

The Foundation Review

Volume 8

Issue 4 *Colorado Philanthropy*

Article 4

10-2016

Editorial

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Recommended Citation

Behrens, Teresa R. and Calonge, Ned (2016) "Editorial," *The Foundation Review*: Vol. 8: Iss. 4, Article 4.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1322>

Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/tfr/vol8/iss4/4>

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editorial

Dear Readers,

In this issue, sponsored by The Colorado Trust, we focus on several major philanthropic initiatives from the state of Colorado. The purpose of this issue is not only to highlight the state's vibrant philanthropic sector, but to share what has been learned that may be applicable to others. Colorado's geographic and demographic diversity and the challenges faced in its communities are much the same as those in other states: racial and ethnic disparities in education and health outcomes, access to mental and behavioral health services, and inadequate public transportation. The articles in this issue highlight the ways in which foundations, government organizations, and community members have come together to address these issues, as well as describe the new and innovative approaches being brought to bear in this important work.

Connor, Church, and Yondorf examine the development of the Early Childhood Mental Health Funders Network, an organization of more than 12 community, private, and family foundations, to develop shared strategies for promoting the behavioral health of young children and families. The network evolved from a learning collaborative to an incubator for jointly funded initiatives. Among its collaborative funding efforts is LAUNCH Together, a five-year, \$11.4 million initiative to support the behavioral health of young children and their families. While the network is still new, there are early signs of progress and lessons learned.

Gagne analyzes the efforts of Mile High Connects, a collaborative working to ensure that the Denver region's \$7.8 billion transit project benefits low-income communities and communities of color by connecting them to affordable housing, healthy environments, quality education, and good-paying jobs. The collaborative includes local and national funders that have coalesced around the central issue of transit equity.

The Colorado Health Foundation implemented significant changes to how they invest and operate. **Fort and Price** assessed the uses of strategic communications as an integral tool in announcing and implementing these changes. The success of the foundation's "change" communications strategy was rooted in use of multiple communications and opportunities to engage with the Foundation about the changes. Preparing foundation staff to have front-line communications with primary audiences proved to be critical to conveying information appropriately.

Csuti and Barley explore how The Colorado Trust confronted the fact that the lives of many Coloradans remained fundamentally unchanged after years of nonprofit-led grantmaking. In response, The Trust developed a community-led grantmaking process aimed at achieving a new vision of health equity. These shifts led to significant changes both within The Trust and in



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long-standing relationships with many nonprofits. The Trust dissolved its program department and replaced the program officer position with a team of “community partners” tasked with building relationships with residents in far-flung regions of the state. Resident groups were empowered to identify the needs in their own communities, and have received funding to disperse as they see fit to implement their plans to address those needs. Putting Colorado residents in the driver’s seat for part of its grantmaking altered the fulcrum of power at The Trust. This article also discusses how The Trust came to examine its own power and privilege and to explore diversity, equity, and inclusion – what it means to The Trust and how it can best be prepared for deeper community conversations.

Easterling and Main explore the tension between trusting the wisdom of communities versus trusting scientific evidence. This tension arises not only across the field of philanthropy, but also within individual foundations. This article considers how foundations should manage situations where the two competing philosophies are generating divergent and even inconsistent strategies. This article uses the Polarity Management model in a post-hoc explanatory description of The Trust’s process for adapting strategy, and considers the larger question of whether this model allows foundations to generate more effective strategies than occurs if they are strictly concerned with the principle of strategic alignment.

The final article in this issue is not specific to Colorado philanthropy, but addresses a sector-wide issue, the fit between foundations and how they conduct evaluation. **Coffman and Beer** point out that foundations have become more variable in how they address their missions. This variability means that there is no one right model for how a foundation’s evaluation function should be designed. It is imperative for a foundation to think carefully about how the structure, position, focus, resources, and practices of its evaluation function can best fit its own needs and aspirations. They identify common areas of misalignment between what foundations need and how they are spending their evaluation time and resources. For foundations that are new to evaluation, these are misalignments to avoid. For those experienced with evaluation, they are reminders of what to heed as practices are examined.

These articles highlight how Colorado funders have sought to creatively and collaboratively address community needs. New approaches to how foundations work internally, how they collaborate and communicate with partners, and deep reflection about creating structures that match purpose are desperately needed to tackle today’s challenges. Perhaps the examples we offer here can serve to inform such efforts across the country – and indeed, the world.



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