BENCHMARKING
FOUNDATION
EVALUATION
PRACTICES 2020

CENTER FOR
EVALUATION
INNOVATION

About the Center for Evaluation Innovation

We are a nonprofit that works with foundation leaders and other evaluators to advance evaluation and learning practice in philanthropy so that it helps to produce better and faster results. We specialize in areas that are challenging to assess, such as advocacy and systems change. We also coordinate the Evaluation Roundtable, a network of evaluation and learning leaders in philanthropy.

Authors

This report was prepared by the Center for Evaluation Innovation (CEI). Contributors include Tanya Beer, Albertina Lopez, Julia Coffman, Kat Athanasiades, and Mariah Brothe Gantz.

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Acknowledgements

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About the Survey

In 2019, the Center for Evaluation Innovation administered the Evaluation Roundtable benchmarking survey to collect data on evaluation and learning practices at foundations. This is an ongoing effort (previous surveys were conducted in 2015, 2012, and 2009) to understand evaluation functions and staff roles at foundations; the level of investment in and support of evaluation; the specific evaluative activities foundations engage in; the evaluative challenges foundations experience; and the use of evaluation information once it is collected.

Sample: The 2019 survey was sent to 354 independent and community foundations reporting at least $10M in annual giving during the previous fiscal year, and to foundations that participate in the Evaluation Roundtable network (the vast majority of which meet the annual giving criterion).

Response rate: This report includes survey data from 161 foundations, a 45% response rate. The survey was completed by the most senior staff person responsible for evaluation at each participating foundation.

Where possible, the report compares 2019 results to previous benchmarking surveys to highlight trends.

Throughout this report, evaluation is defined as those activities undertaken to systematically assess and learn about the foundation's work, above and beyond final grant or finance reporting, monitoring, and standard due-diligence practices.

This is the most comprehensive review of evaluation and learning practices in philanthropy.

We conduct the survey so that foundations can compare their evaluation and learning structures and practices to those of the broader sector. The results offer a point-in-time assessment of sector practice. They do not necessarily represent "best" or even "good" practice. They do, however, offer valuable inputs on key questions, such as: How should the evaluation and learning function be staffed and resourced? What kinds of evaluative activities should be prioritized? How can evaluation and learning link to strategy?

We hope this report helps foundations to focus their energy and resources on evaluative and learning work in a way that increases their ability to achieve results.

Respondent Characteristics

69% of respondents previously served as external consultants to foundations.

n = 160

Of these, the majority consulted on **evaluation** and/or **strategy.**

Consulting Capacity Served by Former Consultants

Evaluation	75%
Strategy	65%
Organizational Development	37%
Other	25%

0%   50%   100%
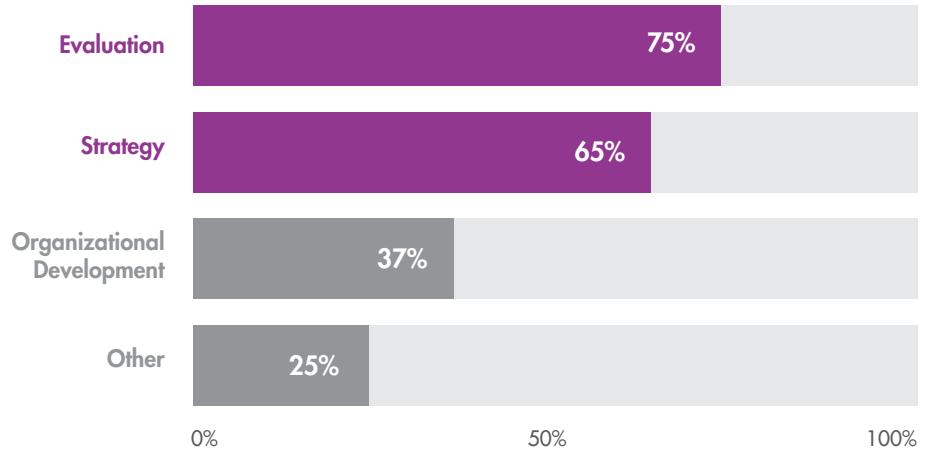
n = 103

One-third of respondents have had responsibility for evaluation-related activities at their foundation for two years or less.

There were half as many new hires (<1 year) in 2019 compared to 2015 (6% vs 13%).

n(2019) = 161; n(2015) = 125

Length of Time with Evaluation-related Responsibilities at this Foundation

6% <1yr	27% 1–2 yrs	35% 3–5 yrs	15% 6–8 yrs	17% ≥9yrs

0%   50%   100%

n = 161

The majority of respondents had primary responsibility for advising, managing, or designing evaluation and/or evaluation-related activities at their foundation.

Extent of Evaluation-related Responsibilities at this Foundation

43% "I share responsibility for this work"

57% "I have primary responsibility for this work"
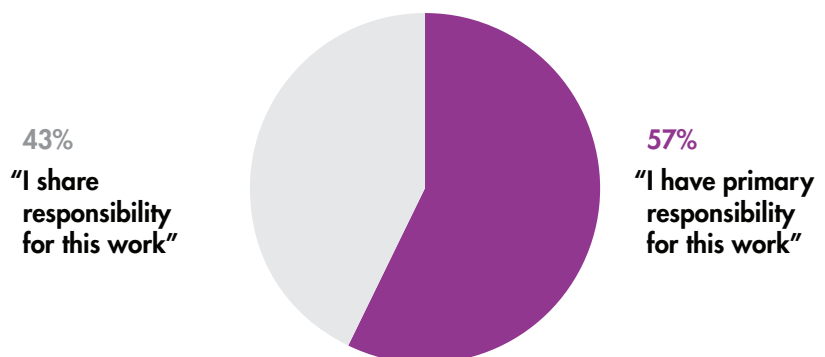
n = 161

Respondent Characteristics

Less than half of respondents' job titles included the word **evaluation.** More than one-third of their job titles included the word **learning.**

"Strategy" did not appear in any job titles in 2009. By 2019, it was in about 10% of titles.

Job Titles Including the Word Evaluation, Learning, Research, or Strategy

Evaluation

2009	2012	2015	2019
45%	72%	32%	40%

Learning

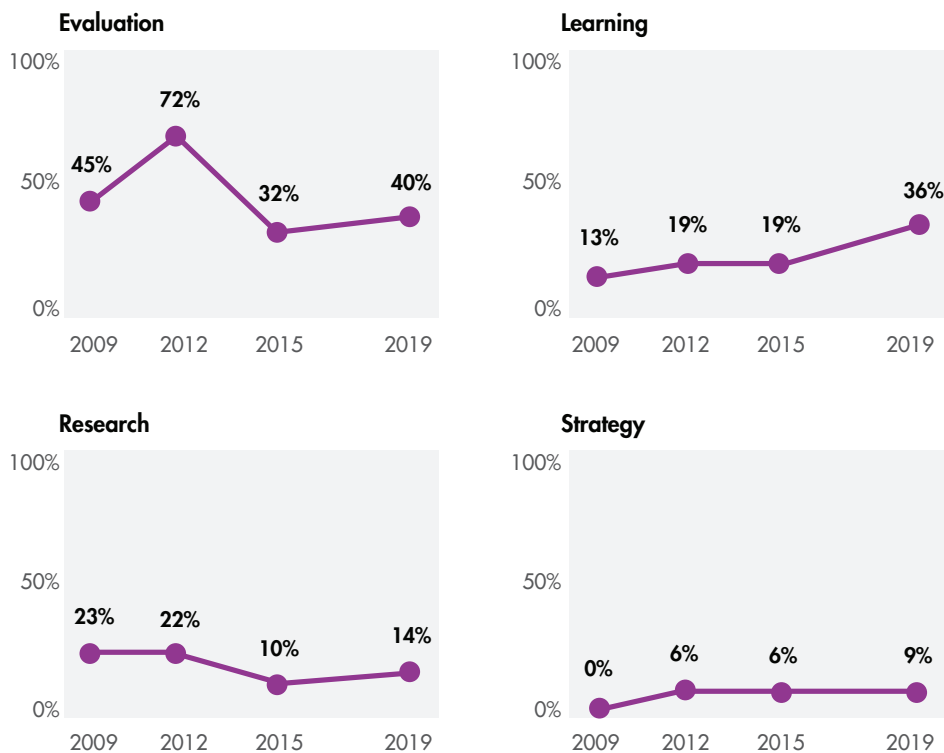| 2009	2012	2015	2019
13%	19%	19%	36%

Research

2009	2012	2015	2019
23%	22%	10%	14%

Strategy

2009	2012	2015	2019
0%	6%	6%	9%

The senior-most evaluation staff person at nearly three-fourths of foundations was at the **director or vice president level.**

In 2015, this question changed from an open response to discrete choices. Open responses from 2009 and 2012 were coded to fit into one job title.

The surveys in 2009 and 2012 were conducted with a sample of Evaluation Roundtable members. In 2015 and 2019, the surveys were distributed to the broader sample described in About the Survey on page 4.

Most Senior-Level Evaluation Staff Person at the Foundation

	Vice President	Director	Manager	Officer	Other
2019	22%	51%	4%	16%	7%
2015	25%	48%	3%	19%	6%
2012	10%	52%	3%	26%	10%
2009	13%	73%	3%	3%	7%
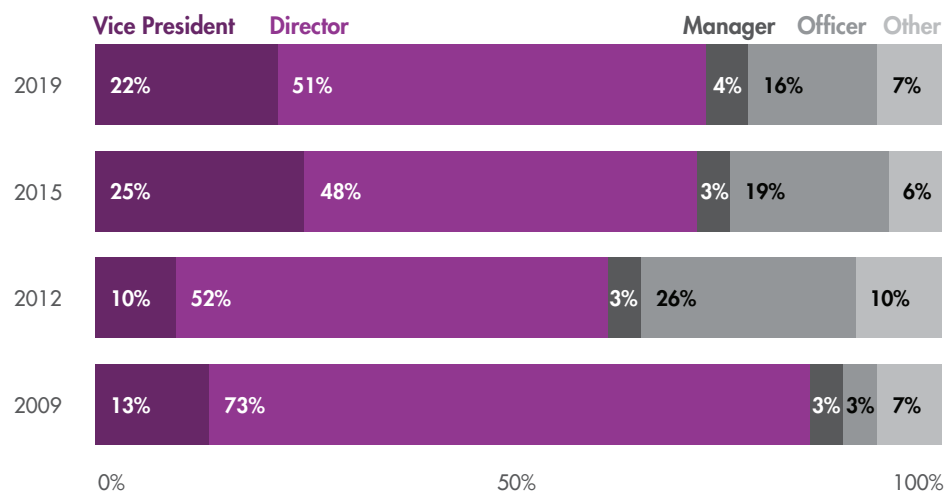
For page: n(2019) = 161; n(2015) = 127; n(2012) = 32; n(2009) = 31

Foundation Characteristics

Almost **two-thirds** of foundations that responded gave less than $50M annually.

Median giving was $30M.

Reported by the Foundation Center in September 2019.

Annual Foundation Giving

63% <$50M	25% $50–200M	12% >$200M

0%　　　　　　　　50%　　　　　　　100%

n = 119

In the previous three years, over half of foundations had experienced major organizational changes in the form of foundation-wide strategy revisions; staff restructuring; shifts in priority issue areas; and/or diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts.
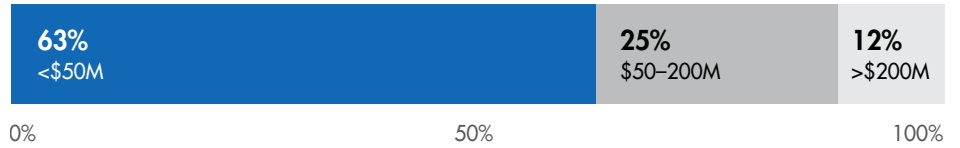
Foundations that experienced a CEO transition were more likely to experience **all other changes** except for changes to mission and priority issues within program areas.

n =161　　(.17 ≤ r ≤ .23)

Foundations that Experienced Each Change During the Previous Three Years

68%
Organization-wide strategic planning or strategy refresh

61%
Organization/staff restructuring

59%
Change in priority issues within program areas

40% saw changes in all three.

56%
Organization-wide Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) effort

47%
Change in the grants management system

34%
Change in program areas

30%
CEO transition

13%
Change in mission

12%
Other

0%　　　　　　　　50%　　　　　　　100%
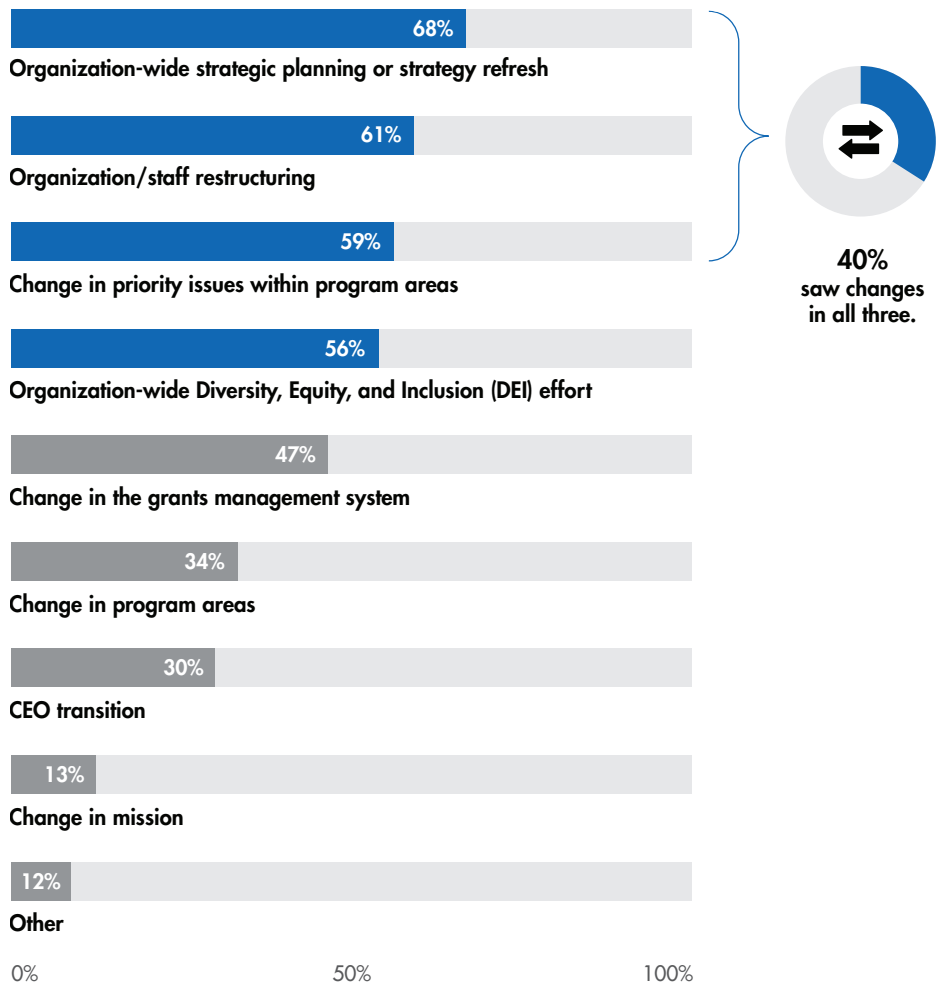
n = 161

Organizing for Evaluation

In 42% of foundations, staff responsible for evaluation were housed in a unit or department separate from program staff.

This increased from 34% in 2015.

42%
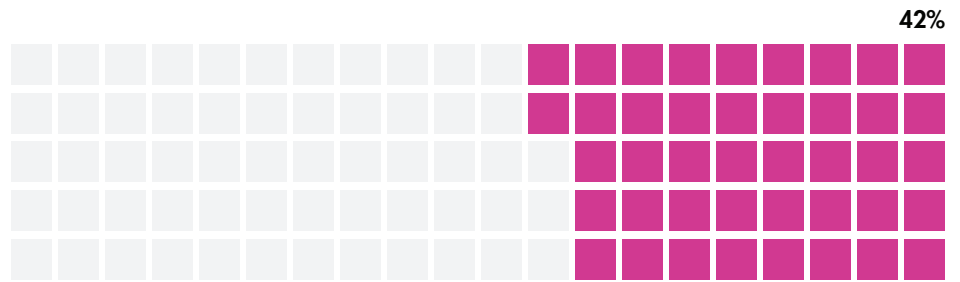
n(2019) = 159; n(2015) = 127

Half of respondents reported directly to the foundation's CEO or president.

Who The Evaluation Function Reports To

42% — **34%** — **62%** — **49%** **CEO / President**

38% — Senior or Executive-Level Non-Program Staff — **32%**

35% — **23%** — **9%** — **11%** Senior or Executive-Level Program Staff

19% — **22%** — **6%** — **7%** Other

3% — **6%**

2009 2012 2015 2019
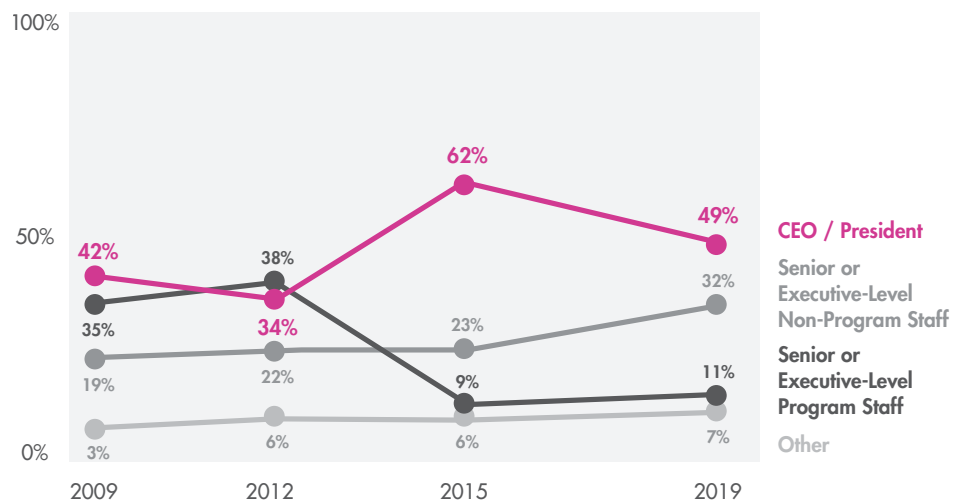
n(2019) = 160; n(2015) = 127; n(2012) = 32; n(2009) = 31

Organizing for Evaluation

As with job titles, **unit or department names** most commonly included the words *learning* and *evaluation*.

Unit names often combine two or more of these terms.

21% had changed their department or unit's name in the previous two years.

n = 68

Words Included in Unit or Department Names

Category	Percentage
Learning	48%
Evaluation	47%
Research	25%
Strategy	20%
Impact	13%
Measurement	7%
Operation	7%
Executive / President	6%
Assessment	4%
Policy	4%
"No name"	4%
Shared / Team	3%
Effectiveness	3%
Other	15%

0%   50%   100%
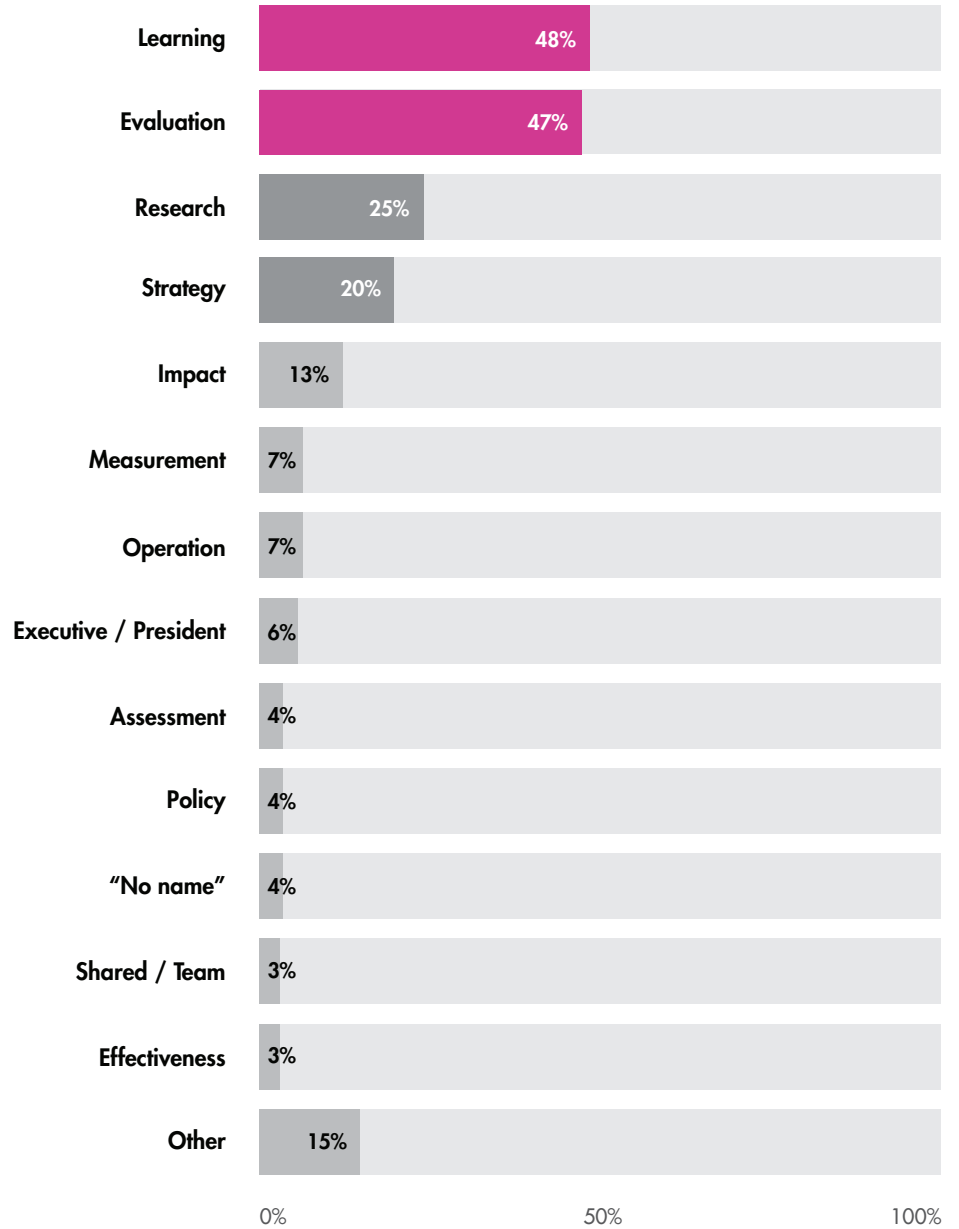
n = 67

Staffing for Evaluation

Foundations had almost 16 full-time program staff for every 1 evaluation staff.

This ratio has widened from 2015 where there were 10 program staff for every 1 evaluation staff member.

Evaluation and Program Staff

Median FTE Evaluation Staff = 1.0

Median FTE Program Staff = 15.75

n = 155

40% of all evaluation staff at foundations were people of color.

Survey participants reported on the race and ethnicity of their teams. Percentages do not sum to 100% due to rounding error.

Percentages reported in right-side bar are out of 100%.

Race / Ethnicity of All Staff with Evaluation Responsibilities

White 60%

People of Color 40%

Asian 12%

Black 12%

Hispanic 8%

Multiple 4%

Middle Eastern 2%

American Indian 1%

Pacific Islander .2%
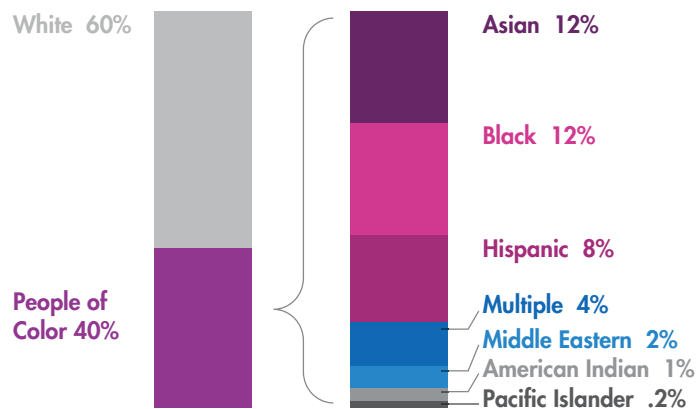
n = 147

Larger foundations tended to have more program staff, but the number of evaluation staff did not similarly increase.

In the outlier analysis, eight foundations were removed for having extremely high giving amounts. These foundations had more evaluation staff relative to program staff than is shown in the general trend line.

Number of Staff by Annual Giving Amounts

Program Staff

Evaluation Staff

90

50

0

$0 $150M $250M
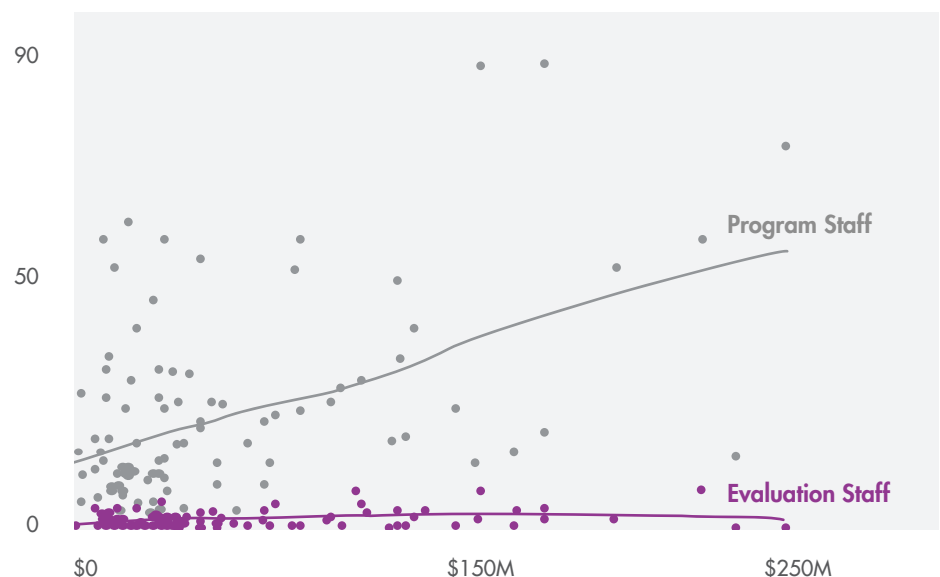
n = 108

Evaluation Responsibilities

In 2019, 61% of foundations had staff with evaluation responsibilities who **also had** programmatic grantmaking responsibilities; this increased from 42% in 2015.

61%
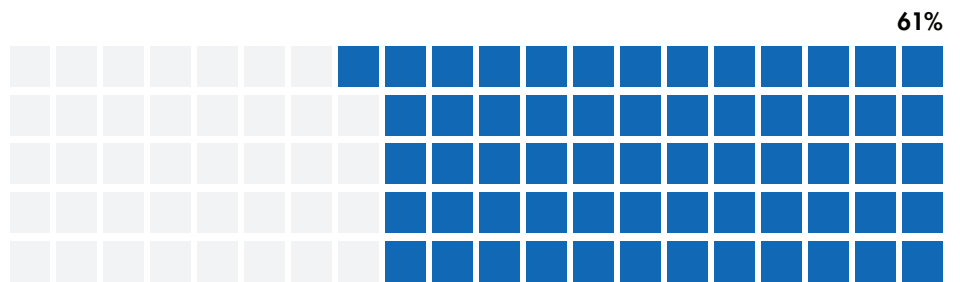
n(2019) = 150; n(2015) = 118

Among staff with evaluation-related responsibilities:

55%
Directed and managed all or most evaluation work.

35%
Provided advice and coaching to other foundation staff.

23%
Hired third-parties to direct and manage most or all evaluation work.
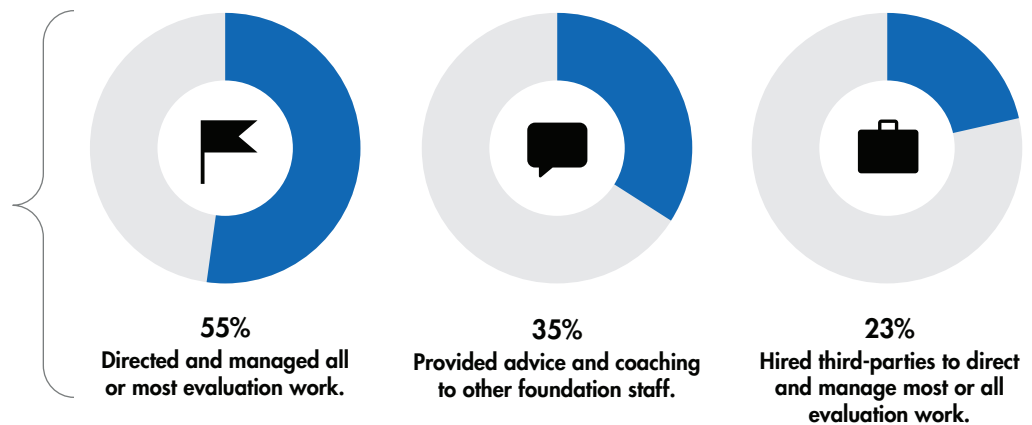
14% reported a combination of all three responsibilities.

n = 150

19% of those answering the question indicated "other" and wrote in their responses. These responses were coded and added to these three categories where appropriate. Therefore, these three response options sum to more than 100%.

In addition, 6% of the total responses indicated an "other" that did not fit into these three categories.

21% of foundations had staff who were responsible for **supporting learning** *separate* from evaluation.

n = 153
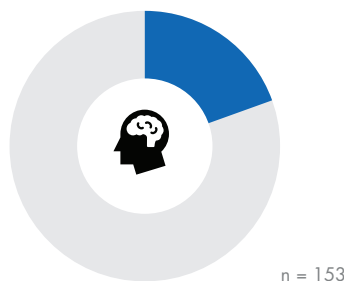
Evaluation Responsibilities

Evaluation staff divided their time among a wide range of responsibilities.

Responsibilities that Evaluation Staff Prioritized and Spent Time On

% that prioritize as top 4   % that spend time

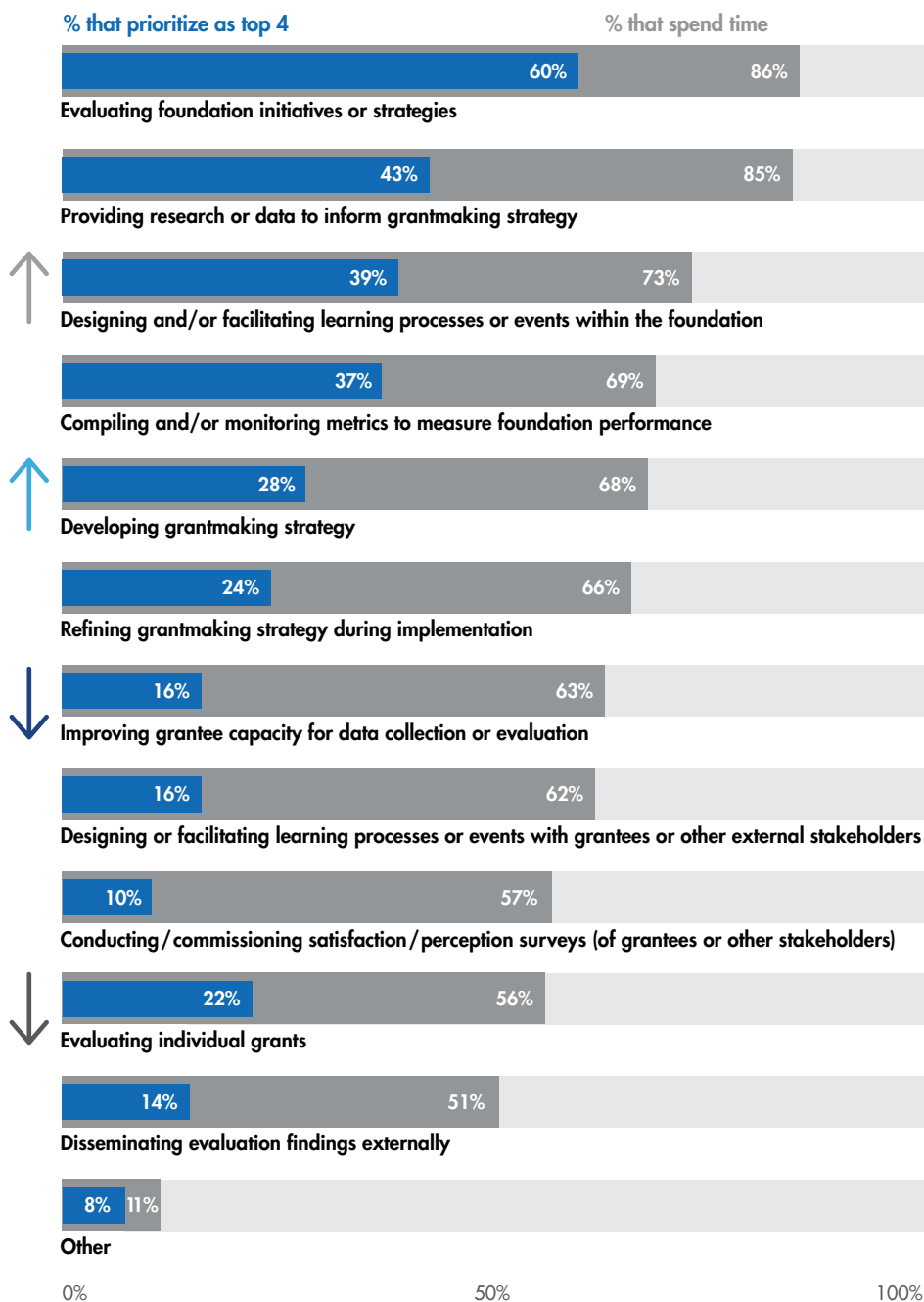|	% prioritize	% spend time
Evaluating foundation initiatives or strategies	60%	86%
Providing research or data to inform grantmaking strategy	43%	85%
Designing and/or facilitating learning processes or events within the foundation ↑	39%	73%
Compiling and/or monitoring metrics to measure foundation performance	37%	69%
Developing grantmaking strategy ↑	28%	68%
Refining grantmaking strategy during implementation	24%	66%
Improving grantee capacity for data collection or evaluation ↓	16%	63%
Designing or facilitating learning processes or events with grantees or other external stakeholders	16%	62%
Conducting/commissioning satisfaction/perception surveys (of grantees or other stakeholders)	10%	57%
Evaluating individual grants ↓	22%	56%
Disseminating evaluation findings externally	14%	51%
Other	8%	11%

0%   50%   100%

n(prioritize) = 147; n(spend time) = 150

↑↓ Priorities for **developing grantmaking strategy** increased in rank and **improving grantee capacity** decreased in rank since 2015.

↑↓ Time-spent **designing learning processes** increased in rank and **evaluating individual grants** decreased in rank since 2015.

For each reporting year, responsibilities were ranked by the percentage of foundations who selected prioritizing or spending time on each responsibility. The largest rank increase and decrease across 2015 and 2019 are reported.
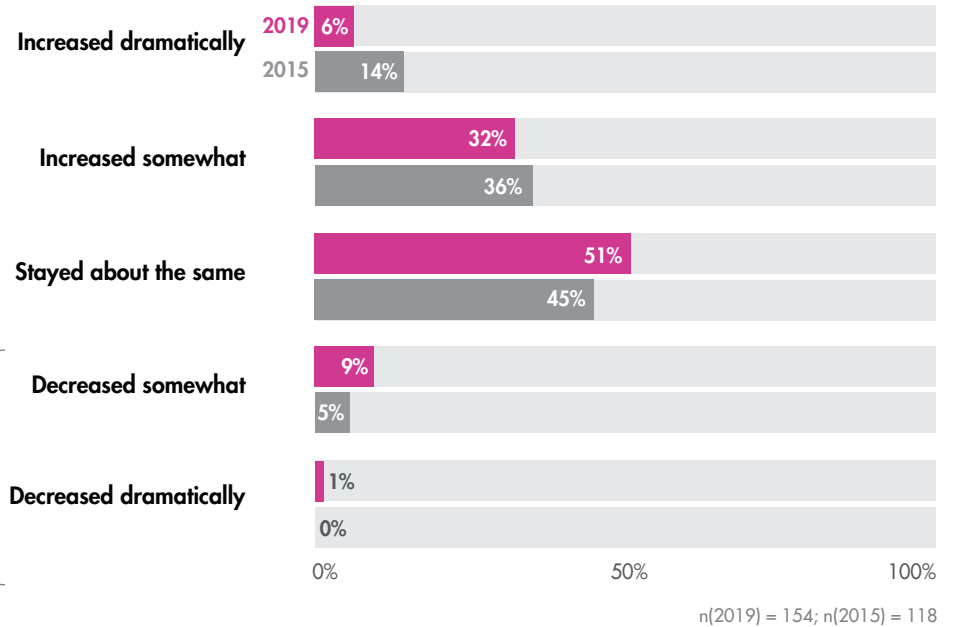
Funding for Evaluation

The proportion of foundations reporting an increase in evaluation funding relative to program funding has declined since 2015.

The proportion who perceived a decrease in evaluation funding doubled from 5% to 10% in the same period.

Perception of Change in Evaluation Funding Relative to Program Funding Over the Previous Two Years

	2019	2015
Increased dramatically	6%	14%
Increased somewhat	32%	36%
Stayed about the same	51%	45%
Decreased somewhat	9%	5%
Decreased dramatically	1%	0%

n(2019) = 154; n(2015) = 118

Respondents said individual grant funding that included funds for evaluation was rare.

In 2015, only 20% of foundations allocated evaluation funds in over one-quarter of their individual grants; this decreased to 12% in 2019.

Almost two-thirds said they include evaluation dollars for less than 10% of individual grants.

Foundations' Individual Grants that Included Funding for Evaluation

	2019	2015
More than 75%	6%	8%
51% to 75%	4%	5%
26% to 50%	2%	7%
10% to 25%	26%	18%
Less than 10%	50%	50%
None	13%	13%

n(2019) = 117; n(2015) = 102
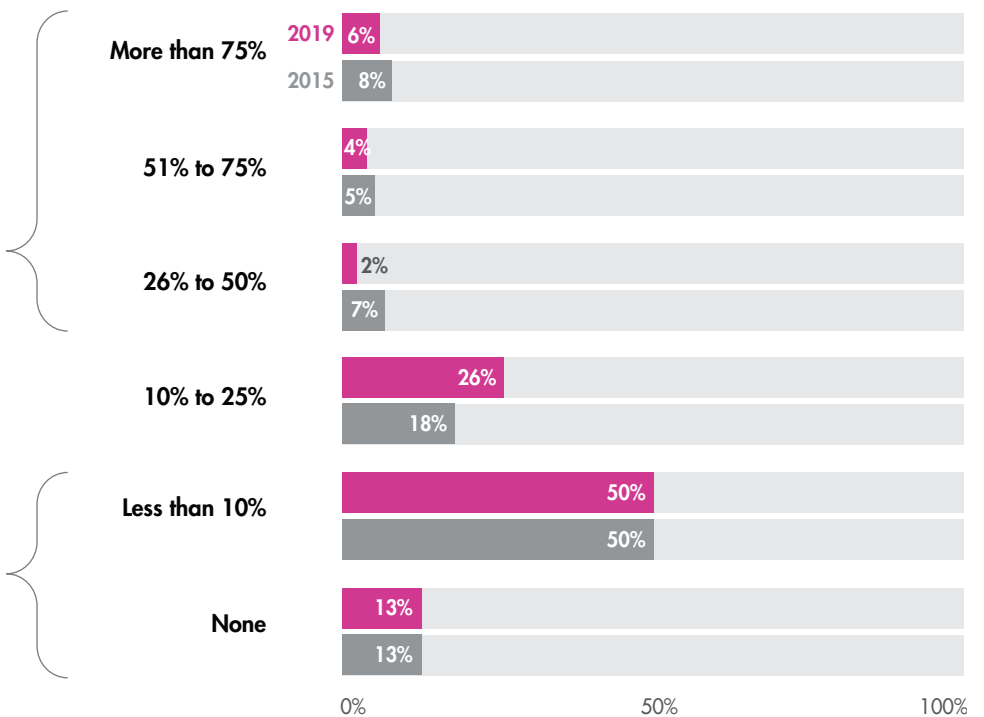
Funding for Evaluation

68% of foundations reported the evaluation unit had its **own grantmaking or contracting budget,** down from 79% in 2015.
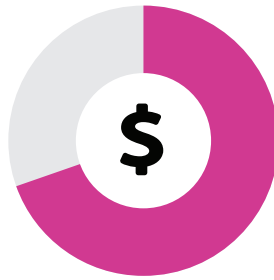
n(2019) = 66; n(2015) = 43

The median annual evaluation budget was a little over **half a million** dollars for grantmaking or contracting. The small number of respondents **spending a lot more than that** drove the mean much higher to $3.4M.

Evaluation Grantmaking or Contracting Budget in the Most Recent Fiscal Year

Max (Q4)	$80M
Mean	$3.4M
Q3	$1.9M
Median (Q2)	$525K
Q1	$200K
Min	$5K

In the most recent fiscal year, the median grantmaking and/or contracting budget of the evaluation unit was $525,000.

n = 40

Funding for Evaluation

More than half of foundations reported spending **less than $200K annually on evaluation** contracts or grants with external evaluators.

94% of respondents were somewhat or very confident in their estimate.

Amount Spent Annually on Contracts or Grants for External Evaluation

3%	>$10M
22%	$1M to $10M
18%	$200K to <$1M
11%	$100K to <$200K
17%	$50K to <$100K
18%	$1 to <$50K
11%	None

100%

50%

0%
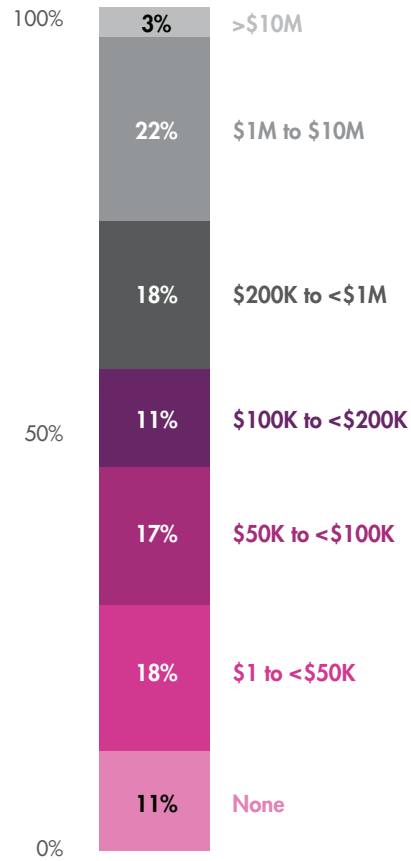
n = 148
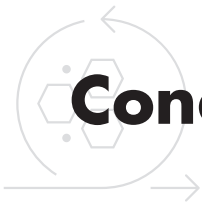
Conducting and Communicating Evaluation

Just over half of foundations reported considering the cultural appropriateness of methods and diversity of evaluation teams when conducting and commissioning evaluations.

71% of foundations reported only *occasionally* or *never* giving communities being evaluated the power to shape and participate in the evaluation process.

Considerations When Conducting and Commissioning Evaluations

Frequency of consideration

Never	Occasionally		Regularly	

13%	32%	54%

Cultural appropriateness of the methods used

16%	32%	52%

Diversity of the teams, including cultural as well as disciplines, beliefs, and lived experiences

16%	49%	34%

Ability of the design to reveal structural and systems-level drivers of inequity (present-day and historically)

28%	43%	29%

Degree to which people/communities being evaluated have the power to shape and participate in the evaluation process

n = 142

Foundations reported commissioning all types of evaluations in 2019, and are commissioning more of all of them compared to 2015.

Types of Evaluation Commissioned

Developmental

	Never	Occasionally	Regularly
2019	30%	44%	26%
2015	42%	39%	19%

Formative

	Never	Occasionally	Regularly
2019	13%	56%	31%
2015	25%	56%	19%

Summative

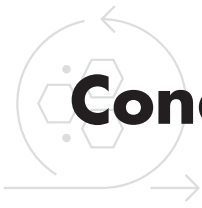|	Never	Occasionally	Regularly
2019	11%	61%	28%
2015	22%	53%	25%

Never **Occasionally** **Regularly**
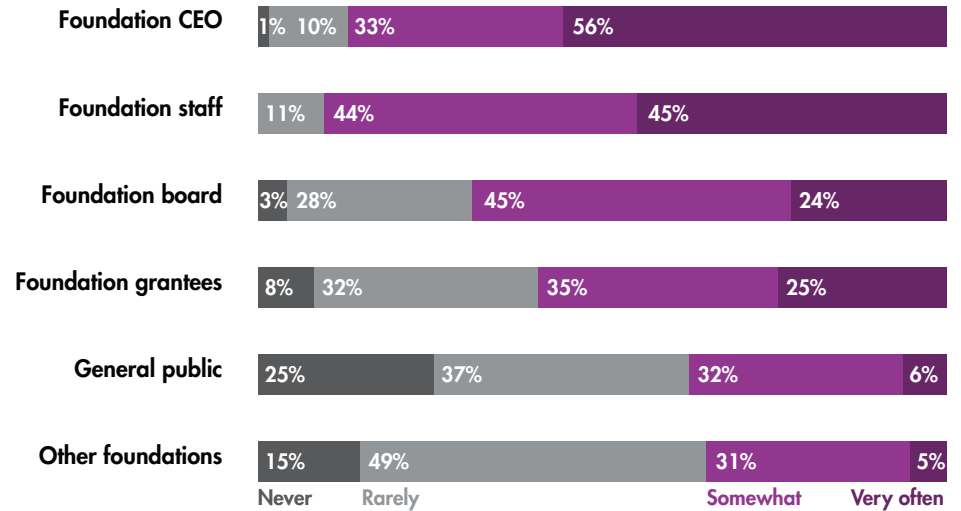
n(2019) = 145; n(2015) = 119

Conducting and Communicating Evaluation

Foundations were most likely to **share evaluation findings internally with the CEO and staff,** and least likely to share findings externally with the general public and other foundations.

Foundations were no more likely to share their findings externally in 2019 than they were in 2015.

n(2019) = 139; n(2015) = 117

Who Foundations Share Evaluation Findings With

|	Never	Rarely	Somewhat	Very often
Foundation CEO	1%	10%	33%	56%
Foundation staff		11%	44%	45%
Foundation board	3%	28%	45%	24%
Foundation grantees	8%	32%	35%	25%
General public	25%	37%	32%	6%
Other foundations	15%	49%	31%	5%

n = 139

Barriers and Supports to Evaluation

In general, challenges to foundations' evaluation efforts were similar to 2015.

Rank Ordering of Biggest Evaluation Challenges

	2019	2015

Having evaluations result in meaningful insights for the foundation — 73% ① ① 83%

Having evaluations result in useful lessons for the field — 73% ② ② 82%

Having evaluations result in useful lessons for grantees — 69% ③ ③ 76%

Incorporating evaluation results into the way the foundation will approach its work in the future — 62% ④ ④ 70%

Identifying third-party evaluators that produce high-quality work — 56% ⑤ ⑤ 63%

Allocating sufficient monetary resources for evaluation efforts — 54% ⑥ ⑥ 59%

Having foundation staff and grantees agree on the goals of the evaluation — 37% ⑦ ⑦ 36%

Having programmatic staff and third-party evaluators agree on the goals of the evaluation — 27% ⑧ ⑧ 31%
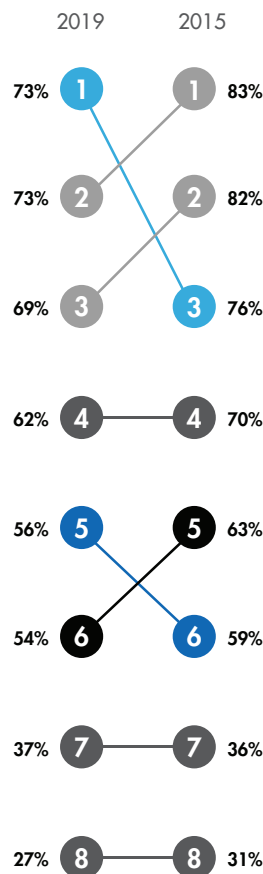
Having evaluations result in meaningful insights for the foundation increased from the third-ranked challenge in 2015 to the highest rank in 2019.

Identifying third-party evaluators that produce high quality work was also slightly more challenging.

Having evaluations result in useful lessons for the field and for grantees was less challenging than in 2015, though still among the top challenges.

Allocating sufficient monetary resources for evaluation was also slightly less challenging.

n(2019) = 143; n(2015) = 125

The number and content of response options for this question changed between years. To compare the data, the highest response options for each year were collapsed: Somewhat, Quite, and Extremely challenging in 2015, and Somewhat and Very in 2019. The sum of the percentages for each evaluation challenge was calculated across these highest response options; these sums were then ranked and compared between 2015 and 2019.

The top two challenges in 2019 both appear as 73% due to rounding error; the first ranked challenge is 73.39% and the second is 72.65%.

$ When senior management showed **good or excellent engagement** with evaluation, **allocating sufficient monetary resources** for evaluation was less of a challenge.
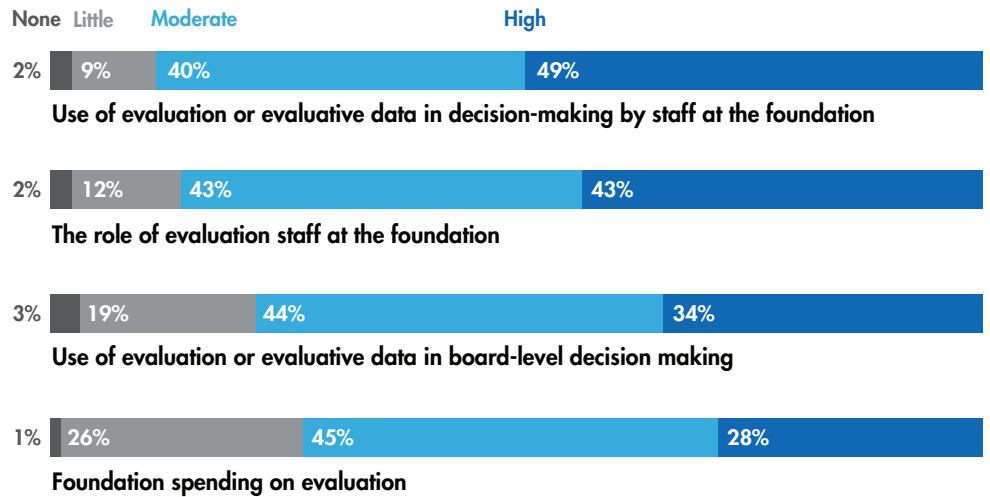
n(2019) = 143, (t (108) = 2.21, p = .029, d = .43)

Barriers and Supports to Evaluation

Respondents said their foundation **boards** were overall **supportive** of evaluation.
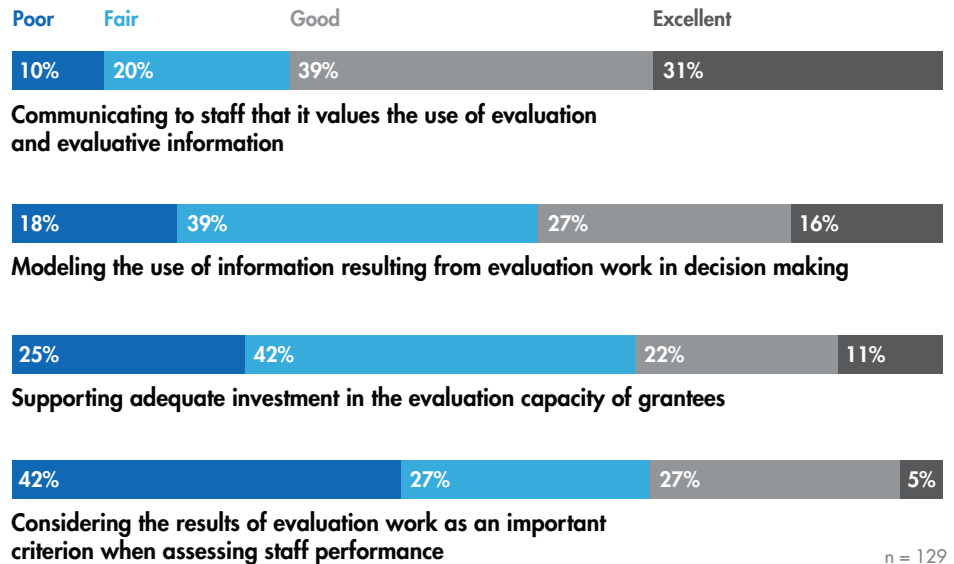
Board's Level of Support for Evaluation

None	Little	Moderate		High

2%	9%	40%	49%

Use of evaluation or evaluative data in decision-making by staff at the foundation

2%	12%	43%	43%

The role of evaluation staff at the foundation

3%	19%	44%	34%

Use of evaluation or evaluative data in board-level decision making

1%	26%	45%	28%

Foundation spending on evaluation

n = 131

Respondents said **foundation senior management** communicated support for evaluation, but their evaluation leadership *behaviors* were more often rated as **poor or fair.**

Engagement ratings may total over 100% due to rounding error.

Senior Management Engagement with Evaluation

Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent

10%	20%	39%	31%

Communicating to staff that it values the use of evaluation and evaluative information

18%	39%	27%	16%

Modeling the use of information resulting from evaluation work in decision making

25%	42%	22%	11%

Supporting adequate investment in the evaluation capacity of grantees

42%	27%	27%	5%

Considering the results of evaluation work as an important criterion when assessing staff performance

n = 129