

Acts of Commission

Lessons from an Informal Study

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September 2003

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Executive Summary

National policy commissions are a tool available to philanthropy—as well as to government and other sectors—that can be useful for raising the visibility of an issue and shaping a policy agenda, or moving a policy debate toward resolution and action. The accomplishments of a few such commissions are referred to decades after their work was completed because they redefined, or defined for the first time, a particular enterprise of concern to the public or because they devised consensus solutions to complex problems. The National Commission on Excellence in Education, created by the U.S. Department of Education in collaboration with the Carnegie Corporation, alerted policymakers and the general public to a quiet crisis in the schools in its 1983 report, *A Nation At Risk*, and set the educational performance of American children in the context of global economic competition, making it a matter of *national* (not just local) public policy for the subsequent decades. The National Commission on Social Security Reform led by Alan Greenspan in the early 1980s is credited with creating a financing structure that ensured financial sustainability of the trust fund into the 21st century. Two commissions on philanthropy that provided their recommendations in the 1970s stimulated legislation on payout obligations of foundations and helped create expectations of accountability to the public that define philanthropy today.

These examples are among more than a dozen that the author draws on to discuss the uses of national commissions by foundations, criteria for commission success, and how commissions are best structured to be effective. The paper results from research conducted by the Annie E. Casey Foundation as part of an exploration to determine whether that foundation should create a national commission to heighten the visibility of workforce issues for the millions of people who provide services to families, youth, and children. This paper shares the lessons of the foundation’s exploratory research, beginning with an analysis of how the “lifespan” of a policy issue fits with the work of a policy commission. The author suggests that commissions are most likely to be effective when they address issues in either an early phase of the policy lifespan—when an issue is either wholly invisible to the public or not viewed as a matter of public policy—or a late phase, when an issue has become a high-profile problem and there are numerous, competing ideas about how to resolve it. (At an in-between stage, it is more difficult for a policy commission to develop a clear charge—such as defining the problem or offering solutions.)

The main lessons offered for foundations considering the creation of a national commission are summarized as: *The most successful commissions are the ones that combine clear goals with savvy management of staff, well chosen commissioners, and strategic use of research and the media.* Unpacking this complex of challenges, more detailed recommendations include:

- Begin with a clearly defined task, a target audience, and an emphasis on articulating tangible actions that are within the power of the audience to execute.
- Bring together a bipartisan cross-sector group of diverse individuals as commission members who have the authority and responsibility to make decisions and shape policy. Posture and temperament of commissioners matter. While a whole body of “middle-of-the-roaders” is not desirable, commissioners must be willing to listen, study, prepare, and be able to transcend ideology.
- Create a tight structure to manage the work of the commission. Elements of such a structure include: active and engaged chairs, or co-chairs who work well together; small enough membership to enable the members to get to know each other; a single, strong staff director leading a staff able to frame clear, data-based decisions for commissioners; and continuing involvement of a foundation executive.
- Invest in applied research, make sure the research is positioned to get attention and reinforce the commission’s goals, and regularly release topical information and research findings to stay in the public eye and build interest and support for the commission’s ultimate recommendations.
- Limit the product of the commission’s work to a small number of actionable recommendations that are within the constituency’s control.
- Develop a media strategy appropriate to the commission’s goal and maintain a constant media presence.
- Invest in follow-up after the commission’s recommendations are released. Activities that support implementation include: education of key audiences, fostering broad-based discussion of recommendations, clarifying guidelines for implementation, building the capacity of organizations that can carry out the work of implementation, and creating awards programs for communities that follow commission recommendations.

The success of a policy commission depends in large part on the funder's preparedness to take on the task of forming and guiding the commission, which requires a considerable investment of time, staff, leadership, and resources for research, media outreach, public education, and coalition building. The author suggests that there is a higher likelihood that commissions will be successful and effective if the foundations that sponsor them can answer "Yes" to these questions:

- Do you know where your issue "sits" in the policy lifespan?
- Do you understand both how the media frame your issue and how the public interprets it?
- Do you have the staff, budget and willingness to do advance research and describe your issue?
- Are you prepared to stay on top of a commission's design and operations for the life of its work?
- Will you actively plan the communications strategy for a commission's work while that work is ongoing?
- Are you prepared to address the requirements for implementation at the same time the policy commission is formulating solutions?