

# The Foundation Review

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# THE FoundationReview®

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***The Foundation Review*** is the first peer-reviewed journal of philanthropy, written by and for foundation staff and boards and those who work with them implementing programs. Each quarterly issue of *The Foundation Review* provides peer-reviewed reports about the field of philanthropy, including reports by foundations on their own work.

**Our mission:** To share evaluation results, tools, and knowledge about the philanthropic sector in order to improve the practice of grantmaking, yielding greater impact and innovation.

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We believe that the forthright sharing of information among foundations and nonprofits builds a knowledge base that strengthens their ability to effectively address critical social issues. We encourage foundation donors, boards, and staff to honor this transparency in their own practices and to support others who do so.

# Editorial

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Dear readers,

As with many of our unthemed issues, this issue covers a broad range of topics related to the work of philanthropy, from ever-green challenges to emerging approaches to supporting work in communities.

One of the more recent approaches to community philanthropy has been the emergence of community giving days. Typically spear-headed by a community foundation, giving days are an opportunity to encourage philanthropy within a geographic community and raise awareness of the work of nonprofit organizations. **Humphries Brown and Bhati** analyzed the impact of these giving days and found that while the total amount of giving increased between 2009 and 2016, the median amount dropped and the range widened. While the number of giving days is increasing, and they may help increase the number of donors, the expectation about how much money they will raise in any given community should be modest.



*Teresa R. Behrens, Ph.D.*

Looking at one of the perennial challenges in philanthropy, **Easterling and McDuffee** examine the Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts' experience in supporting collaboration. Through interviews with representatives from successful projects, they identified ways in which the foundation was able to support collaborative efforts in ways that increased impact. They also emphasize that it requires high levels of commitment and the capacity to analyze data.

How to scale successful programs is another frequent challenge in the sector. **Maxwell and Richman** describe a process called SPREE — Scaling Programs with Research Evidence and Effectiveness — that has been found to help grantees scale successfully. Efforts to scale programs need to assess both which interventions are likely to be successfully scaled and which organizations are ready to engage in scaling programs. Systematic use of evaluation is key to success.

How to effectively engage board members in strategic planning is yet another ever-green issue. **Mitton, Mundorf, Putnam-Walkerly, and Krey** developed a decision-making placemat tool to engage the board members of the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland in revising the strategy for the foundation's place-based program. The tool used scenarios to guide board members toward consensus. After using the tool, board members were better able to articulate the rationale for the shift in strategic direction.

As critiques about philanthropy have increased in recent years, **Williamson and Luke's** exploration of the ways in which a foundation is “public” raises important considerations. They investigated the ways Australia’s public ancillary funds understand their identity as public foundations, and examined how perceptions of publicness inform and influence the practice, conduct, and identity of grantmaking foundations. Two dimensions of publicness were significant: donations, or public money; and grantmaking, or public benefit. Community foundations in the U.S. are similarly situated, needing to consider both dimensions in order to achieve the goal of transparency.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) represents a long-standing challenge to philanthropy that in recent years has begun getting the focused attention it needs. Reporting on work done as part of an initiative by the National Network of Consultants to Grantmakers, **Clohesy, Dean-Coffey, and McGill** interviewed consultants about how they have effectively partnered with foundations to advance DEI. Consultants found that they need to help foundations refine their definitions of DEI and put them in the context of the foundation’s mission, vision, and values as they work with foundation staff.

While funders often see a big part of their role as strengthening the nonprofits they support, **Bettis and Pepin** explore issues that are emerging as nonprofits are tasked with addressing systems change. Funders must take into account the dynamic social systems within which the nonprofits they fund aim to effect change. Funders that build partnerships, recognize and respond to grantee business models, ease reporting burdens, and leverage their power to convene are more likely to make significant contributions to improving the resiliency of communities.

We hope you will find something you can use in these articles, as you address challenges old and new.



Teresa R. Behrens, Ph.D.

Editor in Chief, *The Foundation Review*

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# Growth of Community-Based Giving Days in the United States: The Landscape and Effects

*Catherine Humphries Brown, Ph.D., Nebraska Children and Families Foundation; and Abhishek Bhati, Ph.D., Bowling Green State University*

**Keywords:** *Giving days, online giving, community foundation, philanthropy, fundraising*

## Introduction

Over the past few decades, philanthropic giving online has steadily grown in the United States: In 2017, it grew by 12.1 percent compared to the previous year (Blackbaud Institute for Philanthropic Impact, 2018). This phenomenal growth of online fundraising has contributed to the success of online and social media campaigns globally, including the Ice Bucket Challenge, which went viral in the summer of 2014 and led to the donation of \$220 million within a few weeks toward research into amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (also known as Lou Gehrig’s disease). Online giving also has given rise to 24-hour fundraising campaigns, known as “giving days.” One of those efforts, #GivingTuesday, raised over \$168 million in charitable donations worldwide in 2016, an increase of 44 percent over 2015 (Jones, 2016).

Although there are exceptions in practice to this general definition, giving days are place-based fundraising efforts that span 24 hours and are characterized by an online component and a gamification component (Giving USA, 2014; Third Plateau, n.d.). Such giving days may or may not run in conjunction with #GivingTuesday, which is defined by its organizers as being global in scope (Giving USA, 2014). The majority of giving days, however, focus on a specific city, region, or state. Bhati, Humphries Brown, and Eikenberry (2015) found an increase in such days between 2009 and 2014, growing from zero to nearly 60. Bingle (2017), using data from the DeKalb County Community Foundation, recently found that giving days supplement foundation donations and also serve as an event for philanthropic engagement among

## Key Points

- Over the past decade, local and regional community foundations across the United States have adopted “giving days” as a means to build awareness, bolster community pride, and raise money for local nonprofit organizations. Despite the increasing prevalence of giving days, little scholarly research has empirically examined this phenomenon and its impact, particularly at the local and regional levels.
- To address these gaps, this article shares the findings of a study that examined similarities and differences across communities’ giving days and sought to evaluate the extent to which those days led to more giving at the community level.
- While the study found that aggregate amounts raised through giving days are increasing, the median amount raised has dropped substantially and the range is widening. Still, there was substantial growth from 2009 through 2016 in the number of giving days in the U.S., raising over \$1 billion across counties, cities, and states and thereby growing philanthropy within communities.

donors. Despite the increasing prevalence of giving days, little empirical research exists into the landscape of giving days within the United States, how this landscape has changed, and the extent to which such efforts actually lead to more giving at local levels.

*[T]here is growing evidence that giving days may help increase a donor base and that community foundations are often organizers of such days. But findings also suggest extra care should be taken when deciding to organize a giving day, because not all events are likely to raise large amounts of money.*

The primary scholarly work done on giving days is a report on #GivingTuesday, which found the event had a positive impact on the charitable landscape in a broad, nonlocal sense through an increase in the number of donations given, the amounts raised, and the number of nonprofits participating (Giving USA, 2014). Beyond this, there is relatively little scholarly literature on giving days. Nonetheless, a significant amount of gray literature, in the form of evaluation reports and similar documents, provides information on how much money has been raised by community foundations that have organized giving days and how many donations have come from individual donors (e.g., Community First Foundation, 2011–2015; Bhati et al., 2015; Community Foundation, 2014; Idaho Nonprofit Center, n.d.)

This article offers a meta-analysis of the large amount of existing gray literature — defined by Alberani, Pietrangeli, and Mazza (1990) as “non-conventional literature” — to map the landscape of giving days within the U.S., describe how this landscape has changed, and quantify amounts raised. In its goals, the study is similar to work funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation (i.e., Third Plateau, n.d.), although it adopts a different methodological approach and assesses the full range of giving days in the U.S.

since 2009, as opposed to a bounded set. Findings examine the number and type of communities that have adopted giving days, and how this has changed; the number of donors that have participated in giving days and the amount raised through place-based giving days, and how these numbers have changed at the aggregate level and the community level; and the number of non-profit organizations participating in place-based giving days, at the aggregate level and the community level. In short, the questions are: What does the landscape of giving days look like at the national level and how has it changed? How many places? How many donors? How many dollars? And, how many nonprofits?

The remainder of this article provides a literature review, a data and methodology section, results, and discussion. Among its key findings are that while aggregate amounts raised through giving days are increasing, the median amount raised has dropped substantially and the range in amounts is widening. The data on amounts raised and the number of unique donors also suggest a landscape in which there are increasingly more “little” giving days at the same time there are more “big” giving days.

These findings have implications both for researchers and practitioners. For researchers, additional work is needed to better understand how “little” giving days compare to “big” giving days, and what factors contribute to any variations. The findings of this study are particularly important to fundraisers and community foundations; there is growing evidence that giving days may help increase a donor base and that community foundations are often organizers of such days. But findings also suggest extra care should be taken when deciding to organize a giving day, because not all events are likely to raise large amounts of money.

## Literature Review

This article is an initial exploration, primarily quantitative and descriptive in nature, to assess where place-based giving days are and their patterns. The literature on giving days has broadened and deepened in the past decade, focusing primarily on the technology involved,

secondarily on their implications for nonprofits and their staff, and tertiarily on potential donors and the communities they inhabit. There are also several evaluations and reports on specific place-based giving days.

One example is Colorado Gives Day, first held in 2010. The Community First Foundation (CFF) was the creator of Colorado Gives Day and continues to be the primary organizer. Its goal is “to increase philanthropy in Colorado through online giving” (CFF, 2011, p. 1). The CFF provides training and education to participating nonprofits as part of its “nonprofit toolkit,” which includes key dates and deadlines; marketing resources, such as press release templates and an event logo; and links to webinars featuring nonprofit case studies and explaining possible strategies to be used in association with Colorado Gives Day. Donor contributions are submitted via an online platform, available year-round and managed by the CFF; it involves a 2 percent third-party processing fee. Colorado Gives Day includes several incentives to motivate donor participation, including a fund that boosts the amount of money participating nonprofits receive and a number of contests and drawings, which require a \$10 donation to participate. The CFF has published a report after each giving day with general information about the participating nonprofits, how much money the organizations raised, and data about the donors themselves (e.g., where they live). Similarly, another giving day — Omaha Gives — raised over \$7.3 million, with over 50,000 donations from 18,548 donors, in 2018. The event, which has occurred annually over six years, has raised a total of \$42 million (Bauman, 2018). Like other giving days such as Colorado Gives, Omaha Gives is also online with a minimum donation of \$10 and no limit to the maximum amount. The event is conducted on the third Wednesday in May and donors can give to as many local nonprofits as they like and follow the progress of their favorite on the leaderboard throughout the day.

The growth of giving days can be attributed to the increase in both online giving and donors’ comfort with the use of the relevant technology. It was less than a decade ago that the executive

*[T]he literature suggests that giving days may build the capacity of nonprofit professionals to use technology for fundraising: Such events provide an opportunity “to teach nonprofit leaders about online giving,” and experience new ways of “publicizing their causes.”*

director of the Pittsburgh Foundation remarked about giving days, “We are at the beginning of a very large national experiment that wouldn’t have been possible without the technology available now” (West, 2011, p. 16). The risks inherent in such a technology-dependent event became fully evident when an online giving platform servicing 50 community foundations across the country failed to operate as expected during Give Local America 2016 (Creedon & McCambridge, 2016; Nimishakavi, 2016). The failure also highlighted the extent to which the technology provider — Kimbia — at the time held “a near monopoly” on the event (Creedon & McCambridge, para. 3).

For community foundations and participating nonprofits, the literature suggests that giving days may build the capacity of nonprofit professionals to use technology for fundraising: Such events provide an opportunity “to teach nonprofit leaders about online giving” (West, 2011, p. 16), and experience new ways of “publicizing their causes” (Hall, 2015, p. 22). Development staff also learn what works when it comes to raising money on giving days specifically, such as publicizing a target number of donors rather than a dollar goal (Arnett, 2015, p. 12). Still, nonprofits that are already familiar with how to use technology may be in the best position to use giving days to their advantage. Specifically,

*Research shows that there are often new tensions that accompany this new philanthropy. One of those is between promoting philanthropy and raising funds: the extent to which efforts are focused on educating existing and potential donors and creating a new concept of philanthropy, versus simply raising money.*

a study of the Omaha Gives giving day found that nonprofits' increased use of social media is positively related to the amount they raise and contributes to the growth of giving days (Bhati & McDonnell, 2019).

Giving days have the potential to increase awareness and influence behavior of individuals — both donors and potential donors. They have been seen as particularly appealing to younger donors (West, 2011), and place-based giving days on behalf of colleges and universities specifically are about “connecting the community, the alumni, to stories happening in the school” (Arnett, 2015, p. 13). What is unclear, however, is whether first-time donors to a giving day will go on to become regular donors (Malcolm, 2016).

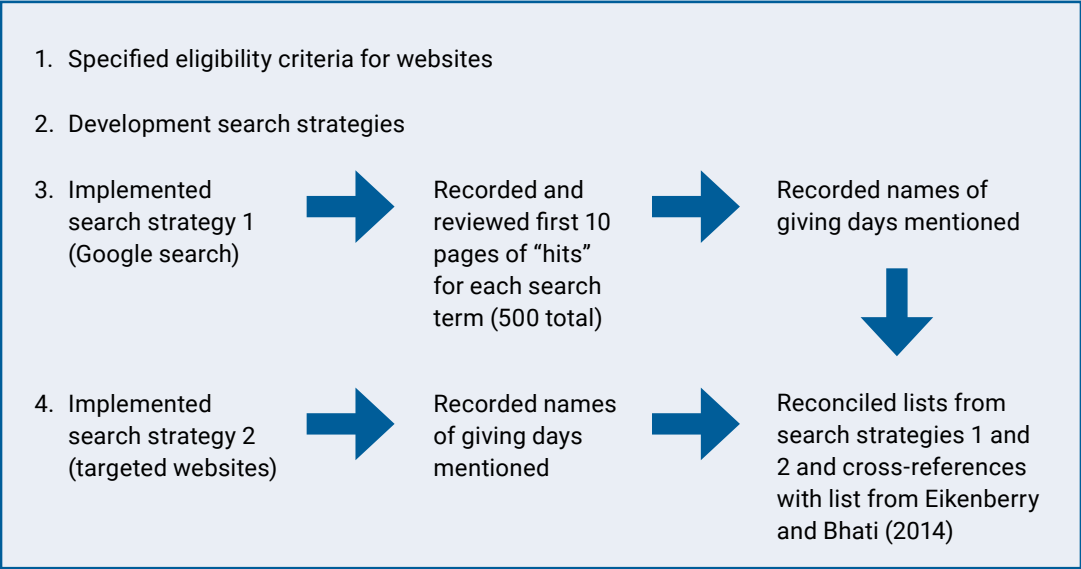
The concept of a time-limited, “blitz” fundraising campaign dates back nearly 100 years (Zunz, 2012). Yet giving days are arguably a feature of “the new philanthropy,” as are technological innovation and “collaboration across groups and sectors, more hands-on direct modes of giving and volunteering, and a focus on small organizations, issues, and grassroots problem solving” (Eikenberry, 2005, p. 141). Research shows that there are often new tensions that

accompany this new philanthropy. One of those is between promoting philanthropy and raising funds: the extent to which efforts are focused on educating existing and potential donors and creating a new concept of philanthropy, versus simply raising money (Eikenberry).

A sense of excitement — or, as Malcolm terms it, “hoopla” (2016, para. 5) — is also implied in contemporary giving days (and their historical antecedents). With giving days, organizers achieve this through a “gamification” element: a contest structure rewards participants for behavior that cultivates the most donors or draws the highest number of donations in a certain time period. In Omaha Gives 2014, for example, participation prizes were given in three categories to nonprofits (based on the size of their annual operating budget) and to organizations receiving the highest number of unique donors. In addition, a \$1,000 prize went to an organization each hour throughout the day by randomly selecting a donation made during that hour. A report on Give to the Max Day, in Washington, D.C., noted that “[g]amification added a level of excitement to a contest that is not typically present with a traditional match. Nonprofits felt a sense of competition and motivation to win awards, small and large, which in turn increased giving” (Livingston, 2012, p. 8).

While much is known about some specific giving days, questions remain about how these events fit into a larger landscape of giving days and how they compare in terms of amounts raised and the number of donors and participating nonprofits. These are questions that an examination of the landscape of place-based giving days in the U.S. might help answer. This article also steps outside the existing literature’s focus on technology to examine whether there are patterns in other aspects of these giving days: What is the variation in the amounts raised across events and across time, and why? In terms of dollars raised, what are reasonable expectations? And, more philosophically, what do the data say about how giving days create a new concept of philanthropy as opposed to simply raising money?

**FIGURE 1** Giving Days List: Development Process



### Data and Methodology

This study offers a meta-analysis of a large amount of gray literature to map the landscape of giving days within the United States and describe how this landscape has changed. Meta-analysis is “a systematic, quantitative, replicable process for synthesizing numerous and sometimes conflicting results” (Ringquist, 2013, p. 3). In recent decades the health care field has been the primary proponent of this technique, but it has also been used by social scientists, including those in the field of nonprofit studies (e.g., Lu, 2016).

Given the technique’s roots in health care, the methodology for the study discussed in this article generally follows the protocol for conducting the meta-analytic studies set forth by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA, [Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, Altman, & PRISMA Group, 2009]). Included in the protocol is a 27-item checklist that provides guidance on the development and reporting of studies whose content include a systematic review and/or meta-analysis. Moher et al. distinguish systematic reviews from meta-analyses based on the use of statistical methods:

A systematic review is a review of a clearly formulated question that uses systematic and explicit methods to collect and analyze data from the studies that are included in the review. Statistical methods (meta-analyses) may or may not be used to analyze and summarize the results of the included studies. Meta-analysis refers to the use of statistical techniques in a systematic review to integrate the results of included studies. (2009, p. 1)

The meta-analysis was conducted in two parts. In Part One, a list of all giving days in the United States was developed. In Part Two, searches were conducted to identify four basic data points: geography, amounts raised, number of participating nonprofits, and the number of unique donors. (See Figure 1.)

#### Part One

In the first stage of Part One, criteria were developed that specified what gray literature would be included. Given what the literature suggests is a relative lack of publicly available formal studies and evaluation reports and the considerable selection bias that would result, a systematic review following the technique suggested by Ringquist (2013) included an extensive search for gray literature from print and electronic sources. Eligibility criteria were established to include or



**TABLE 1** Gray Literature Review Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Available in English	Unavailable in English
Specifies a geographic location	Does not specify a geographic location
Geographic location specified is in a United States state, district, or territory (for a list, see <a href="https://usa.usembassy.de/travel-states.htm">https://usa.usembassy.de/travel-states.htm</a> )	Specified location is a place other than a United States state, district, or territory (for a list, see <a href="https://usa.usembassy.de/travel-states.htm">https://usa.usembassy.de/travel-states.htm</a> )
Specifies that the event incorporated an online component, although the details of the online component do not need to be included	Does not make mention of any online component
Uses terms “giving day” or “day of giving”	
Documents publicly available in print as a website, an electronic report available for download, or a thesis or dissertation	Documents not available to the public, such as emails or other personal communication; information not available in printed form (e.g., videos, verbal communication)
Date of publication is Jan. 1, 2013 or later	Date of publication is prior to Jan. 1, 2013

exclude a source for further review. (See Table 1.) Information sources and search strategies were compiled to identify the set of giving days. (See Table 2.)

In the second stage of Part One, researchers recorded and reviewed the first 10 pages of “hits” for each search term, and included or excluded those hits according to the initial eligibility criteria. For included sources, we recorded the names of giving days mentioned and maintained a list of observations if patterns seemed to be emerging around types of websites that were consistently picked up by the search strategy and then screened out based on eligibility criteria. This process was used to create a list of giving days and identify any initial information about the relevant geography. If a giving day and its relevant geography were listed earlier, they were not relisted for subsequent hits; we added only new information as the list was developed.

Following the second search strategy, we generated a separate list of place-based giving days by reviewing reports found through searches of targeted websites and sources containing known

lists. Finally, lists from the two search strategies were reconciled and cross-referenced with the list developed by Eikenberry and Bhati (2014). We then proceeded to Part Two, during which data on specific giving days were collected and a data set was developed. (See Table 3.) If additional giving days were identified during this process, each was added to the list and noted as a “late add.”

### Part Two

As the search progressed, researchers attempted to identify the year that a giving day was launched, and then searched for the giving day alongside a specific year reference. The search strategies were further adjusted so that specific searches were done for annual reports, when the data provided clues to what organization was the event organizer, and for documents in the PDF format, in which annual reports, evaluation reports, and newsletters containing some or all of the data points sought are often published. Given that some sources, such as press releases and news articles, tended to provide a rounded number rather than an exact count, we annotated fields while building the data set to note whether the amount was an exact or rounded figure.



TABLE 2 Information Sources and Search Strategies, Part One

Database/Source	Search Strategy
Google: "All results" – first 10 pages, representing 500 results screened	1. giving AND day AND 2017 2. giving AND day AND 2016 3. giving AND day AND 2015 4. giving AND day AND 2014 5. giving AND day AND 2013

**Note:** This table describes the original search strategy. Researchers modified this strategy to exclude “hits” related to giving days for educational institutions, many of which were included in the original search strategy. The modified search strategy, applied for all years, was the above plus “-site:.edu”

TABLE 3 Information Sources and Search Strategies, Part Two

Began with list of giving days and relevant geography:  1. Searched name of giving day - “all results” first 2 pages 2. Searched name of giving day AND report first 2 pages 3. Searched name of giving day AND results first 2 pages 4. Searched name of giving day AND evaluation first 2 pages
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With the data set created, the data were then imported into PSPP statistical analysis software. Descriptive and summary statistics were calculated to map the landscape of giving days and how has it changed over time, with a focus on amounts raised and the number of participating nonprofits and individual donors.

List of Identified Giving Days: Limitations

One specific threat to the reliability of this study is the risk of bias due to an incomplete list of place-based giving days. To address this, the study followed a multiple-search strategy (a structured internet search as well as a search of targeted websites); triangulation of search results with existing lists of place-based giving days; and eligibility criteria that explicitly included gray literature. During Part Two, new names of giving days were added to the list; the process of identifying giving days, therefore, was sufficiently robust to address possible threats. That said, future work would benefit from what might best be described as “respondent validation” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 126) — asking potential organizers of such events (e.g., United Way, community foundations, national organizations

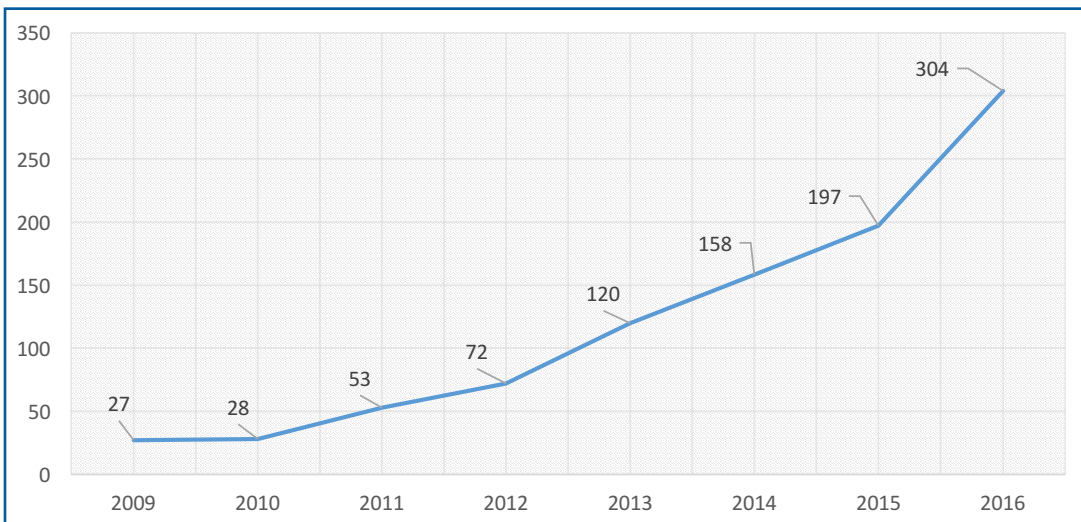
such as the Council on Foundations) to verify the accuracy of presented data and ensure that no events are missed. Furthermore, the explicit definition of a search strategy should combat potential threats to the reliability of this study.

Data on Giving Days: Limitations

Another specific threat to the reliability of this study is the risk of bias due to failing to identify a complete data set in terms of amounts raised and the number of participating organizations and unique donors. To address this threat, this study followed a search strategy that incorporated explicit inclusion of gray literature — not only event websites, but also news articles, formal evaluation reports, annual reports, and newsletters. There arguably remain greater limitations in this area and questions as to whether missing data were not collected, as opposed to not reported. Also, the extent to which the study’s findings can be generalized might be limited, since the data are based on secondary sources obtained via internet search. Using our database, we suggest future studies focus on collecting primary data for each community foundation to determine total amount raised, number of

**TABLE 4** Giving Days by Location Type, 2009–2016

Location Type	Number (%)	Total Raised (per giving day)	Total Nonprofits Participating
Multicounty	48 (48%)	\$457.1 million (\$9.5 million)	36,932
County	23 (23%)	\$242.5 million (\$10.5 million)	11,734
State	15 (15%)	\$301 million (\$20 million)	35,473
City	14 (14%)	\$56 million (\$4 million)	6,843
<b>Total</b>	<b>100 (100%)</b>	<b>\$1.05 billion</b>	<b>90,982</b>

**FIGURE 2** Total Dollars Raised by Place-Based Giving Days (in Millions)

donors, and how giving days have impacted the community's funding landscape throughout the year (e.g., have new donors and new opportunities for giving been created, or have existing donors simply rescheduled their giving). Also, a more robust data set would result if technology providers such as Razoo and Kimbia were tapped to provide access to raw data.

## Results

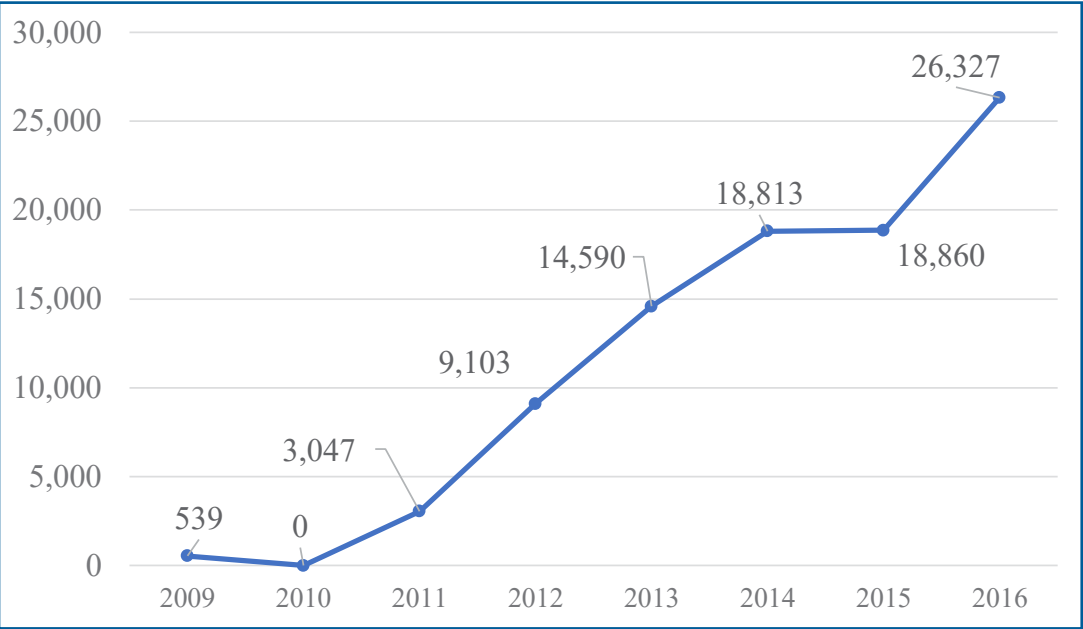
Analysis of the data set shows that from 2009 through 2016, 100 place-based giving days were held in the United States. The geographic scope of these giving days varies; some spanned entire states, others multiple counties, and still others focused on a specific city or county. (See Table 4.)

Over this eight-year period, these 100 place-based giving days raised a total of \$1.05 billion for over 90,980 participating nonprofits (these numbers are inflated, as most of the organizations participated every year). Multicounty giving days raised the most money: 48 giving days raised over \$457 million over the eight years. Statewide giving days followed, raising \$301 million; single-county events raised \$242.5 million and citywide giving days raised \$56 million. But looking at average giving per giving day (total giving divided by total number of giving days in a particular location), statewide events raised the most per day (\$20 million) and citywide giving days raised the least (\$4 million) per event.

**TABLE 5** Total Dollars Raised by Place-Based Giving Days

Year	Number of Giving Days	Mean (dollars)	Median (dollars)	Minimum (dollars)	Maximum (dollars)	Range (dollars)	Total (dollars)
2009	5	5,559,162	4,000,000	412,000	14,000,000	13,588,000	27,795,812
2010	6	4,798,674	4,150,000	630,000	10,000,000	9,370,000	28,792,047
2011	14	3,801,927	1,116,074	104,156	13,400,000	13,295,844	53,226,980
2012	20	3,635,002	1,250,000	75,000	16,391,905	16,316,905	72,700,050
2013	32	3,775,570	1,499,117	90,000	25,200,00	25,110,000	120,818,233
2014	56	2,836,537	951,556	39,863	26,300,000	26,260,137	158,846,098
2015	58	3,409,687	1,254,215	55,000	33,100,000	33,045,000	197,761,825
2016	70	4,345,322	1,496,488	34,262	37,347,237	37,312,975	304,172,517

**FIGURE 3** Total Nonprofit Participants in Place-Based Giving Days



The total amount raised each year through giving days has grown alongside the increasing number of such events. The total raised in 2016 was more than 10 times that raised in 2009. (See Figure 2.) This is perhaps not surprising — the number of giving days also grew substantially over the same period, from five in 2009 to 70 in 2016. (Counts reflect giving days for which donation data were available.)

At the same time, the range in amounts raised has continued to widen. Since 2010, there have been more giving days that are smaller, in terms of amounts raised, as well as increasingly larger giving days taking place each year. (See Table 5.)

The data show a fairly steady increase in the cumulative number of nonprofit organizations participating in giving days. (See Figure 3.)

**TABLE 6** Number of Nonprofit Organizations Participating in Giving Days

Year	Number of Giving Days	Mean	Median	Minimum	Maximum	Total
<b>2009</b>	1	539	539	539	539	539
<b>2010</b>	0	---	---	---	---	---
<b>2011</b>	8	380.88	209	36	932	3,047
<b>2012</b>	15	606.87	187	19	4,381	9,103
<b>2013</b>	27	540.37	287	21	4,437	14,590
<b>2014</b>	44	427.57	172	4	5,544	18,813
<b>2015</b>	50	377.2	288	30	2,022	18,860
<b>2016</b>	59	446.22	382	36	2,518	26,327

**TABLE 7** Individual Donors to Place-Based Giving Days

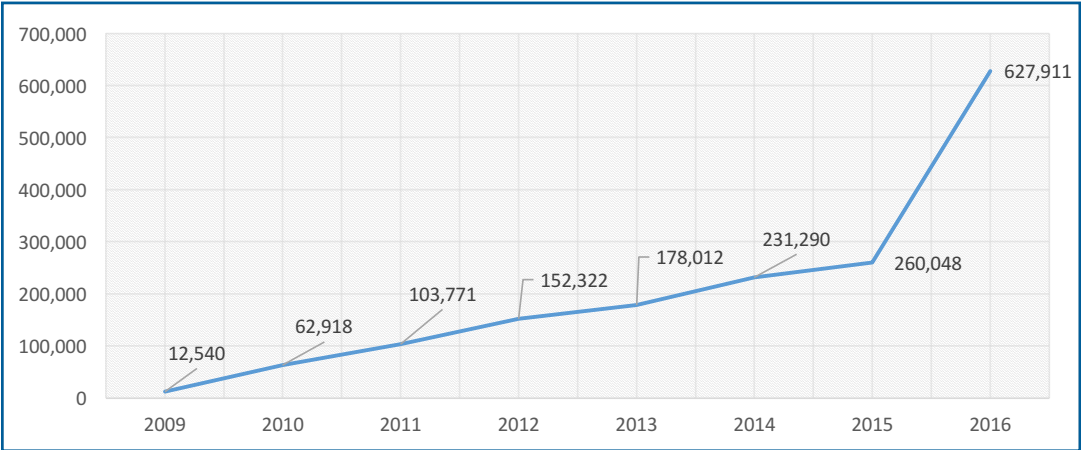
Year	Number of Giving Days	Mean	Median	Minimum	Maximum	Total
<b>2009</b>	1	12,540.00	12,540	12,540	12,540	12,540
<b>2010</b>	3	20,972.67	12,540	7,778	42,600	62,918
<b>2011</b>	6	17,295.17	13,153	1,265	47,534	103,771
<b>2012</b>	12	12,693.50	5,712	48	53,000	152,322
<b>2013</b>	16	11,125.75	7,553	955	38,760	178,012
<b>2014</b>	28	8,260.36	5,010	828	43,979	231,290
<b>2015</b>	20	13,002.40	8,640	120	47,806	260,048
<b>2016</b>	44	14,270.70	7,777	507	81,890	627,911

Additionally, the minimum number of participating nonprofits has remained fairly steady, while the maximum number has seen greater fluctuation — peaking in 2014 and dipping in 2015 and 2016. (See Table 6.) It should be noted that counts reflect giving days for which data on the number of nonprofits participating were available; in 2010, while giving days did take place, the methodology used in this study did not identify any data on the number of participating organizations.

Lastly, the data show that the average number of donors fluctuated from year to year, and while

the 2016 average is greater than that of the lone 2009 event for which there are donor data, it is not notably larger. The median number of donors is relatively stable and generally increases from 2012 forward, although this, too, fluctuates. Analysis shows a fairly steady increase in the number of donors, with the greatest year-to-year increase occurring between 2015 and 2016. (See Table 7.) The number of giving days is a count of events with available data on the number of unique donors. The number of donors rose from year to year for specific place-based giving days, from 12,540 in 2009 to 627,911 in 2016. (See Figure 4.)

**FIGURE 4** Total Individuals Donating on Place-Based Giving Days



### Discussion

When aggregated, data show that place-based giving days in the United States span multiple types of geographies. When considered as a unitary phenomenon, the total amounts raised through such events has increased year to year since 2009. The same pattern is present in the aggregate number of nonprofits and individual donors participating in place-based giving days: each year, the total number of participating organizations and the total number of unique donors nationwide increases.

However, the pattern toward “more” is not necessarily universal when the average amounts raised are considered. Data show less of a consistent upward trend, with a decreased average from 2009 to 2010, 2010 to 2011, 2011 to 2012, and 2013 to 2014. Only in more recent years — from 2012 to 2013, 2014 to 2015, and 2015 to 2016 — did average amounts raised increase. These amounts, however, still have not surpassed the average raised in 2009. The data suggest that a large part of this pattern may be an increase over time in the number of place-based giving days that raise smaller amounts, even if giving days of all sizes tend to improve, in terms of amounts raised, relative to their own prior year’s performance. (See Figure 2.)

Although the quantity of data on the number of participating organizations and, especially, on

the number of unique donors is more limited, they suggest that the average number of organizations per place-based giving days each year has been relatively constant, even as there continue to be fairly small and fairly large place-based giving days. As with the aggregate amounts raised, it is not surprising that the total number of nonprofits participating in such events has increased year to year since the number of giving days also increased. Although data on the number of unique donors are particularly limited relative to other types of data considered in this study, they also show an uptick in total unique donors year to year alongside an uptick in the number of events.

While the results of this study provide initial parameters around place-based giving days as a general phenomenon, which is how most of the literature outside of event-specific studies has framed such events, they also suggest that future work should systematically consider variations among giving days, including different types of giving days, and take into account contextual variables such as the physical size, population, and wealth of the area covered; who the organizers are; when, how, and what type of games and/or contests are used; when the event takes place (e.g., the time of year, whether the event coincides with #GivingTuesday); and when and how match funding is used.

*This might suggest that donors active during giving days are more motivated to give at the local level than at the city level. At the same time, giving per event is highest for statewide giving days, suggesting that donors connect to improving conditions for state or county residents more than they do at the city level.*

We also find that multicounty giving days are more popular by both number of events and total amount raised. For instance, 48 multicounty giving days have raised over \$457 million, and the average amount raised per event is \$9.5 million. Looking at single-county giving days, 23 events raised over \$242.5 million over eight years. This finding is significant for community foundations, as it seems county and multicounty giving days are the most popular, but statewide giving days raise more money — \$20 million — per event. But it should also be noted that the average amounts raised in statewide events are also dispersed among a population larger than those for single- or multicounty events. It is also surprising that city-based giving days do not seem to generate larger average giving: \$4 million versus \$10.5 million raised by county-based events. This might suggest that donors active during giving days are more motivated to give at the local level than at the city level. At the same time, giving per event is highest for statewide giving days, suggesting that donors connect to improving conditions for state or county residents more than they do at the city level.

Further, there is the continued importance of place — or, at least, an idea of place — in giving and thinking about the world generally. Data

collected for this study show evidence that some donors who participate in place-based giving days reside elsewhere: in the case of Colorado Gives, there were donors from 20 countries outside the United States (CFF, 2017). This wider sense of “connection” to place is also seen in the rising number of county-level giving days — 48 percent of all giving days were at the county or multicounty level as compared to 15% and 14% state and city level respectively — and why giving days in higher education, with its established sense of community among students and alumni, also seem to be gaining momentum. The fact that donors who live elsewhere “give locally” highlights the complexities of feeling connected to place. A sense of nostalgia can motivate people to give to a community even when they no longer live, study, or work there.

As with technology, where existing capacity and experiences have been shown to influence success in online giving days, overall community “success” with giving days may also be a result of existing capacity and experiences. While technology may be perceived as accessible to everyone, everywhere, and at all times, such is not the case and, when it is accessible, it may not outweigh the fact that there are simply more people, greater wealth, and different relationships in different places. When defining, analyzing, and understanding place-based giving days, “place” cannot be overlooked.

There is also the growing concern among fundraisers that place-based giving days may not actually increase the “donation pie” — that existing donors are waiting to make their contributions during a giving day, thereby merely shifting their timing of planned gifts. An evaluation of Omaha Gives found that “a little more than half (52.3 percent) of donor survey respondents said they gave to a new organization for the first time during Omaha Gives! 2015. First-time gifts totaled \$885,071, which is 11.2 percent of total amount raised” (Bhati & Eikenberry, 2016, p. 34). The same report found that “more than three-fourths (77 percent) of the nonprofit survey respondents indicated that Omaha Gives! 2014 slightly or substantially increased their overall funding last year” (p. 37). This suggests that

giving days not only increase the giving for a particular community during the event, but also help nonprofits raise funds throughout the year.

This study sheds light on the growing phenomenon of giving days across the United States, ranging from city- and county-based to statewide events. It also adds to the limited literature on the size and magnitude of giving days in the U.S. and highlights the trend of increases in funding to local nonprofits through annual giving days largely organized by community foundations. The study, built using systemic strategies and containing data from community foundation websites, foundation annual reports, and newspaper articles, has limitations despite its contributions, based as it is on secondary sources. We recommend future studies in which this data set could be amplified by a survey of all community foundations known to organize giving days and interviews with foundation leaders to about the challenges involved in organizing successful giving days.

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# How Can Foundations Promote Impactful Collaboration?

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**Keywords:** *Collaboration, collective impact, systems change, foundation strategies*

## Introduction

As foundations have become more focused on generating measurable social impact, one of their primary strategies has been to foster interagency collaborative problem-solving (Kubisch, Auspos, Brown, Buck, & Dewar, 2011; Kania & Kramer, 2013; Easterling, 2013; Pearson, 2014; Easterling & McDuffee, 2018). The basic idea is to bring together leaders from different organizations and sectors of a community to find more effective ways to address a problem that they all have a stake in solving. Collaborative problem-solving initiatives generally focus on big, thorny issues such as homelessness, opioid misuse, and racial disparities in educational attainment — issues that are beyond the scope of influence of any single organization.

Collaborative problem-solving is premised on the concept of synergy. Roz Lasker and Elisa Weiss (2003) present the logic as follows:

When a collaborative process combines the complementary knowledge of different kinds of people — such as professionals in various fields, service providers, people who use services, and residents who are directly affected by health problems — the group as a whole can overcome these individual limitations and improve the information and thinking that undergird community problem solving. (p. 25)

## Foundation Interest in Collaboration

Funders are naturally positioned to bring together leaders from different organizations for collaborative problem-solving, even in cases where those organizations compete with one another. Several foundations throughout the U.S. launched collaborative problem-solving initiatives in the 1990s, including the Annie E. Casey Foundation (1995), the Robert Wood Johnson

## Key Points

- Funders are increasingly looking to interagency and cross-sector collaboration as a strategy to solve complex, large-scale issues, but many collaborative groups fail to generate an impact with their work. This is due in part to funders' own practices, such as pre-specifying the problem to be solved or limiting their grantees' ability to adjust their strategy.
- The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts has been intentional about facilitating the effectiveness of the collaborative groups it supports. Its Health Care & Health Promotion Synergy Initiative provides long-term funding and assistance with planning, evaluation and sustainability to groups that define the problems they want to solve.
- This article presents systems-change outcomes from 14 collaborative groups supported under the initiative since 2000. Interviews with representatives from four of the more successful projects indicate the key tasks involved in designing, implementing, refining, and sustaining impactful programs. Interviewees reported on the value of the Synergy Initiative model, but also emphasized that the model requires high levels of commitment and analytic capacity.
- One of the most challenging features of the model is the funder's direct engagement in the process. Given the power dynamics that naturally arise when the funder engages directly, we recommend that this approach be used only in situations where the funder can build strong, honest, give-and-take relationships with the other participants in the process.

Foundation (Silver & Weitzman, 2009), The Colorado Trust (Gallagher & Drisko, 2003), The California Wellness Foundation (Cheadle et al., 2005), the Sierra Health Foundation (Meehan, Hebbeler, Cherner, & Petersen, 2009), and the Health Research and Education Trust (Hasnain-Wynia, 2003).

In most of these initiatives, the funder supported an interagency coalition in developing a shared definition of the problem, setting a vision for success, analyzing the causes and consequences of the problem, and developing a collective strategy appropriate to the local context. Groups were expected to produce strategies where the participating organizations shift their programs, services, and practices in a coordinated way in order to get more fully to the root issues underlying the problem. After the planning phase, the group submits a proposal for implementation funding and the foundation decides which elements of the plan it wants to support. Most implementation grants cover expenses over at least two years, and some run for as long as five.

Many of these initiatives failed to live up to their expectations (Brown & Fiester, 2007; Kubisch, Auspos, Brown, & Dewar, 2010; FSG, 2011), which curbed foundations' enthusiasm for collaborative problem-solving, at least temporarily. In 2011, John Kania and Mark Kramer introduced the concept of "collective impact" in a widely read article. Collective impact is a particular form of collaborative problem-solving which borrows heavily from research conducted in the 1990s and early 2000s (e.g., Mattessich & Monsey, 1992; Butterfoss, Goodman, & Wandersman, 1993; Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Lasker & Abramson, 1997; Lasker & Weiss, 2003; Roussos & Fawcett, 2000; Chavis, 2001). The model differs from earlier approaches by focusing on shared measurement and backbone organizations. It also emphasizes participation by institutional

leaders who have the authority and resources to implement new programs and services.<sup>1</sup>

In the eight years since the publication of Kania and Kramer's article, collective impact has become an increasingly popular paradigm within philanthropy. Foundations such as the Kansas Health Foundation, the Health Foundation of South Florida, the New York State Health Foundation, and the Duke Endowment are supporting collective-impact initiatives. The Collective Impact Forum, a learning community managed by the Aspen Institute and FSG, listed 76 collective-impact initiatives on its website in December 2018, as well as more than 25,000 Listserv members.<sup>2</sup>

With this resurgence of foundation interest in collaborative problem-solving, it is even more crucial to identify what it takes for coalitions to achieve meaningful impact. Collaborating for community change is lengthy, difficult, frustrating work fraught with obstacles and trap doors. Although more and more success stories are being shared (Hanleybrown, Kania, & Kramer, 2012; Lynn & Stachowiak, 2018), success remains elusive. Many interagency groups convened by foundations fail to generate concrete strategies, instead getting stuck in difficult conversations around mission, vision, turf, responsibility, and money (Kreuter & Lezin, 1998). Some initiatives have succeeded in producing new services, facilities, or technologies, but changes have often been incremental rather than transformational (e.g., Conrad et al., 2003).

## How Funders Undermine Impactful Collaboration

When collaborative efforts fail to generate long-term impacts, the responsibility is often laid at the doorstep of the coalition and its members, but funders can also be to blame. Two specific ways in which foundations have inhibited

<sup>1</sup> This focus on institutional leaders is a contrast with the more inclusive approaches to collaboration that foundations like The Colorado Trust employed in the 1990s (Easterling, Gallagher, & Lodwick, 2003). Tom Wolff (2016) and his colleagues (Wolff et al., 2017) vociferously criticized the collective-impact model for being elitist and for ignoring the community development aspect of collaborative problem-solving, which is central to models such as Community Coalition Action (Butterfoss & Kegler, 2002). At least partially in response to this criticism, the framers of the collective-impact model made a number of adjustments and augmentations, codified in Collective Impact 3.0 (Cabaj & Weaver, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.collectiveimpactforum.org/about-us>

impactful collaboration are: (1) imposing their own agenda with regard to the problem to be solved, and (2) failing to allow for learning and adaptation during the implementation process.

### *Imposing Their Own Agenda*

One of the most common flaws in foundation-sponsored collaborative initiatives is for the funder to unilaterally name a problem and then invite a particular set of stakeholders to come together to solve that problem. Under this model, the participants work at the funder's behest rather than in response to their own intrinsic interests. Often their commitment is tentative and their problem-solving efforts are uninspired. Consequently, many funder-convened collaborative groups focus their attention on figuring out how to get their share of the available funding (Kubisch et al., 2010; Kimball & Kopell, 2011; Castelloe, Watson, & Allen, 2011; Easterling, 2013).

Funder-driven coalitions tend to last only as long as the foundation supports the process. This dynamic is captured by a nonprofit leader quoted in Easterling (2013):

I don't think I've ever seen any [funder-driven collaborative efforts] that have been successful. ... That [approach] just is so bogus to me. ... They've got the housing people, the medical people. They've got everybody from every category and they just don't know where to go. It takes them years to figure out what they even want to talk about. And then when they start, they infringe on things that other people are trying to do. ... If all of a sudden the pot dries up or really shrinks down, they aren't there. They're no longer talking to each other. (p. 68)

A much more productive approach for foundations is to identify naturally occurring networks where members are already focusing on a problem that fits with the foundation's interests, and then work with that network to determine what forms of support would allow their work to move to the next level (Easterling, 2013).

*Two specific ways in which foundations have inhibited impactful collaboration are: (1) imposing their own agenda with regard to the problem to be solved, and (2) failing to allow for learning and adaptation during the implementation process.*

### *Failing to Allow for Adaptation*

A second critique is that foundations often conceptualize collaborative problem-solving according to a simplistic two-step process of planning and implementation. During the planning phase, the group is expected to analyze the problem and develop a collective strategy. That strategy is submitted to the funder, along with a request for either full or partial funding to implement key elements of the strategy. The funder then determines which elements of the strategy will actually be supported and provides grant funding to the organizations responsible for implementing those elements.

The problem with this approach is that the plans that emerge from collaborative planning processes are, at best, a first approximation to effective strategy. After 12 to 18 months of exploration, analysis, discussion, priority setting, decision-making, and politicking, the group might have developed a well-informed strategy, but usually the strategy will be untested. Unfortunately, funders often regard these strategies as definitive rather than preliminary. As such, implementation grants are often made with the expectation that the group will abide by the work plan in the proposal and will achieve the stated outcomes. However, if the strategy is actually an imperfect first approximation, imposing rigid accountability criteria will inhibit the group from adapting its approach, and thus will

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undermine the potential for large-scale impact (Easterling, 2016).

Another problem with this two-step view of planning and implementation is that foundations too often allow for only a single cycle of implementation funding at the end of the planning process. Groups are able to become smarter and more strategic through the process of testing out their initial plan. In The Colorado Trust's Colorado Healthy Communities Initiative, a number of the funded groups came up with their most impactful projects once their grant funding had ended and the funder was no longer engaged (Easterling, 2014). Foundations can capitalize on the learning that occurs during the implementation phase by setting aside grant funding for second- and third-generation strategies.

### **The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts' Approach**

While some foundations convene and fund collaborative groups in ways that limit the potential for large-scale impact, other foundations have developed approaches that significantly enhance the quality of collaborative problem-solving. One of these is the Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts, which began supporting inter-agency collaborative problem-solving and systems change in 2000 (11 years prior to the introduction of the collective-impact model). The foundation's signature strategy in this regard is

the Health Care & Health Promotion Synergy Initiative. Under this initiative, the foundation provides collaborative groups with an average of \$2 million over five years to support the planning process, the implementation of new programming, and the hiring of an evaluation consultant. Funded groups are expected to meet a number of specific milestones, including defining their goals, target populations, and outcomes; designing an intervention; piloting that intervention and refining it based on evaluation findings; sustaining the eventual program model within local institutions; and carrying out advocacy.

The program model underlying the Synergy Initiative recognizes that the funder can do a number of things that facilitate a collaborative group's success, including allowing community groups to determine what problem they want to solve, ensuring that the group uses a rigorous approach to planning, encouraging learning and adaptation, providing funding for evaluation, and paying explicit attention to systems change and the sustainability of effective programs. The Synergy Initiative model also calls for foundation staff to be directly involved in the group's process of planning, testing, learning, and advocacy. These design features are described more fully in the following sections.

### *Community-Defined Problem*

Collaborative groups are more committed when they are working to solve problems that are intrinsically important to participants. Under the Synergy Initiative, the foundation offers opportunities for local agencies to come forward with whatever health-related issue they have an interest in addressing. The foundation does not self-identify issues that are priorities for funding, and its grantmaking history demonstrates an interest in a wide variety of social and economic determinants of health, as well as access to health care.

The call for letters of intent invites nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and others to come together on their own to identify a shared interest that can become the basis of a proposal. Foundation staff engage in conversations with the applicant groups, but there is no



effort on the part of the foundation to mold the proposal to a particular agenda.

### *Executive-Level Representatives*

The foundation expects that applicant groups will include high-level staff from the participating organizations, often involving the chief executive officer. This increases the chances that planning and decision-making will be truly strategic and that the solutions developed by the group will have buy-in from the leaders of the organizations that are charged with implementing the solution.

### *Funding for a Coordinator*

Because agency leaders have extensive responsibilities outside their engagement in the Synergy Initiative, the foundation funds a project coordinator who provides operational leadership and day-to-day logistical support for the problem-solving process. The coordinator is based in the lead agency and is supervised by the project director. The project director provides overall strategic leadership and is often the executive within the lead agency who organized the collaborative.

### *Long-Term Commitment*

The foundation recognized that developing and implementing effective programs<sup>3</sup> is a long-term endeavor. As such, the call for proposals indicates that it expects to support funded groups for five years. This sends a message to applicants that the foundation is committed over the long haul and, likewise, that it expects funded groups to commit themselves for the full period of time required to implement and sustain an impactful strategy.

### *Resources Tailored to Life Cycle*

Rather than framing collaborative problem-solving as a two-stage process of planning and implementation, the foundation promotes a more complex, iterative process of assessment, research, planning, testing ideas, refining approaches, evaluating, aligning systems, and putting in place supportive policies. It offers different forms of financial support, technical

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assistance, and other resources tailored to each stage of the work. When the group reaches a point where additional funding is needed, the foundation works jointly with participants to determine what type of funding is most important in moving the work toward impact.

### *Focus on Outcomes and Evidence*

While the Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts does not define the issues that Synergy Initiative groups will address, it does specify the problem-solving process that groups need to use. In keeping with the CEO's extensive background in "empowerment evaluation" (Yost, 2015), the foundation has developed a process that emphasizes accountability, evidence, and learning. The process includes the following steps: assessment, exploration of program models, program development, implementation, and evaluation. More specifically, funded groups are expected to answer the 10 accountability questions in the "Getting to Outcomes" framework (Wandersman, Imm, Chinman, & Kaftarian, 2000). (See Table 1.)

One of the defining features of the framework is the reliance on evidence and best practices when designing and choosing programmatic strategies. The foundation is clear throughout the process that funded groups will need to adopt and implement evidence-based strategies, rather than relying solely on their own internal analysis. These expectations are initially communicated in the call for proposals, and then reiterated by foundation staff as funded groups carry out their work.

<sup>3</sup>We use the term "program" in a generic sense to encompass a wide range of remedies that groups might devise to address their target issue, including new and expanded services, changes in how services are organized, new policies and procedures, new facilities, and educational strategies.

**TABLE 1** The 10 Accountability Questions in the “Getting to Outcomes” Framework

1. What are the underlying needs and conditions in the community? (**Needs/Resources**)
2. What are the goals, target populations, and objectives (i.e., desired outcomes)? (**Goals**)
3. Which evidence-based models and best-practice programs can be useful in reaching the goals? (**Best Practice**)
4. What actions need to be taken so the selected program “fits” the community context? (**Fit**)
5. What organization capacities are needed to implement the plan? (**Capacities**)
6. What is the plan for the program? (**Plan**)
7. How will the quality of the program and/or initiative implementation be assessed? (**Process Evaluation**)
8. How well did the program work? (**Outcome Evaluation**)
9. How will continuous quality improvement strategies be incorporated? (**CQI**)
10. If the program is successful, how will it be sustained? (**Sustain**)

Source: Chinman, Imm, & Wandersman (2004)

The emphasis on learning is reinforced by the foundation’s approach to holding the group accountable. Rather than expecting a coalition to stick with whatever strategy emerges from the planning phase, the foundation encourages learning and adaptation. This fits directly with the emphasis on impact: If the initial program model is not producing the intended results, the group is expected to learn this and to adapt.

Once an approach has been designed, the group evaluates its effectiveness using both formative and summative methods. The foundation allows enough time for the group to test and evaluate its programs. In addition, the group is encouraged to collect data that will be rigorous enough to satisfy a set of critical audiences, including policymakers.

#### *Funding for an Evaluator*

The foundation expects the group to use formative evaluation methods in developing, testing, and refining its strategy, as well as to gather summative data on the effectiveness of whatever program models the group decides to implement.

To support this expectation, the foundation helps each applicant group select a suitable evaluation consultant to assist in writing their proposal. This is done through a speed-dating process where applicants invited to apply for a full proposal are able to interview a pool of evaluators identified by the foundation as being trained in the methods and principles of empowerment evaluation (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005). Successful applicants receive grants that include dedicated funding to support the evaluator’s services. The evaluator designs and carries out short-term and long-term studies that allow the collaborative to understand how well its interventions are meeting its expectations. Evaluation findings are continuously fed back to the collaborative to promote learning and adaptation.

The evaluator is expected to conduct a summative evaluation once the group has optimized the program model. Using experimental or quasi-experimental methods, the evaluator collects data that can be used to demonstrate effectiveness and, ideally, cost-effectiveness. Those data support efforts to sustain and



disseminate effective program models, including advocacy efforts for policy change at the local and state levels.

### *Active Engagement by the Funder*

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the Synergy Initiative is the active role of the funder over the life course of each project. Rather than simply hanging back and encouraging the group to find an impactful strategy, the foundation plays an active role in the collaborative process, keeping the group oriented toward impact and effective strategy. One or more members of the foundation staff participate fully in all aspects of the process and push the group toward effective action. They raise hard questions about the logic underlying the strategy, what the evidence says, and what it will take to implement and sustain a strategy. This form of engagement requires staff to be conscious of the power they hold and to take steps to ensure that the group retains control over the process.

The foundation plays a particularly important role in promoting sustainability. This includes issuing evaluation reports that make the case for interventions or programs emerging from groups funded under the Synergy Initiative, occasionally reaching out to other funders to build buy-in for the program, and making a direct case to elected officials and leaders of government agencies to change policies and revenue streams in ways that support sustained funding for the program.<sup>4</sup>

### **Track Record of the Synergy Initiative**

The foundation awarded funding under the Synergy Initiative to 17 groups between 2000 and 2015. The first cohort of four groups was funded in 2000 and 2001; subsequent cohorts launched in 2007, 2011, and 2015. These groups have addressed a wide variety of issues related to health and the social determinants of health, including health care access, mental health, child abuse, oral health, homelessness, hunger, criminal justice, and breaking cycles of poverty.

Fourteen of the 17 groups were able to carry out all the steps expected by the foundation and to implement new programming. (See Tables 2 and 3.) The remaining three groups terminated the initiative partway through their process. This included a project focused on refugee resettlement that was discontinued because the federal government abruptly and significantly reduced the number of refugees allowed to enter the United States. The foundation discontinued funding to the other two groups after determining that they had not conformed to the initiative's guidelines and milestones.

All 14 of the groups that fully implemented the Synergy Initiative model were able to develop one or more solutions to their target issue. These solutions took a variety of forms, including new programs and services, expanded access to existing programs, interagency coordination of services, new centers and facilities, public awareness campaigns, training and education programs, and designation as a redevelopment district. In addition, half of the projects were able to bring about changes to state or local policy.

Table 3 highlights the specific enhancements in programming, services, facilities and policy associated with each of the 14 projects. The following five projects are particularly notable:

1. The Central Massachusetts Oral Health Initiative (CMOHI) increased the availability and accessibility of dental health services for low-income populations through a variety of programmatic and policy-oriented approaches. These included bringing new, school-based dental screening and treatment services to Worcester and South Worcester County schools, increasing the capacity of three community health centers to provide dental care, and promoting a change in Medicaid rules that provided more flexibility to dental practices, which in turn led to an increase in the number of practices that were willing to accept Medicaid patients.

<sup>4</sup>The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts is permitted to engage in policy advocacy and lobbying because of its legal status as a 501(c)(4) organization and an agreement the Massachusetts Attorney General's Office.

**TABLE 2** Synergy Initiative Projects That Successfully Carried Out the Steps of the Model

Cohort	Project Focus	Specific Projects	Duration	Approx. Funding	Intent
<b>1</b>	Oral Health	Central Massachusetts Oral Health Initiative (CMOHI)*	November 2000–June 2011	\$6 million	Expand dental services for vulnerable populations.
		Oral Health Initiative of North Central Massachusetts	January 2001–June 2008		
	Child Abuse	Child Abuse Prevention and Protection Collaborative	January 2001–November 2007	\$2 million	Develop a coordinated effort to prevent child abuse and neglect.
	Behavioral Health in Preschools	Together for Kids*	May 2001–June 2009	\$1.8 million	Reduce suspensions by developing a mental health consultation model for use in preschool settings.
<b>2</b>	Homelessness	Home Again	January 2007–June 2013	\$2.2 million	End adult chronic homelessness using the “Housing First” model.
	Hunger	Hunger-Free & Healthy	January 2007–December 2012	\$1.5 million	Improve access to healthy food and reduce hunger in Worcester.
	Children’s Mental Health	Choices	January 2007–December 2011	\$2.2 million	Expand access to mental health services and prevent substance abuse among adolescents.
		The Winchendon Project	January 2007–December 2012		
<b>3</b>	Economic Self-Sufficiency	A Better Life*	January 2011–December 2017	\$3 million	Help families achieve economic self-sufficiency and transition out of public housing.
	Prisoner Reentry	Worcester Initiative for Supported Reentry (WISR)*	January 2011–August 2017	\$2.3 million	Reduce recidivism among men and women who were formerly incarcerated.
	Healthcare Access	Improving Access to Health	January 2011–December 2015	\$900,000	Improve access to primary health care and reduce impact on unnecessary hospital emergency department use.
<b>4</b>	Childhood Adversity	Worcester’s Healthy Environments and Resilience in Schools Initiative	January 2015–present	\$1.7 million	Reduce suspensions by integrating trauma-sensitive routines and supports into schools.
	Healthy Eating	Worcester Regional Food Hub	January 2015–present	\$1.8 million	Develop a regional food hub to promote sustainable agriculture, healthy eating, and economic development.
	Community Development	ReImagine North of Main	January 2015–present	\$1.9 million	Revitalize downtown and adjacent neighborhoods as the “Gateway to Arts and Culture.”

\*These projects were included in the evaluation study.

2. The Home Again project brought to Worcester the Housing First approach, which transitions chronically homeless adults into subsidized housing. Worcester was recognized in 2011 as the first city its size in the U.S. to effectively end adult chronic homelessness.
3. The Worcester Initiative for Supported Reentry (WISR) group developed a model for coordinating the various services (e.g., health, social, educational, employment, housing) that agencies provide to support re-entry among ex-offenders following release from jail or prison. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has committed \$7 million to agencies in Worcester and Middlesex counties to implement the model. Follow-up of program participants found a 47% reduction in the three-year recidivism rate (Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts, 2018).
4. The Together for Kids project addressed the issue of excessive suspensions and expulsions within the preschool setting. The group developed and implemented a comprehensive approach that includes training for teachers in classroom management and behavioral health consultation to children and their parents. Their intervention significantly reduced the rate of suspensions within the participating preschools (Upshur, Wenz-Gross, & Reed, 2009). Based on observed outcomes, the Massachusetts lawmakers included funding for the program model in the Department of Early Education and Care budget.
5. Under A Better Life, the group developed, tested, and implemented an intensive case-management approach for families living in public housing to help them become economically self-sufficient and move out of public housing. As a result of the program, many participants have become employed, increased their income, and moved to private or Section 8 housing.

*[I]t is important to recognize that the 14 Synergy Initiative projects produced variable degrees of impact, implying that the model is more effective in some instances than others.*

Collectively, the 14 projects have generated a variety of documented improvements to the health and well-being of residents in the foundation's service region. These impacts compare favorably to what has been observed in other collaborative problem-solving projects, including the 25 collective-impact initiatives that Spark Policy Institute and ORS Impact identified in their scan of the United States and Canada (Lynn & Stachowiak, 2018). The fact that notable impacts have occurred in multiple projects funded under the Synergy Initiative speaks to the value of the foundation's model for supporting collaborative problem-solving. At the same time, it is important to recognize that the 14 Synergy Initiative projects produced variable degrees of impact, implying that the model is more effective in some instances than others. This variation reflects a variety of factors, including differential capacity to carry out the steps required by the model (described below), transitions in staffing and leadership that occurred in some projects, and some situations have more potential for high-impact solutions because of the nature of the problem or the specific opportunities that present themselves.

### Evaluating the Practice of Impactful Collaboration

Because the Synergy Initiative produced multiple instances of impactful collaborative problem-solving, the initiative offers a valuable opportunity to learn about the process of generating impact. The foundation contracted with the authors to conduct a qualitative study examining four of the more successful projects funded

**TABLE 3** Key Outcomes from Synergy Initiative Projects

Synergy Project	Key Outcomes (Policy change outcomes in <i>italics</i> )
Central Massachusetts Oral Health Initiative (CMOHI)*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A fully accredited dental hygiene program was established at Mount Wachusett Community College.</li> <li>Dental care capacity at two community health centers in Worcester was nearly doubled.</li> <li><i>Medicaid policy was changed to allow private-practice dentists more flexibility in determining the number of Medicaid patients to accept, which led to more dentists participating in the Medicaid program.</i></li> </ul>
Oral Health Initiative of North Central Massachusetts*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community Health Connections opened dental clinics at three locations in north-central Massachusetts, providing 25,000 dental visits per year.</li> <li>Preventive dental care is offered at 55 public schools.</li> </ul>
Child Abuse Prevention and Protection Collaborative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family Outreach Network expanded the home visiting services it offers to parents of newborns.</li> <li><i>State legislation required all birthing parents to receive education about shaken baby syndrome.</i></li> </ul>
Together for Kids *	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Behavioral health consultation in child care settings for educators and families, training for educators, and referrals for intensive services have resulted in a substantial reduction in suspensions and expulsions from preschool.</li> <li><i>A new line item was added to the state budget for Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care that provides funding for the Together for Kids intervention model across the state.</i></li> </ul>
Home Again	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Housing First approach was established in Worcester to focus resources on moving chronically homeless adults into subsidized housing. Worcester was recognized in 2011 as the first city its size in the U.S. to effectively end adult chronic homelessness.</li> </ul>
Hunger-Free & Healthy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Worcester Public Schools improved the quality of meals offered to 25,000 students and now provides “free breakfast after the bell” at 21 schools.</li> <li>A community outreach worker was hired to assist food pantries in signing up clients for SNAP.</li> </ul>
Choices and the Winchendon Project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Passage of Chapter 321 — An Act Relative to Children’s Mental Health: Major provisions include early identification for children with mental health needs; the creation of a task force to assess the capacity of schools to deliver behavioral health services and make recommendations to promote effective delivery; improved insurance coverage for children with mental health needs; and the restructuring of the state’s provision, coordination, and oversight of children’s behavioral health services.</i></li> </ul>
A Better Life*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intensive case management provided to families living in public housing to promote self-sufficiency, focusing on educational, occupational, financial, personal, and health care issues. Participants have become employed, increased their income, and moved to private or Section 8 housing.</li> <li><i>State policy was changed to allow A Better Life to be implemented in state-subsidized housing properties. One of the program’s primary goals — to help residents transition out of public housing — would have otherwise been at odds with state policy.</i></li> </ul>

\*These projects were included in the evaluation study.

TABLE 3 Key Outcomes from Synergy Initiative Projects (continued)

Synergy Project	Key Outcomes (Policy change outcomes in <i>italics</i> )
Worcester Initiative for Supported Reentry (WISR)*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Re-entry services across agencies (social and health services, housing placement, employment readiness and job placement) were coordinated beginning prior to release, including individualized navigation plans and evidence-based interventions. The approach has generated a 47% reduction in the three-year recidivism rate and a 59% return on investment based on one-year incarceration costs.</li><li>• <i>\$7 million for reentry services was included in the state's 2018 Criminal Justice Reform legislation.</i></li><li>• <i>The state has approved contracts piloting the WISR model in Worcester and Middlesex counties, with the intent of expanding services statewide.</i></li><li>• <i>The Worcester County jail changed its policy to allow inmates more flexibility in attending treatment programs.</i></li></ul>
Improving Access to Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Edward M. Kennedy Community Health Center opened a satellite site in Milford to relieve some pressure on its Worcester and Framingham sites. The Milford site reduced inappropriate use of the Milford Regional Medical Center's emergency room.</li></ul>
Worcester's Healthy Environments and Resilience in Schools Initiative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Evidence-based trauma-sensitive routines and individual supports have been integrated into the school day at four elementary schools and one middle school in Worcester.</li><li>• Community-based mental health agencies are providing services in after-school programs at three elementary schools.</li><li>• The use of a clinical stabilization team in the schools is being expanded.</li><li>• A school-based health center was renovated and opened in April 2018. The center provides access to health care and behavioral health services to more than 800 middle-school students.</li></ul>
Worcester Regional Food Hub	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Worcester Regional Food Hub was developed to improve the regional food system by strengthening sustainable agriculture, promoting healthy eating, and fueling economic development. The Food Hub is comprised of two distinct programs: the Commercial Kitchen Incubator provides a certified commercial kitchen, and the aggregation, marketing, and distribution services aim to increase market opportunities.</li></ul>
Relmagine North of Main	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To support branding the neighborhood as the "Gateway to Arts and Culture," NewVue Communities and the Fitchburg Art Museum are renovating the B.F. Brown School for artist living and work space.</li><li>• MassDevelopment designated the North of Main area of Fitchburg as a Transformative Development Initiative district, which brings a range of financial resources and technical assistance to support revitalization efforts.</li></ul>

\*These projects were included in the evaluation study.

under the initiative, focusing on the following evaluation questions:

- What are the critical tasks that a collaborative group needs to complete in order to produce impactful solutions?
- How did the Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts either support or inhibit the completion of these tasks?
- What preconditions need to be in place for a group to carry out the rigorous work that the Synergy Initiative calls for?

Because of resource limitations, this study included only a subset of the 14 projects that completed the Synergy Initiative process. The primary goal of the study was to increase knowledge about how collaborative groups generate impactful solutions. Thus, we purposefully sampled cases where the group had implemented a program or service with documented benefits, and where there had also been a policy change or systems change that makes it likely that the program or service will be sustained financially over the long run.

Two additional criteria were used to select projects for the study. First, in order to evaluate which features of the Synergy Initiative model were most important to the group's success, it was necessary to include only projects where the group had actually carried out all the required steps. Second, in order to promote the generalizability of the findings, we intentionally selected projects that addressed a wide range of issues.

Applying these criteria led to the selection of the following four projects: CMOHI, WISR, Together for Kids, and A Better Life. These projects address the issues of oral health, prisoner reentry, behavioral health in preschool settings, and self-sufficiency among residents of public housing. All four had received at least six years of funding from the foundation at the time we began our evaluation in the fall of 2017.

For each project, we reviewed a variety of materials, including staff memos, progress reports, reports written by evaluation consultants, and project-impact summaries. We gained a more in-depth view of the four projects through conversations with foundation staff and extended interviews with eight individuals who were central to the work, including project directors, project coordinators, and evaluators. Interviewees were asked to describe their experience carrying out the Synergy Initiative process, as well as to offer observations, critiques, and recommendations as to how the model might be revised or replicated. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

## Key Tasks in Generating Impactful Solutions

Our analysis focused primarily on understanding what is required for a collaborative group to be effective in developing, implementing and sustaining impactful programs. Each of the following six tasks was cited by multiple interviewees:

1. Building and sustaining commitment over the long haul,
2. Maintaining a focus on impact,
3. Using a systems lens to analyze the situation and to develop strategies,
4. Reviewing evidence when developing strategies and choosing program models,
5. Testing and adapting initial strategies, and
6. Changing policy and funding streams in order to sustain interventions.

These tasks are described more fully below. We also show how the Synergy Initiative model reinforced the importance of these tasks and how the foundation supported the groups in carrying out these tasks.

### *Building and Sustaining Commitment*

The Synergy Initiative model presumes that impactful collaboration is a long-term, multi-stage journey. To stay the course, participants need to bring a high level of commitment and sustain that commitment throughout the ups and downs of the process. This occurred for all four of the studied projects, including projects that had a transition in the project director, project coordinator, and/or other collaborating partners who were central to the work. In one project, maintaining the commitment involved a shift in the lead agencies. Persistence in the face of these key transitions speaks to the value of a high-functioning collaborative.

The foundation played a major role in ensuring that the groups were committed to the work



— by allowing the group to define their own problem, by testing participants' commitment during the application phase, and by encouraging the group to continue on with the process when commitment wavered. As one interviewee said,

The foundation CEO sits down at a table with high-level stakeholders. I think it is critical that she is at those meetings and she pushes them ... [to make] more of a commitment and then the work can happen at lower levels.

### *Staying Focused on Impact*

When asked to explain why their groups had been productive, interviewees reported that participants were uniformly (and even relentlessly) focused on solving their problem and generating tangible impacts. The foundation explicitly looked for this bottom-line orientation during the selection process and continued to emphasize impact in all its interactions with the groups. While the foundation was expansive in terms of the five-year funding commitment, its staff pushed the groups to achieve large-scale outcomes as expediently as possible. As one interviewee said,

Right from the beginning, it was a challenge to all of us to really think much bigger and broader than we had ever been asked to think before. It was challenging. It was exciting. I think we were probably fearful along the way, too. We have an opportunity here and we want to make sure we don't squander it, but it was invigorating.

### *A Systems Lens*

Each of the four groups recognized that achieving their goal would involve changing a system or multiple systems, rather than simply developing a program or service. The evaluator and foundation staff often played critical roles in questioning the partners as to what sorts of systems changes were possible and would make a difference. They also brought a form of analytic and critical thinking that helped the groups move from tactical remedies to larger, more impactful strategies. This is reflected in the following quote from an interviewee:

We are in the weeds here, and sometimes we had to try to force ourselves to get out of the weeds.

*The foundation played a major role in ensuring that the groups were committed to the work — by allowing the group to define their own problem, by testing participants' commitment during the application phase, and by encouraging the group to continue on with the process when commitment wavered.*

[The foundation's representative] was able to come in and just give us a different perspective, but also to challenge us to say, "Well, why do you want to keep doing it that way?"

As another interviewee described it, "I had someone behind me pushing me and saying, 'keep looking at the big picture.'"

### *Evidence-Informed Decision Making*

All four of the funded groups focused on evidence-based models and engaged in a long-term process of analysis, planning, implementation, and experimentation. They tested whether their expectations were met and how well their assumptions bore out. The evaluators designed studies that directly answered the groups' most critical questions. Multiple interviewees provided feedback that echoed the following:

The evaluator was sitting at the table, part of the conversation, willing to push us, willing to listen, willing to be open and flexible to go where the data allowed.

### *Evolving the Strategy*

In many other foundation-sponsored collaborative initiatives, the participants feel beholden to pursue whatever action plan emerged from the planning process or was prescribed by the funder, even if the action steps prove ineffective



*While sustainability is talked about in most systems-change initiatives, this is one of the thorny issues that is often left unaddressed. In contrast, the four groups studied here strategized throughout the process as to what it would take for their solutions to take root in the community and to succeed over the long run.*

once they are implemented. In contrast, the Synergy Initiative model encourages the collaborative to make data-informed adjustments to its program strategy, and indeed provides the collaborative with an evaluator to ensure that data are available to support learning. Interviewees reported that foundation staff encouraged these programmatic adjustments during meetings, often approving changes in real time, and also when applying for implementation grants. One interviewee summarized it as follows:

The real benefit here is that the foundation is not a partner who is going to look at your data and what's going on and say, "I don't like that. We are taking our dollars away." Instead, they are at the table with the implementers strategizing [and to say along with us], "Well, that doesn't seem to be working."

Adaptation occurred not only with the program model, but also the evaluation strategy. In each of the four projects, the evaluators revised the evaluation design, methods, and measures as the program models took shape and the collaborative learned more about how and where the program worked. As one interviewee recounted,

We were constantly working [with the evaluators] and figuring things out on what's working and what's not working. What do we need to change

and how do we need to do it? So, it was that kind of a process over the years that I think worked very well.

### *Addressing Sustainability*

While sustainability is talked about in most systems-change initiatives, this is one of the thorny issues that is often left unaddressed. In contrast, the four groups studied here strategized throughout the process as to what it would take for their solutions to take root in the community and to succeed over the long run. Foundation staff emphasized sustainability and, more particularly, the role of policy change as they interacted with the groups. One of the interviewees noted:

[The foundation's representative] gets the group thinking about sustainability early. What are the policies you have to change? Not just the steps you have to take to do work, but what are the actual policies you need to change within city government or school district or something like that.

The foundation not only instilled this expectation around policy change, but also contributed in substantial ways to making policy change happen. A number of interviewees explicitly referenced the staff's expertise in policy analysis and legislative processes, as well as the connections that it was able to take advantage of when advocating for policy change.

### **Preconditions for Impactful Collaboration**

The four projects highlighted in the previous section were all able to implement strategies that have had tangible benefits to people living in the region. But not all of the groups funded under the Synergy Initiative were this successful, suggesting that they may not have been fully prepared for this highly rigorous model of collaborative problem-solving. Likewise, many of the groups that applied for funding under the Synergy Initiative were judged by the foundation as not being ready for the required work.

While the sampling frame for our study (i.e., four exemplar cases) did not allow a thorough analysis of the preconditions that lead to readiness, we were able to ask participants in successful

projects what they regarded as important in being able to carry out the model. Interviewees affirmed that there is a threshold of readiness that only some groups will meet. The following two quotes are illustrative:

- “If you don’t have the resources and capacity, the expectations are probably overwhelming. ... I think it would be very difficult for any small agency to run a project of this size and with the expectations that come with that.”
- “I would hold up the Synergy Initiative model as a model for the field. I do think positive things occur in the communities around making these big social changes. But I don’t feel like everybody can do it; I mean, certainly that level of intensity. Not every project director or community agency can do that, so it’s like the right conditions have to be met and there are things like high expectations; understanding how to work with an evaluator; being flexible and adaptive.”

When describing readiness factors, interviewees consistently referred to two domains: commitment and capacity.

### Commitment

The Synergy Initiative model presumes that meaningful systems change requires intensive planning, analysis, deliberation, and action over an extended period of time. Participants are expected to commit themselves to a five-year process. Multiple interviewees noted that the time and effort they devoted to the work was considerably greater than what they envisioned at the outset. They also reported that some partners opted out of the Synergy Initiative process as other commitments competed for attention. But they also indicated that this level of time and effort was necessary in order to achieve the outcomes they were seeking.

The implication for funders who are interested in replicating the Synergy Initiative model is that they need to ensure that groups fully understand and appreciate the work ahead. For example,

*Multiple interviewees noted that the time and effort they devoted to the work was considerably greater than what they envisioned at the outset.*

the Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts explicitly tests applicants’ level of commitment during highly interactive site visits. Once groups begin the process, the funder needs to actively monitor whether participants are maintaining their commitment, especially when there is turnover, and to step in with encouragement, adaptations, and resources when commitment does waver.

### Capacity

Interviewees stressed that their success depended not only on the commitment of participants, but also their capacity to carry out sophisticated analysis and planning. Each of the four studied groups addressed problems that were complex on conceptual, practical, interpersonal, and political levels. The groups compiled and analyzed data from a variety of sources and drew sophisticated inferences in the design and adaptation of program strategies. This required high-level skills on the part of all partners, but especially from the project director and project coordinator.

Based on our analysis of the four successful projects, we believe that the following forms of capacity need to be present within a group that pursues this model:

- In-depth understanding of the issue being addressed, including what research says about prevalence, etiology, risk and protective factors, co-occurring issues, etc.;
- Solid understanding (grounded in both experience and research) of different approaches to addressing the issue, including at least fundamental knowledge about

*[I]t is essential that partners enter into the process with foundational knowledge and skills, as well an authentic desire to further develop their ability to design, implement, evaluate, and sustain effective programs.*

whether, where, and when these approaches are effective;

- The ability to design a sound program based on research, experience, deliberation, and analysis;
- The ability to work with data and interpret evaluation findings with assistance from the evaluator;
- The ability to think strategically and to develop strategies capable of achieving goals;
- The ability to think in terms of systems, recognize interconnections between issues, understand how changes in one part of a system affect other parts of the system, etc.; and
- The ability and disposition to work effectively on teams and in collaborative processes, especially over the long run.

It is not strictly necessary for everyone involved in the project to have all these forms of capacity, but all forms should be present somewhere within the collaborative. It is particularly important that the individuals with leadership roles be capable in these ways.

Additionally, we don't contend that all these forms of capacity need to be fully formed at the

outset of the project. Partners can expect to build their skills and knowledge as they engage in the different phases of the Synergy Initiative process. Many of the interviewees described the intensive learning and skill building that occurred for themselves and their colleagues over the course of their projects. At the same time, it is essential that partners enter into the process with foundational knowledge and skills, as well an authentic desire to further develop their ability to design, implement, evaluate, and sustain effective programs. The foundation tests for these forms of capacity when deciding which groups to fund.

### Larger Lessons for Funders

The successes that have occurred within the Synergy Initiative indicate that collaborative problem-solving efforts can in fact produce solutions that tangibly improve the lives of people. At the same time, it is important to appreciate how much commitment, time, and effort was required to produce these impacts. Collective impact is not something that automatically happens when leaders from multiple organizations come together to work on a shared problem.

The positive track record of the Synergy Initiative demonstrates that funders can play a crucial role in facilitating progress among collaborative groups. We believe that the following elements of the foundation's strategy were particularly valuable:

- Allow organizations to self-organize and to define the problems they want to solve.
- Support collaborative groups over at least a five-year period, with the expectation that different forms of planning and implementation work will occur at different points in time.
- Bring a planning model that promotes evidence-informed decision-making, experimentation, and adaptation.
- Provide support for an evaluation consultant over the course of the work.

- Sequence implementation grants so that funding is available at each stage of strategy development.
- Assist groups in influencing policies that are key to implementing and sustaining their strategies.

Arguably the most profound complexity with the Synergy Initiative model is the funder's direct involvement in the collaborative process. Foundation staff invest considerable time, attention, and effort in each funded group. Multiple interviewees indicated that the foundation's engagement in the process was at least as valuable as the financial support. They were highly respectful of the skills and experience that the foundation's CEO and other staff brought to the process, especially around strategic thinking, evaluation, systems change, and policy change.

On the other hand, we also heard about the tensions that this engagement sometimes generated, especially when the foundation pushed the group to work hard and to stay focused on outcomes. One interviewee described the dynamic this way:

[The foundation CEO] held us to a really high standard to make sure that the money that the foundation was giving us was being used to the fullest potential. Some folks would say, "Here, take the money back. This is too much work."

As a summary statement, the interviewees generally viewed the foundation's engagement as a net positive, but it is important to recognize that our sample included only exemplar cases. It is quite possible that participants in less successful projects viewed the foundation's involvement differently.

Interviewees also recommended this approach for other funders. The following quote is illustrative:

I think that if more funders were involved in the process ... they would be more open-minded and more creative and more understanding of barriers. I think all of that outweighs the growing pains or challenges around working in this kind of model, by far.

*While funders can add value by participating directly in a collaborative process, it is important to consider that this approach may not always stimulate progress. Participants may feel intimidated having the funder at the table, and may orient their time and attention to the issues they perceive to be of interest to the funder.*

While funders can add value by participating directly in a collaborative process, it is important to consider that this approach may not always stimulate progress. Participants may feel intimidated having the funder at the table, and may orient their time and attention to the issues they perceive to be of interest to the funder. Even if the funder is genuinely interested in supporting the group in meeting the group's own purpose, participants may make assumptions and draw inferences that divert the problem-solving process away from its goals. It is important for the funder to respect the group's autonomy and to ensure that the resources and guidance it brings to the process is supportive of the purpose that the group has defined for itself.

We addressed the issue of differential power in our report to the foundation summarizing the evaluation findings. We also offered the following recommendation to the CEO: "Encourage the community organizations involved in Synergy Initiative projects to occasionally engage in dialogue among themselves, without the foundation present." The foundation formally accepted this recommendation at a board meeting.

Foundations that consider adopting the Synergy Initiative approach need to be highly conscious of the power dynamics associated with having the funder directly engaged in the group's deliberations. We recommend that this approach be used only in situations where the funder can build strong, honest, give-and-take relationships with the other participants. This may be easier to accomplish when the funder has a history of grantmaking with the participating organizations. On the other hand, previous grant awards may lead to the sort of gaming that gets in the way of honest, open relationships.

The conditions that lead to constructive engagement by funders are similar to the conditions that lead to impactful collaboration. Namely, all the participants need to enter the process committed to solving a collective problem rather than meeting their own narrow interests. They need to be ready and willing to engage in a long-term process of discovery, learning, and testing of ideas. The process needs to be designed and managed in a way that participants openly share their knowledge and perspectives with one another. Participants need to respect one another's perspectives while also pushing each other to think bigger and to look beyond traditional remedies. And the group needs to be cohesive enough that it can bring together different perspectives into a synergistic strategy.

## Conclusion

Foundations have been attracted to models like collective impact because of the potential for synergistic strategies and large-scale impact. The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts' experience with the Synergy Initiative demonstrates that it is possible for groups to generate impactful strategies beyond what they would have done on their own, and that funders can add considerable value to the collaborative process. But it also shows that this is an intensive process that requires commitment, action, deep thinking, and stretching of boundaries on everyone's part.

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# Using a Decision-Making Placemat to Inform Strategy

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**Keywords:** Strategic planning, tool, board of directors, data-informed decision-making

## Introduction

Strategic planning in philanthropy allows board and staff to articulate and commit to their priorities and set a plan for how to accomplish the foundation's goals. Multiple internal and external factors shape priorities, including the foundation's history; current board, staff, and strategy; and the community's most pressing needs (Bryson, 1988). Foundations routinely assess potential new or modified funding areas through needs and strength assessments, identification of potential partners, and input from key stakeholders, including those impacted by the foundation's priorities. Formation of philanthropic strategic direction amid many competing priorities and factors involves the processing and sharing of complex internal and external information with multiple stakeholders, including the board of directors.

The role of a foundation board member in strategic planning varies by organization, with planning ranging from staff-driven to board-driven (Stern, 2013; Mittenthal, Cardona, & Blanchard, 2014). Preskill et al. (2019) identify four realities of foundation boards, including varying levels of understanding of the foundation's work based on disparate experiences and perspectives. Board members also experience different levels of engagement with the foundation, depending on which committees they serve. Ultimately, however, the board of directors makes the final decision on the adoption of a foundation's strategic plan, and the more thoroughly informed and engaged board members are throughout the planning process, the stronger the board buy-in and resulting strategic plan are likely to be. Creating clear and compelling

## Key Points

- Strategic planning in philanthropy allows board and staff to articulate and commit to their priorities and set a plan for how to accomplish a foundation's goals. To do so requires the processing and sharing of complex internal and external information amid the competing priorities and commitments of multiple stakeholders.
- This article explores the development and use of a decision-making placemat tool to inform the strategic shift of the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland's place-based program area. The foundation has focused its work on housing, health, education, and disparities in outcomes for Cleveland, Ohio, residents who are living in poverty, with focused attention on the city's Central neighborhood. Using the key elements of the foundation's learning approach, the tool guided board members as they worked toward consensus around one of four potential scenarios.
- Use of the decision-making placemat tool strengthened the board's ability to articulate the rationale for the shift in strategic direction, and allowed board members to assume the role of learner by providing a road map for finding and filling gaps in their understanding of the foundation's goals and approaches. And the resulting changes to strategy in the Central neighborhood reflect growing evidence of the interconnections among poverty, health, trauma, and education outcomes, as well as ongoing input from residents and partners.

## *The foundation's investment in education and health in the Central neighborhood was deepened in 2008, when the community emphasized the need for better employment and educational opportunities, greater food access, and infrastructure developments.*

rationales to drive board decision-making requires the synthesis of complex information into a format accessible to and approachable by all board members.

This article explores an organizational learning process that uses data-informed decisions to take action. In the strategy-formation step of a strategic-plan refresh, the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland's staff developed a decision-making tool for board members and other stakeholders to inform the shift of a place-based program area. This article provides an overview of how the foundation used a decision-making placemat tool with the board within the context of the strategic-planning process to inform its learning journey, exploring how the placemat was developed and how it was used to engage the board in rich discussion that ultimately informed and focused the program area's strategic direction.

### **The Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland**

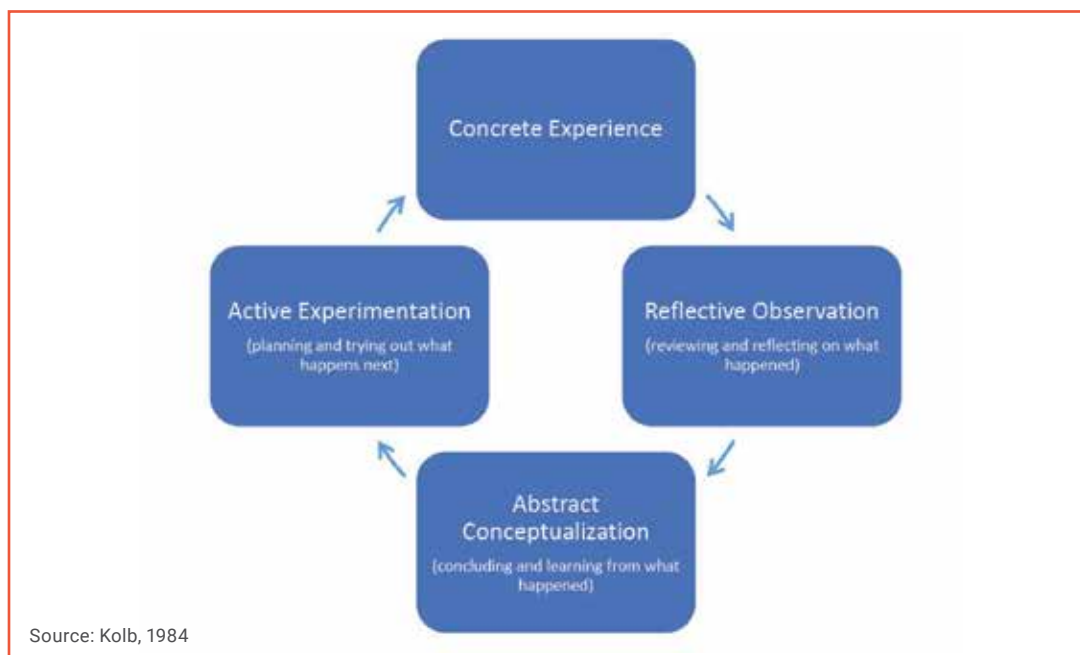
The Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine, the first public health nurses in Cleveland, Ohio, founded the Saint Ann Foundation in 1974. It was the nation's first health care conversion foundation, and the first grantmaking foundation established by Roman Catholic sisters. The Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland was founded in 1996, and in 2006 the two foundations merged with a single mission to improve the lives of those

most in need, with special attention to families, women, and children living in poverty. For more than two decades, the foundation has focused its work and investment strategies on issues of housing, health, and education disparities for Cleveland residents living in poverty, as well as sustaining the organizations that Catholic sisters established to support these populations. The foundation focuses special attention within the Central neighborhood adjacent to downtown Cleveland, based on the sisters' legacy of service to that area.

For decades, residents of the Central neighborhood have lived in concentrated, multigenerational poverty. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2017), 82% of the children in Central live below the poverty line, and the majority of the neighborhood's residents have low educational attainment and poor health outcomes. The foundation's investment in education and health in the Central neighborhood was deepened in 2008, when the community emphasized the need for better employment and educational opportunities, greater food access, and infrastructure developments. The foundation worked with residents and partners to launch and incubate the Cleveland Central Promise Neighborhood (CCPN), an education-focused, place-based strategy with the goal of every child achieving success in learning, work, and life. Simultaneously, the foundation partnered with residents and organizations in the same neighborhood to address the social determinants of health, ultimately to improve health outcomes through a "healthy eating/active living" strategy. The foundation and its grantee partners routinely use qualitative and quantitative data to inform the future of the neighborhood, incorporating the experiences of partners and residents into a model that ensures success.

### *The Learning Approach*

A guiding principle of the foundation is to learn by using knowledge to drive decisions, evaluate impact, and build mission-based systems of intervention (Maxwell, 2016). Its learning approach is rooted in its founding, when the sisters gave the new foundation its four-part charge:

**FIGURE 1** Experiential Learning Cycle

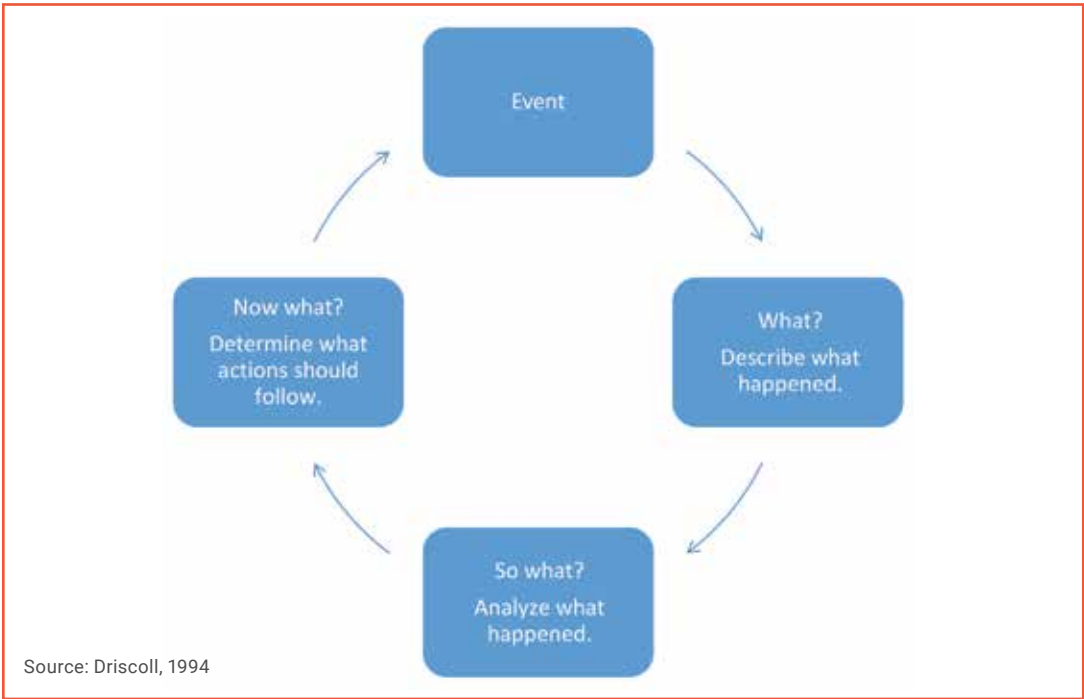
- Understand root causes of poverty in the area,
- Nurture growth of healthy communities,
- Emphasize needs of youth and families, and
- Measure the outcome of these efforts.

In 2013, the foundation completed an impact assessment to understand the community's perceptions of the foundation's effectiveness. A consideration from the assessment was to enhance its evaluation efforts and use the resulting information for learning, decision-making, and documenting impact. Here the foundation recognized that learning — or using what was discovered from measuring outcomes to make better decisions — was key to deeper impact. As with other foundations wrestling with complex social issues such as poverty, homelessness, and health and education inequities, the foundation committed to growing its capacity to present understandings concisely to facilitate comprehension and drive change. This meant that context,

rationale, and situational understanding had to play an equal role in data-collection, analysis, and reporting methods (Preskill et al., 2019). In 2017, the foundation created a full-time knowledge and learning position to operationalize a process for taking action around data-informed decisions.

Today, the foundation is an engaged funder with a small program team that nurtures deep, long-term relationships with grantee partners. Ongoing course adjustment, problem solving, and the development and launch of new ideas are built into the work. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle reflects this continuous cycle of experience, reflection, and action. (See Figure 1.) Similarly, Driscoll's (1994) reflective model provides a road map for foundation stakeholders to take action around informed decisions. (See Figure 2.) After an experience, three easy-to-remember prompts — “what,” “so what,” and “now what” — facilitate description for understanding (“what”), deeper examination to consider what does and does not work (“so what”), and shaping next steps and taking action (“now what”).

**FIGURE 2** Reflective Learning Model



**FIGURE 3** Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland Learning Framework



The foundation's learning approach uses these models to provide a framework for developing and refining grantmaking strategies as well as strategies for partnership, community engagement, capacity building, and other philanthropic approaches. (See Figure 3.) Understanding the quantitative outputs of a program are more meaningful for future strategy implementation when they are considered along with historical, political, or social contexts; the voices of those impacted and those of service-provider partners; and other situational information and evidence that provide insights into what is contributing to change. During the most recent strategic-planning process, staff designed a decision-making tool to make visible the three elements of the learning framework. The tool informed board consensus and led to a decision around a strategic shift in direction for the foundation's work and investment in the Central neighborhood.

### *The Strategic-Planning Process*

Over six months, the staff and board participated in several guided conversations. These included staff presentations on key learnings from current strategy, and discussions with local field experts to broaden understanding through other sources of data and evidence from national models and research. These sessions left board members with a more nuanced understanding of the assets and resources in the neighborhood, including a strong network of highly rated early-learning and prekindergarten centers and an "ambassador" program that created a network of over 60 residents participating in leadership development and community-organizing training. Board members also recognized in a deeper way how the layered nature of housing instability, food insecurity, trauma, and physical and emotional safety were impacting areas where the current strategy had not seen expected change, particularly in K–12 academic outcomes.

Board members were resolute in their commitment to staying invested in the neighborhood. They agreed that while the foundation was making progress in improving access to opportunities to improve health and education outcomes, other factors related to poverty, such

as unresolved trauma and poor mental health, were preventing utilization of such opportunities. Recognizing the scope and scale of the complex issues at hand, the board and staff next sought to align the internal and external environmental scans around a shifted strategic goal to ensure the foundation continued to contribute to change in significant ways (Bryson, 1988; Preskill et al., 2019).

### **Tool for Decision-Making**

Several ideas on how the foundation might shift its focus in the Central neighborhood were beginning to surface based on the foundation's history in the neighborhood and input from field experts. Ultimately, four scenarios emerged that focused on issues related to poverty in Central, but each pulled from multiple data and information sources, had varying potential outcomes, and connected to various strengths and attributes of the foundation's history.

Staff looked for tools by which multiple scenarios might be shared with board members in a way that would not be overwhelming, but would provide clarity around the theory of change and rationale for why each scenario might be appropriate for the foundation to undertake. Data placemats — 11-inch by 17-inch sheets of paper containing several key data points for discussion — are useful tools evaluators have used to engage stakeholders and enhance understanding of data (Pankaj & Emery, 2016). In philanthropy, these data placemats have been used among various stakeholder groups and focus on evaluation data of philanthropic investments. Using adaptive facilitation, stakeholders are guided through the data placemat(s) and asked open-ended questions to garner input and enable an opportunity to co-create meaning. In the foundation's situation, however, data was only one component of information needed to inform decision-making.

Foundation staff adapted Pankaj and Emery's (2016) data placemat to create a tool that incorporates multiple elements for decision-making in one place and contains all of the information board members need to envision the "what," "so what," and "now what" to consider



TABLE 1 Sources for Placemat Development

National	Local	Organizational
Evidence-based and philanthropic best practices; expert recommendations	Context, data, resident and partner voices	Mission, history, current focus
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Trauma-informed practices</li><li>• Ascend at the Aspen Institutes's two-generation approach</li><li>• Cradle-to-career solutions</li><li>• Grantmakers in Health's place-based health strategies</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Central neighborhood<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◦ social determinants of health and education administrative data</li><li>◦ partner interviews</li><li>◦ resident focus groups</li><li>◦ asset-mapping focus groups and surveys</li></ul></li><li>• Say Yes to Education (Cleveland chapter)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mission: In the spirit of the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine, we increase the community's ability to improve the lives of people living in poverty.</li><li>• Education strategic goal: To help kids in Cleveland's Central Promise Neighborhood grow up with the tools they need to thrive and be successful, from birth through college, through a coordinated strategic effort.</li><li>• Health strategic goal: To improve the health outcomes for those most in need in order to reduce health disparities in Cuyahoga County, with a special emphasis in the Central neighborhood.</li></ul>

TABLE 2 Decision-Making Placemats: Four Scenarios

Scenario 1: Early Childhood Approach	Scenario 2: Two- Generation Approach to Break the Cycle of Poverty	Scenario 3: Positive Youth Development Approach	Scenario 4: Place-Based Approach to Address Community Trauma
<p><b>Rationale:</b> Improving early childhood well-being has greatest return on investment and greatest potential for mitigating childhood trauma. Nearly half of Cleveland Central Promise Neighborhood (CCPN) residents are children, most of them living in poverty. We have past success in increasing early childhood resources; however, Central residents have identified barriers to utilizing neighborhood resources, including early learning</p>	<p><b>Rationale:</b> Children in low-income families face greater barriers in the early years; child poverty is very high in Central. Residents are underemployed and/or undertrained for higher paying jobs. Opportunities for postsecondary education and training exist, but residents face high barriers to access them. Supporting caregivers to increase family income and children to meet developmental milestones has potential.</p>	<p><b>Rationale:</b> Many CCPN adolescents are disconnected from school or work and may lack positive role models. Positive adult relationships are key to adolescents reaching their full potential. There are opportunities for vocational training, but there are high barriers for youth to access such opportunities. There has been limited success in engaging and connecting Central youth.</p>	<p><b>Rationale:</b> Community trauma is pervasive and creates barriers to trust and utilizing services; many of the symptoms of community trauma exist in Central. Building trust and social capital in the community could lead to positive health and education outcomes. Understanding of community trauma is nascent and much work needs to be done to build awareness.</p>
<p><b>Strategic Goal:</b> Young children in Central are healthy and meet developmental milestones</p>	<p><b>Strategic Goal:</b> Young families in Central reach their full potential.</p>	<p><b>Strategic Goal:</b> Central youth are healthy, productive, and engaged so they are empowered to reach their full potential.</p>	<p><b>Strategic Goal:</b> Prevent and mitigate trauma to create a resilient Central neighborhood.</p>

data-informed strategies for the four identified scenarios. (See Table 1.) Each decision-making placemat comprises multiple sources and types of evidence used to inform the development of the scenario. (See Table 2.) The information is paired with suggestions for strategic direction that give the user an opportunity to explore best practices and evidence-based interventions and approaches that could fit the data.

### Components of the Tool

Foundation staff used multiple sources and types of evidence to inform the development of each scenario and show the reader what raw data the foundation had accumulated. The title of Scenario 2, “Two-Generation Approach to Break the Cycle of Poverty,” grounds it in a theme that emerged from the learning conversations: Breaking the multigenerational cycle of poverty requires strategies that align, coordinate, and provide resources for children and families simultaneously while tracking outcomes for both. (See Figure 4.) Previously, the foundation’s strategy often did not make this alignment explicit.

#### “What”

The “evidence” section presents findings from national and field research that represent key findings and a-ha moments from earlier learning conversations. For Scenario 2, staff elevated evidence that contributed to the board’s interest in this theme, particularly the link between children living in poverty and their greater risk for living in poverty as adults. Each placemat featured one compelling chart or graph to visually illustrate a significant data point; for Scenario 2, this was a visual depiction of the relationship between adverse child and family experiences and household income — information shared during an earlier learning conversation. This depiction illustrated for many board members how the current strategy’s “healthy eating/active living” focus may not adequately encompass the mental and emotional health needs of Central residents. Each placemat also displayed a collection of quotes from Central residents related to the placemat’s key theme as well as related quantitative data from administrative data sources and the foundation’s own data collection. These

*Much of the evidence on the placemats had been presented in previous strategic-planning meetings and learning sessions, but the placemats allowed staff to weave together information from those different sessions.*

qualitative and quantitative data gave the board a sense of how residents perceive the issue and the related core assets of the community.

Much of the evidence on the placemats had been presented in previous strategic-planning meetings and learning sessions, but the placemats allowed staff to weave together information from those different sessions. When aligned in this way, these components not only demonstrated the “what” and shared understanding, but also helped to identify how the data formed meaningful patterns of information.

#### “So What”

The “rationale” provides a brief summary of the key evidence illustrated in the decision-making placemat. The rationale statement synthesizes the information presented into useable knowledge, providing insight into why the scenario was important given what the board and staff had uncovered during the learning process.

For the Scenario 2 placemat, staff used the rationale to reinforce that many families in Central live in situations reflecting the needs characteristic of a two-generation approach, and that supporting caregivers and children at the same time has greater potential to break the cycle of poverty. The evidence presented on the placemat illuminates what these needs look like, as residents share directly how families are disconnected from available neighborhood resources. The data reveal how families must navigate unique structural and social/emotional

**Strategic Goal:** Young families residing in Central reach their full potential.

1. Support primary care; mental health; and food access, utilization, and quality for mothers and children (e.g., nurse-family partnership, mental health awareness, healthy food outlets).

- ### Evidence:

Nationwide, only 1 in 10 high school graduates who are academically prepared for postsecondary education are from poor families; only 15% are students of color.<sup>2</sup>

Family Experience Level	0-99% FPL	100-199% FPL	200-399% FPL	400% FPL or more
One adverse family experience	33%	30%	26%	17%
Two or more adverse family experiences	35%	29%	21%	10%

Source: Data from the 2011/12 National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH)

Source: Data from the 2011/12 National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH).

Source: Dave Lath, Meeting Report 5.

**Rationale:** Children in low-income families face greater barriers in the early years; child poverty is very high in Central. Residents are underemployed/undertrained for higher-paying jobs. Opportunities for postsecondary education/training exist, but residents face high barriers to access them. Supporting caregivers to increase family income and children to meet developmental milestones is potential.

"Food is limited because, not talking about McDonald's, can't sit down with family to eat" = ?

Sources: 1. National Center for Children in Poverty; 2. Dave Lusk, *McKers Report*; 3. Urban Institute; 2017; 4. SOCF and CHIRU/COFN (July 2014); 5. Center for Community Solutions 2018; 6. Policy Link/PERE 2017; 7. SOCF/REAL/COFN Brief on Focus months 2017

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challenges and make daily choices about how to access economic, cultural, and social resources while maintaining family stability.

Taken together, the evidence presents the contexts of Central families holistically, allowing the board to see patterns in the needs of children and adults and leading to a rationale that suggests why a shift in focus to both child and adult outcomes is necessary. This synthesis speaks to the lessons the foundation has learned and how this knowledge might compel the board to select this scenario.

### *“Now What”*

The “strategic goal” and “direction for programmatic goals” elements allowed board members to consider how to use their knowledge of complex social issues to establish goals and take action. The strategic goal for Scenario 2 — “Young families residing in Central reach their full potential” — provides board members with a sense of the long-term goal for change proposed in the scenario. This goal is focused in that it provides an understanding of the target population, but is sufficiently broad to allow for adaptation and nimbleness through the life of the strategic plan.

The “direction for programmatic goals” element focuses on the types of philanthropic support and tools the foundation might use to make progress toward the strategic goal. These directions provide examples of specific interventions that might be appropriate for the scenario, and give a sense of what intervention strategies and philanthropic tools would be utilized within a shorter time frame (one to three years). In the two-generation scenario, the direction for programmatic goals leverages what the foundation has learned in its efforts to end chronic homelessness over the past two decades. The four suggestions — supporting health and well-being quality and access for young children and mothers, supporting quality early learning, supporting young parents in accessing success pathways, and aligning and leveraging resources and systems for support to create a culture of success — reflect how the foundation can contribute to the growth of an aligned infrastructure with a specific population over many

years. With these components, the decision-making placemat became a tool to determine and facilitate the “now what” conversation and decision around the desired path forward.

### Use of the Tool

To share the decision-making placemats with the board, the foundation leadership and the strategic-planning consultant led and facilitated a series of cluster meetings. The foundation occasionally uses cluster meetings to break up the board for small-group discussions. This provides an opportunity for all board members, regardless of scheduling challenges, to attend at least one small-group meeting to hear key information. It also allows for deep learning and rich discussion that is not often possible in a quarterly board of directors meeting.

Each cluster meeting was scheduled for two hours and included seven to nine participants. Participants received a decision-making placemat for each of the four scenarios. The consultant provided an overview of the materials at the beginning of each meeting to explain the tools, and foundation leadership provided five- to seven-minute verbal summaries of each of the placemats. Presentations were brief to allow for ample discussion among participants, beginning with initial observations and questions from the participants. Then, participants were asked a series of questions:

- What most excites you about the scenarios?
- What seem to be the most challenging aspects of the scenarios?
- If you could imagine this work in five years, what would you want to see accomplished?

At the end of each cluster meeting, participants were asked to complete a feedback form to rank their most-preferred and least-preferred scenarios, and provide a written rationale or commentary.

*Using the tool, the diverse members of the board and staff identified how different hypotheses grounded in evidence and resident voice could align with a strategic direction that leveraged the foundation's previous contributions to change and its investment capacity.*

### Feedback

At the conclusion of the meetings, the minutes and feedback forms were compiled and summarized. Of the 25 participants, 21 selected a first and last preference and 19 included a rationale or commentary for their selection. Though each cluster-meeting discussion included a different set of participants, the feedback forms indicated a clear preference (62%) for Scenario 2 (a two-generation approach to breaking the cycle of poverty). However, that preference was nuanced by suggestions for incorporating into it aspects of other scenarios. Of those that provided rationale or commentary, a majority (58%) requested that modifying the top preference be considered. Participants shared a variety of reasons for preferring and/or adapting the two-generation scenario:

- “Scenario 2 allows for the empowerment of Scenario 1.”
- “It seems [Scenario 2] provides for both short- and long-term [return on investment]. To be effective, however, it should be addressed with perspective to Scenario 4, with deep understanding of place and sense of community trauma. Scenario 2 effectively leverages the foundation's strength of systems alignment at a grassroots level.”
- “Thinking [Scenario 2] may be the best opportunity for greatest impact. Although [the number] of people affected may be limited. Recognize all scenarios impact each other.”
- “Impacting early childhood involves the whole family. We need parts of all scenarios.”
- “In order for Scenario 2 to be most successful, focus around trauma/toxic environment in Scenario 4 is needed. I like that Scenario 4 would impact more people and it would support systems change.”
- “I believe that the [two-generation] approach will provide the greatest impact and positively change the lives of the young families and those who are influenced by their outcomes. I believe there are other agencies providing similar resources and creating similar programs to help facilitate the goals outlined in Scenario 3.”
- “Scenario 2 (and 4). I personally want to address Scenario 4, as I believe it aligns with my passion and ultimately addresses the root causes of the problem. For the sake of moving forward and aligning with existing/future opportunities, I select Scenario 2. I believe narrowing the scope will produce measurable outcomes in the immediate future.”

The decision-making placemats had facilitated significant movement on the path toward an appropriate strategic direction. Using the tool, the diverse members of the board and staff identified how different hypotheses grounded in evidence and resident voice could align with a strategic direction that leveraged the foundation's previous contributions to change and its investment capacity (Buteau, Buchanan, & Brock, 2009). Combining aspects of the scenarios was anticipated by the foundation leadership, and the staff set forth to adapt the top preference to incorporate aspects of the other scenarios.



## Results

Staff synthesized the results and findings from the cluster meetings to develop a shift in strategic direction and programmatic goals. Foundation leadership presented this proposed strategic direction to external stakeholders at a Central community advisory meeting designed and led by a core team of four active participants in the resident-ambassador program. There, more than 60 residents and community partners and leaders provided input on the proposed direction. Further refinements from this community discussion shaped the final direction approved by the full board, including:

1. The Central neighborhood strategic goal:  
Break the cycle of poverty, family by family, by advancing health, education, social capital, stability and economics.
2. Programmatic goals:
  - Work alongside Central residents, including youth, to develop effective relationships, programs, and systems to foster and sustain healthy child development and family economic mobility.
  - Provide parents with multiple pathways and social connections to get family-supporting jobs and achieve financial stability.
  - Equip parents to better support their children socially and emotionally and to advocate for their children's healthy development and education.
  - Ensure access to high-quality early child care and education.
  - Work with health organizations to improve access to primary care, healthy food, and health education, with an emphasis on health-related causes of family instability and low student achievement.
  - Measure and account for outcomes for both children and caregivers, and use

*Deploying the three key elements of the foundation's learning framework then allowed board members to deeply reflect on the evidence and rationale for each scenario and recognize patterns of need and possibility across the scenarios.*

data for continuous improvement of two-generation programs.

## Discussion

Use of the decision-making placemat tool benefited the board and staff in several ways. The tool provided a clear pathway for board members to align around a strategic direction, somewhat paradoxically by making the case for several related scenarios (Bryson, 1988). Deploying the three key elements of the foundation's learning framework then allowed board members to deeply reflect on the evidence and rationale for each scenario and recognize patterns of need and possibility across the scenarios. Ultimately, this resulted in board members reaching consensus in an informed way.

In addition, the purposeful discussion guided by the tool lead the board to fully consider how the foundation's nongrantmaking strategies and approaches contribute to change in a complex ecosystem like the Central neighborhood (Mittenthal et al., 2014). The board's commitment to remain invested in the neighborhood speaks to the board's recognition that changing contexts and circumstances are inherent in such ecosystems. Board members now are better able to articulate the many implications of this complexity for Central residents, and why the foundation's role as a trusted convener and



*The use of quantitative and qualitative data from many sources provided a strong example of the importance of context and situational evidence in analyzing and interpreting the foundation's work and contributions to change in the Central neighborhood.*

advocate are powerful tools to drive change in such an environment (Bryson, 1988).

Staff also recognizes important benefits related to the foundation's continued growth as a learning organization. One key example is the collective recognition that in order to do the work of the foundation well, staff and board must feel comfortable assuming the role of a learner by asking the question, "What don't I know?" Several board and staff members found that the probing conversations about the foundation's direction led to their own new understandings or ways of thinking about the foundation's mission and strategies, or reignited personal passions and commitments to the Central neighborhood, its residents, and its potential. Using the decision-making placemat facilitated this discovery process by providing a road map for finding and filling the gaps in one's own understanding (Stern, 2013).

Finally, the tool's use of different levels and presentations of data demonstrated to both staff and board the value of each (Preskill et al., 2019). The use of quantitative and qualitative data from many sources provided a strong example of the importance of context and situational evidence in analyzing and interpreting the foundation's work and contributions to change in the Central neighborhood.

## Conclusion

The foundation's board members have varying time to commit and varying expertise and exposure to the complexities of the foundation's place-based strategy, necessitating efficient and effective presentation of proposed strategic-direction scenarios. The decision-making placemat addressed the foundation's need for a clear and concise tool to help board members understand complex information and make informed strategic decisions. The specific dimensions of the paper used for the placemat required foundation staff to choose the information judiciously and present it succinctly. It also allowed the board members to easily see relationships between the information, unlike slide deck formats or other linear formats that may not connect the dots as readily.

A number of key attributes of the decision-making placemat were instrumental in helping board members decipher priorities amid the complexities of poverty. The placemats:

- offered simplicity and clarity;
- gathered all information in one place;
- presented multiple forms of data and information;
- looked across multiple scenarios simultaneously;
- allowed for rich discussion without the sense of being "talked at"; and
- summarized and made the case for each scenario.

The decision-making placemat was useful in the foundation's strategic-planning process by facilitating dialogue and led to a consensus in strategic direction among board members. Changes to the strategy in the Central neighborhood reflect growing evidence of the interconnections among poverty, health, trauma, and education outcomes, as well as ongoing input from residents and partners. Accessing information and evidence from many sources in

a format that was easy to navigate allowed board members to confidently identify a preferred scenario and articulate a compelling rationale for their choice.

This tool may be applicable to other foundations considering a strategic shift and/or desiring deep engagement from the board in strategic decisions. In particular, foundations that address poverty, lead place-based initiatives, or are value-based may find the tool useful for capturing the full complexities and opportunities that lead to informed decisions. It can be used by board strategy or evaluation committees, by foundation strategy and learning staff, or by entire boards to better understand complex issues and make better-informed decisions. It may also be helpful for stakeholders beyond the board, or for exercises beyond strategic planning.

Whenever complex information must be understood in order to make an informed and effective decision, the decision-making placemat can help lay out information and options in a digestible way that will foster deeper understanding of prior experiences and knowledge. By guiding stakeholders through the focused process of considering what is known about an experience or initiative, looking for patterns and explanations for what occurred, and using this understanding to take action, the placemat ensures informed participation and engagement in the decision-making process.

*By guiding stakeholders through the focused process of considering what is known about an experience or initiative, looking for patterns and explanations for what occurred, and using this understanding to take action, the placemat ensures informed participation and engagement in the decision-making process.*

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# Scaling Programs With Research Evidence and Effectiveness (SPREE)

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**Keywords:** Implementation science, scaling, evidence, evaluation

## Introduction

Funders increasingly use evidence to select practices and programs that can best address individual and community needs. Evidence can also play a role in replicating the effects of these practices and programs, so that foundations can serve more people and increase their reach. To support effective scaling, funders need a comprehensive methodology for identifying effective interventions and assessing the readiness of the interventions and implementing organizations for scaling (Miller, Sorensen, Selzer, & Brigham, 2006; National Implementation Research Network [NIRN], 2018).

This article describes a process called SPREE — Scaling Programs with Research Evidence and Effectiveness — and provides insights into conditions under which foundations can apply it to help them and their grantees scale successfully. Implementing SPREE can assist foundations in two ways: (1) using evaluation research as a tool to determine which interventions are likely to produce desired outcomes, and (2) identifying those organizations ready to scale them. The insights and lessons discussed here are derived from the experiences of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), a federal grantmaking agency, in applying the process.

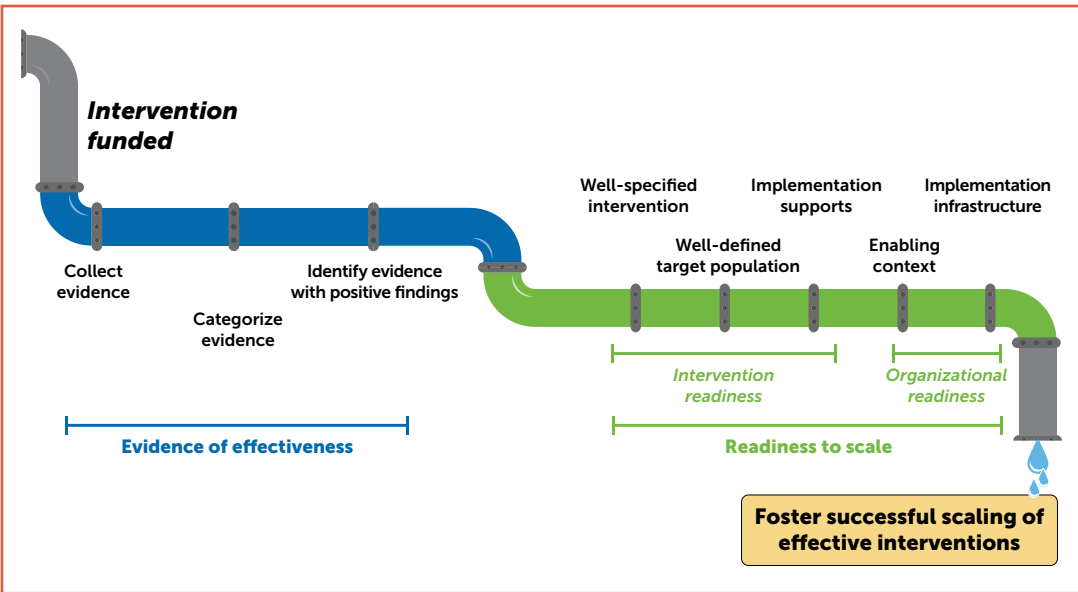
## The SPREE Process

Program managers can make informed decisions by incorporating measurement, learning, and evaluation into their strategic planning. Developing an inventory of currently funded interventions, requiring grantees to demonstrate evidence of an intervention's effectiveness, and using evidence requirements to structure contracts and grants can ensure that a foundation's funding is directed toward interventions most

## Key Points

- Foundations can serve more people by identifying and supporting effective interventions that are ready to be scaled. This article describes a process called SPREE — Scaling Programs with Research Evidence and Effectiveness — that can help funders and their grantees scale successfully. Implementing this process can assist foundations in using evaluation research as a tool to determine which interventions are likely to produce desired outcomes, and to identify which organizations are ready to scale them.
- The SPREE process is grounded in evaluation and implementation science frameworks and has been applied since 2016 by the Corporation for National and Community Service. This article explores how the agency's application of the process helps it ensure that the interventions it funds are likely to improve outcomes and extend its reach through successful scaling. In addition, the process generated discussions about using evidence and readiness to scale to guide funding decisions.
- While the SPREE process might work best when foundations and the grantees they fund have a culture of measurement, learning and evaluation, the process itself can be used to help them build or strengthen that culture. It can also help funders identify and provide the kind of support grantees need in demonstrating that an intervention is effective and in building the conditions needed to scale it successfully.

**FIGURE 1** Scaling Programs With Research Evidence and Effectiveness – The SPREE Process



likely to achieve desired outcomes among specific target populations (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2016). Similarly, foundations can use research from implementation science about intervention and organizational readiness for scaling to expand their reach.

The two-part SPREE process aims to help foundations identify which of their funded interventions can be scaled successfully. The first part of the process helps foundations identify the interventions that are most likely to achieve desired outcomes; the second part helps them identify which of those effective interventions demonstrate a readiness for scaling and which organizations might be ready to scale them. (See Figure 1.)

### Identifying Effective Interventions

The availability of rigorous research on the effectiveness of social programs has increased dramatically over the past decade. Most prominently, three federal research clearinghouses

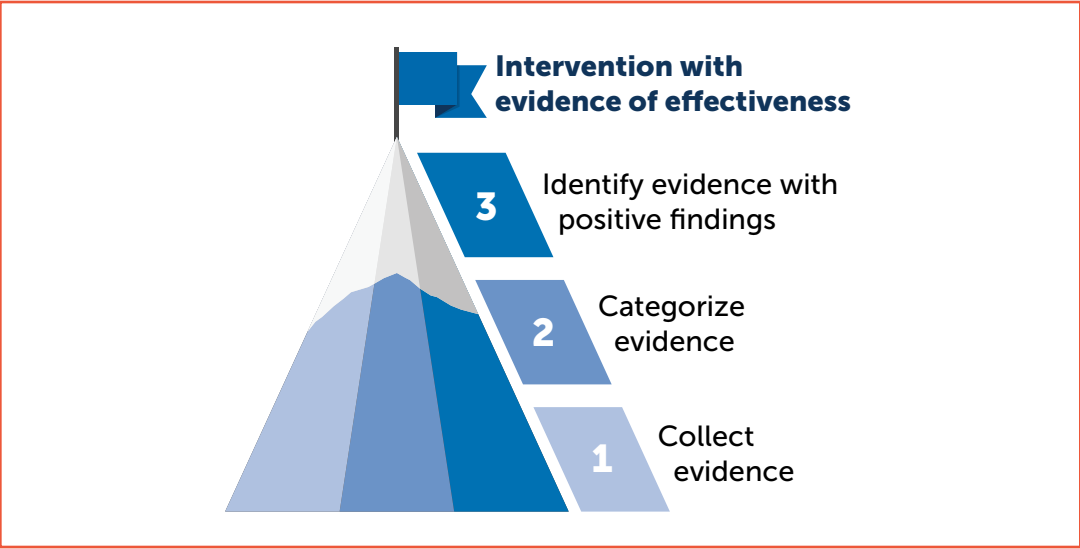
are providing information about interventions to help policymakers and program managers identify effective interventions: The Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse<sup>1</sup> (WWC) reviews research to determine which education interventions are effective; the Labor Department's Clearinghouse for Labor Evaluation and Research<sup>2</sup> (CLEAR) reviews studies for their ability to establish a causal impact for an intervention; and the Department of Health and Human Services' Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness<sup>3</sup> (HomVEE) project reviews research on home-visiting models to identify effective interventions for pregnant women or families with children from birth to kindergarten. Still, foundations often make funding decisions without looking at the evidence of an intervention's effectiveness. The first part of the SPREE process includes three steps a funder can take to identify an intervention's effectiveness so that information can be used in decision-making. (See Figure 2.)

<sup>1</sup> <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc>

<sup>2</sup> <https://clear.dol.gov>

<sup>3</sup> <https://homvee.acf.hhs.gov>

**FIGURE 2** Identifying Effective Interventions



**TABLE 1** Clearinghouse Standards Frequently Used to Identify Effective Interventions

<b>Reporting on Methods</b>	The study includes adequate information about the research design and statistical approach to gauge impacts.
<b>Evaluator Independence</b>	The evaluator was external to the grantee to ensure independence in findings.
<b>Study Design</b>	Research contains a comparison group, ideally with members assigned randomly. In addition, the study has:
	Low attrition: Few people in the treatment or comparison group who left the study.
	No reassignment: No people randomly assigned to comparison group switched to the treatment group and vice versa.
	Baseline equivalence: People in the treatment and comparison groups in the analytic sample did not differ at the start of the study.
	No confounding factors: The design precluded factors other than the intervention from producing outcomes.

1. *Collect evidence.* To identify effective interventions, foundations need to compile a comprehensive inventory of funded programs and the evaluation research for each one. This inventory should include a description of each program, its goals, the target population, the number of participants served, and the research providing evidence of the program’s effectiveness.
2. *Categorize evidence.* Because the quality of the research may vary, foundations need to define standards to demonstrate that the effects estimated can be attributed solely to the intervention. (See Table 1.) For foundations that lack the staff to develop and apply such standards, research clearinghouses are a useful source. For example, a foundation funding a college and career intervention



**FIGURE 3** Summary Ratings of Evidence

- A **high rating** indicates confidence that the intervention caused the desired outcomes.
- A **moderate rating** indicates some confidence that the intervention produced the outcomes, but that other contributing factors might have also intervened.
- A **low rating** indicates little confidence that the intervention produced desired outcomes, because other factors likely contributed.

that is structured like a career academy could use CLEAR and the WWC to find research on whether career academies have been shown to be effective. Because the clearinghouses provide summary ratings of evidence for an intervention's effectiveness, the foundation can compile summary ratings for interventions it funds to help it assess the level of confidence in the effectiveness of each intervention. (See Figure 3.)

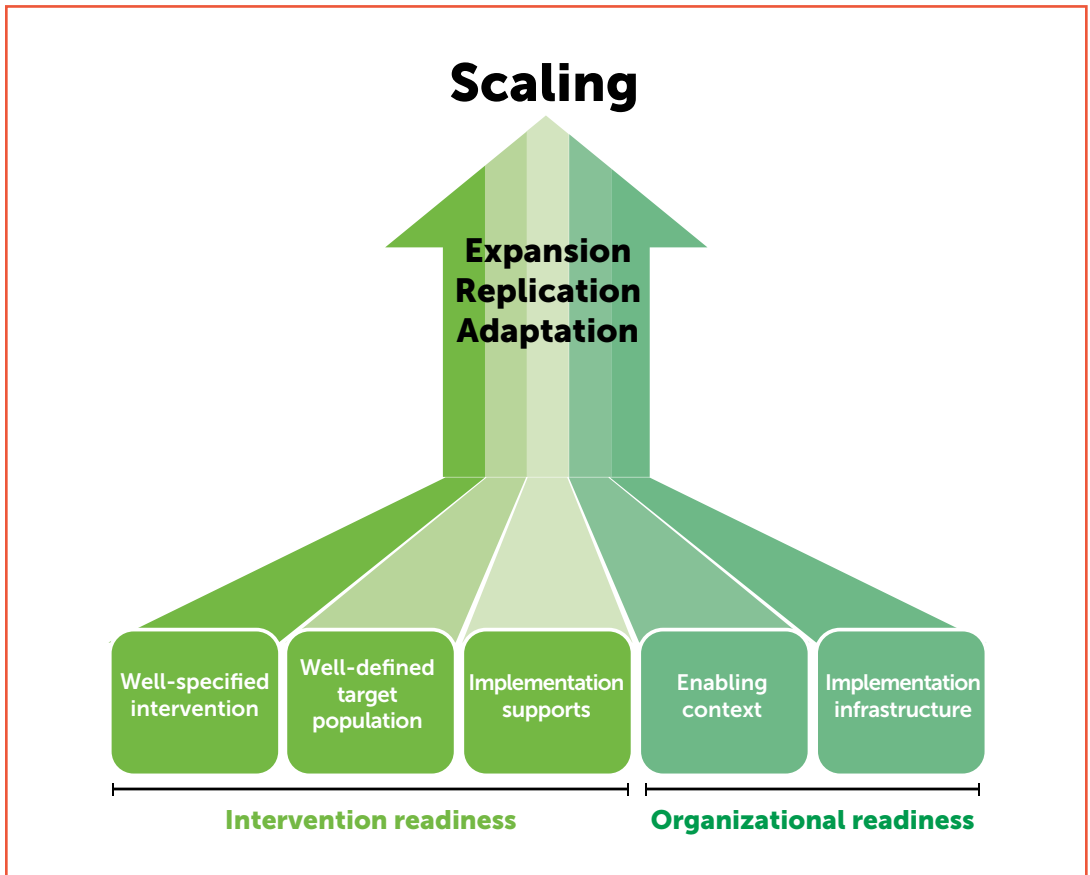
3. *Define evidence of positive outcomes.* For evidence to support confidence in an intervention's outcomes, it is not necessarily the case that all evaluations of the intervention show a positive impact or that expected benefits exceed costs. Each funder must define what evidence is adequate to consider an intervention effective. One evaluation showing a positive causal relationship on at least one outcome might be adequate evidence for one foundation, for example, while another might require that most evaluations show such an impact on the majority of outcomes examined or that one evaluation indicates that an intervention's benefits shown through causal evidence outweigh its costs.

Since not all interventions will have been researched for their effectiveness, foundations themselves may have to make those assessments. But standards that are too rigid might lead funders to discard potentially effective interventions that have not yet been able to establish such evidence. Accurate impact measurement can be

difficult for some types of outcomes or in work with specific target populations.

An evaluation of a program that attempts to reduce drug use, for example, faces the often difficult challenge of locating people for whom the intervention did not work; as a result, the evaluation might overstate the program's effectiveness because the study could not fully administer post-intervention surveys among those participants. Or while randomly assigning participants into either a treatment group that receives the intervention or a comparison group that does not is the gold standard for evaluation research, circumstances might not allow for random assignment. Legislation might mandate that members of a certain group receive an intervention, thereby precluding their assignment to a group that does not receive it; or ethical concerns about withholding services from those who need them for the sake of research might prevent an organization from using random assignment. Insufficient resources might also be a barrier to evaluation. High-quality evaluation of an intervention can entail considerable costs that might rule out an evaluation altogether, or lead to less rigorous or poorly implemented research — adequate funding may not be available, for example, to train staff about specific evaluation tasks (Despard, 2016; Gondolf, 2015).

Such limits on the accurate assessment an intervention's effectiveness are not inconsistent with the SPREE process. The process does not dictate that only effective interventions be considered for their scaling potential; it merely highlights how scaling effective interventions enhances the

**FIGURE 4** Conditions for Successful Scaling

probability that a funder will be able to improve lives of more people. Furthermore, foundations and other mission-driven organizations might embrace values other than participant outcomes when assessing which interventions to scale. Expanding diversity, inclusion, and equity; investing in new or innovative programs and practices; and supporting a particular practice or program (e.g., community service and volunteering) are all goals that funders might want to emphasize when deciding which interventions to scale.

#### *Identifying Interventions and Organizations Ready for Scaling*

Funding and implementing effective interventions increase the likelihood of improving

participants' lives. Scaling takes implementation to the next step; the focus goes beyond executing an effective intervention to replicating the same effects for a greater number of people. The SPREE process was developed to assess readiness for three types of scaling. The first type is expansion, or extending an intervention to more people in the same target population and location, and requires increasing the capacity of an existing infrastructure. The second type is replication, or extending an intervention to the same target population but in a new location, and requires a new implementation infrastructure. The third type of scaling is adaptation — modifying an existing intervention to serve a new target population or to implement it in a new setting while adhering to the intervention's intentions.

The SPREE process identifies five conditions indicating that both an intervention and the organization implementing it are ready for successful scaling. Successful scaling means that the intervention is implemented with fidelity — as it was intended — after it is adapted to serve a larger number of people.<sup>4</sup> (See Figure 4.) Both fidelity and effectiveness often flounder during scaling as capacity increases and adjustments are made (Larson, Dearing, & Backer, 2017). Maintaining fidelity to the intervention model after scaling helps ensure the intervention will continue to generate its beneficial outcomes.

The first three conditions for successful scaling indicate whether the intervention has the features that will allow it to be implemented with fidelity after scaling:

- *A well-specified intervention* clearly identifies the core set of elements critical to achieving beneficial outcomes (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). Each element must describe what it takes to produce the intended outcomes, including the intervention's content (e.g., activities or services); how it is to be delivered; how much of the intervention participants should receive; the requirements for staff delivering the intervention; and the setting in which the intervention will take place (Blase & Fixsen, 2013). These elements provide structure that ensures the intervention is delivered with fidelity and consistency; without those elements, it is less likely that the intervention will improve participants' outcomes to the extent expected given the intervention's success before it was scaled.
- *A clearly defined target population* ensures that the organization is offering the intervention to those for whom it was designed and shown to be effective. This definition must specify the characteristics necessary for people to participate in the intervention

(Garg, 2016; McElroy & Ladner, 2014); if the organization intends to serve a new population, that definition should be adapted accordingly.

- *Implementation supports* must be in place. They include a monitoring team that ensures the intervention is implemented as intended, continuous quality-improvement processes, and pre-service and in-service staff training (Breitenstein et al., 2010).

Even if the intervention is ready for scaling, the organization must be able to support the scaling for it to be successful. This means that the organization must have an environment that is conducive to scaling and have supports in place to ensure the scaled intervention's success. The final two conditions indicate an organization is ready to scale an intervention:

- *An enabling context* must be present: The organization's leadership and culture must support innovation, learning, and improvement. This support is necessary for the creation of an environment hospitable to the implementation of effective interventions and the use of effective implementation supports for staff. Although an organization's enabling context develops in different ways, having successfully tackled challenges in the past is one way such a context can develop. The organization's structures, roles, and functions should facilitate, rather than hinder, service delivery and its ability to affect beneficial outcomes.
- *A solid implementation infrastructure* must exist. An organization's infrastructure must contain sufficient financial, human, and physical resources to support the intervention (Bernfeld, 2006; Fixsen, 2009; Klingner, Ahwee, Pilonieta, & Menendez, 2003) and its successful implementation (Mihalic & Irwin, 2003) after scaling. To effectively

<sup>4</sup> Other frameworks also provide guidance in scaling an intervention. Although many are, like SPREE, broadly focused in implementation science (e.g., Achieving the Dream, 2011; Barker, Reid, & Schall, 2016), they lack the simplicity that allows a funder to easily capture a readiness for scaling (e.g., Cooley, Ved, & Fehlenberg, 2012). Still other frameworks are more narrowly focused. For example, Meehan and Jonker's (2018) readiness-to-scale matrix uses a management perspective to focus on an organization's readiness without considering that of the intervention.

TABLE 2 CNCS Tiered Evidence Ratings

Rating	The Evidence
Strong	Supports causal conclusions that assess the intervention nationally, regionally, or at the state level.
Moderate	Supports causal conclusions but has limited generalizability beyond the study context.
Preliminary	Is based on an outcome study with no comparison group.
Pre-Preliminary	Has some data collection and data.

support the scaled intervention, the organization’s infrastructure must enable it to supply the new staff necessary for scaling; support hiring, supervision, and staff development through a human resources management system; engage in continuous quality-assurance processes; and provide funding and other resources (e.g., materials, physical space). Of note, the infrastructure could include resources external to the organization: For example, if partners play a key role in implementation, their policies, priorities, systems, and so forth must also support successful scaling of the intervention.

CNCS: A Case Study in Applying the Process

The Corporation for National and Community Service is the nation’s largest grantmaker for national service and volunteering. By funding programs such as AmeriCorps State and National, VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America), and Senior Corps, it enables thousands of Americans to effect change in their communities through interventions in economic opportunity, education, disaster services, environmental stewardship, healthy futures, organizational capacity building, and support for veterans and military families. The CNCS and its grantees also invest significant resources in evaluating the effectiveness of these interventions.

Because of the diverse nature of its programs and in their expected outcomes — including impacts on increased literacy and education attainment, employment, career growth in volunteers, and conserving natural resources — the CNCS has applied the SPREE process since 2016 to determine how to identify effective interventions and decide which of those to scale.

Laying the Groundwork

Since its inception in 1990, the CNCS has assessed the programs it funds by holding grantees accountable to performance measures. Starting in 2010 with the launch of the Social Innovation Fund program, the agency began to more systematically organize and develop the evidence base for its programs. These efforts included (1) developing a tiered evidence-rating framework to assess the quality and strength of evidence underlying the impact of the interventions the agency supports, and (2) establishing tiered evaluation requirements for grantees. (See Table 2.) The CNCS contracted with independent, third-party evaluators to review and apply the appropriate evidence rating to documentation submitted by grantees addressing the effectiveness of proposed interventions. Through an iterative process, a body of evidence on the programs the agency supports emerged, and the agency conducted a number of meta-synthesis and meta-analysis studies to determine areas of strength, weakness, and growth concerning target outcomes. This evidence base would not

have emerged without grantee investments and efforts to capture data on their programs and the CNCS's efforts in compiling, categorizing, and making meaning of those data.

In developing guidelines for its grantees, the CNCS wanted to bring more uniformity, strategic learning, and a focused vision to evaluate the range of evidence frameworks and metrics for determining what constitutes an effective intervention applicable to its programs. In 2016, it began a multiyear effort to deepen its understanding of the interventions it supports and to build its knowledge base on scaling them. Its vision was to leverage its investments by ensuring that its most effective interventions could be scaled to engage more people and communities across the country.

### *Implementing the Process*

The CNCS selected the SPREE process as the vehicle to further its thinking on using evidence in funding and scaling. Working with a contractor, it completed four main tasks. First, it compiled research from grantees the agency previously rated as having moderate or strong evidence (Richman, Maxwell, Streke, Needels, & Eddins, 2018). Next, it used standards set by federal research clearinghouses to develop its own standards to categorize research; these went beyond the agency's tiered evidence ratings. In its third task, the CNCS defined an effective intervention as having at least one study that showed a positive impact in research meeting these standards. Lastly, the CNCS applied the SPREE's scaling framework to determine whether an intervention and organization implementing it were ready for scaling (Needels, Selekman, Jones, Richman, & Maxwell, 2018).

The CNCS contractor applied the SPREE process by developing and applying a rubric to extract information about the research's ability to provide evidence that the intervention leads to participant outcomes and evidence of the intervention's and organization's scaling readiness. The rubric served two key purposes: to enable the contractor to systematically review the research, to determine what met the standards for effective intervention; and the scaling

plan documents, to determine whether the intervention and organization met SPREE's five conditions for scaling readiness. It is important to note that the contractor applied the rubric to evidence and scaling documents that grantees had already developed and submitted to the agency based on the agency's existing reporting requirements; the SPREE process was applied to these documents after the fact. As a result, the CNCS case study provides an example of benefits the SPREE process might provide in the absence of an ideal set of information to feed into it.

### *Results*

Applying the SPREE process helped the CNCS understand which of its funded interventions are likely to be effective, and which of those effective interventions and the organizations implementing them might be ready for scaling. The process accomplished the following:

First, it identified the primary reasons why an intervention did not meet the standards set for effectiveness: the evidence that could establish whether the program produced desired outcomes did not consistently provide favorable results and the evidence could not establish that the intervention produced the desired outcomes. The latter finding was not necessarily surprising given the variety of programs the agencies offered. Programs were subject to different requirements for producing evidence and had different expectations for outcomes, with some prioritizing community service and career growth among volunteers over participant outcomes.

The process also highlighted the need for more detailed and structured information from grantees about their readiness to scale an intervention. Because scaling documents were developed before the CNCS adopted the SPREE process, information provided was not always specific enough to assess readiness, the criteria for which are now clarified through the SPREE process.

The SPREE process also fostered conversations about the desire to incorporate evidence in decision-making and scaling. (See Figure 5.) It spurred discussion on how best to use evidence as a basis for funding intervention scaling and

**FIGURE 5** Promoting Discussion**The SPREE Process Stimulated Discussion About:**

- research standards an agency should embrace;
- assistance an agency can provide to help grantees provide evidence of their intervention's effectiveness;
- assistance an agency can provide to ready grantees to scale an intervention;
- how an agency might reconcile differences between an intervention research found to be effective and a greatly modified version of that intervention a grantee proposes for scaling; and
- how the agency might retain its ability to fund innovative programs while also stressing the need to show an intervention to be effective.

support grantees in documenting the potential effectiveness of their interventions. Such support might include, for example, helping grantees understand what constitutes evidence of an intervention's effectiveness and what it takes to be ready to scale an intervention.

The knowledge and discussions resulting from applying the SPREE process helped the CNCS identify the following imperatives:

1. Build an agency consensus about appropriate standards for research evaluations and what constitutes readiness to scale an intervention;
2. Modify application and reporting requirements to ensure applicants and grantees fully understand the reasons for an intervention's effectiveness, provide evidence of the outcomes, and clearly demonstrate their readiness for scaling; and
3. Support grantees in their efforts to build capacity in evaluating and scaling interventions.

### Insights

In addition to helping foundations ensure that the interventions they fund are likely to improve outcomes and reach more people through successful scaling, the SPREE process can generate

much-needed discussions about using evidence and readiness to scale to guide funding decisions. The CNCS's application of SPREE highlighted these benefits as well as three conditions that could maximize its use.

### A Learning Culture

A funder is best positioned to build research evidence and use it to make decisions if it has a culture of measurement, learning, and evaluation. Such a culture requires foundation leadership, management, and staff to develop a common understanding about the value of measurement and evaluation in decision-making and to agree on what constitutes evidence of an effective intervention (Austin & Claassen, 2008a).

Such a culture also strengthens grantees. Although some grantees might have an established culture of learning that includes measurement and evaluation, others might require a cultural change to accommodate a foundation's evidence-based decision-making. For those grantees, foundations would be wise to demonstrate the value of measurement and evaluation over time, rather than mandating their use in the short term (Walker & Soule, 2017). Grantees might need time to see that a high-quality evaluation that examines inputs, processes, outputs, and impacts can provide them with both formative feedback that informs successful implementation and summative findings about



the intervention's effectiveness. Together, that knowledge can be a powerful tool for improving intervention design when grantees use the results to examine the values and assumptions underlying a program. It is therefore important that foundations provide grantees with funding or other support to help them understand how evaluations can be used for improvement, and not as a "thumbs up/thumbs down" decision about whether to continue an intervention (Austin & Claassen, 2008b).

### *Support for Conducting Evaluations*

In addition to a culture that values measurement, learning, and evaluation, a grantee might need additional evaluation-related supports to provide evidence of an intervention's effectiveness.

Funding for evaluation research is one such support. High-quality evaluations require financial resources. The CNCS found that evaluations that can provide evidence of effectiveness tend to cost 15% to 20% of a grant's budget for a small-scale evaluation and 25% or more for a large-scale evaluation (Zandniapour & Vicinanza, 2013). Evaluation costs include implementation expenses as well as the fees for experts in research design and implementation and for those who can distinguish two key types of research: evaluation research, which seeks to improve a program or intervention, and basic research, which seeks to test a hypothesis. Offering technical assistance to grantees, such as teaching them how to work with an evaluator to provide rigorous evidence, is another effective form of support.

Grantees should also know what constitutes a high-quality evaluation. Meaningful information can ensure a common understanding of the value of intervention evidence. Foundations can help grantees and their third-party evaluators improve the quality of evidence that shows the effectiveness of their interventions by using guidance materials developed by research clearinghouses. Such materials might be especially useful if used in conjunction with discussions about the challenges grantees may face in conducting rigorous evaluations of impact.

Funders can also help grantees in selecting an appropriate evaluator. Sometimes grantees do not understand that the greater objectivity of third-party evaluators leaves their studies — as opposed to those conducted by staff — in a better position to provide stronger evidence of an intervention's effectiveness. Foundations can help grantees see how a third-party evaluation complements the measurement, evaluation, and learning that their internal staff undertake every day. For example, during the evaluation design phase, grantees will work with evaluators on three key tasks: First, they will clarify the intervention's theory of action so that evaluators understand the indicators of inputs, processes, outputs, and outcomes that are important to track. Second, they will ensure the evaluation addresses all elements in the theory of action. Finally, they will create processes to translate information from the evaluation into organizational learning and improvement. During the implementation phase, grantees will work with evaluators to make sure the tasks are carried out as planned.

Even when grantees do realize the benefits of a third-party evaluation, they might not have the staff with sufficient expertise to select an appropriate evaluator. Because not all interventions are at a stage where their effectiveness can be accurately determined, the characteristics an evaluator requires will vary. Foundations can help grantees identify ideal characteristics after assessing the intervention's readiness for an impact evaluation and the grantees' current investment in measurement and learning. The foundation can then help grantees select an evaluator with those characteristics.

### *Capacity to Scale Successfully*

The SPREE process was designed to counteract the struggles that often occur during scaling and diminish the effectiveness of an intervention. When seeing an opportunity to serve additional participants, grantees might not consider the need to step back and ensure they are prepared to maintain the intervention's effectiveness as they extend their reach. Foundations can help grantees both see the need to build capacity for scaling and gain that capacity. Requiring

grantees to assess whether they are ready for scaling before funding an effort can help them see how a priori preparation can smooth the transition to implementing an expanded, replicated, or adapted version of the intervention. Once that assessment is complete, foundations can provide funding to develop the infrastructure to support successful scaling. Examples of such funding include developing implementation manuals for an intervention, purchasing training materials, and acquiring equipment to build staff capacity to implement an intervention after scaling. By using the SPREE process, foundations can work with grantees to increase their capacity to scale an effective intervention and, by doing so, expand their own reach and improve more lives.

## Conclusion

As foundations look to enhance their decision-making processes, a strategic use of research evidence can help them make more efficient funding decisions. The SPREE process can provide a systematic way to identify interventions that are likely to improve desired outcomes for their participants. The SPREE process can also help foundations identify whether these interventions and the organizations implementing them are ready to successfully scale the intervention. By adopting such a process, foundations can expand their reach and address needs for more people and communities.

Engaging in the SPREE process also can build or further develop a culture of measurement, learning, and evaluation in both the foundation and among the grantees it funds. As exemplified by the experiences of the CNCS, applying the process can stimulate internal conversations within foundations. These conversations can guide foundations in learning how to best use evidence in decision-making, identifying ways to support grantees that need to build evidence for their intervention's effectiveness, and recognizing situations in which grantees require additional resources to support their scaling and sustain their intervention's effectiveness.

*The SPREE process was designed to counteract the struggles that often occur during scaling and diminish the effectiveness of an intervention. When seeing an opportunity to serve additional participants, grantees might not consider the need to step back and ensure they are prepared to maintain the intervention's effectiveness as they extend their reach. Foundations can help grantees both see the need to build capacity for scaling and gain that capacity.*

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# Publicness and the Identity of Public Foundations

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**Keywords:** *Philanthropy, philanthropic foundations, publicness, accountability, Australia*

## Introduction

Responsibility to the public is often understood through the limited frame of transparency, highlighting the idea of “the public view.” In this context, accountability is considered to be visibility regarding a foundation’s operations and processes. The research discussed in this article questions in what ways Australia’s public ancillary funds (PubAFs) understand their identity as public foundations, and examines how perceptions of publicness inform and influence the practice, conduct, and identity of grantmaking foundations. PubAFs, a diverse group of foundations with little homogeneity in their operating models, include community and corporate foundations, fundraising foundations for single organizations such as hospitals or schools, and those established by wealth advisory firms. PubAFs must encourage public donations and may offer subfunds or donor-advised funds to larger donors.

At a time when private wealth and philanthropy are facing increased public accountability expectations, investigating the nature of foundations’ publicness is a continuing concern (Phillips, 2018). This study provides empirical evidence from interviews with foundation managers and trustees regarding the ways public foundations perceive publicness. Philanthropic debates and discourses are often informed by tropes rather than by data; further, most philanthropic studies are undertaken in a U.S. context and findings may not be generalizable to countries such as Australia. Accordingly, this Australian study examines perceptions of publicness, or ways of understanding and interpreting publicness in public foundations, given that perceptions influence behavior and actions. Among its key findings:

## Key Points

- This article investigates understandings of publicness in the context of public foundations in Australia by examining how perceptions of publicness inform and influence the practice and conduct of those grantmaking foundations.
- As part of a broader study on perceptions of accountability and identity in Australian foundations, the article provides empirical evidence from interviews with managers and trustees from a diverse group of public foundations suggesting that understandings and applications of two dimensions of publicness were significant: donations, or public money; and grantmaking, or public benefit. Further elements of publicness were expressed around foundations’ visibility and the transparency of their operations.
- In sharing learnings from foundation representatives and discussing perceptions and dimensions of publicness in public foundations from an internal perspective, this article also provides valuable insights for external stakeholders, including donors, beneficiaries, and regulators.

While foundations may perceive accountability to the general public, taxpayers, or the nation as a whole, the “publics” to which they are accountable in practice are more tightly defined.

In the philanthropic sector, partially public assets under private control are applied for public benefit purposes (Anheier & Leat, 2013). PubAFs’ public nature raises further questions around the meaning of public or publics

as stakeholders. Accountability to “the public” may not necessarily mean accountability to the population or to taxpayers, but instead may be interpreted as accountability to a community of geography or interest, or to a defined group that nevertheless has an open membership (e.g., donors to the PubAF).

While this article is concerned with public foundations, there are differences in the ways private and public foundations are viewed — not only regarding their titles, but other characteristics related to publicness. Jung and Harrow (2016) describe foundations as individualistic organizations operating within collective contexts. However, given that philanthropic foundations exist to promote public good and in most countries enjoy tax advantages for doing so, the question arises as to whether foundations’ knowledge should be public knowledge and a public resource along with a foundation’s financial assets. The knowledge held by foundations includes both knowledge about the areas of interest and/or communities it funds, and of its own priorities, governance, funders, and decision-making processes. Knowledge is understood to be a critical part of leadership (Phillips, Bird, Carlton, & Rose, 2016). However, other knowledges held by foundations include knowledge of other funders, connections to policymakers and leaders in other contexts (government and business), and knowledge of research and international best practice. Thus, there is a distinction between a public resource and a resource for public good.

## Background and Context

Australia has a cultural and historical emphasis on anonymity and privacy around giving. However, the philanthropic sector’s public profile is increasing as attitudes among several prominent philanthropists and foundations change in favor of public disclosure, and with the democratization of structured giving through subfunds<sup>1</sup> and giving circles. While institutional and isomorphic forces support the growth of

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public transparency and accountability, philanthropic foundation research is limited, partly due to the lack of collection and/or provision of publicly available data by regulatory bodies, principally the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) and the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC) (McGregor-Lowndes & Williamson, 2018). No data are made publicly available through tax filings, although details such as a PubAF’s expenses, assets, and total amount granted are publicly available through the ACNC.

Ancillary funds are trusts established by deed for the purpose of making grants for public benefit in Australia. There are two types — private ancillary funds (PAFs) and PubAFs — and both are regulated by legislated Australian Treasury guidelines as well as by the ACNC; they may not operate programs or deliver services, but instead must distribute a minimum percentage<sup>2</sup> of their net assets each year through grants to nonprofits

<sup>1</sup> Similar to donor-advised funds (DAFs) in the U.S., subfunds are accounts within a PubAF where donors may propose eligible recipients for grants. The trustees remain free to reject such recommendations.

<sup>2</sup> Those minimums are 5 percent for PAFs and 4 percent for PubAFs.



*Commonly known PubAF categories include corporate foundations; community foundations; and “flow-through,” or fundraising, foundations for individual charities, such as hospitals or schools. PubAFs thus offer an interesting and underresearched context in which to investigate implications of the publicness of public grantmaking foundations.*

and charities approved by the ATO (Ward, 2016). They benefit from significant tax exemptions and concessions, and play an important role in providing untied<sup>3</sup> funds to Australia’s nonprofit sector.

Somewhat akin to public charities in the U.S., PubAFs are a heterogeneous and dispersed group with little resemblance among them in their missions and operating models. PubAFs are often established with a small initial donation, and many remain small, with 79% having annual revenue of less than \$50,000<sup>4</sup> (Williamson, 2019). They must raise funds from the public and receive gifts from a wide donor group (Ward, 2016), and consequently have large and diverse stakeholder groups. Commonly known PubAF categories include corporate foundations; community foundations; and “flow-through,” or fundraising, foundations for individual charities, such as hospitals or schools. PubAFs thus offer an interesting and underresearched context in

which to investigate implications of the publicness of public grantmaking foundations.

## Literature Review

Definitions of terms are particularly important in reporting research across different countries and cultures. In this article,

- A public foundation is understood to mean a nonprofit organization that receives tax exemptions and concessions, receives financial support from a broad segment of the general public, and has a primary focus on grantmaking (Council of Michigan Foundations, 2008).
- The term “publicness” refers to the quality or nature of concerning or affecting, or of being owned by, maintained for, or used by, the community or the people (Perry & Rainey, 1988). There are different definitions of publicness in different academic fields, all of which add nuance and insight to understandings (Bozeman, 2009).
- The identity of an organization encompasses what is central, enduring, and distinctive about that organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985).

The concept of public benefit is fundamental to studies of philanthropy, and publicness is central to understandings of why charitable foundations exist. Anheier and Leat (2013) note that the definition of a foundation as existing for public good brings public accountability to foundations, while the tax and legal privileges and concessions enjoyed by foundations offer a strong argument for viewing them as public entities with public accountabilities. These arguments reference potential tax revenues lost through charitable deductions, and the democratic accountability of any individual, organization, or agency that influences the provision of public goods.

<sup>3</sup> Untied funding refers to grants not for a specific project or program and that instead can be allocated by the beneficiary organization as it sees fit.

<sup>4</sup> Equivalent to about \$33,600 in U.S. currency.

Common forms of publicness are transparency and accountability, evidenced by increasing discourses around transparency, particularly in the grey literature. It has become almost axiomatic within the philanthropic sector that increased transparency is good and that transparency is the only form of accountability that matters to the public. Ways in which PubAFs enact transparency include publishing annual reports, disclosing operational and fundraising costs as part of expenses, and identifying responsible persons or trustees on the ACNC register. Other forms or mechanisms of transparency include disclosing policies and decision-making criteria against which PubAFs are answerable, and reporting to donors on investments and the social and environmental impact of those investments.

However, critical perspectives have recently offered a more nuanced analysis of the impact of transparency on organizations (Reid, 2018; Roberts, 2017). While not all specific to a philanthropic context, such critiques note both negative consequences and blurred boundaries of transparency, where we cannot reveal what is unknown or invisible to us, and the impositions (both moral and practical) of accountability demands.

Roberts' (2017) work explores the harm done at both an individual (employee) and organizational level when transparency is the sole or dominant management tool. Transparency can thus be considered to give power to the external over the internal (Roberts, 2017). Extending this critique to an institutional or societal level, negative impacts of total transparency include short-termism, uniformity, surveillance, and control (Han, 2015). This "dark side" of transparency involves homogenization, collapse of trust, distraction, and anxiety resulting from constant monitoring. Han (2015) consequently condemns transparency as a false and pernicious contemporary mythology.

Discussing roles of foundations in a democracy, Barkan (2013) posits that not only do foundations have no broad accountability to the public and the community in which they exist, but additionally they have no direct accountability to those immediately affected (either positively or

*The countervailing view is that philanthropic foundations play an important role in challenging the democratic majority, allowing for a diversity of voices, social values, and purposes that strengthen civil society. Further, foundations' risk-taking in the face of public opinion and conventional or majority wisdom is an important and undervalued quality.*

adversely) by their programs. Hammack (1995) further notes that historically, those groups in society that foundations often work to serve (e.g., women, children, and ethnic minority groups) are those with the least possibility of engaging in accountability relationships. While there are both internal and external mechanisms for creating beneficiary influence and involvement in grantmaking, such as committees, surveys, and third-party-hosted reviews, there is little detail available on the extent to which these mechanisms are used in practice.

The countervailing view is that philanthropic foundations play an important role in challenging the democratic majority, allowing for a diversity of voices, social values, and purposes that strengthen civil society (Whitman, 2008). Further, foundations' risk-taking in the face of public opinion and conventional or majority wisdom is an important and undervalued quality (Anheier & Leat, 2013). This view acknowledges that what constitutes "public good" changes over time, and that "different visions of public accountability reflect different histories, different

experiences, and different concerns” (Dowdle, 2017, p. 198).

Previous perspectives on publicness and transparency published in *The Foundation Review* illustrate differences in units of analysis and theoretical framing in the literature. Articles focus on social innovation (Abramson, Soskis, & Toepler, 2014), accountability (Rey-Garcia, Martin-Cavanna, & Alvarez-Gonzalez, 2012), stakeholder theory (Reid, 2018), and reporting and evaluation (Colby, Fishman, & Pickell, 2011).

Fernandez and Hager (2014) note publicness (and also privateness) in philanthropic foundations can be conceptualized in four ways: regulatory, political, economic, and social. Legal and regulatory publicness, they argue, holds that public organizations are funded by public resources (for foundations, through foregone taxes), and their objective is to serve the citizenry. Political publicness holds that public interests are focused on the public as a whole, and are informed by public discussion and debate. Implicit in concepts of public value, purpose, or “public good” is the idea that processes and outcomes serve the community or collective, rather than cater to specific individuals or particular groups. Publicness here depends on the extent to which a broad, diverse group benefits, and foundations may deliberately target inclusion as a funding principle.

Economic publicness, according to Fernandez and Hager, is focused on public institutions supporting the distribution of benefits to the broader citizenry, or collective. Foundations providing a wider distribution of benefits have a more public orientation, such as community foundations that purposefully seek out a diversity of donors and issues to address needs within a community. Social publicness, in contrast, holds that the public may be characterized as a realm where others are impacted beyond those directly involved, and the community will experience consequences of a decision, beneficial or otherwise. Democratic publicness suggests individuals should be consulted and considered when they stand to be affected, and decisions should be made in the open in terms of visibility, access, and feedback. For foundations, this relates to the impact of

their work on the general public, and listening to feedback from all stakeholders.

An organization’s identity and how it perceives itself also have important publicness implications. Identity influences how organizations relate to stakeholders and generate social value, explicitly connecting organizational values with actions (Whitman, 2008). Foundations draw on their internal value system to make strategic and operational decisions.

Organizational identity theory examines what is central, enduring, and distinctive about an organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985). In the PubAF context:

- *Central* may be considered as the public-benefit purpose expressed through mission, and the requirement to raise funds from the general public;
- *Enduring* may be viewed as sustainability linked with public donations; and
- *Distinctive* may be assessed in terms of an organization’s need to differentiate itself from other public charities for fundraising purposes.

It is helpful to briefly note differences between the concepts of organizational identity and organizational image (Hatch & Schultz, 1997). Organizational identity is internally created and held; organizational image is both internally and externally created but externally held (Scott & Lane, 2000). A crucial characteristic of image is its dependency on visibility, as image is a consequence of what others think. The desire for social approval implies that people and organizations will act more prosocially in the public sphere than in private settings. Thus, the publicness of public foundations incentivizes their good conduct.

Beyond the philanthropic literature, publicness is also defined and theorized in a public relations context. Hallahan (2000) proposes a model with five categories of publics based on their degree of knowledge of and involvement with

an organization (i.e., an “inactive public” or an “active public.”) These nuanced conceptions reflect perceptions of publicness explored in the findings and the “targeted publics” reported: “People do not always distinguish between the public and a public, although in some contexts this difference can matter a great deal” (Warner, 2002, pp. 49, emphasis added). PubAFs’ donor and beneficiary groups are an example of “a public” that is strategically important to the foundation.

Two alternate theoretical lenses through which publicness may be viewed are contingency theory and institutional theory, both examined by Antonsen and Jørgensen (1997) in the context of public organizations. Contingency or dependency “increases the organization’s sensitivity to the environment and its ability to adapt to it” (Hafsi & Thomas, 2005, p. 343). New or neoinstitutionalism reflects this focus on survival and legitimacy through an emphasis on environments, specifically the isomorphism that leads to similarities in behavior of organizations within an institutional context — here, philanthropic foundations.

Thus, the literature identifies key aspects of publicness from an external perspective as transparency and visibility, public beneficial ownership, public benefit, knowledge, and engagement. However, the perspectives of internal stakeholders on a foundation’s publicness are less clear. Accordingly, the following sections detail the methods and the findings investigating publicness and identity from the perspectives of PubAF managers and trustees.

## Methods

A qualitative methodology was chosen for this exploratory study, focusing on obtaining rich and in-depth insights. The sampling frame was the population of 1,450 PubAFs at the time of data collection (late 2017 to early 2018). Analysis based on publicly available data (Annual Information Statements submitted to the ACNC, and PubAF

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websites) identified seven categories of PubAFs. Purposive sampling was used to target a range of categories (e.g., corporate, community, and wealth advisor foundations) and sizes.<sup>5</sup> Representatives from the seven PubAF categories across five Australian states (Queensland, Victoria, South Australia, New South Wales, and Western Australia) took part.

To recruit the 28 participating PubAFs, 116 organizations were contacted, giving an acceptance rate of 24%. (See Table 1.) Participants were accessed through email invitation using publicly available contact details. Involvement was voluntary, with all participants remaining anonymous. Interestingly, recruitment rates were lower than expected based on a previous study of private foundations. The initial assumption was public foundations would be more open to participating in research. In fact, they were more cautious, with several stating they lacked the knowledge or experience to contribute or needed board approval.<sup>6</sup>

In-depth, semistructured interviews were conducted in person and by telephone.

<sup>5</sup> The ACNC’s charity categorization, based on annual revenue, was adopted: “Small” equalled revenue less than \$250,000 (Australian); “medium” equalled revenue of \$250,000 to \$1 million; and “large” equalled revenue greater than \$1 million.

<sup>6</sup> Other reasons cited included not being the best person within the organization to speak with (but with no offer to refer onwards), no time available, current or imminent organizational restructure, new to the role, and inactive organization.

TABLE 1 Participating PubAFs by Category and Size (n = 28)

Category/Size	Small	Medium	Large	Totals
Independent public foundations	2	1	4	7
Single organization fundraising foundations	2	3	1	6
Issue or identity-based foundations	1	1	1	3
Corporate foundations	2	—	1	3
Independent public foundations (religious)	1	—	2	3
Community foundations	2	1	—	3
Wealth advisor foundations	—	1	2	3
<b>Totals</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>28</b>

Semistructured interviews are appropriate for exploratory qualitative research because additional questions can be included as successive interviews are conducted to probe emergent themes. Questions about publicness posed to participants included, “Your organization is called a ‘public ancillary fund.’ What does ‘public’ in this context mean to you?” The average interview duration was 63 minutes (range: 45 to 95 minutes). Audio recordings were transcribed using Trint,<sup>7</sup> and thematic coding was undertaken using NVivo software. Data were analyzed using both theory-driven codes and open coding in an iterative process, categorizing phenomena by theme and searching for patterns. The differing internal understandings and applications of publicness were a strong emergent theme, capturing aspects or features of publicness relating to PubAFs’ perceptions of identity.

Findings

The most common understanding of publicness within PubAFs was the quality of being available to ordinary people and the general community. This was perceived as providing accessibility and public benefit. One respondent from a wealth advisor foundation described publicness in terms of a PubAF’s two main activities, fundraising, and grantmaking:

There’s two aspects. The main aspect is that it’s open to anybody who would like to make a donation, so it’s publicly and broadly available [and] open to all comers. ... The word public connotes the fact that ... there’s a charitable intent that it is positive for the community. So there is a broader Australian public or a global public that benefits from the operation of the PubAF.

This distinction between publicness in terms of contributions, and publicness in terms of benefit was expressed throughout the interviews.

Publicness as Donations and Contributions

Publicness in terms of donations and contributions was understood by several foundations with reference to donor numbers: “We’re a public ancillary fund,” responded a participant from an independent public foundation; “we have thousands of contributors and therefore we should be accountable and transparent.” A respondent from another wealth advisory foundations said “public is accessibility to more people.”

Equity of access was another element of publicness in terms of accepting contributions. As another representative from an independent public foundation observed, “really importantly, though ... obviously, anybody can donate to the foundation. We don’t restrict that. ... We are truly public in that sense.”

<sup>7</sup>Trint is an online, artificial intelligence voice-to-text transcription service.



The regulatory requirement for PubAFs to raise funds from the public, rather than from a small, closely connected group of people, was critical and sometimes challenging. “To meet the definition to be a public ancillary fund,” said a respondent from a corporate foundation, “we’ve got to actually encourage public donations. ... On our compliance agenda every quarter is, “well, what have we done to encourage public donations?”

Several respondents observed that fundraising was part of their identity and publicness, often targeting particular groups such as alumni or clients of a PubAF’s linked, partner organization. “The very nature of being a public ancillary fund is that you have to ask the public for money,” observed a participant from an independent public foundation. “But then you can do that in a whole raft of different ways, so that changes the nature of the organization.”

One PubAF trustee from an issue/identity-based foundation described its public fundraising as being in its early stages, while the foundation’s size remained small:

We haven’t gone out into the marketplace ... and tried to canvass donations because we just don’t think that’s appropriate for the size of the trust. ... So there is the ability for people to donate ..., but so far we’ve only received one donation.

Interestingly, several interviewees described fundraising as a form of public or community engagement, beyond the monies raised. A representative of an independent public foundation argued, “That distinction that we need to actively fundraise, ... the reason why that criteria is in there, ... is about actively engaging the community for our cause.” A respondent from an independent religious public foundation also noted the role of fundraising as “that sort of public participation that we hope we can gain more in the future .... We want to attract more public support, public participation.”

### *Publicness as Public Benefit*

Publicness in terms of public benefit was expressed as the beneficial ownership of the

*Some PubAFs identified inclusion as part of their grantmaking practices, with specific reference to regional, rural, and remote areas and the disadvantages facing those communities.*

foundation by the public. “We’re public in that the money belongs to the community,” a participant from a community foundation observed; “that’s where the accountability and the public component of it belongs.” This was directly linked by several respondents with tax concessions received. One interviewee from an independent public foundation said that taxpayers who wanted to learn why the foundation “was able to issue tax deductible donations should be able to see why we exist as a charitable organization, what we do.”

Public benefit was also derived through a foundation’s work in a community: The respondent from another independent public foundation said, “I feel like we have a certain sort of accountability to the general populace” of the foundation’s region. Another interviewee, from a single-organization fundraising foundation, expanded on their definition of “public” to encompass all the foundation’s stakeholders:

Well, the public’s got to be the donors and sponsors. But then again ..., the community, they’re the public as well. I mean, all of those stakeholders really are public. ... Correct me if I’m wrong; the public is anybody that we are servicing.

Some PubAFs identified inclusion as part of their grantmaking practices, with specific reference to regional, rural, and remote areas and the disadvantages facing those communities. Describing a program of university scholarships for regional students, a respondent from a community foundation noted: “to many of these young people ...,



almost as important as the money is the fact that someone has taken an interest in them. They feel a sense of connection with their community and a sense of responsibility.”

Beyond regulated reporting requirements, such as the Annual Information Statement to the ACNC, varying perspectives were expressed with regard to transparency and visibility to the public and targeting communications to different publics. “I’m not sure to whom we would want to announce these things,” said a respondent from an issue/identity-based foundation. An interviewee from an independent religious public foundation said, “We don’t really have a very big pool of people who ... I think of them as being our public. But otherwise we’re out there .... Because of our website, we are in the public arena.” A representative from a community foundation noted that “reporting and showing where the money’s coming in and where it’s going out helps everyone on every side of the equation.”

Visibility and goodwill were further linked with a PubAF’s legitimacy and ability to fundraise. A “50-year celebration ... brought together all of the community partners,” noted an interviewee from an independent public foundation. “It was celebrating their work and reinforcing within the public eye the focus of the foundation being in this location.”

The quality of being humble was also reflected in several PubAFs’ public identities, particularly those with a religious auspice: “We want to be a reflection of the people that we’re serving,” said one representative.

Those foundations with subfunds discussed additional elements around publicness. These related to the reporting entity being the overarching foundation, meaning individual subfund donations and grants were not publicly reported. “The benefit of a public ancillary fund as well is that it’s reporting on one structure,” noted a representative from a wealth advisor foundation. Another interviewee from this type of foundation reported leaving decisions about privateness and publicness to subfund donors:

We are happy if members identify themselves, or subfund donors identify themselves, as being part of the subfund that’s associated with [us] ...; and if more people hear about it, great, ... but we certainly don’t have a marketing campaign or a strong public face.

## Discussion

Interviewees understood publicness as having two main elements: public benefit and public contribution. PubAF managers and trustees’ perceptions of publicness focused on drivers or motivations, rather than methods of visibility and transparency. Donors and beneficiaries are the closest publics to a public foundation, yet they are a select group within the broader general public, and even these most proximate stakeholders just see part of a whole. Only three PubAFs specifically referred to consultation or engagement processes with stakeholders and/or existing or potential beneficiaries. Differing perceptions of transparency, whereby what is perceived by those outside the organization as a complete view is understood by those inside as a brief, partial, and distant view, are critical. Le (2018) describes this as the arrogance of transparency, regarding assumed knowledge of “the jobs that consume us on a daily basis and that you get to glimpse a fraction of from afar” (Le, 2018, para. 24).

Conceptions of “public good” are framed by assumptions about public benefit purpose. If nonprofits and philanthropic foundations are attempting to do good, then efforts to hold them accountable, and potentially impose sanctions upon them if they fail to give an account, sit uncomfortably and may be overlooked or opposed. This is reflected in the absence of discussion in interviews regarding consequences of a lack of transparency or public disclosure.

The importance of subfunds (donor-advised funds) in shaping publicness was mentioned by several interviewees. In Australia, subfunds may be set up only within a PubAF; however, PubAFs themselves can be established by a wide range of groups of founding donors. And naming of subfunds has direct implications for discretionary publicness. By selecting an anonymous name

**TABLE 2** Key Findings Summarized by Elements of Identity and Publicness

Elements of Identity and Publicness	Central	Enduring	Distinctive
Public contribution	Freely accessible to public donations	Sustainability of a foundation through public donations	Fundraising and public engagement undertaken in many ways and at many levels
Public benefit	Mission and public benefit purpose of the organization, concept of beneficial ownership of the foundation by the public	Minimum distribution of percentage of funds and resources to eligible beneficiary organizations	Ultimate beneficiaries, the individuals, families, groups, and communities receiving assistance from a foundation

that carries no link to the donor's identity or the subfund's objects and purpose, donors can limit the publicness of their philanthropy within a public foundation. Further, provided the PubAF as a whole distributes the minimum 4% of the fund's capital value each year, there is no requirement to report on distributions from individual subfunds, either to the ACNC or to the public.

An organization's nature and funding may change over time, and the balance between publicness and privateness is not static. Interest in public engagement can change through new personnel, new beneficiaries or donors, changes in regulation, or peer pressure (Williamson, Luke, Leat, & Furneaux, 2017). Key findings around public contribution and public benefit can be viewed under the three pillars of organizational identity: what is central, enduring, and distinctive. (See Table 2.)

The findings highlight that publicness is not as simple as visibility and transparency. Complex nuances of meaning and perception are apparent. Public contribution through donations concerned accessibility and sustainability, but was also a way of building the foundation's identity in a community. Public benefit also reflected a foundation's identity through its mission and purpose, but focused on strategic publics benefiting from the foundation's funds and resources.

"For publics, dialogue can mean increased organisational accountability, a greater say in organisational operations, and increased public satisfaction" (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 30).

Publicness relates to PubAFs' actions in regard to contributions solicited and accepted by them, and benefits conferred through grantmaking. Publicness in terms of contributions and donations was enacted through seeking larger numbers of donors, ensuring donations are simple to make, and welcoming all gifts of all sizes. Different publics might be targeted for fundraising by some PubAFs using methods that matched their mission and identity. Activities were scaled to fit the size and age of the organization.

Publicness in regard to creating public benefit was enacted through creating visibility and transparency of the PubAFs mission and work to the general public, and in particular to beneficiaries. This was achieved for some PubAFs by reporting on what they are supporting and why, as well as inflows and outflows of funds. Reporting channels included a PubAF's website and their Annual Information Statement. Activities to create public benefit beyond grantmaking encompassed convening and celebrating communities and their achievements. Public benefit also included making investments

**TABLE 3** Value Added by PubAFs

Forms of Publicness (activities)	Publicness Implications	Relevant Public(s)
Public presence, visibility, convening	Public profile and awareness, accessibility (e.g., donations and grantmaking), equity of access	General public
Public fundraising	Community engagement	General public; targeted publics including alumni, clients of a related organization
Reporting/disclosure regarding mission, purpose, operations, and investments	Beneficial ownership of the foundation	General public; targeted publics including other foundations
Grants made; outcomes achieved	Legitimacy, identity, public benefit	Targeted publics, including beneficiary organizations, specific communities of geography or interest, individuals or groups who are clients of beneficiary organizations
Optional identification of subfunds	Discretionary publicness	Targeted publics, including beneficiary organizations, other donors

of capital that were socially and environmentally positive. (See Table 3.)

Public benefits not broadly communicated are then not fully appreciated. Thus, increasing and broadening their communication offers PubAFs opportunities to have the benefits of their work better understood and valued.

### Conclusions and Reflections

In this article, we investigated understandings of publicness in the context of public foundations in Australia by examining how perceptions of publicness inform and influence grantmaking foundations' practice and conduct. This is particularly valuable given that past studies have typically focused on the privateness of private foundations, rather than their publicness.

Despite the wide diversity among PubAFs, understandings and applications of publicness remained significant and different conceptions of "publicness" related to how and why PubAFs consider themselves to be public. Two key

dimensions identified were donations (public contribution) and grantmaking (public benefit). Further elements of publicness were expressed in terms of foundations' visibility and the transparency of their operations.

The study's findings make several contributions to current knowledge. First, they show that a focus on transparency as a method for engaging with the public can offer at best partial insights into the foundations' understanding of their public nature. Second, the literature on the public, publics, and publicness is fragmented, and understandings can be gained from research contexts other than philanthropy. Further, conflation of the concepts of transparency and publicness without a nuanced approach may be inhibiting some PubAFs from fully and robustly articulating the contribution they make, both to and in the public domain.

This research extends our empirical understanding of foundations that perform important public roles in acting as aggregators and enhancers of

giving and of bringing donors together. Practical insights include that foundations should consider ways in which they are public, what that publicness means to their strategic focus, and the difference between methods (visibility and transparency) and drivers (public benefit and public contribution) of publicness.

The limitations of this study include the small sample of 28 organizations, which restricts transferability of findings to the wider population of public foundations. There was also a self-selection bias (i.e. those who were confident agreed to take part); and perspectives of key stakeholders (beneficiaries and donors) are not included. Nevertheless, findings provide valuable insights, giving rise to issues and questions to be addressed in the future. The generalizability of much published research on philanthropic publicness is problematic, largely due to regulatory and cultural issues around philanthropy between different countries (Phillips, 2018). Research has been mostly restricted to limited comparisons of foundation forms within single countries, and while the Australian context would benefit from such analysis of differences in approach, perhaps most immediate need is for a greater comparative understanding of publicness in differing national and cultural philanthropic contexts.

In undertaking this study, it has been a privilege to talk with foundation managers and trustees who are working to understand and put into practice their responsibilities to the public. We are grateful for their willingness to share their knowledge more widely for the use of foundation managers and trustees worldwide.

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# Leveraging Effective Consulting to Advance Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Philanthropy

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## Introduction: A Call for Knowledge and Know-How

The desire to achieve social justice missions and compelling humanitarian agendas has propelled the U.S. social sector into accelerated efforts to remodel its institutions to be and do the important work of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Although many organizations — particularly those created in the last two decades — have DEI values embedded into their missions and framework, there are many mainstream groups that are facing outdated structural ideas and missions. In the same 20 years, there appears to be a greater willingness among foundations and funders to hear and embrace existing efforts to address DEI as well as invite and encourage new approaches.

For example, a 2018 survey from the Center for Effective Philanthropy found that 70% of nonprofit leaders believe that staff diversity is important for achieving an organization's goals (Buteau, Glickman, Leiwant, & Ilegbusi, 2018). In another example, the Foundation Center (n.d.) has data since 2008 that shows there are close to 5,000 foundations investing in racial equity, providing grant support to a similar number of recipients. Although this is an increase of resources, there is a need for more funding and more effective DEI methodologies to serve the other 82,000 or so foundations and nearly 1.5 million nonprofit organizations. Groups such as the D5 Coalition (2016) have pointed out that while more funders are picking up the pace on DEI, the scenario is urgent: Fewer than 9% of foundation CEOs, based on data available in 2014, are people of color, and, while no data are

## Key Points

- In 2018, the National Network of Consultants to Grantmakers launched an initiative to sharpen the impact of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work in grantmaking by increasing the capacity of consultants and grantmakers engaged in these efforts. Network researchers used a systematic protocol to interview consultant members about their most effective partnerships with grantmakers. Case studies drawn from those interviews yielded valuable lessons for advancing DEI in philanthropy.
- In sharing some of these lessons, this article advises consultants to be prepared to help grantmakers define or refine the meaning of DEI and understand where equity fits into their values and mission. It also explores how a good DEI consulting process helps to distinguish technical and complex dimensions of a DEI commitment, and how the scope of work should encompass both development of internal leadership skills and investment in grantee, community, and issue leaders.
- This article concludes with tips on how smart DEI consultant/grantmaker partnerships can understand and honor emergent strategy and help the funder follow opportunities without overwhelming the size and scale of the funder's capacity.

available on the proportion of people of color served by grants to institutions, only 6.9% of grants go directly to communities of color.



*Consulting partners are emerging as the “servant leaders” in the DEI field as they interpret organizational aspirations and culture, customize DEI learning and action challenges, and then interpret the learning into action plans and social change models/methodologies for others to adapt or follow.*

In the process of accepting the challenge of embracing diversity, equity, and inclusion in the social sector, some organizations and leaders are stalled by confusion over the terminology and precise definitions of DEI language; yet, others intuitively are accepting the ideas and moving forward with “DEI” initiatives to disrupt inequities and make steady progress toward equity. Most DEI initiatives are focused both internally and externally: Internally, DEI programs usually aim for personal and organizational change; externally, DEI efforts support structural change locally and nationally, aiming for impact like increasing economic self-sufficiency or leveling leadership representation. As awareness grows of economic, social, and political inequalities in communities and institutions, DEI programs are trending up in acceptance in philanthropy and in the broader social sector; they are pursued to change how people work together and restructure institutions and systems for equity. Philanthropy leaders like the Ford, W.K. Kellogg, and Rockefeller foundations and many others are

increasing the transparency of their own institutions while also actively funding DEI initiatives throughout the sector.

Achieving transformative change relies on the collaborative efforts of both funders and organizational leaders, along with their experts and constituents, to address DEI. In this mix, consultants (in both content and process) conceptualize, facilitate, and support DEI initiatives in funding/grantmaking and social-sector organizations. Consulting partners are emerging as the “servant leaders”<sup>1</sup> in the DEI field as they interpret organizational aspirations and culture, customize DEI learning and action challenges, and then interpret the learning into action plans and social change models/methodologies for others to adapt or follow.

In an effort to contribute to national efforts to build a community of practice around DEI consulting, the National Network of Consultants to Grantmakers (NNCG) and its DEI Initiative in 2018 began documenting and analyzing the work of its member consultants and collecting and organizing the work of consultant-partners into a field of knowledge about DEI methodology. The purpose of this article is to twofold: 1) to describe and advocate for consultants as key partners in successfully embedding DEI in effective philanthropy and social-sector change, and 2) to provide ways to understand and use the field-based knowledge and DEI methodology emerging through consulting partners’ experiences.

This article serves as a comparative study analyzing eight consulting projects or cases focused on philanthropic efforts to achieve DEI with the help of a consulting team. A set of case-by-case tables will help funders and consultants to understand process, outcomes, and unexpected changes. In its work, the NNCG has adopted the

<sup>1</sup> “Servant leader” is a term coined by Robert Greenleaf in 1970 to distinguish leaders who see service as the first priority of leadership. The Center for Servant Leadership (n.d.) advises that the best tests for this mode of leadership include: “Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?” (para. 3) A servant-leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong. The servant-leader shares power, puts the needs of others first, and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible.

TABLE 1 DEI: Definitions From the D5 Coalition

What is DEI?
<p><b>Diversity</b></p> <p>The word “diversity” can mean different things to different people. We’ve defined it broadly to encompass the demographic mix of a specific collection of people, taking into account elements of human difference, but focusing particularly on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Racial and ethnic groups: Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Hispanics/Latinos/Latinas, African Americans and blacks, and American Indians and Alaska Natives</li><li>• LGBT populations</li><li>• People with disabilities</li><li>• Women</li></ul> <p>D5 uses this broad definition of diversity for three reasons. First, this is what diversity looks like in the 21st century. Second, our definition encompasses populations that historically have been — and remain — underrepresented in grantmaking and among practitioners in the field, and marginalized in the broader society. Third, to be a national leader, organized philanthropy must get in front of diversity, equity, and inclusion issues and do so in a comprehensive way. We acknowledge and respect that this is one of many ways to define diversity, a concept that can encompass many other human differences as well.</p>
<p><b>Equity</b></p> <p>Improving equity is to promote justice, impartiality, and fairness within the procedures, processes, and distribution of resources by institutions or systems. Tackling equity issues requires an understanding of the underlying or root causes of outcome disparities within our society.</p>
<p><b>Inclusion</b></p> <p>Refers to the degree to which diverse individuals are able to participate fully in the decision-making processes within an organization or group. While a truly “inclusive” group is necessarily diverse, a “diverse” group may or may not be “inclusive.”</p>

Source: D5 Coalition (2014)

DEI definitions of the D5 Coalition.<sup>2</sup> (See Table 1). These definitions provide the core for NNCG’s DEI Initiative and the framework for emerging DEI resources and methodology.

Mapping the Scope of Roles of DEI Consultant-Partners

Across organizations and the sector, DEI initiatives usually involve a partnership of the funder, grantees, and consultants/facilitators committed to using or discovering a DEI lens to assess and create ideas and actions for effective change.

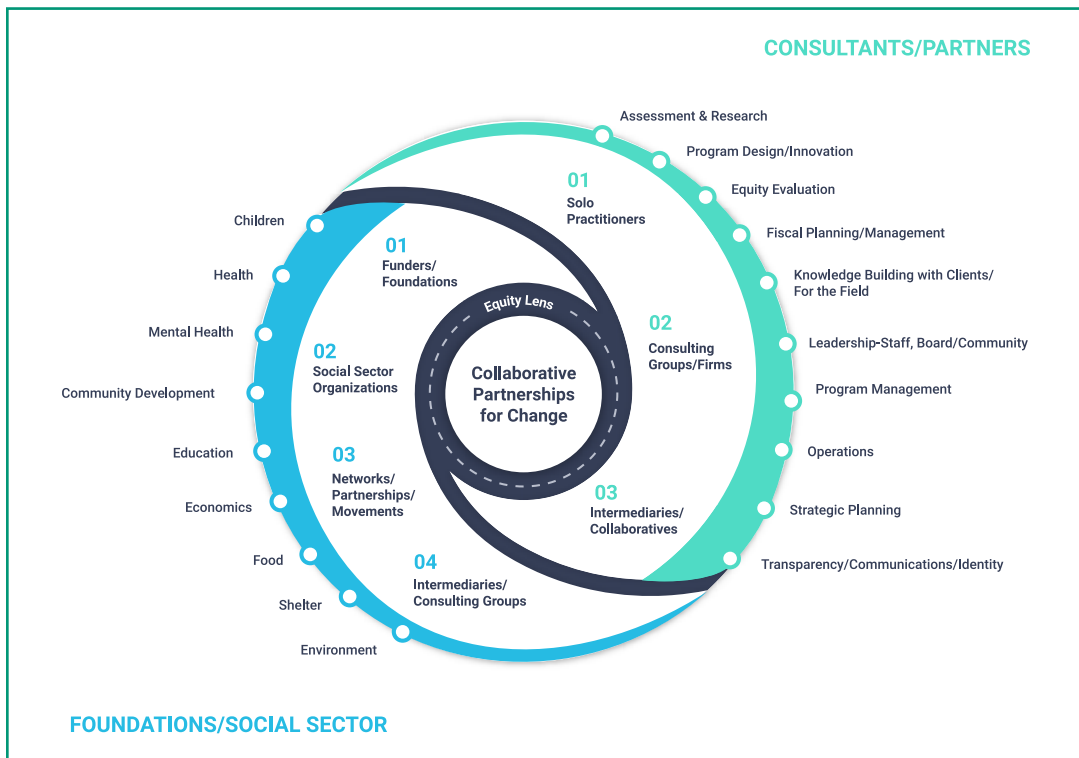
Consultant-partners in DEI initiatives are conceptualizing new ways to do the work while also naming and solving roadblocks. According to the reflections of the consultants represented in

the case studies, “DEI” is not so much its own narrow area of competency; rather, it is emerging as an equity approach that spans the breadth of organizational and strategic effectiveness: planning; program and product design; program delivery; staff, board, volunteers, and clients/constituents; operations; impact; evaluation; identity/brand; and more. Foundations are confronted with the idea of what it means to be diverse, equitable, and inclusive. It requires a full organizational review and often a full transformation — processes guided by both consultants and peers in philanthropy.

DEI Partnerships in Philanthropy

How exactly are funders and organizations taking on the challenge to do better at DEI,

<sup>2</sup>The D5 Coalition sunsetted in 2018 after eight years of work in advancing DEI in philanthropy.

**FIGURE 1** Roles for DEI Consultant-Partners in Philanthropy

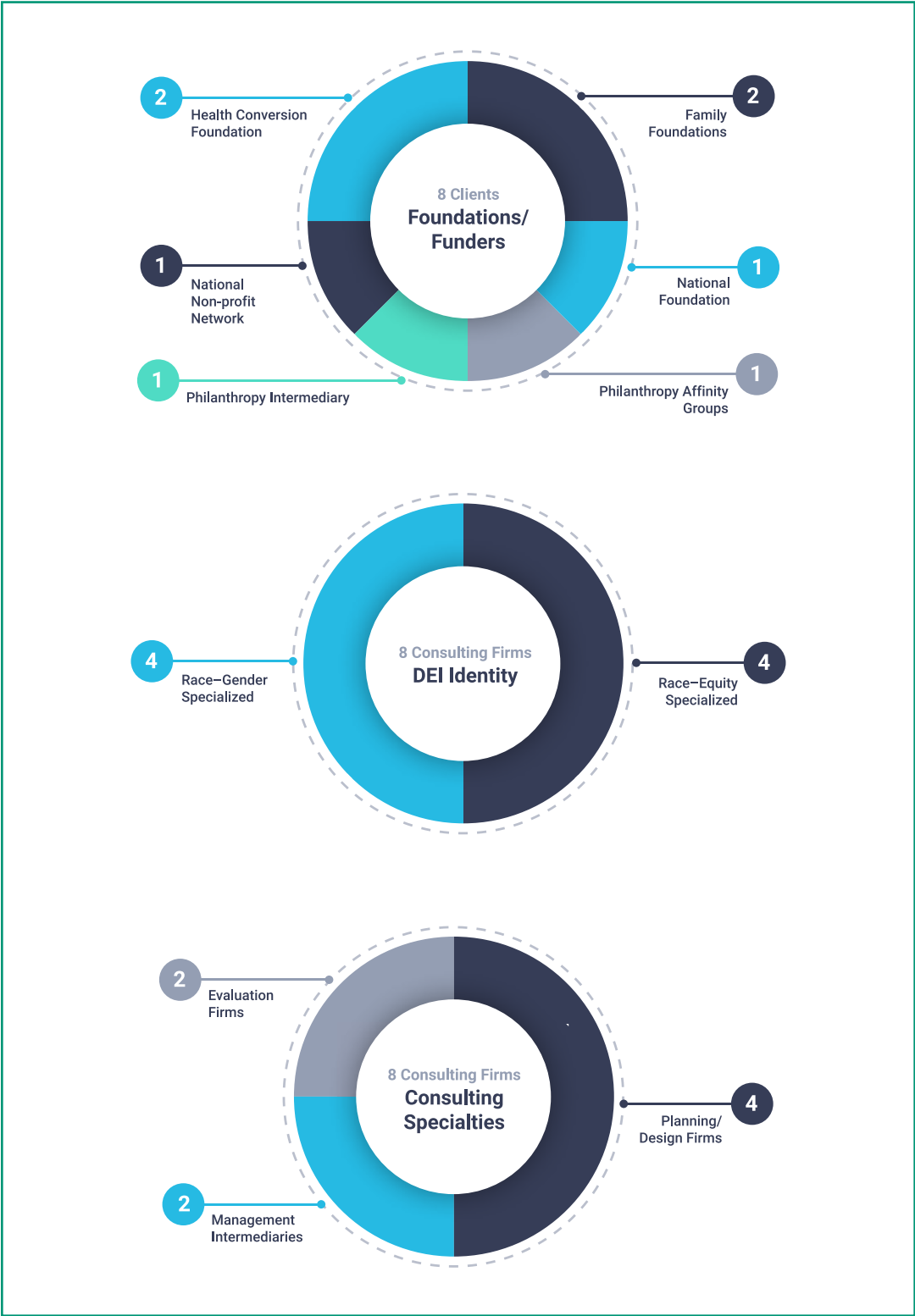
and how are consultants helping them do it? This article is based on the work of the NNCG to collect and organize experience-based data that improve methodologies, recognizing that changing the field's practices requires field-based knowledge. The NNCG is organizing case studies on DEI projects that provide a real-life look at how DEI practices are used to meet organizational needs. (See Figure 1.) The case studies reveal the impetus as well as the journey made by organizations trying to do more on equity. These studies provide a starting point to capture experiences and methodology as a way of sharing and developing DEI "practice," leveraging the vantage point of consultants who are often go-to resources for and allies to foundations implementing DEI efforts.

To date NNCG has collected eight case studies that span a range of clients/partners, among them two family foundations; two health conversion funders; one national funder and a multifunder collaborative; an intermediary philanthropy

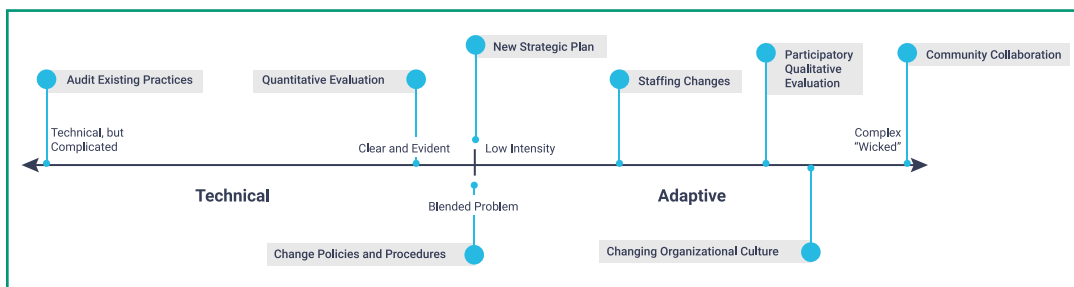
focused on women of color; a funder affinity group; and a major, national nonprofit organization. (See Figure 2.) All of the funders are medium to large organizations with million- to multimillion-dollar grantmaking levels.

The differences among the consultants serving these clients mirror the complexity of the philanthropy consulting field. They all are multispecialty consulting firms that integrate the values of DEI into their own theories of change and approaches to consulting. Their skills and services focus on one or some of these classic areas of consulting: organizational capacity development; leadership; evaluation; strategic planning/decision-making; grantmaking and program design; research; assessment; communications; and fundraising/finance. Of the firms involved in the eight case studies, two are solo practitioners; five are the founders and leaders of small to medium-size firms (five-30 people); and two are medium-size philanthropy intermediaries. All have social justice and equity values that

FIGURE 2 The 8 Case Studies: Clients and Consultants



Sector

**FIGURE 3** Making Change: Problems, Leadership, and Innovation

Source: Heifetz, Linsky, & Grashow, 2009

are transparent and branded into their identities as consulting firms or intermediaries. Their equity expertise is varied: Four are identified specifically with race equity, and the others are known for gender or race-gender work.

None claim or want the title of “DEI” consultants, though they are clear about their commitments to DEI and broader social change for equity. One of the consultants captured a shared sentiment: “A consultant’s own deep mission drives expertise.” Another reflected,

We believe in being intentional as consultants about keeping concepts of DEI front and center in the work. ... Sometimes it takes creative thinking and tenacity to find ways to exercise DEI when a client’s resources and time are limited ... and in some projects we don’t refer to “DEI” by name, yet the work on DEI principles can be effective.

These consultants are a small cross-section of an increasingly large and diverse field of philanthropy consulting. While some embed DEI principles into all their capacities, others identify substantial portions of their portfolios as being focused directly on DEI. The frameworks and drivers of projects also differ depending on the client’s goals, context, or community. While consultants are helping to make advances in every area of organizational effectiveness, they have been particularly powerful in modeling how change can happen in DEI. Equity-driven philanthropy affinity groups and consultants — among them the Association of Black Foundation Executives (ABFE), the Women’s Funding Network, the D5 Coalition, and

Change Philanthropy — were early leaders in equity change.

Several of the cases emerged from consulting projects that centered around research/scanning and assessment activities that could help the client organization understand the definitions and scope of the words and concepts for DEI. One client told its consultant, “We want to go from ‘standing up’ for DEI to taking action.” Two clients wanted to know what it would take to make the changes once the DEI issues could be identified; they asked their consultants, “How does an organization/funder actually make changes to acquire and make impact with a DEI lens or culture?” Three clients were aiming for specific outcomes — two with goals in health equity, and another aiming for gains in leadership for women of color/gender identity. And two were focused on doing evaluation using practices that are transformed by DEI principles.

One of the most compelling common denominators in these cases is the arc of each client’s journey. The clients — funders or organizations — asked their consulting partner to help them to start a DEI project or initiative with some early steps (i.e., defining, learning, assessing) that would have real impact on their organizations (i.e., staff, board, grantees, constituents) and could be done in a finite time frame. Most of the funder-clients framed their work in sweeping aspirations and some awareness of the scale of achieving DEI in philanthropy. But, as they plunged into the work, they learned that there is little in a quest for equity that is a quick fix; almost everything involved with achieving

TABLE 2 Case Study No. 1: The Big Windfall

The Initial Project Mandate	The Emergent Issue That Altered the Work	The Roadblock and the Breakthroughs
Design a new grantmaking program for the expanded assets; facilitate creation of a new strategic plan for grantmaking and operations, including an expansion of staffing.	<p>Data about the community had a “consciousness raising” impact on foundation leaders that compelled them to an equity agenda. To do that well, it recognized the need to do its new grantmaking in a much bigger cross-section of the community. It accepted that it had to get the word out widely in the community about its expanded capacity, and realized the need to “hear” the community.</p> <p>The foundation began to see itself in partnership with the community, rather than a distant friend to it, and began to transform its philanthropic perspective: Work “with,” not “for.”</p>	<p>The family wanted to focus on new grantmaking, but every step toward program growth and greater impact also raised challenges for the foundation’s own development. The decision to hire a senior staff member came with an awareness that this person would need to know the community and preferably be from the community.</p> <p>Ultimately, the bulk of the first round of funding (65%) went to many new organizations that had not been funded before; the new staff manager, a woman of color, has deep roots and experience in the community.</p> <p>Staff leadership diversity has been lifted by the D5 Coalition and others as an important accelerator in DEI change.</p> <p>The board has committed to more board development and more engagement in the foundation’s work and in the community.</p>

equity is complex and destined for solving through time. Even though many were hoping for a mostly technical, “fix-it” solution, the foundations and donors revised their thinking and their plans to accommodate complex change strategies that could happen over time.

This evolution of thinking that happened in almost every case can be best understood by incorporating the “technical-adaptive” scale for leadership and problem-solving. (See Figure 3.) This scale is useful in illustrating that some problems or ideas fit on one side or the other of this continuum, and some problems and solutions are a blend of both technical and complex or adaptive ideas. This scale runs through the case studies and is useful in understanding both the cases and the summary analysis.

The consultants reported that the clients all understood that they were venturing into new or challenging territory with a DEI project or initiative, but that each thought they were scoping out a reasonable, if not humble, starting point. They all ended up with more information

and action options than they had imagined, and most made deep and meaningful breakthroughs toward restructuring the culture, goals, and potential impact of their organizations. In each of the cases, the client-consultant relationship evolved. The projects took unexpected twists and turns — new issues emerged that exceeded or deepened the original contract, and roadblocks had to be removed so that breakthroughs could be achieved.

To provide the main lessons learned as well as a brief analysis of the case, each of the eight cases is organized to examine the initial project mandate, the emergent issues that altered the work, and the roadblocks and breakthroughs.

The DEI Case Studies: Humble Beginnings and Big Breakthroughs

Case No. 1: The Big Windfall

A family foundation experiencing a generational shift and a huge increase in assets needs to change its grantmaking and operations. (See Table 2.)

Sector



TABLE 3 Case Study No. 2: Improving Community Health

The Initial Project Mandate	The Emergent Issue That Altered the Work	The Roadblock and the Breakthroughs
Assess state-based philanthropy of a conversion foundation and report back on what's working, then facilitate development of a new strategic plan to improve grantmaking and outcomes, including being more effective in terms of equity.	<p>The assessment had to also help define equity, so the foundation leaders could understand equity and assess the impact of current programs in order to make future plans.</p> <p>Everyone in the organization had to learn more about the basics of DEI in order to decide what to change and how. The consultant knew about reports commissioned by and about other funders; the use of this information made a big difference to this foundation's ability to understand the issues and to see itself in context.</p>	<p>Accepting a responsibility to do more on equity is a "stop/start," "hot/cold," or "accept/reject" pathway. While an insight into inequity inspires leaders to want to change, they then may lose confidence or feel unsure about how far to go.</p> <p>Defining equity is important, but it is not necessarily possible to get it — especially with a simple or time-limited strategy. It is easy for leaders to misunderstand their own equity work, or lack of it. Sometimes aspirational language is put on the record and this stands in as action.</p> <p>Operationalizing big, strategic ideas becomes critically important, but requires more planning and commitment. The consultant helped the client see a current reality and to begin to imagine a long-term pathway for change.</p>

Sector

*Most powerful lessons:* This foundation has a geographic mandate — essentially one metro area — where it has funded for years across multiple issues and without regard to the class of beneficiaries. With the windfall of new resources (an endowment of about \$20 million grew to about \$100 million), the consultant encouraged the family members to look at the data and demographics of their geography and to try to view areas of need and gaps in services with a “new” lens. Once they saw the data, they understood the compelling needs: The disparities were so powerful that the family members agreed they could no longer continue with general funding, and wanted to be focused on the communities’ poverty, diversity, and related disparities. This insight and organizing principle for program strategies affected many of the strategy and operational decisions they would make in their strategic-planning process.

Case No. 2: Improving Community Health

A statewide health conversion foundation was striving for better health outcomes and reasoned that increasing its focus on equity might help, but it needed to understand its situation better

before making a big change. (See Table 3.) The foundation brought in a consulting team to document its internal situation and to engage everyone in the organization to understand the big picture.

*Most powerful lessons:* Foundations and leaders can sense that they need to do more to achieve equity, and yet do not want to be discredited for past actions since they believe that so much of their cumulative work to help people has inherently been about equity and diversity. Institutions want to improve for the better, but don’t want to be found to have been wrong or inadequate. Making a plan for the future that includes real change can be supported effectively with data and comparative experiences that are trustworthy and believable to the decision-makers. Strategic planning in this context requires time for learning as well as decision-making.

Case No. 3: Make a Mark on Gender, Race, and Human Rights

A young family foundation in a generational transition wanted to launch a new era by making a big difference. Family leadership decided to

TABLE 4 Case Study No. 3: Make a Mark on Gender, Race, and Human Rights

The Initial Project Mandate	The Emergent Issue That Altered the Work	The Roadblock and the Breakthroughs
Help the foundation leaders to imagine and operationalize a large funding initiative (30 grantees over five years) that would make a noticeable difference for race, gender, and human rights; monitor and evaluate grantee progress and devise ways of strengthening the grantees and their impact.	<p>This funder was in a hurry for impact and wanted to build the bike and ride it at the same time. Emergent learning had to be integrated quickly into evolving ideas about the grants.</p> <p>The desire to strengthen the grantees while the grantees worked for high impact required the funder to provide “more than money.” That approach to giving included supporting consultants and staff to work directly with grantees to find and overcome inhibitors to their impact — in their strategies and/or their operations.</p>	<p>As learning accelerated, race and racial equity emerged as a dominant issue that changed the shape of the funder’s goals and expectations.</p> <p>The funder made decisions to add substantial learning opportunities for its staff, board, and all the grantees so that racial equity could be more explicitly intersectional in all of the grantees’ strategies.</p> <p>The initiative was structured for each grantee to succeed individually while learning from and being inspired by all the other grantees in the initiative. To compare outcomes, the foundation needed to define impact strategies. As a result, the foundation also adopted a framework for impact so that all grantees would have a shared language.</p>

plan and implement a five-year initiative requiring a spending level well beyond the payout in order to make a substantial difference for gender, race, and human rights issues and institutions. It wanted consulting guidance for planning, implementation, and evaluation. (See Table 4.)

*Most powerful lessons:* The foundation leaders thought that what they most needed was a strategic plan for their grantmaking, which they intended to be an aggressive strategy engaging bold grantees with strong social-change missions. They discovered that most of their grantees —funded for their potential for innovation and scaling up social change — needed support to stabilize and grow. And the grantees agreed that to be intersectional in their approach to equity (i.e., working on multiple equity issues like race, gender, class, ethnicity, and abilities affecting people), they needed to be more informed about gender, human rights, and, especially, about race. In addition, the foundation decided to align its own staff, board, operations, and investments to support its gender/race/ human rights focus; everyone and everything in

terms of the foundation operations and programming were aligned for and became part of the drive for impact.

Case No. 4: A Complex Evaluation Partnership to Launch an Equity/Social Justice Collaborative

A new philanthropic intermediary needed help to launch and evaluate an initiative to make grants and build capacity for organizations with women of color and transgender leaders working in and for the reproductive justice movement. Ultimately, the performance of this intermediary, along with its grantee leaders/organizations, was intended to catalyze more philanthropic investment in the reproductive justice movement. (See Table 5.) Known primarily as an evaluation/ planning firm, the consultants are committed explicitly to DEI values and their other clients openly want to advance racial and/or gender equity, among other DEI values.

*Most powerful lessons:* This case is about an 11-year partnership between the consultant and the funder and the funder’s grantees. Over time

Sector

TABLE 5 Case Study No. 4: A Complex Evaluation Partnership

The Initial Project Mandate	The Emergent Issue That Altered the Work	The Roadblock and the Breakthroughs
Evaluate from startup an intermediary funder's efforts to support and strengthen organizations at the forefront of the women-of-color and transgender-led reproductive justice movement.	How can an evaluation process enable the participants to share information that is culturally relevant and that supports definitions of "success" and "impact" held by their own organizational constituents? This project also wanted to understand and help build up a movement beyond each organization's effectiveness.	<p>Developing a theory of change had to be accomplished in order to structure an evaluation tool/process. The culture of the initiative is participatory and collaborative, and evaluation could not be imposed.</p> <p>The need for data sometimes coincided with the grantee partners' limited personnel, technology, time, and money for evaluation activities.</p> <p>Listening to grantee partners and accepting new ideas made a difference. Grantees learned to speak up about evaluation questions that did not allow the grantees to report on their experiences. This led to new thinking and language that is more inclusive, which in turn fosters the ability to reveal information.</p>

TABLE 6 Case Study No. 5: Moving DEI to the Center of a Network's Culture

The Initial Project Mandate	The Emergent Issue That Altered the Work	The Roadblock and the Breakthroughs
Help a collaborative, multisectoral, multipartner national organization to begin a journey to understand racial equity and to operationalize it centrally in its work and culture. It wanted to build a consensus understanding of the gaps in culture, values, practices, and policies that were a barrier to a full programmatic commitment to racial equity.	<p>Culture change takes time.</p> <p>There is a need for a clear understanding with organizational leadership of how much work a DEI transformation requires and how difficult it can be to create authentic relationships around race, power, and privilege.</p>	<p>Diversity does not mean equity, and a scattering of DEI efforts are not enough for real change and achieving equity.</p> <p>The process searched for and the client accepted many new ideas, including this action framework for the project:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Make room for new information.</li><li>• Gain understanding through a facilitated, interactive process.</li><li>• Examine implications.</li><li>• Gain commitment from leaders and staff.</li><li>• Align action, even while the work is in progress.</li></ul> <p>Ultimately the organization agreed to a three-part action strategy to integrate racial equity and inclusion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Organizational learning: Proactively learning as an organization</li><li>• Public engagement: Strategically using all platforms to engage public conversations about racial equity</li><li>• Make a plan to integrate: Achieving racial equity and inclusion throughout the organization</li></ul>

**TABLE 7** Case Study No. 6: Evaluating a Racial Equity Process for Health Equity

The Initial Project Mandate	The Emergent Issue That Altered the Work	The Roadblock and the Breakthroughs
Help a regional health conversion foundation to assess the effectiveness of a community-based racial-equity approach to health equity.	Eight multi-entity and cross-sector community collaboratives were asked to apply a racial lens to their local collaboration processes and their work, and to inform the funder on ways to improve its grantmaking for true health equity.	<p>The collaboratives had difficulty thinking about power-shifting strategies in their communities; they were limiting their thinking to programs and services.</p> <p>The consultants learned to go above and beyond to help the partners understand systemic change: the value of qualitative, not just quantitative, information and setting realistic, long-term change goals, not short-term fixes.</p> <p>A combination of inclusive strategies to form the local groups — training them about concepts of racial equity, learning to use a racial-equity impact assessment tool, peer-learning sessions, and technical assistance — helped each collaborative group to do its work.</p>

the partners have used their experiences to create learning methodologies that rely on the participation of all to create knowledge and standards. The grantee partners are engaged in developing and refining the data-collection processes; they are not just contributors to the data. The consultant, intermediary, and grantees all learned that to be inclusive and to capture the real story of projects aimed at equity, the process of data collection also has to be inclusive. It requires taking time to reach out to stakeholders who have indicated that a data-collection tool or report of evaluation findings excludes them, and then making appropriate revisions with an inclusive process. It means carving out time in an intense timeline to invite a diverse group of community stakeholders to share their reactions and insights about the work. These partners discovered that this is indispensable to integrating DEI values and principles into the work.

*Case No. 5: Moving DEI to the Center of a Network’s Culture*

A major national network stepped forward to make progress on equity in its highly complex organizational structure. (See Table 6.)

*Most powerful lessons:* The organization and its consultants emerged from the first phase of the work with some fresh insights about what the

work of inclusion actually involves, and have captured four lessons:

- Diversity does not equal equity. While diversity (staff, board, contractors) is important, by itself it falls short of equity.
- Racial equity starts at home. Organizations cannot jump into an external-facing racial-equity initiative without first doing the tough work of examining the ways systemic and internal issues are impacting daily experience.
- Work across the organization. Deepen and improve current work in concrete ways.
- Partner with those who have proven track records. Look for peers, colleagues, and partners who already are on a path to equity. Look for collaborative possibilities and interpersonal bridge-building.

*Case No. 6: Evaluating a Racial-Equity Process for Health Equity*

Consultants were asked to review a collaborative community process that explicitly addresses racial equity by building community expertise in using a racial equity lens for better community health outcomes. (See Table 7.)

**TABLE 8** Case Study No. 7: Philanthropists Bending Philanthropy Toward Equity

The Initial Project Mandate	The Emergent Issue That Altered the Work	The Roadblock and the Breakthroughs
Scan and write a report about how various funders are handling DEI, which led to a request to facilitate and guide a group of funders to form a community of practice to define, learn, engage others and make changes in DEI practice in philanthropy.	<p>Those in the startup of this community of practice first believed that sharing information about DEI would lead to change.</p> <p>They then realized the need to go deeper — to actually transform one foundation at a time, which would then eventually transform philanthropy. It sounds like a slow approach, but for anything to stick, the policies and practices inside the institution needed to change beyond lip service. Increasing numbers of foundations are joining in or seeking information.</p>	<p>This “roundtable” is activating a movement toward DEI within philanthropy. Participating foundations need an environment that is member-driven but also coordinated and guided with expertise and knowledge. The consultants are co-creators/co-leaders with the funder-members.</p> <p>The consultants devote time to the content work, but also to building relationships between and among members. They are working on three levels with the members:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helping each member to make change in its own foundation</li> <li>• Facilitating a meaningful experience among the members to catalyze the larger change goals</li> <li>• Helping to design and deliver information and engagement to inspire interest among others not yet in the group</li> </ul>

*Most powerful lessons:* The consultants themselves learned that an evaluation that involved many players (eight multisectoral community collaboratives) and processes needed technical assistance, coaching, and training. The process was strengthened by creating a holistic view of the community work, and then working collaboratively with the foundation to provide information and feedback. Traditional notions of favoring quantitative data and treating the foundation as the primary audience and user of the evaluation were not useful. All the partners — the foundation, the community, and the consultants — had to be both flexible and practical, and to see that racial equity is systemic as well as programmatic. Qualitative data had to be valued equally with quantitative, and the evaluators had to learn to work with the community by “reading” what was said and not said.

*Case No. 7: Philanthropists Bending Philanthropy Toward Equity*

A major funder commissioned a consultant in a short-term contract to scan and report on the DEI efforts of other foundations, which then evolved into a multiyear “roundtable” or community of

practice of funders for sharing, learning, and leading on DEI issues within philanthropy. (See Table 8.)

*Most powerful lessons:* From the first step of commissioning a scan, this project was about change. The consultants did not expect initially that their role would evolve from research to facilitation, organizing, and leadership for DEI improvements in philanthropy; they had not anticipated that a one-off project for one foundation would turn into a multiyear initiative to influence many foundations and the field of philanthropy. They learned to create a working environment for the project that is simultaneously member-driven and consultant-guided. In order for the group to learn, work together, and then influence the field, the consultants had to step into a co-leadership role. Their time and work strategies had to involve relationship-building with each member and then with the group and the broader field. The project has required a broad array of consulting capacities. This type of initiative opens possibilities for how consultants can do sustainable change work with their clients, and not merely “projects.”

**TABLE 9** Case Study No. 8: How Are We Doing? Assessing the Implementation of a DEI Policy

The Initial Project Mandate	The Emergent Issue That Altered the Work	The Roadblock and the Breakthroughs
<p>Conduct an organizational racial-equity audit of a large philanthropy affinity group with a small staff /hub. The audit was to include its programs, policies, practices, culture, and communications.</p> <p>The expected result was a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the work and workspace and the gaps between current practice, and recommendations for a desired future state.</p>	<p>The affinity group had codified its commitment to racial equity through a “statement of purpose” adopted among the members 10 years ago. The audit was intended as the tool to help illuminate strengths as well as areas for further improvement and action.</p>	<p>The hub organization is small and had modified most of its own internal practices to model and support DEI. But readiness for action varied widely among members, and therefore an action plan to change individual members had been uneven in taking root. During the audit, it became evident that some transformative changes — for example, more participatory grantmaking — should be part of DEI efforts and conversation across the membership.</p> <p>The audit began to reveal how complex it will be to get changes in practices across the membership, especially those that realign the power in philanthropy.</p> <p>A report was produced from the audit, but it is not clear if such a small, hub organization can facilitate its members to go after changes in their own organizations.</p>

*Case No. 8: How Are We Doing? Assessing the Implementation of a DEI Policy*

A funders’ affinity group committed in 2008 to DEI goals for its own operations and its members. But how do you measure effective implementation — can adopting a policy drive real change among members? The funding group asked a consultant to assess its progress and bring back recommendations for improvements. (See Table 9.)

*Most powerful lessons:* Racial equity is at the center of DEI. While DEI is an intersectional framework, it is often important to recognize the importance of leading with race. Neither a consultant nor a funder can “do” DEI if they are not “being” DEI. In other words, you can’t help others if you are not challenging and improving your own internal operations (e.g., Do you have a shared language around DEI — values, communications, culture?). Finally, the knowledge and resources on DEI are sometimes outdated or difficult to find. Although much of what has been published is still relevant, there is a need for new resources based on contemporary and emerging experiences.

**Recommendations for Effective DEI Work**

The real experiences and lessons learned that unfold in the NNCG case studies show patterns of practice that offer much-needed knowledge and know-how to funders, their grantees, and the consultants who assist them in pursuing a bigger, deeper commitment to DEI. While funders and consultants work hand in hand, these findings are based on the views of consultants about the work and evaluation of the work. The case studies did not rely on formally designed shared evaluations with the philanthropy clients.

For those venturing into aspirations, goals, and/or initiatives on DEI, these ideas for better practice could lead to greater success. When synthesized, the eight case studies yield some useful cross-cutting recommendations for proceeding with DEI aspirations and projects:

1. *Define the meaning of diversity, equity, and inclusion (Case Study Nos. 2, 5, 7, and 8).*  
Don’t rush to implement change until the appropriate leaders and participants (board, staff, grantees, stakeholders) understand the



*Consultants occupy a unique sphere in the world of philanthropy. They represent their own individual commitments to DEI, but possess the opportunity to share their knowledge and ideas on furthering DEI by working closely with multiple foundations.*

meaning of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Consultants can offer starting definitions from other sources (e.g., see Table 1), and then guide their partners through a process for adapting or creating clear and useful definitions in their context. This process — particularly when it is information-based and participatory — can be a key ingredient in launching a successful initiative. The definitions likely will change over time, but organizations need to have some common language in order to do the work.

2. *Create a trusting partnership between foundation/client and consultant (Case Study Nos. 3, 6, and 8).* This will not be just “work for hire.” Pursuing equity touches values, vision, mission, organizational structure, and operations. It all connects and it all will change as DEI efforts increase. Interchangeably, the foundation/client and the consultant will be learning, leading, and innovating. Being forthright and transparent about trust will be important to thrive in an iterative learning/action/learning process. As a 2019 *Stanford Social Innovation Review* article by Brittany Boettcher and Kathleen Kelly Janus (2019) observes, “Trust is a key ingredient to building processes that favor diversity, equity, and inclusion. ... Philanthropy must
- shift from the position of gatekeeper to the role of ally and partner” (para. 7).
3. *Make room in the work for all partners to understand that equity goes beyond diversity and inclusion and is intersectional (Case Study Nos. 3 and 6).* Recognizing equity as intersectional can be especially difficult when race, gender, and other equity issues are all part of the intersection. Both foundations/clients and consultants need to take time for this essential learning step. Sometimes this might include a “DEI lens” review of the organization’s own practices and portfolios, looking for both strengths and problems. Respect all stakeholders in the process, and assume that any of them can and will have useful insights and ideas.
4. *Guide DEI projects and initiatives into a scope broad enough to articulate aspirations and goals as well as committing to internal changes and action (Case Study Nos. 1, 2, and 5).* DEI cannot be a “stick-on” commitment; it must be embedded and internalized into policies and practices. Any aspirational plan also needs an operationalizing plan, and actual operationalizing takes time. Foundations should be willing to fund the strengthening and capacity building of philanthropy and grantee partners; and the partners should seek and welcome opportunities to build themselves for the long haul. Deep change will take stamina.
5. *Distinguish the technical, “fix-it” elements of a solution from more complex and adaptive change strategies (Case Study Nos. 4 and 7).* Foundations and organizations will need to allocate precious resources to change, and can do a better job when they can match the right resources to the problem or challenge. Finding some things that can be “fixed” (i.e., technical actions in the technical/complex scale) can enable quick and/or inexpensive action, leaving more resources for those issues that will require many players and a longer time frame for making change. (See Figure 3.)

6. *Embrace emergent strategy* (Case Study Nos. 3 and 8). In DEI work, the starting point often is a brief takeoff point for a quick and lively evolution of ideas and action. But emergent ideas inevitably change the scope and assumptions about the situation. Even when incremental changes are the goal, new ideas can result in leaping forward — and that can be disruptive. Preparing everyone to welcome emergent ideas that can reframe or redirect action is important for success.
7. *Commit to ongoing organizational learning* (all case studies). Committing to DEI is a commitment to cultural change; and cultural change only happens when aspirations, design, operations, roles, and actions all transform. The thoroughness of cultural change requires an active learning environment that embraces ongoing organizational and leadership learning and development.

## Conclusion: How Consultants Can Fill Critical DEI Gaps

Consultants occupy a unique sphere in the world of philanthropy. They represent their own individual commitments to DEI, but possess the opportunity to share their knowledge and ideas on furthering DEI by working closely with multiple foundations. As illustrated in this article's case studies and summarized in the concluding points, a trusting partnership between the foundation/client and consultant is crucial to guiding successful DEI projects and initiatives. By working together, foundations can provide the resources to tackle DEI strategies, while consultants can provide guidance that may range from “fix-it” elements to more complex and adaptive change strategies.

As more and more foundations understand the need and importance of DEI in their workforce and grantmaking strategies, the need for consultants in this sphere will only increase.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Additional resources for establishing effective consultant/foundation partnerships to support diversity, equity, and inclusion can be found at <https://nncg.org>.

# Strengthening Support for Grantees: Four Lessons for Foundations

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**Keywords:** Responsive, philanthropy, community resilience, trust

## Introduction

The nonprofit sector delivers services that contribute to the economic stability and mobility of communities across the United States (Camper, 2016). Yet nonprofits are increasingly vulnerable: 8% are technically insolvent, one third have had deficits for three or more years, and half have cash reserves to meet less than one month of expenses (Hrywna, 2018).

It is not surprising that more than half of nonprofit leaders say they are unable to meet the sharply increasing community demands for services (Independent Sector, 2016). As society becomes more interconnected, the problems nonprofits are tasked with addressing require systems work. It is imperative for funders to adapt not only to the challenges faced by the organizations they fund, but also to the dynamic social systems within which they aim to effect change. This requires new approaches that are responsive to community needs and address the known challenges in grantor-grantee relationships.

In an effort to identify those new approaches, in August 2017 we conducted a study that involved hour-long interviews with 33 board members, executives, management, and front-line staff at nonprofit organizations with similar missions that serve vulnerable populations in the same locale, and with subsequently chosen funders that had relationships with those nonprofits. The interviewees were selected from among those who had experience addressing financial instability within their organization and were either (1) recipients of grant funds or (2) funders. (See Table 1.)

The questions developed for the interviews were based on a review of literature on

## Key Points

- As society becomes more interconnected, the problems nonprofits are tasked with addressing require systems work. It is imperative for funders to adapt not only to the challenges faced by the organizations they fund, but also to the dynamic social systems within which they aim to effect change. This requires new approaches that are responsive to community needs and address the known challenges in grantor-grantee relationships.
- This article offers a new perspective on the role of private foundations and four key lessons for strengthening funder support. These learnings build upon existing research and were gleaned from a qualitative analysis of data from interviews with 33 board members, executives, management, and front-line staff at nonprofit organizations with similar missions that serve vulnerable populations in the same locale, and with subsequently chosen funders that had relationships with those nonprofits.
- The interconnected challenges facing our communities are demanding more from philanthropy. Funders that build partnerships, recognize and respond to grantee reimbursement models, ease reporting burdens, and leverage their power to convene will make significant contributions to improving the resiliency of those communities.

grantor-grantee relationships, grantmaking best practices, and common financial challenges experienced by nonprofit agencies. Interviews were recorded with participants' consent, and later transcribed. We conducted a qualitative analysis using NVivo coding software and

TABLE 1 Study Interviewees

Type	No. of Interviewees
Funders	7
Nonprofit staff/leadership	18
Nonprofit board members	8
Total	33

identified recurring themes, from which four overall lessons emerged.

Research supports the idea that a key to building resilience is “gaining greater knowledge and awareness of risks ... as well as gaining lessons learned” (Schipper & Langston, 2015, p. 13). This article presents these four lessons to inform funder support for organizations and help foster community resilience, which we define as the “ability of people, communities, and systems to rebound from shocks and stressors” (Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust & Institute for Sustainable Communities, 2018, p. 3):

1. Building a trusted partnership with grantees better positions funders to address risks and increases the chance of grants achieving intended outcomes.
2. Responding to challenges faced by grantees dependent on government reimbursements improves their ability to deliver grant outcomes.
3. Easing grantee reporting burdens reduces unnecessary strain on nonprofit capacity.
4. Convening community partners around a cause benefits both grantors and grantees.

**Lesson No. 1: Build a Trusted Partnership With Grantees**

Recognizing the inherent challenges in grant-or-grantee relationships, we propose an approach that goes beyond traditional risk-identification

mechanisms like annual reports or financial reviews. We argue that when funders can intentionally work to build relationships, publicly demonstrate their willingness to meet grantees where they are, and use their expertise to help address or prevent challenges, their investments in nonprofit partners have a better chance of achieving intended outcomes.

According to the National Center for Responsive Philanthropy, “power dynamics are the most significant source of tension” in foundation relationships with grantees (Choi, 2017, para. 1). And because of this inherent power imbalance, it is human nature for nonprofits to give a positive report to funders. As one nonprofit leader stated,

It’s a human tendency and survival tendency to paint the prettiest picture you can [when talking to funders]. ... I don’t know how you break that, other than developing relationships at the level where you can really understand what’s going on and have a good line of communication.

As Maya Winkelstein (2018) notes, many grantees “fear that communicating honestly will have negative consequences for their organization” (para. 12). Our interviewees shared this sentiment. When speaking to funders, many said, they felt they always “had to say everything was fine.” As one remarked, “When funders asked me [about challenges], I did not feel that I could be honest and I hated it.” How would a foundation know of a threat on the horizon to a grantee’s viability, and thus to the work in which it has invested? Audited financial statements are often outdated by the time funders see them. Many

Reflective Practice

*While the field recognizes the importance of building trust with grantees, our findings highlight that investing more time in building relationships is not enough: Funders need to be there when trouble arises. The real world is messy; it is impossible at the start of a multiyear grant to perfectly predict the future.*

nonprofit failures are rooted in governance, culture, or leadership issues, none of which would be found in the data on a balance sheet. Nationally, “only 52 percent of nonprofit leaders believe their foundation funders are aware of the various challenges their organizations face” (Buteau, Block, & Chaffin, 2013, p. 6). If every one of its grantees are reporting that progress is being made entirely as planned, a foundation should take that as a sign that it has more work to do to create a safe space for dialogue. It is not enough to ask about challenges; intentional work is necessary to build an atmosphere where grantees feel comfortable sharing them. Without permission and the sense of trust needed to disclose problems, nonprofits may “improvise in the face of disappointing results without benefitting from the advice or assistance that funders could offer” (Fairfield & Wing, 2008, p. 29). When a grantmaker opens a necessary yet difficult conversation, a developing financial challenge can be brought forward before it becomes a crisis. By enabling open and honest dialogue with grantees, funders are better positioned to identify risks to their investments.

Strengthening relationships with grantees means investing time and energy in communication. Studies show that foundations that initiate

contact more than once a year with grantees, rather than waiting for grantees to reach out, have stronger relationships (Buteau, Buchanan, & Chu, 2010). To work toward a trusted partnership, practitioners in the field should consider how often they have conversations with grantees. Do funders wait for grantees to call? Do they ask grantees how often they would like to communicate? The dynamics of grantor-grantee relationships are inherently challenging; knowledge of and attention to best practices can help mitigate the power imbalance.

While the field recognizes the importance of building trust with grantees, our findings highlight that investing more time in building relationships is not enough: Funders need to be there when trouble arises. The real world is messy; it is impossible at the start of a multiyear grant to perfectly predict the future. If nonprofits are honest, as one interviewee stated, funders “can’t use that against them. That’s where it’s going to have to be the leap of faith from the nonprofit, and the foundation is going to have to say, ‘OK, thank you for telling us. How do we help with this?’”

In a trusted partnership, funders open the door for grantees to disclose challenges. Beyond continued funding, consider how grantees can benefit from sharing institutional knowledge or augmenting grants. For example, could a programmatic grant request be strengthened by adding funding for better financial management software, evaluation support, development staff, or technical assistance to help address the grantee organization’s most pressing threats?

It takes a strong organization to deliver effective programming. A threat to one unit can have a ripple effect throughout an organization. Even if a funder supports only one program at a nonprofit, it is prudent to respond to any risks that could undermine the viability of the organization delivering that program.

Another way to signal that a funder would like to be a trusted partner is to regularly share what it has learned that grantees could benefit from knowing. Funders are usually in a position to see



the larger landscape of efforts in a community, and are likely are aware of multiple agencies working in a similar space. But only around a third of nonprofits believe that their foundation funders share “knowledge they have about what other nonprofits are doing to address similar challenges” (Buteau et al., 2013, p. 6). It is the funder’s responsibility to change that. With so many nonprofits financially vulnerable — more than a third are fearful they will lose a major source of funding — this is true now more than ever (BDO USA and Nonprofit Times, 2017). As one interviewee stated, “There’s so much uncertainty out there. I’m really fearful that something like 25% of nonprofits are going to go under because the government will just say, ‘You know what? Figure it out.’” Nonprofit leaders report that they are often so focused on delivering services that they do not see big challenges coming. With foundations in a unique position to understand the challenges facing nonprofits, it is incumbent upon them to share what they have learned with their partners — thereby better equipping them to succeed.

Education on how to navigate sector-specific vulnerabilities is an ongoing need for nonprofit staff and boards, and is another critical area where funders are uniquely positioned to respond. Nonprofits often draw their staff from other sectors, and institutional knowledge can be difficult to retain given the high turnover rates that can occur in these organizations (Bur, 2017). Specifically, interviewees pointed to the need for a better understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the finance committee of a nonprofit board, and said that funders can better support grantees by informally sharing best practices for nonprofit finance when they see opportunities to do so.

The finance committee is responsible for oversight and management of the nonprofit’s financial risks. According to H. Polanco, founder and CEO of FMA, a consulting firm specializing in strengthening foundation capacity and nonprofit financial management, a nonprofit’s finance committee at minimum should have quarterly meetings where financial variances are discussed (personal communication, February

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23, 2018). Yet many board members do not have prior experience with nonprofits and therefore are not aware of this. While it is the responsibility of the nonprofit’s staff to ensure that funds flow in accordance with contract stipulations, without regular review of financial statements by the board an important safeguard for the organization’s viability is missing. Funders can strengthen nonprofits by ensuring that their boards have the tools and knowledge needed to perform their oversight duties.

Sharing financial expertise is another way funders can support grantees. Nonprofits can have difficulty attracting and retaining finance talent; philanthropic organizations can support the sector with their institutional talent. Further, lending foundation staff expertise to uncover problems that grantees have not yet seen can contribute to strong grantor-grantee relationships (Buteau et al., 2010).

A foundation with a history in a community has important institutional and contextual knowledge that can greatly benefit grantees. Funders should consider how to lend to grantees this knowledge and, more broadly, consider how the questions they ask could increase grantee awareness of essential best practices.



*In some cases, adding a financial consultant or reporting-system upgrade to a grant can strengthen a grantee's ability to deliver important services. Practitioners are passionate about solving problems in the community and will take advantage of funding opportunities to expand programs that address those problems — sometimes at the expense of their internal capacity.*

## Lesson No. 2: Address the Unique Vulnerabilities of Nonprofit Grantees

One recurring theme in our interviews was the particular difficulties in managing organizations that receive a majority of their revenues from government contracts and reimbursements.

Given that one third of funding to the nonprofit sector comes from government sources, funders should be aware of what unique vulnerabilities this type of funding creates (Never & De Leon, 2014). With the help of Fiscal Management Associates, we identified the five significant challenges to nonprofits whose funding depends substantially on government contracts:

1. Most government contracts are cost reimbursements — nonprofits must spend money before getting the money. This requires that nonprofits have cash and/or a credit line.
2. Reimbursement arrives only after the required paperwork has been submitted on

time. This demands that nonprofits are adequately staffed and trained.

3. There is a significant administrative burden that comes with reporting for reimbursements. This requires sophisticated systems and staff with specialized, up-to-date skills.
4. Government contracts can have unfunded mandates and usually do not cover the full costs to deliver on those mandates. As a result, delivering on a contract may cost a nonprofit more than its reimbursement.
5. Each new government contract adds pressure on a nonprofit to raise funds that will cover the gap between the cost to deliver services and what the government is willing to pay for it. A good rule of thumb: For every dollar it receives in government funds, a nonprofit needs to raise 10 cents elsewhere.

These vulnerabilities can have immediate implications for nonprofits. Reimbursements can be slow to arrive, which often leads to cash-flow problems (Campbell, 2016). This was another recurring theme; as one interviewee stated, “every nonprofit has its issues in terms of ... the whole business model of providing services and then being reimbursed later.” Nonprofits with a significant amount of federal funding are 226% more likely to draw on reserves, 159% more likely to reduce the number of staff they employ, and 230% more likely to freeze salaries (Never & De Leon, 2014). The complex reporting requirements from government funders add another layer of difficulty to the already strained financial capacities of nonprofits — one respondent described them as “crippling.”

Given these challenges, be inquisitive about how funding can be best leveraged to help advance the work of grantees with a significant portion of their revenue from government sources. In some cases, adding a financial consultant or reporting-system upgrade to a grant can strengthen a grantee's ability to deliver important services. Practitioners are passionate about solving problems in the community and will take advantage

of funding opportunities to expand programs that address those problems — sometimes at the expense of their internal capacity. Listen to grantees that receive government funding to learn about how you can be most helpful, rather than holding them to a predetermined funding protocol. Treating these nonprofits as you would an organization with more diversified and flexible revenue does them a disservice.

### **Lesson No. 3: Reduce Administrative Burdens on Grantees**

Grantors are in a position of power relative to prospective grantees. Organizations that do not meet funding guidelines will not receive support. Organizations that rely on contributed revenue are impacted by the decisions made by funding agencies. Relative to public funding, which is often inflexible and requires sophisticated administrative systems, private foundations are bound by far fewer restrictions (Ohio Literacy Resource Center, n.d.). In a world that can change rapidly, the nonprofit sector is often on the front lines in responding to pressing community needs and must be resilient to do so effectively; private philanthropy is better positioned to offer nonprofits the necessary support.

Changes to reporting requirements are one way funders might reduce the burden on grantee capacity. Nonprofits are asked to comply with different reporting requirements for each funder (Kotloff & Burd, 2012). Does this need to be true for private funders — especially those in the same community? As one interviewee observed, “[we are all] dealing with the same private [foundations] here in town.” Many interviewees told us that meeting the reporting demands of multiple funders was a capacity challenge for their organization.

While a simplified approach to reporting might take more effort on the part of funders, they have a shared interest in strengthening the nonprofits they invest in. Furthermore, as one interviewee noted, “If you’re asking the nonprofits to collaborate, doesn’t it make sense to also ask the foundations to collaborate?” Foundations have the ability to reduce the reporting burden by

*Foundations have an underutilized ability to convene stakeholders around a cause. Convenings are an opportunity for grantors to learn about local needs and for grantees to identify risks and strategic opportunities to work together.*

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working together to deploy a single reporting mechanism. Philanthropy increasingly recognizes the importance of building nonprofit capacity; reducing unnecessary administrative burdens would go a long way in that direction.

### **Lesson No. 4: Convene Community Partners Around a Cause**

Foundations have an underutilized ability to convene stakeholders around a cause. Convenings are an opportunity for grantors to learn about local needs and for grantees to identify risks and strategic opportunities to work together.

Foundations are uniquely situated to encourage the connections among nonprofits that contribute to organizational and community resilience. Funders typically have links to many agencies and thus have a landscape view of the work in the community. Staff at foundations are in a position to research effective practices in the field and scan the horizon for threats to the sector. For community organizations, an invitation from a funder can serve as a motivator to get the right people to the table. Foundations can offer financial resources, provide experienced facilitators, and foster the connections between organizations upon which to build trust. Furthermore, foundations are often seen as neutral actors — an important factor for successful collaboration.

Convenings can also provide an opportunity for broader input from grantees about community needs. When exploring potential funding

opportunities, grantors often ask about an organization's mission and the mechanics for sustaining its work. When nonprofits with similar missions are convened around a cause, however, we found that the conversation among their leaders tended to focus more on impacts. Interviewers indicated that by actively listening in these settings, funders can learn about sector and community needs and the local context more holistically than by following traditional grantmaking approaches. Convenings are an avenue for funders to lean on grantees' expertise in "on the ground" issues. The goal of philanthropy is not to simply produce thriving nonprofits, but also to achieve effective outcomes. Given the pace of change and the interconnected nature of the problems the nonprofit sector aims to address, neither funders nor grantees can afford to operate in a vacuum.

The number of nonprofit organizations is steadily rising (Pettijohn, 2013). In discussing this proliferation of nonprofits and resulting inefficiencies, interviewees frequently pointed to a seldom-discussed factor: individual ego. The realization that a new or merged organization will not need two executive directors can lead many nonprofits away from joining forces (Lewis, 2016). One interviewee from a nonprofit argued that "[when people] really care about their impact in the community, they don't have to be the CEO of their own nonprofit. They can ... connect to another, stronger nonprofit that has the same mission." Convening nonprofits with similar missions is one way to foster this outlook. In a field where decisions should be made to advance public good, it is incumbent upon nonprofits to prioritize the mission and for funders to help facilitate the conditions where this can take place.

Leading a nonprofit effectively is no small task, and interviewees indicated that limited resources require staff tend to wear many hats. The future of funding for social service agencies is uncertain, but faced with the day-to-day responsibilities of operating a nonprofit, time for scanning the external environment for potential risks is scarce. Collaboration can help nonprofits be more resilient by providing a vehicle for

learning about those risks. Strategic collaborations can help organizations tap complementary skills, support best practices, expand their reach, improve efficiencies, and reduce costs (Stengel, 2013). Connections among agencies also create more resilient communities by expanding options for responding to threats and strengthening social cohesion. Isolation from others doing similar work means leaders have one fewer source of alerts to external shifts that may threaten their business model.

While staying connected to the ecosystem of providers is important for any nonprofit, some may benefit from teaming up with another provider. Bringing together organizations with similar missions can provide opportunities for nonprofits to envision new ways of collaborating. Mergers between nonprofits are often explored in response to financial distress or major challenges (Foster, Cortez, & Milway, 2009); coming together in this way can help challenged agencies avoid a lapse in services to vulnerable clients. But nonprofit leaders should not wait until a crisis to explore the benefits of merging with others doing similar work.

Consider, for example, Arizona's Children Association (AzCA), which reduced cost per beneficiary by 40% while increasing the number of clients served by 100% by merging with and acquiring a number of organizations that complemented AzCA's strategic goals related to geography, service and brand (Foster, Cortez, & Milway, 2009). As the association and other organizations have demonstrated, services for the community can be expanded by considering how smaller nonprofits can become programs of larger ones. Funders should intentionally reward organizations for collaboration efforts and create spaces where they can develop: "Get some of these folks to look around the room and see if they couldn't merge," one nonprofit leader advised.

Fostering collaboration among stakeholders in the community requires a degree of humility on the part of the funder; it means listening and allowing others to lead. The process of ensuring that the right people are at the table also creates

space for new voices. Bringing stakeholders together helps to build a stronger, more resilient community capable of adapting and overcoming challenges.

## Conclusion

This article presents a new perspective on the role of private foundations in the field that is based on qualitative insights from nonprofit leaders and funders. By analyzing those insights and building upon the existing literature, four key lessons emerged.

First, funders should build a trusted partnership with grantees whereby they lend institutional knowledge, intentionally foster open dialogue, and demonstrate their commitment to helping address challenges. Second, grantmakers should be aware that grantees may receive government contracts requiring them to spend first and be reimbursed later; even if it means parting with “what you’ve always done,” be responsive to these grantees rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach. Third, by working together, funders have the ability to reduce unnecessary administrative burdens on grantees. Fourth, the interconnected challenges facing our communities demand more from philanthropy; use convenings to not only foster collaboration, but to garner insights about approaches to addressing the social challenges that nonprofits are collectively working to address.

Funders who build partnerships, recognize and respond to grantee reimbursement models, ease reporting burdens, and leverage their power to convene will significantly contribute to the resiliency of their communities.

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# Executive Summaries

VOL. 11 ISSUE 3

## Results

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### Growth of Community-Based Giving Days in the United States: The Landscape and Effects

*Catherine Humphries Brown, Ph.D., Nebraska Children and Families Foundation; and Abhishek Bhati, Ph.D., Bowling Green State University*

Over the past decade, local and regional community foundations across the United States have adopted “giving days” as a means to build awareness, bolster community pride, and raise money for local nonprofit organizations. While aggregate amounts raised through giving days are increasing, the median amount raised has dropped substantially and the range in amounts is widening. Still, there was substantial growth from 2009 through 2016 in the number of giving days in the U.S., raising over \$1 billion across counties, cities, and states and thereby growing philanthropy within communities. Giving days may help increase a donor base but not all events are likely to raise large amounts of money.

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### How Can Foundations Promote Impactful Collaboration?

*Douglas Easterling, Ph.D., and Laura McDuffee, M.P.A., Wake Forest School of Medicine*

Funders are increasingly looking to interagency and cross-sector collaboration as a strategy to solve complex, large-scale issues, but many collaborative groups fail to generate an impact with their work. The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts’ experience demonstrates that it is possible for groups to generate impactful strategies beyond what they would have done on their own, and that funders can add value to the collaborative process. Interviews with representatives from four successful projects indicate the key tasks involved in designing, implementing, refining, and sustaining impactful programs. Interviewees reported on the value of the model, but also emphasized that it requires high levels of commitment and analytic capacity.

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## Tools

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### Using a Decision-Making Placemat to Inform Strategy

*Christine Baker Mitton, Ph.D., and Adrienne R. Mundorf, M.P.H., Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland; Kris Putnam-Walkerly, M.S.W., Putnam Consulting Group; and Susanna H. Krey, M.Ed., Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland*

This article explores the development and use of a decision-making placemat tool to inform the strategic shift of the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland's place-based program area. Using the key elements of the foundation's learning approach, the tool guided board members as they worked toward consensus around potential scenarios. Use of the placemat tool strengthened the board's ability to articulate the rationale for the shift in strategic direction, and allowed board members to assume the role of learner. This tool may be applicable to other foundations considering a strategic shift and/or desiring deep engagement from the board in strategic decisions.

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### Scaling Programs With Research Evidence and Effectiveness (SPREE)

*Nan L. Maxwell, Ph.D., and Scott B. Richman, Ph.D., Mathematica*

Foundations can serve more people by identifying and supporting effective interventions that are ready to be scaled. This article describes a process called SPREE — Scaling Programs with Research Evidence and Effectiveness — and provides insights into conditions under which foundations can apply it to help them and their grantees scale successfully. Implementing SPREE can assist foundations in two ways: (1) using evaluation research as a tool to determine which interventions are likely to produce desired outcomes, and (2) identifying those organizations ready to scale them.

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## Sector

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### Publicness and the Identity of Public Foundations

*Alexandra K. Williamson, Ph.D., and Belinda G. Luke, Ph.D., Queensland University of Technology*

At a time when philanthropy faces increasing public accountability expectations, the nature of foundations' publicness is a continuing concern. This article investigates the ways Australia's public ancillary funds understand their identity as public foundations, and examines how perceptions of publicness inform and influence the practice, conduct, and identity of grantmaking foundations. Interviews with managers and trustees from a diverse group of public foundations suggest that understandings and applications of two dimensions of publicness were significant: donations, or public money; and grantmaking, or public benefit. Further elements of publicness were expressed around foundations' visibility and the transparency of their operations.

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## Leveraging Effective Consulting to Advance Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Philanthropy

*Stephanie Clohesy, B.A., Clohesy Consulting; Jara Dean-Coffey, M.P.H, Luminare Group; and Lisa McGill, Ph.D., LM Strategies Consulting*

In 2018, the National Network of Consultants to Grantmakers launched an initiative to increase the capacity of consultants to engage with grantmakers on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work. Consultant members were interviewed about their most effective partnerships with grantmakers to identify lessons for advancing in philanthropy. Consultants need to be prepared to help grantmakers define or refine DEI and where equity fits into their values and mission. A good DEI consulting process helps to distinguish technical and complex dimensions of a DEI commitment, and how the scope of work should encompass both development of internal leadership skills and investment in grantee, community, and issue leaders.

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## Reflective Practice

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## Strengthening Support for Grantees: Four Lessons for Foundations

*Anna J. Bettis, MSUS, PMP, and Susan Pepin, MD, MPH, Arizona State University*

The problems nonprofits are tasked with addressing require systems work. Funders must adapt not only to the challenges faced by the organizations they fund, but also to the dynamic social systems within which they aim to effect change. Based on qualitative insights from nonprofit leaders and funders and building upon the existing literature, four key lessons for strengthening funder support emerged. Funders that build partnerships, recognize and respond to grantee reimbursement models, ease reporting burdens, and leverage their power to convene will make significant contributions to improving the resiliency of those communities.

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# Call for Papers

## FOR VOLUME 12, ISSUE 4

**Abstracts of up to 250 words are being solicited for Vol. 12, Issue 4 of *The Foundation Review*.** This issue is focused on how foundations support efforts creating “inclusive growth” communities. We define inclusive growth as more people sharing in the rewards of a growing economy and community. Inclusive growth communities are those that invest through philanthropy, public policy, financial decisions, and community commitments in the success of efforts like workforce training and talent development, small business success, personal access to financial resources, neighborhood development, and reducing gaps in social determinants such as health, education and housing.

Evidence suggests that collaborations across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors are the critical factor in tackling this complexity and creating community success. Philanthropy brings many billions of dollars in assets to strategies that address matters that contribute to inclusive growth, such as health inequities, access to quality education, affordable housing, and community and economic development. Philanthropy also contributes through roles such as leader, convener, influencer, and advocate.

**Abstracts are due December 2, 2019.** If a full paper is invited, it will be due May 29, 2020 for consideration for publication in December 2020. Submit abstracts to [submissions@foundationreview.org](mailto:submissions@foundationreview.org).

### **While this is not an exhaustive list, topics might address the following questions:**

- What promising new programs are foundations supporting to increase entrepreneurship in the community, especially for marginalized populations?
- What role do foundations play beyond awarding grant dollars, such as advocacy, convenings, building collaborations and networks, capacity building, etc.?
- How is equity defined and addressed in philanthropic efforts to increase prosperity for more people in the community?
- How is data being used to impact regional or local efforts surrounding economic outcomes for individuals and families?
- How has philanthropy invested in economic development, what strategies are being supported, and what outcomes are being achieved?
- How is philanthropy supporting learning and evaluation around inclusive growth to ensure that grantmaking efforts are effective and generative?

### Abstracts are solicited in four categories:

- **Results.** Papers in this category generally report on findings from evaluations of foundation-funded work. Papers should include a description of the theory of change (logic model, program theory), a description of the grant-making strategy, the evaluation methodology, the results, and discussion. The discussion should focus on what has been learned both about the programmatic content and about grantmaking and other foundation roles (convening, etc.).
- **Tools.** Papers in this category should describe tools useful for foundation staff or boards. By “tool” we mean a systematic, replicable method intended for a specific purpose. For example, a protocol to assess community readiness and standardized facilitation methods would be considered tools. The actual tool should be included in the article where practical. The paper should describe the rationale for the tool, how it was developed, and available evidence of its usefulness.
- **Sector.** Papers in this category address issues that confront the philanthropic sector as whole, such as diversity, accountability, etc. These are typically empirically based; literature reviews are also considered.
- **Reflective Practice.** The reflective practice articles rely on the knowledge and experience of the authors, rather than on formal evaluation methods or designs. In these cases, it is because of their perspective about broader issues, rather than specific initiatives, that the article is valuable.

### Book Reviews:

*The Foundation Review* publishes reviews of relevant books. Please contact the editor to discuss submitting a review. Reviewers must be free of conflicts of interest.

Authors can view full manuscript specifications and standards before submitting an abstract at [https:// johnsoncenter.org/author-guidelines](https://johnsoncenter.org/author-guidelines).

### Questions?

Contact Teri Behrens, editor of *The Foundation Review*, with questions via email at [behrenst@foundationreview.org](mailto:behrenst@foundationreview.org) or call (734) 646-2874.

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