

# Acts of Commission

## Lessons from an Informal Study

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*Practice Matters: The Improving Philanthropy Project* presents a series of papers that explore, and ultimately aim to advance, key practices in philanthropy. Written by national experts, the titles address ten core philanthropic practices: using intermediaries, sponsoring policy commissions, effecting community change, attracting and managing talent, creativity in grantmaking, using ideas in building a field, building organizational capacity, communications for social good, foundation partnerships, and evaluation.

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## Editors' Note

In the last century, foundations have used commissions to mobilize concern and shape agendas regarding important issues of national policy. The National Commission on Excellence in Education, created by the U.S. Department of Education in collaboration with the Carnegie Corporation, successfully alerted policymakers and the general public to a quiet crisis in the public schools. Yet, there are dozens of efforts that fall into disregard. What separates effective commissions from the mundane? Catalyzed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation's interest in exploring whether to create a national commission on workforce issues in the human service sector, Janice Nittoli takes a hard look at the guiding principles and considerations that produce successful policy commissions.

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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?

# Introduction

National commissions have been used by government, philanthropy, and other sectors to generate new policy ideas, educate the public, build popular support for programs, and mobilize groups to take action. With such diverse aims, national commissions take a variety of forms. While there are no formal rules guiding commission operation and achievement, a commission's success or shortfall is rarely accidental. There is an art and science to designing and managing an effective national commission.

This paper focuses on policy commissions, where success is defined as shaping policy through recommendations that are implemented and a legacy that is lasting. The paper discusses the guiding principles and considerations that produce successful policy commissions. Conclusions are drawn from research that the author carried out as part of an effort by the Annie E. Casey Foundation to understand how its own possible use of a national commission might help shape its grantmaking strategy and further its policy agenda. I researched the history and track record of national commissions, looking first at when, how, and under what conditions a foundation might choose to invest in a national commission to advance a policy reform agenda. My conclusions are discussed in the next section—Section II—of the paper. Further research yielded lessons from a variety of national commissions about the context, structure, management, and follow-up that contribute to a successful commission. These lessons are outlined in Section III and are summarized in the final section of the paper, which also offers a set of questions for foundations considering sponsoring national commissions to help them judge their readiness and capacity for such an undertaking.

The paper is based on reviews of over a dozen national commissions sponsored by foundations or the federal government that set out to change both policy and public perception, as well as interviews with several individuals who were involved in those commissions. It is titled an “informal study” because it does not purport to be an exhaustive investigation of all national commissions, nor even of those focused on changing policy, which were examined most carefully. Instead, the paper's goal is to pass on successful examples and practical lessons that may be useful to other foundations considering sponsoring commissions. Some of the lessons are based on a lack of success. It was also important to learn what not to do by looking at some national commissions that failed, wholly or in part, to meet their objectives.

# Commissions: What Are They and How Can They Be Used?

What is a national commission? What can it accomplish? And in what context will it be most successful? My initial exploration of these questions made it clear that little has been written about what makes for an effective commission. I found only one document that addressed these questions from the perspective of foundation staff. This is Joan Wynn's 1991 memo for the Ford Foundation on foundation-sponsored commissions, entitled "Foundation-Supported Commissions: Lessons for Their Creation and Management." Wynn's literature review found no prior documents sharing her focus. In the course of my research, I found none since. (There are, however, several resources that address foundation-sponsored commissions from other perspectives, such as the analyses by Ellen Lagemann and Eleanor Brilliant, cited in the list of sources at the end of the paper.) For the sake of consistency, Wynn's definition of commissions will be used throughout this paper.

**Commissions**—Highly visible advisory bodies composed of a representative group of respected individuals. Commissions are established to study a specified problem within a fixed time period. They are charged with seeking out relevant information, assessing it, and issuing findings or policy recommendations in the form of a public report. Commissions derive much of their force from the development of findings or recommendations that reflect a consensus.

Joan R. Wynn, *Foundation-Supported Commissions: Lessons for Their Creation and Management*, p. 5.

## Purposes

Commissions are formed for a variety of reasons, determined by the needs and goals of the commission sponsor. The research conducted for this paper points to five basic purposes that motivate sponsors to assemble a commission:

- **To frame a new understanding of an issue.** The national commission that produced *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, chaired by a former president of the Carnegie Corporation, is widely credited for creating and shaping awareness of education issues that were not on the public's agenda.
- **To provide a seal of approval.** The Social Security Commission created by President George W. Bush in 2001 and co-chaired by retired Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan and then-Co-CEO of Time Warner, Richard Parsons, was established for this purpose, although negative public reaction to its preliminary recommendations caused the Bush Administration to distance itself from the Commission's work.<sup>1</sup>
- **To buy time.** Establishing a commission is one way elected officials can appear to be taking action when they need time to decide what they really want to do. One historical review found that a U.S. civil rights commission was established after virtually every episode of significant racial violence, going back to the nineteenth century, mostly to buy time.<sup>2</sup> At least as often, according to Peter Szanton, who was involved in two national commissions, "they are intended to produce the semblance of action while taking enough time to allow passions or interest to cool."<sup>3</sup>
- **To find out the facts.** The National Academy of Sciences (NAS) is perhaps the best-known body for work supporting fact-finding commissions. The NAS commissions, committees, and panels convened at the request of government primarily serve to gather data and sift facts, educating their audience and sometimes making recommendations based on consensus among participating experts, usually without media outreach or public awareness-building.<sup>4</sup>
- **To shape policy.** Depending on the extent to which an issue is already defined as a policy problem, a commission established to influence policy may evaluate alternative policy solutions—if the problem is well-defined—or it may surface and define a nascent policy issue. The Social Security Commission chaired by Alan Greenspan in the 1980s is an example of a commission that effectively advanced a policy solution to a problem that was ripe for resolution.<sup>5</sup>

The categories of commissions listed above are not mutually exclusive. A sponsor may invest in a commission for multiple reasons: to get the lay

## What Led the Casey Foundation to Study National Commissions?

The Annie E. Casey Foundation explored the history and track record of national commissions to understand how the use of a commission might further its agenda in a policy area that was relatively new to the Foundation and not well established in the public sphere—i.e., workforce issues in the human services sector.

The Foundation's mission is to foster policy and practice-based reforms aimed at improving the systems of service delivery that have been charged with helping vulnerable children and their families. As part of this work, the Foundation is undertaking a new project to examine the state of the human services workforce. Preliminary research revealed substantial challenges facing this workforce, challenges that threatened the prospects both for large-scale system reform and the well-being of children and families. Further, while there was a wealth of information about these workers, their problems were on no one's agenda, and, in fact, few policymakers or practitioners viewed the legion of counselors, youth workers, childcare teachers, and probation officers as a workforce with common responsibilities, demands, and challenges. The Foundation concluded that naming and studying this workforce could bring attention to its problems and lead to beneficial policy changes. To these ends, Casey looked for a means to raise the profile of this issue, even as the staff gathered new information and sought to shape policy.

Early in the exploration and design phase of this new work, Casey began to consider sponsoring a national commission as a tool to raise awareness and build a constituency around the issues and grantmaking strategies for this new area. The study outlined in this paper was undertaken to determine whether the formation of a national commission would serve to further the Foundation's goals. The Casey Foundation is continuing to assemble data on the challenges and likely solutions in this arena. As that agenda takes shape, the Foundation will determine whether a national commission will become part of its strategy for policy change.

A commission's objectives have implications for the structure and management of the commission.

of the land (fact find and educate); to create a public policy priority out of a currently invisible issue (shape policy and set the agenda); or to offer specific recommendations about how to address a policy problem that is already a subject of debate.

A commission's objectives, along with the intended use and type of commission deployed, have implications for the structure and management of the commission. Therefore, it is important for potential foundation sponsors to carefully consider their goals and capabilities prior to launching a new commission. Among the questions to consider are:

- Would the commission serve the strategic or substantive objectives of one of the foundation’s existing or planned program areas?
- Does the foundation want to build its capacity in the policy area to be addressed by the commission?
- Does the foundation know what it wants from the commission—i.e., to learn, educate, or shape policy and solve problems?
- Does the foundation know its point of view on the issues to be addressed by the commission and is it able to communicate them to potential commission members?
- Is the foundation prepared to make the substantial financial commitment in commission staff, research, site visits, hearings, and media outreach that is required?
- Do foundation staff have the stamina to actively oversee and manage a commission, which often runs for several years?
- Is the foundation ready to invest in reaching or creating a mobilized constituency able to act on commission recommendations (assuming the goal is policy change)?
- Does the foundation have an appetite for visibility and a preference for hands-on management?

If the funder can give a tentative “yes” to the first two questions, the lessons outlined in the next section of this paper should offer some practical guidance on figuring out the rest. (Casey Foundation staff were not able to answer all of these questions at the beginning of the project on the human services workforce, but enough of them could be answered in the affirmative to suggest that a commission was an option worth exploring.)

## What Is a Successful Policy Commission?

Several national policy commissions stand out as effective and illustrative of “best practice.” In reviewing the work of the commissions selected for this study, the standards for success set in Joan Wynn’s paper were used. Wynn judged policy commissions to be effective if they met one of two criteria:<sup>6</sup>

- **They Solved Problems.** Commissions are considered successful if their work serves as a guide to action in addressing a discrete

matter of policy, for example, by exploring and resolving disputes about alternative solutions.

- **They Set an Agenda.** Commissions are considered successful if they make it possible to take a fresh look at the values and assumptions that undergird current policies and consider new approaches. Agenda-setting commissions speak to those responsible for making a commission's vision a reality, either by providing new frames of reference or helping create a constituency for implementation where one does not currently exist.

The product of a successful national commission established to solve problems or set an agenda might be a set of specific, actionable recommendations addressing an already well-defined policy issue. Alternatively, these commissions may issue a simpler, less detailed statement about the importance of a national or international policy issue and identify long-term approaches to addressing it. Reports from agenda-setting commissions work best when they are both accessible and inspirational to their audiences, and relatively brief.<sup>7</sup> In both cases, successful commission sponsors will devote attention and resources to promoting adoption of these recommendations.

Timing is a key determinant of the effectiveness of a national policy commission. Sponsors of policy commissions should have a clear understanding of where in the “policy lifespan” their issue “sits.” This lifespan can be divided into three phases.

In the first phase, an issue is not yet in the public consciousness; either it is wholly invisible or not viewed as a matter of public policy. For example, the consequences of our troubled schools were not on the public agenda before the release of *A Nation At Risk*, but the commission succeeded in both making the issue visible and making it a matter for state governments and the federal government to address. On the other hand, healthy child development is an abiding priority for Americans, but many consider it a private matter and not one that government should get involved in. For this reason, efforts by the Carnegie Corporation to use commissions to elevate to a public policy agenda their professionally acclaimed work in early childhood development have not had the same impact as the commission that produced *A Nation at Risk*.<sup>8</sup>

In the second phase of the policy lifespan, there is heightened public attention and concern about the issue—with multiple and conflicting points of view being actively debated. The issue is on the public policy agenda, but there is no clear route to resolution; constituencies disagree on the nature and extent of the problem and who is responsible for solving it. For example, the National Commission on State and Local Public Service (the Winter Commission) cited several challenges facing government workers at the state and local levels, problems such as efficient recruitment and effective retention of quality workers. There was agreement from

Timing is a key determinant of the effectiveness of a national policy commission.

many quarters that there were problems, but considerable debate on why there were problems, who was responsible for fixing them, and how solutions might be implemented. In other words, the issues faced by the Winter Commission had not boiled down to defined policy proposals which could be analyzed and assessed—which would have reflected a consensus on responsible parties and a mandate for immediate action—as was the case for the National Commission on Social Security Reform (the Greenspan Commission). Nor did the Winter Commission have a blank canvas on which to paint in broad strokes a new vision for public service—which was an advantage for the earlier National Commission on Public Service (the Volcker Commission)—because too many constituencies had already formed opinions about how this policy issue should be framed.

In the third phase of the policy lifespan, the issue has become a high-profile problem and there are numerous, competing ideas about how to resolve it. In both the second and third phases, public attention is focused on the issue, but only in the third phase is there a widely held perception that there is a problem in need of immediate solution.

Commissions are most likely to be effective when they address issues in the first and third phases. In the first phase, an issue awaits definition and a commission with insight and vision can create an agenda where one does not exist by bringing an invisible or currently a private matter to the policy forefront. This is one way to view the work of the National Commission on Excellence in Education (authors of *A Nation at Risk*). In the third phase, all parties, even those who disagree on the nature of the solution, agree that there needs to be one. This was the case when President Reagan appointed the National Commission on Social Security Reform and there was talk of skipping Social Security payments to the nation's elderly.

Commissions that address themselves to issues that fall somewhere in the middle, such as the public service workforce challenges considered by the Winter Commission, fare less well. In these cases, the issues at hand are debated as public policy but they are defined in different ways and argued with varying degrees of urgency. For example, the Winter Commission faced indifference from conservative Republicans with little interest in government, finger-pointing from management groups at unions for causing the problems of worker recruitment and retention, and hostility of unions toward management. This absence of a clear route to a policy solution was combined with a general sense that at the start of the first Clinton Administration, when the Winter Commission released its report, there were many more important policy issues to address than those facing state and local government workers. Commissions taking on policy matters in this middle phase can face the difficult tasks of reframing issues so they are more in line with proposed recommendations and persuading key actors that immediate action is needed.

Commissions are most successful when they seek either to put a low-visibility issue on the public policy agenda or offer a solution to a high-profile problem.

## Policy Commission Examples

Many of the lessons offered by successful policy commissions are drawn from a review of national commissions sponsored by foundations or the federal government. (See Table 1, which provides details on those commissions examined most closely.) Some of the most instructive:

- The report, *A Nation At Risk*, produced by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1981–83), created by the U.S. Department of Education in collaboration with the Carnegie Corporation, alerted policymakers and the general public to the quiet crisis in the nation’s schools. Commission Chairman John Gardner had served previously as President of the Carnegie Corporation.
- The Peterson and Filer Commissions on Philanthropy (1969–70 and 1973–78, respectively), which led to legislation regarding payout obligations of foundations, helped create a recognized field of philanthropy and introduced new voices of accountability, such as the National Committee on Responsive Philanthropy.
- Alan Greenspan’s commission on Social Security reform (1981–83) is credited with creating a financing structure that ensured financial sustainability of the trust fund into the 21st Century. Its management practices, such as creating opportunities for commissioners to get to know and work with each other, are credited for much of its success.
- Paul Volcker’s commission on the federal public service (1988–89), which was among the first to highlight the increasing competitiveness in the labor market for talent, resulted in legislation regarding differential compensation for public employees.
- Labor Secretary Elizabeth Dole’s “SCANS” commission (1990–92) combined careful data analysis and aggressive media outreach to focus public attention on the gap between the skills of the U.S. workforce and those needed in an increasingly technological society.
- The William T. Grant Foundation’s Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship (1986–88) was particularly attentive to following up the Commission’s reports with continued outreach and education efforts.

- The Ford Foundation’s Project on Social Welfare and America’s Future (1984–90), was notable for its sustained investment in the commission’s work (six years) and commitment to sponsoring related research, which accounted for half of its \$6 million budget.

### A Commission Model for Best Practice

The National Commission on Excellence in Education, which produced the groundbreaking report, *A Nation at Risk*, set a “gold standard” for foundation-funded policy commissions. The Commission and its report established a new public policy agenda by focusing attention on school reform issues, a topic that was essentially invisible to the public and had been treated ineffectively by prior commissions. This 18-month effort did four key things exactly right:

- The commission had a clear point of view, which was that U.S. public schools were in crisis;
- The commission targeted its audience of parents and addressed them directly;
- The report’s recommendations were specific, addressed implementation issues directly, and were few in number (only five); and
- The report included ample and solid data that reinforced its credibility and, as a nonpartisan document, focused on the facts.

Lessons also come from several commissions whose success was mixed:

- The Carnegie Corporation’s commission on early childhood was criticized for being too narrow in focus to generate broad action and for under-attending to the pulse of public opinion regarding parental responsibility for children’s healthy development. One highly visible critic disputed the appropriateness of child development as a matter of public policy, asserting it to be a personal matter within families. (This is described in more detail below in the context of media strategies for policy commissions.)
- The Ford Foundation commission on U.S. social policy mentioned above (1984–90) suffered from divided leadership at the staff level and ambiguity about objectives. The commission

was the first sustained assessment of domestic social welfare under Reagan-era policies. At different stages of the commission's life, it appeared that the primary purpose was fact-finding regarding the status of social well-being under the Reagan Administration, while at other points the focus seemed to be on changing the direction of those policies. The fact that the Ford commission exhibits features both to emulate and avoid illustrates the complex nature of managing all aspects of a commission's form and content.

- The National Commission on Civic Renewal (1996–98), sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trusts, drifted in counterproductive directions after a loss of control by the Trusts. It appears that the Trusts invested in this commission to frame an agenda regarding the nature and contribution of community life. Under Commission Chair William Bennett, however, the Commission's messages took on a more individualistic and entrepreneurial emphasis that was consistent with Chairman Bennett's activities at the time as co-director of Empower America, a public policy think tank devoted to the analysis and promotion of free market principles in education, the tax code and Social Security.
- The Rockefeller Commission on Children (1989–91) was deadlocked by an equal number of intransigent members. In the interest of diversity and balance of viewpoints, the Commission was composed of equivalent numbers of Republican and Democratic officials with clear positions on the issues before them. These conditions seemed to contribute to the Commission's difficulty in achieving consensus on little more than generalities. (The issue of balanced commission membership is discussed more in the next section of the paper.)
- The Winter Commission on state and local public service (1993) was created to address in the state and local government the issues that the Volcker Commission had considered regarding the federal public service. This Commission was criticized for being too large and unfocused to have any impact. With 27 members, 11 staff and advisors, and 10 complicated recommendations, the Commission was not identified with clear, actionable positions on issues.

## A Successful Foundation-Sponsored Commission— and a Case of Complicated Relationships

Few foundation-sponsored commissions can—or perhaps would choose to—replicate the close ties to power, decisive action, and rapid implementation achieved by the Carnegie Commission on Public Broadcasting.

In the early 1960s, Carnegie Corporation board members with ties to educational television raised the idea of a commission that would help make public broadcasting a politically and financially viable option for American viewers. This position also enjoyed the support of President Lyndon B. Johnson, who favored Carnegie's idea of a commission, but rejected the proposal of a presidential commission because his wife, Lady Bird, owned radio and television stations in Texas. Carnegie chief executive and trusted Johnson advisor, John Gardner, was asked if Carnegie would support the work. Shortly thereafter—and after Gardner had been named head of the U. S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare—the Carnegie Commission on Public Broadcasting was established, with all personnel informally approved by the Johnson White House.

Lasting about a year, the Commission conducted extensive site visits and received testimony from numerous individuals and organizations. After eight Commission meetings, it released a report—with the help of a public relations consultant. A month later, Johnson recommended passage of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 in his State of the Union Address and signed the bill into law later that year.

The Commission maintained that the issue of public broadcasting—a term the Commission invented—was ready for policy action. The Commission had a broad concept it wanted to establish—a national system of public television supervised by an independent corporation—and a concrete proposal for doing so. Of the dozen recommendations issued, the key one, and the one that was implemented, was the establishment of a federally chartered, nonprofit Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

Ellen Lagemann, in her history of this commission, points out that few foundation-sponsored commissions have so directly shaped public policy or government operations (Lagemann, 1989, pp. 222–26). Fewer might choose to replicate its complicated relationships—a close association with a White House that had its own conflicts of interest around the issue, at a time when Carnegie's chief executive had joined the President's cabinet. Lagemann further speculates that this matter of public broadcasting may have been a policy issue that was already at the boiling point and did not need a commission to achieve resolution. More complex issues regarding the financing of educational television were the focus of a subsequent Carnegie commission in the late 1970s, when consensus and policy impact proved far more elusive.

Regardless of whether the nation needed a national commission to frame the matter of public broadcasting, the Commission did achieve the lasting effect of unifying in an integrated network the public radio and television broadcasters then scattered nationally, as well as help to raise the caliber of programming offered by them.

Table 1 provides a list of the policy-based commissions studied in the Casey Foundation’s exploration of workforce issues in the human services. Even though others are mentioned in this paper for purposes of illustration, they were not examined in depth.

Table 1: National Policy Commissions Reviewed for Casey Study

Commission Name	Commission Chair(s)	Dates	Report	Type of Commission
Carnegie Commission on Educational Television	James R. Killian, Jr. (President of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology at time of appointment)	1966–1967	<i>Public Television: A Program for Action</i> , 1967	Agenda-setting; Problem-solving
Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict	David A. Hamburg, Co-Chair (Carnegie Corporation President Emeritus) & Cyrus Vance, Co-Chair (Former U.S. Secretary of State)	1994–1997	<i>Preventing Deadly Conflict: Final Report</i> , 1997	Agenda-setting; Problem-solving
Carnegie Task Force on Meeting the Needs of Young Children	Richard W. Riley (Former Governor of South Carolina); Eleanor E. Maccoby (Professor, Dept. of Psychology, Stanford University); Julius B. Richmond, (John D. MacArthur Professor of Health Policy Emeritus, Dept. of Social Medicine, Harvard University)	1991–1994	<i>Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of Our Youngest Children</i> , April 1994	Agenda-setting; Problem-solving
Commission on Foundations and Private Philanthropy (“Peterson Commission”)	Peter G. Peterson (CEO, Bell and Howell at time of appointment)	1969–1970	<i>Report and Recommendations of the Commission on Foundations and Private Philanthropy</i> , 1970	Problem-solving
Commission on Private Philanthropy and Public Needs (“Filer Commission”)	John H. Filer (CEO, Aetna Life and Casualty Company)	1973–1978	<i>Giving in America: Toward a Stronger Voluntary Sector</i> , 1975  Research Papers, Volumes 1-5, 1977	Agenda-setting; Problem-solving
Ford Foundation Project on Social Welfare and the American Future	Irving S. Shapiro (Former member of the Foundation’s Board of Trustees and former Chief Executive Officer of the duPont Company)	1984–1990	<i>The Common Good: Social Welfare and the American Future</i> , 1989	Agenda-setting
National Commission on Children (“Rockefeller Commission on Children”)	Senator John D. Rockefeller IV	1989–1991	<i>Beyond Rhetoric: A New American Agenda for Children and Families</i> , 1991	Agenda-setting

Commissions: What Are They and How Can They Be Used?

Commission Name	Commission Chair(s)	Dates	Report	Type of Commission
National Commission on Civic Renewal	William J. Bennett, Co-Chair (Co-Director of Empower America & former U.S. Secretary of Education) & Former U.S. Senator Sam Nunn, Co-Chair	1996–1998	<i>A Nation of Spectators: How Civic Disengagement Weakens America and What We Can Do About It</i> , 1998	Agenda-setting; Problem-solving
National Commission on Excellence in Education	David P. Gardner (President, University of Utah and President-Elect, University of California at time of appointment)	1981–1983	<i>A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform</i> , 1993	Agenda-setting
National Commission on the Public Service (“Volcker Commission”)	Paul Volcker (former Federal Reserve Chairman)	1988–1989	<i>Leadership for America: Rebuilding the Public Service</i> , 1989	Agenda-setting
National Commission on Social Security Reform (“Greenspan Commission”)	Alan Greenspan (Chairman of the President Reagan’s Council of Economic Advisers at time of appointment)	1981–1983	<i>Report of the National Commission on Social Security Reform</i> , 1983	Problem-solving
National Commission on the State and Local Public Service (“Winter Commission”)	Former Mississippi Governor William F. Winter	1993	<i>Hard Truths/Tough Choices: An Agenda for State and Local Reform</i> , 1993	Problem-solving
Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS)	Former U.S. Senator Bill Brock	1990–1992	<i>What Work Requires of Schools: A SCANS Report for America 2000</i> , 1992	Agenda-setting
The William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family, and Citizenship	Harold Howe II (former U.S. Commissioner of Education)	1986–1988	<i>The Forgotten Half: Pathways to Success for America’s Youth and Young Families</i> , 1988	Agenda-setting; Problem-solving

# What Makes a Policy Commission Effective?

The most successful commissions combine clear goals with savvy management of staff, well-chosen commissioners, and strategic use of research and the media.

The most successful commissions—those that people remember and that change their thinking—are ones that combine clear goals with savvy management of staff, well-chosen commissioners, and strategic use of research and the media. The research conducted to explore the Casey Foundation’s possible sponsorship of a national commission pointed to six key elements that require focus if a commission is to be successful. While this research does not prove conclusively that all six are necessary for an effective commission, it is clear that all are powerful contributors to a commission’s success. These elements are:

- A clear charge.
- A diverse and balanced group of decisionmakers led by a strong chair.
- A tight commission structure, with the sponsor controlling the agenda and process.
- A continuous stream of relevant and useful data and research.
- A limited number of actionable recommendations.
- A media strategy and consistent media presence.

Each of these elements is discussed in detail below, with examples of how these factors played out in particular commissions.

## A Clear Charge

The most successful commissions begin with a clearly defined task, a target audience, and an emphasis on articulating tangible actions for that audience to take. The commissions with recommendations that are adopted are those that state their focus early and reinforce this focus by regularly issuing updates and findings that serve to capture public attention and build support for the commission’s goals. Target audiences may

include other funders, legislators and other policymakers, the public at large, or key subgroups of the public, such as parents, or professional constituencies, such as universities.

It is arguably easier for a problem-solving commission to have a clear charge than one that seeks to set an agenda by mapping uncharted territory. The latter has the added task of capturing an audience's attention and persuading them that the issue at hand should be a priority. Thus, for agenda-setting commissions, a clear charge becomes doubly important to a successful outcome. If the commission is itself unclear about what it seeks to do, it will inevitably fail at convincing others.

### What Can Funders Do To Clarify a Commission's Task?

Funders should invest time up front in setting a clear agenda for a commission before they establish one. A foundation sponsor can identify the commission's chair or co-chairs early, seek their input, and take six to nine months to assemble the commission's strategic plan before actually announcing the other commission members and convening them.

This kind of planning not only serves to keep sponsor and staff in control of the commission, it forges a partnership between the foundation and chair(s) and bolsters the chair's capacity to lead.

Two commissions illustrate the importance of defining the commission's charge and audience from the outset. The Winter Commission on state and local public service reform lacked an audience for its message and a constituency able to act on its findings.<sup>9</sup> (The audience was, in theory, to be the first Clinton Administration. However, the new Administration was distracted by other issues, and, with no direct lines into the Administration, the commission had little power to get its attention.) The Ford Foundation's commission on social welfare weakened its impact by failing to clearly identify whether its charge was purely internal education and fact-finding, or was to shape policy.

## A Diverse and Balanced Group of Decisionmakers

Commission members play a powerful role in establishing the profile of a commission and facilitating its goals. The most successful commissions are generally made up of a bipartisan, cross-sector group of diverse individuals who have the authority and responsibility to make decisions and shape policy. A historical review of civil rights commissions suggests that a balanced membership is essential in encouraging public support for

commission findings. The idea is to have a commission that, literally, has face validity, so that anyone looking at the membership list is persuaded that a range of interests is represented. The public will further pay attention to a commission whose individual members have a reputation for getting things done and can garner attention. The issue of getting attention is not a trivial factor. A key finding of the Casey Foundation research is that commissions can send a message that they are serious about change, and unlikely to hew to standard positions, just by who their chair or co-chairs are.

### How Does Selection of Commission Leaders Send a Message?

The selection of a commission chair should always be made with an eye to the message it will send about the commission's work. Carnegie President Alan Pifer succeeded in this with the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education.

Pifer and the Carnegie Board were actively considering the establishment of a broad-ranging commission on higher education. Included in their deliberations was the possibility of naming the widely respected and reform-oriented head of the University of California systems, Clark Kerr, as chair. When Kerr was abruptly dismissed from his post by Governor Ronald Reagan for allowing student protests on campuses, Pifer responded quickly. Four days after Kerr was fired, Carnegie publicly announced that Kerr would lead a study on higher education. The move served not only to garner attention for the new commission but to send a message about the principled and independent stance it planned to assume.

Ultimately, the Commission and its spin-off Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education became a visible and powerful force in higher education policy, much to Kerr's credit. Over its 12 years and through its \$12 million in expenditures, Carnegie's work shaped many elements of the present higher education system, particularly the infrastructure devoted to increased financial accessibility for disadvantaged students. For example, the financial assistance known as Basic Educational Opportunity Grants (BEOG) was modeled on Carnegie analyses and recommendations (Lagemann, 1983, pp. 122–153).

A commission member's resume is important. But equally strong consideration should be given to an individual's posture and temperament. Commissioners must be able to listen and transcend the standard positions of the policy debate. They must be willing to take the time to study the issues and prepare for meetings. A commission of individuals who are unable to bring these qualities to the table is more likely to end in deadlock or reduce its work to compromise—whether by majority rules or lowest

Commission members must be able to listen and transcend the standard positions of the policy debate.

common denominator. Avoiding such outcomes has a lot to do with management by commission staff. (This is discussed more fully in the section below on commission structure.) But funders are advised to carefully choose commissioners with a disposition to problem-solving and to make sure that commission membership includes few individuals ideologically committed to extreme positions on the commission's issue.

This does not suggest that only middle-of-the-road types should be sought to serve on commissions. To the contrary, a range of perspectives and interests gives a commission greater credibility. However, commission members with strong perspectives need to approach the commission's issues with a respect for data, an openness to exchange, and an orientation toward crafting solutions. For example, the National Commission on Children had no shortage of strong viewpoints, but limited capacity to seek and find the common ground needed to solve problems.

### Should a Commission Recruit Sitting Public Officials?

A key issue for any foundation considering investing in a policy commission is whether to recruit sitting public officials as members. The advantage of public officials is that they can make and implement policy decisions. The disadvantage is the politics they invite.

Many influential commissions have included current public officials. For example, David Hamburg surprised many during the Cold War by naming active Soviet officials and U.S. senators to Carnegie's Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict and its related work. Placing Soviet and U.S. policymakers in the room was both an advantage and a risk. Both the Soviets and Americans were decisionmakers for their respective countries; they could hammer out solutions, or they could disagree on Commission matters in ways that extended into and exacerbated US-USSR tensions. The participation of those officials on the Carnegie initiative had the effect of changing Soviet nuclear policy, although, initially, many thought that Dr. Hamburg was taking a chance. On the other hand, Alan Greenspan's Social Security commission, which was equally effective in its own sphere, had no sitting public officials, although many former ones.

In choosing commissioners, sponsors should carefully consider how their own objectives—e.g., educating the public, solving problems, and/or mobilizing support for recommendations—match the kinds of leaders and leadership styles that commission members bring. An action-oriented, problem-solving orientation is key for a commission whose primary task is to shape policy. Different kinds of tasks, though, require

different commission “personalities.” For example, if the purpose is education and fact-finding, a get-it-done commission may move too quickly to bring issues to closure.<sup>10</sup>

### Who Should Serve as Members of a National Commission?

“Successful commissions have different kinds of leaders among their members: thought leaders, relationship leaders, leaders in particular fields, and leaders of public opinion.”

Peter Plastrik, management consultant and co-author with David Osborne of *Banishing Bureaucracy: The Five Strategies for Reinventing Government*.

Foundations should consider a recruitment plan for commission members that brings these qualities to the group:

- Disposition to openness
- Technical knowledge
- Key perspectives (e.g., consumer or provider)
- Standing in the field
- Position as influential generalist (to foster consensus and introduce new ideas)
- Role as listener, persuader, and synthesizer

### A Tight Commission Structure

Smaller commissions with clear lines of authority and an agenda guided by a strategic plan are the ones that tend to produce results. Active and engaged chairs, or co-chairs that work well together, is one key feature of this structure. Another is limiting the commission to a size that lets members get to know each other. A single, strong staff director is important, as is a staff able to frame clear, data-based decisions for commissioners. The key requisites for a tight commission structure are:

*Let commissioners get to know each other.* Commissioners’ willingness to listen, consider other points of view, and seek solutions depends, in part, on their relationships with their colleagues on the commission. It is

reported that Alan Greenspan rotated the seating arrangements at each meeting of his Social Security commission so members always sat next to someone new in order to encourage such collegial relationships.<sup>11</sup> A weakness of the Winter Commission, on the other hand, was that its 27-member size was too unwieldy to allow the group to cohere. Other commissions helped forge a group identity by investing in retreats for commissioners or starting each meeting with a dinner followed by a full working day.

*Put one staff person clearly in charge.* An empowered staff director keeps a commission well run and moving forward. The strongest piece of operational advice the author received in interviews with experienced commission participants and observers is not to divide authority at the staff level. It should be the role of the staff director to frame each decision and discussion that comes before the commission. In contrast, the Chair serves as the public face of the commission—leading the commission’s deliberations and managing consensus, reinforcing the commission’s message through the media, and representing the commission to constituencies who are likely to have a role in implementing the commission’s recommendations.

For foundation-sponsored commissions, a foundation program officer might serve as the staff director of the commission, as opposed to managing the commission as a grant. This helps ensure a linkage between the work of the commission and the foundation’s other program areas, and helps build the capacity of new or related areas of work in the foundation. When foundation staff are directly managing the commission agenda, there are no surprises about directions the commission’s work might take.

*Develop the agenda before creating the commission.* When the task is shaping policy, it is perhaps most effective for the sponsor and staff to develop a framework for debate before the commissioners assemble. This means thinking through, in advance of the commission’s creation, the policy areas to be addressed, key areas of additional research, likely recommendations, and strategy for raising awareness and building support. This framework is then presented at the first meeting for commissioners to review and tweak. Such control is an important but not sufficient condition for effectiveness.

*Use data to frame debate.* Commission hearings framed by data set the stage for a credible, depoliticized discussion of the policy terrain and help commissioners of different perspectives forge common ground. The Greenspan Social Security commission operated by a strict template in which commission staff presented commissioners with numerous policy options and data describing the implications of each issue. No issue made it onto a commission meeting agenda that was not first framed and vetted

by commission staff in light of the assembled data.<sup>12</sup> Strong management at the staff level and data-based decisionmaking also characterized the work of the commission that produced *A Nation at Risk*.

*Make sure the foundation's leadership is on board.* In addition to leadership at the staff level, the continuing involvement of a foundation executive keeps work on track. David Hamburg created several successful commissions on a variety of topics during his tenure as president of the Carnegie Corporation, and their success is credited in large part to his sustained personal involvement. On the other hand, assessments of the Pew Commission on Civic Renewal suggest that its shortcomings are linked to a distant relationship with the commission's sponsors. Similarly, the Ford Foundation commission on social welfare appeared to suffer from internal ambivalence about how the commission related to the foundation's core program areas and whose agenda was being advanced by the commission's work.

A commission's use of data is key to its credibility.

## A Continuous Stream of Relevant and Useful Data and Research

Every successful policy commission studied by Casey invested significant resources in applied research. To maximize this investment, smart commissions make sure their research is positioned to get attention and reinforce the commission's goals. To stay in the public eye, commissions should, ideally, regularly release topical information and research findings. This work can be facilitated by planning and producing numerous, short-term, applied research products, as opposed to a few investigations that take years to complete. By keeping the commission findings in the public consciousness, commissions can build interest and support for their ultimate recommendations. This is arguably a more effective way to press a message than simply announcing the formation and conclusion of a commission.

A commission's use of data is key to its credibility. A commission can build a reputation for reliability and nonpartisanship among policymakers and the public by framing its findings and recommendations in the context of data and sound analysis. In order to claim this high ground of objective assessment, a commission must be able to gather data and use it to clearly define the root of a problem. When he was a member of the Greenspan Social Security commission, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan observed that commissioners could disagree on opinions but not on facts.<sup>13</sup> Those commissions that stand out, such as the Greenspan Commission and the National Commission on Excellence in Education, are those that let the facts speak for themselves.

## An Example of a Tightly Structured Commission

In many ways, the National Commission on Social Security Reform (Greenspan Commission) sets the standard for a policy commission with the task of solving a problem already high on the public's agenda. Indeed, this commission framed a Social Security rescue bill that was signed by President Reagan just before the fund was about to run dry and begin delaying payments to the nation's elderly. In an area littered with the wreckage of failed efforts—the Greenspan Commission was the fourth such group in less than three years—the commission produced a framework that accounts for the continued solvency of the trust fund.

Three areas of practice in which this commission stands out are:

- A diverse group of decisionmakers on the commission.
- Rigorous application of data-based analysis of alternative scenarios and solutions.
- Strategic management of the commissioners as a cohesive group.

Paul Light notes that the “commission provided a rare blend of lobbyists and legislators in the same decisionmaking body.” (Light, p. 165.) The leadership of key interest groups was already represented on the commission, obviating any need to solicit testimony or account for the interests of overlooked constituencies.

In the early 1980s, there were many ideas circulating about how to “fix” the Social Security trust fund and a mounting sense of urgency. What the Greenspan commission did was use credible analytic techniques to assess the implications of each proposed solution, while defining and noting inherent uncertainties with sliding scales or alternative scenarios—for example, by accounting for possible shifts in the economy. It was also clear that indicators of the system's bankruptcy had emerged by the time the Greenspan commission was chartered, reinforcing among policymakers and the public that a solution was urgently needed.

The commission also managed its members effectively—by investing in the time necessary for them to get to know each other and feel comfortable in deliberation and debate. It was also strategic about reaping the benefits of that investment. For example, Chairman Greenspan prohibited deputies from sitting in for commissioners, so that the history and knowledge of all prior discussions were present in all discussions, without the risk that it was being misrepresented by staff who weren't there. (Neustadt and May, p. 28.)

## Investing in Commission Research

One example of sustained investment in commission research is the U.S. Department of Labor Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS). The staff of the SCANS Commission directed all research, focusing on "policy-relevant hypotheses" about education and the economy. The commission and staff decided upon these hypotheses before researchers were hired. Further, SCANS staff held retreats with researchers to create a safe opportunity to debate and brainstorm the next phase of research. The researchers used these meetings to inform their fieldwork, and commission staff found that the meetings reinforced their openness to new ideas and evidence, according to Arnold Packer, the research director. The research budget for SCANS in 1990–1 was \$1 million.

Providing a stream of relevant and useful data also means staying attuned to ways that seemingly unrelated hot-button issues could garner attention for the commission's message. (This also relates to framing and implementing a policy-relevant media strategy for the commission, which is discussed further below.) For example, at the time of this writing, a national commission chaired by Paul Volcker to revisit some of the issues raised in the 1988–89 Volcker Commission on the federal workforce is linking its policy agenda to the national debate underway on the establishment of a federal agency for homeland security.<sup>14</sup>

## A Limited Number of Actionable Recommendations

A policy commission's goal is to produce informed and actionable recommendations. In many cases, a policy or legislative body is targeted to craft legislation supporting reform. However, regardless of the target audience, a commission's recommendations have limited effect if they are not carefully and strategically chosen. Recommendations have a greater likelihood of implementation if they call on a particular constituency to undertake a small number of clear steps that are within the constituency's control. This was the case with several commissions reviewed, including the Volcker Commission on public service (although it is criticized for making too many recommendations), the Greenspan Social Security commission, and the Peterson and Filer commissions on philanthropy.

Recommendations should be tailored to the purposes for which the commission was convened. For example, a policy commission charged with solving a problem needs to produce concrete, realistic recommendations. Agenda-setting commissions also need to be concrete and realistic in their recommendations—although the degree of detail of the

### Commission Recommendations: How Many, How Concrete?

One of the most common errors, committed by even the best-run commissions, is issuing too many recommendations. Another practice that dooms reports to the bookshelf is releasing recommendations that are so vague that no one knows how to act on them.

The National Commission on Excellence in Education was notable for asserting five simple but sweeping recommendations. On the other hand, the Volcker Commission on the Public Service was widely credited with raising an issue of great policy import, but its recommendations were numerous and complex, apparently hindering its impact.

Media strategy is one of the most important factors in a commission's success.

recommendations and the period for implementation may be different. Problem-solving commissions, such as the Volcker, Greenspan, and Peterson and Filer commissions, were expected to recommend strategies that could be implemented in the near term, and their work involved sifting through and evaluating proposed solutions that had been circulating prior to the commission's work. Agenda-setting commissions with staying power, such as those that produced *A Nation at Risk* and the SCANS report, contain recommendations that are generally simpler, fewer in number, and require a longer time frame for implementation.

Above all, recommendations must be aligned with a target audience's ability to implement them. This is particularly true for commissions that highlight issues that have been overlooked or address newly articulated challenges. Such commissions should choose their recommendations with added attention to the policy context in which they will be received. For example, it was noted above that a second commission examining the challenges faced by the federal workforce, chaired by Paul Volcker, framed its recommendations in the context of the national security discussion and the debate on the recently passed Homeland Security legislation.

### A Media Strategy and Constant Media Presence

Media strategy is one of the most important factors in a commission's success, yet it is routinely under-funded or ignored in commission budgets. By paying attention to a few key issues, commissions can effectively use the media to build public support for their agenda and recommendations.

*Recognize media's ability to assist the commission's goals.* Critics Armand Mauss and Julie Wolff argue: "There is no such thing as a social problem until enough people with enough power in society agree that there is."<sup>15</sup> Mass media shape much of what the public concludes is a pressing policy issue—how they see that issue, the causes, and the responsible parties. This can make the media a vital tool in the effort to shift public beliefs about the relative importance of an issue.<sup>16</sup> A commission's effective use of the media and how the media treat a subject can help change what is at the top of the nation's policy agenda, and what the public holds its elected representatives accountable for.

### How Media Can Spread the Message from a Commission

The Volcker Commission, though credited with conducting solid research and public hearings, had no budget for communications, and its impact suffered. Similarly, the Winter Commission under-attended to the labor-intensive advance work required for effective regional hearings and found that most of their sessions had more commissioners than local participants. On the other hand, one member of the SCANS Commission was a vice president of the publishing company for *USA Today* and helped arrange a front-page story on the report's findings on the day of its release. In the week that followed, the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* ran editorials about the report's findings on education and the economy and the Labor Department was besieged with phone calls from parents and teachers requesting copies of the report.

*Understand the link between media and policy formation.* At a commission's outset, staff and commission members are advised to clarify two things: 1) where in the policy lifespan the commission's issue "sits," and 2) the media's current treatment of that issue. As discussed in the first section of the paper, issues evolve through different phases in a policy lifespan and commissions seem to be most effective in the first and third phases. Where an issue "sits" has distinct implications for how the media treat it. Media treatment evolves as the issue passes through its various policy phases. Public perception, too, shifts in tandem with an issue's position and the resulting media treatment.

*Frame your message strategically.* Regardless of the particular way the media frame an issue, every frame includes a point of view on who made the problem and who should fix it. An effective communications strategy uses one frame of an issue, conveyed with enough power and art, to eclipse

all other interpretations.<sup>17</sup> A cautionary example of a frame's power is the release of a Carnegie commission's findings on early childhood. The commission framed its recommendations in the context of scientific knowledge of what works to foster children's healthy development. However, at the press briefing, this powerful message about scientific know-how was trumped by the more powerful core value of personal responsibility when then-Senator Nancy Kassebaum asserted that raising children is the responsibility of parents, not the state.<sup>18</sup>

The task for funders seeking to change policy—and to use a commission as a way to do it—is to determine the public's perception of a given problem and understand the extent to which the issue is seen as a priority, a matter of public policy, and ready for resolution.<sup>19</sup> If the issue is invisible or defined as something other than a policy problem—as in the case of Senator Kassebaum's framing of early childhood development—then the task of policy reformers is to reframe the issue in a way that captures the public imagination and crowds out alternative interpretations of causes, consequences, and who is responsible.

*Build the commission's communications strategy as you build its agenda.* Commissions that have impact remain visible through the life of their operations with a consistent and compelling message. Sponsors are advised to issue a steady stream of topical data that get picked up by the media, both as a result of investment in short-term applied research and as advertising and outreach. The risk of “too much” exposure is in not keeping it linked to the commission's message about problems and likely solutions. Staff should use polling and other research to learn whether, how, and to what extent the media have framed their issue and to understand the public's response to that coverage. The release of findings should be timed to coincide with related issues in the public's consciousness. Additionally, ample advance work should be undertaken to focus public hearings on issues of local interest to ensure broad participation and media coverage.

Many sponsors of policy commissions retain media firms with expertise in public policy to execute media strategy, as opposed to, for example, using the foundation's communications department. Such firms should be brought into the process early in the design phase and closely managed by the foundation and commission. This helps ensure that the media firm develops a clear sense of the foundation's objective, message, and approach and that the foundation and commission frame a clear and compelling strategy.

## *The Final Phase of a Commission's Work*

If a commission is well managed, its goals will remain visible throughout the commission's tenure. However, it is important for ultimate implementation of recommendations that the commission's purpose continues to have momentum after its visible work has been completed. Too often, commissions consider their work done when their report is complete. The report can only be part of the story if the commission is serious about helping ensure the implementation of their advice. The sponsor must keep the commission in the public eye. Investments in follow up—such as education of key audiences, fostering broad-based discussion of recommendations, clarifying guidelines for implementation, building capacity of organizations that can carry out the work of implementation, or creating an awards program for communities following commission recommendations—can help policy commissions make a lasting difference.

Too often, commissions consider their work done when their report is complete.

### How Can Commissions Follow Up on Their Recommendations?

An example of effective follow-up is the William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship. In an effort to increase coverage and discussion of its recommendations regarding European-style apprenticeship programs for youth in the U.S., the Foundation sent 15 reporters selected by the Association of Education Writers to study apprenticeship programs in Germany. The Foundation underwrote the reporters' time to participate in conferences, seminars, and to travel to learn about these programs and other issues of common concern. This contributed to continued and more informed coverage of the issues and ideas raised by the Commission.

# Conclusion

In the course of this research on national commissions, it became clear that the success of a policy commission is substantially aided by the funder's preparedness to take on the task of forming and guiding the commission. Indeed, for such a commission to contribute to policy change, the funder must take an active role in the commission's work—before, during, and after the tenure of its members. My analysis suggests that there is a higher likelihood a commission will be successful and effective if the foundations that sponsor them can answer “yes” to the following questions.

*Do you know where your issue “sits” in the policy lifespan?* Commissions are most useful in defining an issue that has low public visibility or solving a problem that is being actively debated.

*Do you understand both how the media frame your issue and how the public interprets it?* It is especially important with social issues to understand not only how visible the issue is, but the extent to which the matter is seen as a policy problem, as opposed to a matter of personal or family responsibility.

*Do you have the staff, budget, and willingness to do advance research and describe your issue?* This may be research to get a handle on the facts and paint a portrait of current conditions, or research to analyze competing alternative solutions, or both.

*Are you prepared to stay on top of a commission's design and operations for the life of its work?* A tightly focused commission is one that is presented with well-framed, data-driven decisions whose formulation requires significant staff and sponsor management. Before investing in a commission, a foundation sponsor needs to know what it wants to accomplish in the way of policy change, understand how the commission's work links to and extends the foundation's other program areas and investments, and be prepared to dedicate the staff and financial resources to seeing the work through.

*Will you actively plan the communications strategy for a commission's work while that work is ongoing?* Funders should think about how to share early findings and data that can signal the foundation's interest in and perspective on the issue. They should proactively focus (or reframe) public attention on the matter. And they must consistently keep the issues in the public eye by releasing research findings or policy solutions that support the commission's message.

*Are you prepared to address the requirements for implementation at the same time the policy commission is formulating solutions?* This requires thinking concretely about your recommendations and the kinds of financial and staff investments they will demand, for example, in media outreach, public education, and coalition-building.

## Endnotes

1. See Nicholas Confessore, “Commission Impossible. How the Bush Administration Plan to Pave the Way for Privatization Became Its Own Worst Enemy” and *New York Times* Editorial Board, “A Biased Social Security Report.”
2. See Michael Lipsky and David J. Olson, *Commission Politics: The Processing of Racial Crisis in America*.
3. Memo dated July 30, 2002.
4. Interview with Marjory Blumenthal, Executive Director, Computer Science and Technology Board, National Academy of Sciences, July 31, 2001.
5. See Paul Light, *Artful Work: The Politics of Social Security Reform*.
6. See Joan R. Wynn, *Foundation-Supported Commissions: Lessons for Their Creation and Management*, pp. 3–5.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
8. See Carnegie Task Force on Meeting the Needs of Young Children, *Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of Our Youngest Children*. Also, Susan Nall Bales, “Defining the Front End of Strategic Communication,” p. 9.
9. See Lipsky and Olson.
10. Wynn, p. 15.
11. Light, p. 168.
12. Interview with Paul Light, Director, Center for Public Service, The Brookings Institution, June 15, 2001.
13. As reported by Light in *Artful Work: The Politics of Social Security Reform*, the Senator said, “Everyone is entitled to their opinions, but not to their own facts.” (p. 185)
14. National Commission on the Public Service, Paul A. Volcker, Chair. The privately funded Commission’s final report, *Urgent Business for America: Revitalizing the Federal Government for the 21st Century*, was released by The Brookings Institution on January 7, 2003, and is available at [www.brookings.edu](http://www.brookings.edu).
15. Mauss and Wolff, Introduction, p. 3.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
17. Susan Nall Bales, “Defining the Front End of Strategic Communication,” p. 23.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

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# About the Author

## Janice Nittoli

Janice Nittoli directs the Human Services Workforce Initiative and manages New York Grants for the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the nation's largest private foundation dedicated to improving outcomes for poor children and their families. Since joining Casey in 1993, Ms. Nittoli has led the Foundation's work in family development and served on the management team for the Foundation's Neighborhood Transformation/Family Development Initiative. Before coming to Casey, she headed the National Center for Health Education, a national nonprofit that designs and disseminates school and community-based health education programs.

Ms. Nittoli served in several capacities in New York City government. She was assistant commissioner in the Department of Health, where she managed New York City's correctional health system. Before coming to the Health Department, Ms. Nittoli developed and managed child welfare and social services programs in the City's Human Resource Administration and at the Board of Education. In 1984, she staffed a Mayoral Commission to reorganize the delivery of human services in New York City and before that appointment she worked on child welfare issues at the Office of the New York City Council President.

Outside the public sector, Ms. Nittoli has served as president and board chair of High Tide Dance, a modern dance company, and is a board member of University Settlement, a settlement house on Manhattan's Lower East Side, and The Door, a nationally recognized youth services agency in New York City. Prior to returning to New York, she served as president of Southeast Community Organization in her Baltimore neighborhood.

Ms. Nittoli earned her B.A. from Marymount Manhattan College and holds a Master's in Public and International Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School of Princeton University.

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