. And one needs to leave space for its development.

4. The survival of the fittest. The impact of a donor’s exit depends on how large a role the funder played in the life of a field and its organizations. Funders may want to provide support to the field actors that they judge to be the strongest, but the newer, emergent groups may well be as important to the field’s sustainability.

Foundations wishing to redress social inequities often support grassroots community organizations as a key part of any movement because of their ability to represent and articulate the needs of the most disempowered groups. Grassroots organizations are often small and more economically fragile, and the first organizations to feel the impact of foundation exits. Donors should assess the relative value of groups to the field. As an experienced donor explained “The newer organizations often are the source of new energy and are the ones that provide new ideas. If you only fund the strongest organizations, you may have a last hired, first fired effect. This weakens the field.”

Providing larger tie-off grants to some institutions and not others, can affect the relationship of the organizations to one another. Donors should assess how large an impact they are likely to have relative to each field actor, and how their final grants may affect the cohesiveness and collegiality among them. Otherwise, tensions may arise that in the words of one study participant “...allow the difference in funding between the groups to become a representation of their relative importance. This can be very misleading. It can reinforce the sense that because a group is older and has more diverse funding, it is more important.”

5. Expect that other funds will fill the gap. Funders need to be honest with themselves about the impact of exiting, particularly in the current economic environment. They should seriously look at whether there are others – government, academia, foundations, corporations—that can continue to support the field. Exiting donors can think about building a bridge to these other institutions. “The notion that a good idea should be self-sustaining is not based on any data, but it is very persistent and a self-perpetuating falsehood,” affirmed one non-profit leader.

A thoughtful review of others in a field can also help to understand the magnitude of a foundation’s extrication. Who else is in the field? What happens to the total funding for the field when the foundation exits? The Monitor Institute’s Strategy Landscape Tool helps funders understand “...how they fit into the ecosystem of activity around them.” It is a promising tool for assessing the impact of a funder’s exit from a field.

“Selling” the field to other donors is difficult to do during an exit process. “It makes them feel like you want to leave them holding the bag,” explained a study participant. As noted previously, connections with other donors are best when they are done early in the funder’s relationship with the field.

6. Total field disengagement. Funders should consider not exiting entirely. “It is more traumatic when a foundation says ‘we are leaving a field’ rather than ‘we are deemphasizing a field, and will offer limited support for sustaining it.’” After years of investments, funders should stay in touch with the field because “Sometimes you need to step back in.”

Study participants suggested various ways for exiting funders to stay connected: “The main thing the foundation can do is convene. Convening keeps the field interacting and dynamic and demonstrates to others that a donor is still interested. This can attract new donors.” Others suggested giving small grants to the leaders of a field: “A loose \$50,000 can have huge impact.”

7. Thin out the files and close down the web page. With the advent of electronic communications, the paper trail of foundation investments is often lost. Most communication between a foundation and field actors is via email and are not kept even when they contain discussions about strategy, capacity and leadership.

Web pages have become repositories of studies, articles, and publications in PDF or other electronic formats, which are often not archived by foundations. Too often, foundations are closing down the web pages that they supported as part of their work in a field with the resulting loss of materials that were organized in ways useful to scholars. Not only is field knowledge lost, but also what field actors learned in the process of building the field. Without the ability to review past history, foundation staff may “reinvent the wheel” rather than building on past knowledge.

As part of successfully exiting a field, foundations should put in place strategies to ensure the preservation of their own materials and those of the field. For example, a small continued foundation investment could allow web pages to remain active and be managed by one of the field actors.

Foundations must grapple with the new archival needs that have emerged from electronic communications technologies. Most foundations worry only about storing their grant related administrative data of a legal and financial nature. RWJF is taking great care to maintain the content of web pages related to their investments in initiatives and fields, digitizing audio and visual materials, and making them accessible to scholars. These efforts began in 2000 when RWJF hired a full time expert archivist. Before 2000, much material was not kept.

There is no group that is currently discussing, developing or sharing information regarding best foundation practices in archiving electronic data. Foundations should be encouraged to develop systems for preserving their “digital assets” and RWJF has much to share about the structure they have put in place.

### Final reflections

More than once this report has noted that social change is difficult, and that is why it is important to invest in multiple strategies over a long period of time. The report has also noted that it is quite usual for foundations to exit fields, and disconcertingly common for them to do so with little advance notice and unclear rationales. How foundations select the particular fields that they exit is even more opaque. Those of us who have worked in foundations have seen the process from the inside and can report that decisions are rarely motivated by a sense that enough has been accomplished and it is time to move on. Too often, exiting a field happens when there is a weak point in a program area, often because of a vacancy, and especially when an internal advocate of the work leaves and there is an unfortunate overlap with a decline in foundation assets. And of course, new foundation leadership generally leads to major changes in the fields supported.

Responsible and respectful field exits require careful and deliberate procedures. It is hoped that the findings and recommendations of this study may offer a degree of rationality to an often arbitrary and inconsiderate process of field exits, because exiting responsibly is essential to achieving the compelling and far-reaching goals that foundations set out for themselves.

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