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The Yin and Yang of Equity-Centered Philanthropy

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Keywords: *Equity, equity-centered philanthropy, foundation strategies, power and influence, organizational change, alignment, funder–grantee relationships, advocacy*

Introduction

“Centering equity” has become one of the most pronounced trends in philanthropy over the past two decades. Beginning in the early 2000s, a handful of foundations across the U.S. explicitly reframed their grantmaking and strategies around concepts such as equity, social justice, racial equity, health equity, health disparities, and building the power of traditionally disenfranchised populations and communities (GrantCraft, 2007). This trend accelerated following the police killings of Michael Brown Jr. in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014 and Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Maryland, in 2015. It became a groundswell in the summer of 2020 with the intense public attention and protests surrounding the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and other Black Americans.

In a survey of 60 health foundations conducted in the fall of 2020, 81% of respondents indicated that their foundation had increased their focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion over the past six months (James, 2021). The critical question now is whether this newfound focus on equity will translate into different philanthropic practices (Behrens, 2020; Easterling & Benton-Clark, 2020; Hayling, 2021).

Recommendations for Centering Equity in Philanthropy

Grant Making with an Equity Lens (GrantCraft, 2007) and the follow-up publication, *Grantmaking with a Racial Justice Lens* (Sen & Villarosa, 2019), provide foundations with guidance on how to evolve their structures, strategies, and culture in order to center racial equity.

Key Points

- Foundations face two competing imperatives when they commit to advancing equity. On the one hand, they are counseled to support and follow the lead of community-based groups that are on the front lines of social change. On the other hand, they are also being challenged to use their power and influence to act boldly to change inequitable structures, policies, and institutions. These two orientations, yin and yang, can take a foundation in different directions and thus cause confusion and internal conflict.
- The challenge for a foundation is to balance and integrate the two orientations into a comprehensive and effective approach to advancing equity. Drawing on the experience of six foundations that have embraced equity, we provide guidance on how to manage the yin–yang polarity. These foundations recognize that they have different spheres of influence than do action-oriented groups on the front lines of change, and thus adopt strategies that complement those of their grantees.
- One of the most important and challenging aspects of centering equity in philanthropy involves the foundation’s relationships with the groups it funds, especially community-based groups and groups that are led by people of color. We argue that foundation staff need to bring both a yin and a yang orientation when engaging with grantees. Strong working partnerships with open, honest, give-and-take conversations allow for reciprocal learning and collective strategizing, which in turn sets the stage for innovative, breakthrough solutions.

Affinity groups such as ABFE¹ and CHANGE Philanthropy² offer additional guides and toolkits on their websites. In addition, *The Foundation Review* has published a large body of research articles and commentaries on how to center equity (e.g., Arno et al., 2012; Redwood & King, 2014; Gulati-Partee & Potapchuk, 2014; Pickett-Erway et al., 2014; Csuti & Barley, 2016; Young et al., 2017; Braff-Guajardo et al., 2018; Baker & Constantine, 2019; Beer et al., 2021; Ricci et al., 2021). Grantmakers in Health has also published reports focusing specifically on “health equity” (e.g., Grantmakers in Health, 2012; Benton-Clark et al., 2020).

In describing what foundations need to do to center equity, many of these publications draw a distinction between inward-facing work and outward-facing work. Key aspects of the inward-facing work include ensuring that the foundation has a diverse staff and board reflective of the region it serves, as well as adopting policies and practices that incorporate equity into decision-making, operations, investments, and contracting with vendors (GrantCraft, 2007; GIH, 2012; Redwood & King, 2014).

From an outward-facing perspective, advocates of equity-centered philanthropy have called on foundations to be explicit in using their dollars and influence to remedy disparities in health, well-being, and power. This requires intentionality in designing and implementing grantmaking programs (especially in terms of which groups are prioritized), as well as strategically using all the foundation’s assets to stimulate and support changes in structures, systems, and policy outside of the foundation that advance equity (GrantCraft, 2007; Cunningham et al., 2014; Villanueva, 2018; Sen & Villarosa, 2019).

Additional recommendations from the equity literature are presented in Table 1. They are organized around what we regard to be the four overarching tasks associated with centering equity:

1. Build a deep understanding of equity and a commitment among staff and board.
2. Align the foundation’s organizational structures, processes, and culture with equity commitments.
3. Develop and implement strategies to advance equity within the communities served by the foundation.
4. Integrate equity into the grantmaking processes and relationships with grantees.

Competing Imperatives

Recommendations for how foundations should carry out these four tasks sometimes point in contrasting directions. On the one hand, foundations are counseled to be respectful, receptive, and responsive to groups that are doing the challenging work of social change, especially groups led by people of color (Villanueva, 2018). This means following the lead of grantees, rather than setting strategy internally and treating grantees as the agents of the foundation’s strategy (Beer et al., 2021). Some advocates of equity-centered philanthropy have called for foundations to explicitly cede power to communities of color and groups that are working for social justice (e.g., Csuti & Barley, 2016; Villanueva, 2018; Sen & Villarosa, 2019). Trust-Based Philanthropy Project (n.d.) has been a leading advocate for shifting more power to funded groups. According to TBPP, grantmakers “have a responsibility to confront the ways our sector has contributed to systemic inequities, both in the ways that wealth is accumulated and the ways its dissemination is controlled” (para. 1).

On the other hand, foundations adopting equity as a lens are being challenged to act as bold leaders and to be assertive in using their resources and influence to bring about changes in institutions, systems, and structures. Teri Behrens (2020) advocated for this in a blog post:

¹ See <https://www.abfe.org/knowledge-center/>

² See <https://change philanthropy.org/resource-hub/>

TABLE 1 Recommended Steps in Centering Equity (from the Literature)

TASK	RECOMMENDATIONS	REFERENCES
Build a deep understanding of equity and commitment among staff and board.	Clarify what equity means to the foundation, both as a general principle and in terms of the foundation’s orientation and practices.	GrantCraft (2007); Sen & Villarosa (2019)
	Engage staff and board in intensive learning journeys, trainings, consciousness-raising experiences, etc., to explore issues such as equity, disparities, systemic/structural racism, white privilege, accumulated advantage, internalized oppression, etc.	Baker & Constantine (2019); Benton-Clark et al. (2020); Csuti & Barley (2016); Gulati-Partee & Potapchuk (2014); Pickett-Erway et al. (2014); Redwood & King (2014); Young et al. (2017)
	Adopt a racial equity lens when developing strategy, making grants, and assessing impact (analyze data by race, understand the nature and source of disparities, name race explicitly in defining problems and solutions).	Benton-Clark et al. (2020); GrantCraft (2007); Sen & Villarosa (2019)
	Center the perspectives of people and communities who experience disparities and people with lived experience.	Benton-Clark et al. (2020); Csuti & Barley (2016); Ricci et al. (2021)
	Conduct organizational assessments to understand what needs to change, to track progress over time, and to hold the foundation accountable to its commitments.	Csuti & Barley (2016); Grantmakers in Health (2012); Redwood & King (2014)
Align organizational structures, processes, and culture with equity commitments.	Create and sustain an organizational culture that values the perspective, behavior, and culture of people of color, rather than reflecting dominant white Christian culture.	Gulati-Partee & Potapchuk (2014)
	Diversify board and staff through focused recruitment and hiring.	GrantCraft (2007); Redwood & King (2014); Young et al. (2017)
	Recruit board members who have a commitment to equity.	Redwood & King (2014); Young et al. (2017)
	Recruit staff (especially program staff) with lived experience in communities of color.	Csuti & Barley (2016); Redwood & King (2014)
	Provide equity-oriented training to staff and board.	Dean-Coffey et al. (2014); GrantCraft (2007); Gulati-Partee & Potapchuk (2014); Redwood & King (2014); Young et al. (2017)
	Expand and diversify the set of vendors the foundation uses.	GrantCraft (2007); Redwood & King (2014); Young et al. (2017)
	Ensure that evaluators have a racial equity lens and that evaluation methods capture and validate the experiences of people of color.	Benton-Clark et al. (2020); Dean-Coffey et al. (2014)

(table continued on next page)

While “equity” has been a buzzword at philanthropy conferences for years now, will the sector step up in this historic time and move beyond the rhetoric? Money and mouth both count. We need to use both more effectively to call out injustice where we see it in our organizations and communities, put resources in the hands of those who have the deepest experience of pain and how to address it, and call on our colleagues to do likewise. (para. 7)

Many others have called for foundations to bring their voice more forcefully into public and political dialogue (GrantCraft, 2007; Arno et al., 2012; Redwood & King, 2014; Young et al., 2017;

Oliphant, 2018; Benton-Clark et al., 2020). This activist orientation has been framed as “wielding power” within the Power Moves framework developed by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (2018). It would seem to run counter to the imperative for foundations to yield at least some of their power in favor of the organizations they fund and the communities they are seeking to place in a stronger position.

Balancing Yin and Yang

These competing imperatives correspond to the yin and yang orientations that are fundamental aspects of Chinese philosophy (Simpkins &

TABLE 1 Recommended Steps in Centering Equity (from the Literature) (continued)

TASK	RECOMMENDATIONS	REFERENCES
Develop and implement strategies to advance equity.	Focus grantmaking on organizations that have both the will and the capacity to create more equitable policies, systems and communities.	Cunningham et al. (2014); GrantCraft (2007); Redwood & King (2014); Sen & Villarosa (2019); Villanueva (2018)
	Recognize that organizations led by people who have lived experience are often in a better position to advance equity than are mainstream organizations.	GrantCraft (2007)
	Give multiyear, unrestricted grants.	Hayling (2021); Trust-Based Philanthropy Project (n.d.)
	Use the foundation's resources and influence to build the power and influence of groups that are advancing equity.	Arno et al. (2012); Baker & Constantine (2019); Barsoum & Farrow (2020); Csuti & Barley (2016); Easterling & Benton-Clark (2020); GrantCraft (2007); Grantmakers in Health (2012); Hayling (2021); Kim et al. (2019); Ricci et al. (2021)
	Establish and support coalitions and representative councils to advance equity.	Braff-Guajardo et al. (2018); Csuti & Barley (2016); Farrow et al. (2020); Ricci et al. (2021); Young et al. (2017)
	Incentivize mainstream nonprofits and government agencies to be more diverse, inclusive, equitable, and responsive.	Easterling & Benton-Clark (2020)
	Serve as a role model for other institutions on diversity, inclusion, equity, and anti-racism.	GrantCraft (2007); Grantmakers in Health (2012); Redwood & King (2014); Young et al. (2017)
	Encourage the foundation's institutional vendors (e.g., investment advisors) to incorporate equity more fully and explicitly into their structures, policies, and practices.	Redwood & King (2014); Young et al. (2017)
	Bring the foundation's voice more forcefully into public and political dialogue.	Arno et al., (2012); Behrens (2020); Benton-Clark et al. (2020); GrantCraft (2007); Oliphant (2018); Redwood & King (2014); Young et al. (2017)
	Advocate for more equitable public policy by raising public and political awareness around key issues, as well as by conducting or commissioning research that serves as the basis for policy change.	Arno et al., (2012); Barsoum & Farrow (2020); Easterling & McDuffee (2018); Redwood & King (2014)
Integrate equity into grantmaking processes and relationships with grantees.	Respect the expertise and interests of funded groups that are carrying out the work of social change.	Csuti & Barley (2016); Easterling & Benton-Clark (2020); Hayling (2021); Ricci et al. (2021); Trust-Based Philanthropy Project (n.d.)
	Support groups in carrying out their own strategies, rather than requiring them to adapt their work to align with the foundation's theory of change.	Beer et al. (2021); Enright (2017); Le (2017)
	Share or give up the foundation's power and control to the groups they are funding and serving.	Beer et al. (2021); Le (2017); NCRP (2018); Trust-Based Philanthropy Project (n.d.)
	Bring funded groups and the foundation's constituents directly into the process of shaping the foundation's outcomes and strategy, as well as in evaluating whether the foundation has succeeded in advancing equity.	Beer et al. (2021); Enright (2017); Le (2017); Villanueva (2018)

Simpkins, 2015). Yin is a nurturing force, characterized by qualities such as receptivity, sensitivity, contemplativeness, and intuitiveness. Yang is the contrasting assertive force, marked by direct, outgoing, excited, and rational orientations. In one respect, yin and yang are opposing forces, but in another respect, they are complementary.

According to Louis (n.d.), yin and yang are each essential to a healthy life; one of the great challenges in life is to express yin and yang energies in a balanced way. A similar balancing act is required of foundations that seek to fully live out their stated commitment to equity. Fully embracing either the yin or yang orientation at the expense of the other will limit the foundation's effectiveness and potentially cause damage. This is because each orientation has both strengths and weaknesses.

If we apply the yin–yang framework to philanthropy rather than individuals, there is just as much reason to balance the two orientations:

- The yin orientation to philanthropy encourages funded organizations to achieve their full potential, which increases the possibility for social change in line with the foundation's equity goals. Conversely, operating in a mode of receptivity, listening, and learning can cause the foundation to fall into passivity and to fail to step into its own power to lead change.
- The dynamics are reversed for the yang orientation. The foundation is poised to act and make a difference in the world, but it may fail to take the time to appreciate the many assets and strengths of its grantees and other partners which can contribute to social change.

Yin and yang orientations can be regarded as a “polarity” in the context of Barry Johnson's “Polarity Management” model. Johnson (1992) defines a polarity as a “set of opposites which can't function well independently. Because the two sides of a polarity are interdependent, you cannot choose one as a ‘solution’ and neglect the other” (p. xviii). From the standpoint of Polarity Management, the foundation's challenge is to

avoid being either overly assertive (i.e., directing grantees and other partners on what they should do to advance the foundation's goals) or overly receptive (i.e., taking a passive stance and putting all the responsibility on grantees to make change happen).

Insights from Six Foundations

In order to provide guidance on how to manage the yin–yang polarity, we present insights from a study of six foundations with a recognized track record of operating with an explicit equity orientation. (See Appendix.) The participating foundations are Con Alma Health Foundation, Santa Fe, New Mexico; Deaconess Foundation, St. Louis, Missouri; Marguerite Casey Foundation, Seattle, Washington; Meyer Memorial Trust and Northwest Health Foundation (NWHF), Portland, Oregon, and Vitalyst Health Foundation, Phoenix, Arizona. (See Table 2 on page 92.)

How the Foundations Centered Equity

The six foundations in our study conceptualized equity in their own distinct ways, but themes like “fairness” and “equitable access to opportunities” were common across the sample. (See Table 3 on page 93.)

The foundations' equity definitions and principles point to a range of dimensions along which people have historically faced discrimination, including race, ethnicity, citizenship status, language, disability status, sexual orientation, and gender. The primary emphasis for all six foundations is racial and ethnic equity. Kaberi Banerjee Murthy, chief impact officer at Meyer Memorial Trust, described how that foundation has narrowed its focus to emphasize race, while still maintaining a broad view around where disparities exist:

We knew if we're to really take on justice, we would be insincere about doing it without making a really strong and clear commitment to naming and centering on race. As a result, we're being explicit about becoming a racial justice foundation with an intersectional lens, which means it's not at the expense of excluding everything else. This is especially true as we think about the

TABLE 2 Key Characteristics of the Six Studied Foundations*

	Con Alma Health Foundation	Deaconess Foundation	Marguerite Casey Foundation	Meyer Memorial Trust	Northwest Health Foundation	Vitalyst Health Foundation
State	New Mexico	Missouri	Washington	Oregon	Oregon	Arizona
Service area	Statewide	St. Louis metro region	National	Statewide	Statewide, southwest Washington	Statewide
Type of foundation	501(c)(3) private health conversion foundation	501(c)(3) public charity (health conversion foundation)	501(c)(3) public charity (family foundation)	501(c)(3) private	501(c)(4) private health conversion foundation	501(c)(3) public charity (health conversion foundation)
Ruling year	2001	1972	2001	1982	1997	1995
Net assets end of 2018 or 2019	\$27.5 million	\$55 million	\$699 million	\$761 million	\$48 million	\$125 million
Staff size	6	7	19	33	7	12
Number of program staff	3 or 4	3 or 4	6	16	3	7

*Figures as of 2020, the year interviews were conducted

intersectionality between race and gender, given the lived experience and leadership of women of color specifically.

The Marguerite Casey Foundation (n.d.a) and Northwest Health Foundation go beyond adopting racial equity as a principle and explicitly call out the need to confront white supremacy. Casey identifies “Belonging & Representation” as a primary value: “We are intentional and vigilant about identifying and undoing racism and white supremacy, on every level, in order to create an environment where acceptance, dignity and justice are experienced by all” (para. 3). Study interviewee Jesse Beason, president and CEO of the NWHF, remarked:

We acknowledge that the primary way that this country has used race, gender, and all the other ways of embedding, frankly, white supremacy is through public policy, public practice, and public resources. For us, that’s equity — acknowledging that our past wrongs are still very much with us and working to repair those impacts.

The concept of “power” also appears to a greater or lesser extent in these foundations’ conceptualization of equity. The strategy at the Deaconess Foundation (n.d.), for example, is premised on the following statement: “This community only thrives if the allocation of power and distribution of resources, benefits, opportunities and burdens are not predictable by, nor predicated on race” (para. 1). Likewise, the Marguerite Casey Foundation (n.d.b) has the following statement at the top of the landing page on its website:

It’s not enough for communities to be merely represented in our economy and democracy — they must be powerful enough to shape them. Marguerite Casey Foundation helps community leaders gain the freedom they need to lead, so their communities can gain the power they need to change how society works. (para. 1)

Committing to Equity

The six foundations arrived at their equity commitments in a variety of ways. For the Marguerite Casey and Con Alma Health

TABLE 3 Equity Orientations of the Six Foundations in the Study

Foundation	Equity-Relevant Text in Defining Documents (e.g., mission, vision, values)
Con Alma Health Foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Our Mission ... is to be aware of and respond to the health rights and needs of the culturally and demographically diverse peoples and communities of New Mexico” (2021, para. 5).
Deaconess Foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Deaconess Foundation envisions a community that values the health and well-being of all children and gives priority attention to the most vulnerable” (n.d.a, para. 1). • “We believe a just society is essential for the full achievement of individual and community health” (n.d.b, para. 4).
Marguerite Casey Foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Marguerite Casey Foundation supports leaders, scholars, and initiatives focused on shifting the balance of power in society — building power for communities that continue to be excluded from shaping how society works and from sharing in its rewards and freedoms” (n.d.a, para. 1). • “We are intentional and vigilant about identifying and undoing racism and white supremacy, on every level, in order to create an environment where acceptance, dignity, and justice are experienced by all” (n.d.a, para. 3). • “We believe in the organizing necessary to shift the balance of power from the few to all” (n.d.c, para. 7). • “MCF ceaselessly looks for ways to increase justice in the world. That includes influencing the corporations that our endowment sponsors — using our voting power as shareholders to force corporations to make good on long overdue commitments to racial justice” (n.d.d, para. 1).
Meyer Memorial Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “All of our work is framed by our commitment to dismantling barriers to equity and improving community conditions so that all Oregonians can reach their full potential” (n.d., para. 9). • [We define equity] “as fair access to opportunities” (2020, para. 11). • “We prioritize work that increases equity for and inclusion of Oregonians who experience disparities because of race, ethnicity, national origin, citizenship status, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, class, disability, geographic location, or age” (n.d., para. 9).
Northwest Health Foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “We prioritize investing in efforts to better the lives of Black, Indigenous and other people of color (BIPOC) while considering the impact and intersections of geography and disability” (n.d., para. 9). • “We prioritize efforts to improve the social, economic, political and environmental conditions that impede equity through legislative, electoral and other means” (n.d., para. 9). • “We prioritize investing in and building relationships with organizations and coalitions led by those closest to the problems they seek to address” (n.d., para. 9).
Vitalyst Health Foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Equity is a commitment and a journey” (n.d., para. 1). • “Vitalyst’s Strategic Roadmap process reaffirmed equity as a core value, key ingredient for change, and strategic commitment. As individuals and as an organization, there is a great deal to do to live up to this commitment. We also recognize the paradox of being a part of current systems and institutional settings that perpetuate inequities. Traditional philanthropy is one of the dominant cultural systems that needs to change, which means that we can commit to changing our foundation’s practices. Fundamentally, our way forward is to set ourselves on a path of meeting people where they are, listening deeply, and working to transform policies, systems, and environments to be more equitable” (n.d., para. 2).

foundations, equity and related concepts (e.g., “just society”) have long been core principles and priorities. The other four foundations in the sample committed to equity as part of a larger organizational transition.

Meyer Memorial Trust’s Kaberi Banerjee Murth described their shift as follows:

Meyer made a pivot to equity about seven years ago, wanting to be able to ensure that equity was a really critical component of the way in which the foundation showed up, and we have recently deepened our commitment by focusing on justice.

Deaconess embraced equity and racial justice as core issues under the leadership of the

One of the key steps in bringing a foundation's culture and practices into alignment with equity-centered philanthropy is to engage the staff and board in extensive analysis and discussion around the core concepts associated with equity, disparities and racism.

Rev. Starsky Wilson a decade ago, an orientation that took on heightened prominence with the shooting death of Michael Brown in 2014. Wilson co-led the Ferguson Commission,³ which put together a plan to guide the region's response to the shooting.

For Vitalyst Health Foundation, equity emerged as a critical issue when the board and staff took a deeper look at its goal of “reducing health disparities.” They came to realize that this required the foundation to focus on inequities in underlying social conditions and structures. According to Jon Ford, director of strategic initiatives, this shift in perspective tested some core assumptions within the board:

At one point there was a very definite pushback from some board members saying, ‘We are a health foundation, not a social justice foundation. We want you to focus on health disparities,’ and they didn’t see that as challenging inequities. Over time that shifted.

The shift at NWHF was more abrupt when a new CEO brought strong views about equity, the role of the foundation in advancing equity, and the type of organizational culture that was required within the foundation. Beason described the former CEO’s approach:

[She] made that intentional shift in culture very clear and that this was where the foundation was going, and that it was an expectation of the job to do that. If people couldn’t do that, then we would help them leave the organization. Some people left the organization.

One of the key steps in bringing a foundation’s culture and practices into alignment with equity-centered philanthropy is to engage the staff and board in extensive analysis and discussion around the core concepts associated with equity, disparities and racism. The six foundations have done this through trainings, workshops, affinity groups, assigned readings and ongoing informal conversations. At all six foundations, there was a clear expectation (reinforced by the CEO) that all staff were expected to engage in this process of discovery and personal development. This was described by Meyer’s Banerjee Murthy: “One important piece of the equity work at Meyer is making sure that we are doing the work as well, and not asking our grantees to do anything that we ourselves were not willing to do.”

Hiring Processes and Expectations for Staff

Equity, diversity, and inclusion also factor directly into the hiring of foundation staff. Interviewees all recognized the importance of having a staff that is diverse on multiple levels, especially in race and ethnicity. They also pointed out that the foundation needed program staff with direct experience working in community-based organizations. As a result, changes were made to job descriptions, qualifications, and hiring practices. Northwest Health Foundation went further and adjusted pay scales of staff downward in order to increase pay equity between the foundation and its grantees. As CEO Beason describes:

We reclassified jobs and paid everybody less. I think the discrepancies between what our program officers were making versus what our average grant size was, and even versus the salaries in the organizations we were funding, were too far apart.

³ See <https://forwardthroughferguson.org/report/executive-summary/the-commission/>

Three of the six foundations have expectations that staff will engage directly in social-change work. As Kiesha Davis, director of partnership and capacity building at Deaconess, explained,

We get outside of Deaconess. The work that we do to serve the community by serving on boards and different advisory committees that our partners invite us to is valuable to our overall mission. For us, ongoing learning gives us a different perspective that adds to our work and the community we aim to serve.

Similar expectations are in place at both NWHF and Meyer. All three foundations have policies in place to prevent conflicts of interest when reviewing grant proposals from groups where staff serve on the board.

Grantmaking Approach

All the interviewees in our study indicated that their foundations view their primary role as supporting organizations that are on the front lines of social change, providing them with the resources they need to be effective in achieving their goals. A wide range of organizations are supported. Some provide direct services to improve clients' health and well-being, while others focus on advocacy, community organizing, and/or training. The six foundations vary in terms of the specific profile of their grantees, but each expects their grantees to serve people and communities who have experienced discrimination, racism, and marginalization. The foundations also expressed at least some preference for funding organizations that are led by people of color.

Grants are generally designated for operating support rather than discrete projects. Interviewees stressed the importance of flexible funding and were averse to the idea of requiring grantees to carry out foundation-specified work. They also recognized that long-term, predictable funding is important in sustaining and strengthening the groups they support.

To a limited extent, the foundations have also provided their grantees with training and consulting to build organizational capacity.

All the interviewees in our study indicated that their foundations view their primary role as supporting organizations that are on the front lines of social change[.]

Peer learning was a more favored strategy. Interviewees reported that they had been told by grantees that bringing together organizations doing similar work was more valuable to them than having access to expert consultants.

One of the most important strategies these foundations use to strengthen funded organizations is to raise their profile and “amplify their voice.” This is done by highlighting the work of funded organizations on the foundation’s website and publications, as well as by centering these organizations when the foundation interacts with peer funders and other institutions. Constance Harper, director of policy, advocacy, and strategic initiatives at Deaconess, provided the following example:

When we get a call from a reporter requesting a comment on a topic or subject where our partners are more deeply engaged, it’s up to us to also bring our partners to the table and say, “Actually, this is the person that would be better to respond to that.”

Selecting and Working with Vendors

Contracting with vendors is another area where the six foundations adapted organizational policies and practices to center equity. Harper described how Deaconess has diversified its vendors:

When requesting proposals for services, we explicitly encourage businesses owned and led by members of historically underrepresented and undercapitalized groups, including African Americans, Latinx, Indigenous communities, women, and small businesses, to submit proposals, to participate as partners, and/or to participate in other business activity in response.

Vitalyst conducted an extensive assessment of the foundation's vendors and procurements as a first step in diversifying its contracting, and has prioritized small, family-owned businesses when contracting for catering services. Staff of Meyer Memorial Trust are intentional about staying at tribally owned hotels when visiting Native American communities; Banerjee Murthy pointed out that it's not enough to purchase services from a diverse set of vendors. "There's also the way folks are treated," she said, "honoring the folks who are contracted for services instead of not acknowledging them or their labor."

Another way to integrate equity into contracting is to encourage mainstream institutional vendors to incorporate equity more fully and explicitly into their structures, policies, and practices. Harper at Deaconess framed the opportunity as follows:

How can we push folks that we partner with on a consultant basis to make sure that there are Black people — we're very specific about that — leading the work in organizations, whether it's through our investment portfolio or the vendors that we welcome into our space?

The foundations have been particularly intentional in encouraging financial managers who handle their investments, banking, and accounting to show a commitment to equity and to align investment portfolios with the foundation's equity values.

Tracking and Accountability

Given the breadth and depth and organizational change needed to center equity, foundation leaders need to be vigilant in following through on the work. Vitalyst developed a tracking grid that guides equity-related assessment and action in 18 different domains. President and CEO Suzanne Pfister described how this grid is used for accountability:

We've also been very intentional in this last year of documenting. We now have the data showing who we've contracted with, who the grants have gone to, so we can benchmark going forward. Because if you don't have some kind of data, you're never going to know. We don't have quotas. We know

where we are and we're just constantly looking at it as we're a learning organization.

Yin and Yang

While none of the interviewees actually mentioned the terms "yin" and "yang," we observed evidence that all six foundations were operating according to both orientations.

Yin Orientation

The yin orientation emphasizes respect and receptivity when the foundation engages with the groups it funds, as well as supporting each organization in achieving its own goals. A recurrent theme in the interviews was respectful listening and responding directly to the needs that are expressed. Interviewees consistently reported that their foundation does not dictate the work of its grantees, but instead respects their interests, judgment, and wisdom. Dolores Roybal, retired CEO at Con Alma, affirmed this:

A core value is community self-definition and community self-determination. We are not a prescriptive funder, never have been, and as far as I'm concerned, never will be. We support the community in defining the need and in developing community-based solutions.

A similar sentiment is expressed on Vitalyst's (2022) website: "Fundamentally, our way forward is to set ourselves on a path of meeting people where they are, listening deeply, and working to transform policies, systems, and environments to be more equitable" (para. 1).

This grantee-centric orientation is reinforced in the grantmaking practices of the foundations. Grants are generally designated for operating support rather than discrete projects. Interviewees recognized that long-term, predictable funding is important in sustaining and strengthening the groups they support. They also stressed the importance of flexible funding and were averse to the idea of requiring grantees to carry out foundation-specified work. Flexibility applies not only to grant awards, but also reducing the reporting burden for funded groups. Marguerite Casey has begun to use

periodic funder–grantee conversations in place of written progress reports for some of its grants.

Interviewees talked in depth about how to build and maintain relationships that are as equitable as possible. One of the critical elements involves showing respect to the people and organizations that approach the foundation for funding. This includes respect for their experience and knowledge, as well as recognizing that they have interests and aspirations that are separate from the foundation's. And interviewees consistently cited the importance of managing power dynamics in order to create and sustain truly equitable relationships. The comments of Dolores Roybal at Con Alma were representative: "We recognize the power imbalance. We try to level the playing field so that they don't come hat in hand, but they're respected and treated as an equal."

Likewise, many of the interviewees indicated that these groups should be respected because they are the ones doing the actual work of social change. Kiesha Davis at Deaconess pointed out that the term "grantee" can reinforce inequities. "We recognize the power dynamic in utilizing that as a term," she said, "and so we talk about 'partnership' because we truly seek to be in partnership with the work that they're doing in communities."

Yang Orientation

On the one hand, the six foundations use their resources and influence to act in service to other organizations. On the other hand, they pursue foundation-initiated work designed to bring about change. Kaberi Banerjee Murthy's account of Meyer's approach is reflective of what we heard from all the interviewees:

We're also really intentional about thinking about a leadership stance. ... We are aware of the spaces in which we are able to release dollars and share power and move the decision making out of our boardroom, and being able to center the leadership and voice of those who are closest to the challenges and most wise about what next steps could look like.

The foundations in our study focused on policy change as a means of advancing equity, both in selecting grantees and carrying out their own work. They also commission research to inform policy formation and policy debate. To a limited extent, foundation staff also testify in support of proposed policy change. Banerjee Murthy indicated that this requires careful consideration for foundations that are established as 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations:

We craft our testimony carefully so it focuses on what we have learned as a foundation ... in a way that is allowable for private foundations. Foundations sometimes get scared away from doing that, but we've been able to enter into that space. We've learned how invitations need to come to us and under what conditions so that we can say yes.

Another critical way in which all six foundations express their leadership on equity is by using their influence with peer institutions. Kiesha Davis described what this looked like at Deaconess when it adopted "a commitment to racial equity in a very public way, sharing that with stakeholders across the region" and also provided "modeling to philanthropic partners, both regionally and even nationally," Davis said; "new practices to adopt as it relates to how we engage with partners and how we make our grants, or even the language that we use."

The foundations also played a leadership role in funding collaboratives that focused on supporting equity work. Examples include the Racial Healing + Justice Fund (Deaconess Foundation), the Oregon Workers Relief Fund (Meyer Memorial Trust), and a state disaster relief program in New Mexico (Con Alma Health Foundation). In all these instances, multiple philanthropic and government funders came together to establish the fund. The foundations in our study were active in bringing an equity lens to the allocation of funding. This included ensuring that allocation committees include representatives of affected communities and that these individuals had influence in allocating funds.

The practical question faced by an equity-oriented foundation is when to lead and when to follow the lead of others.

Navigating the Tension

The foundations in our study managed the yin-yang polarity by organizing their equity strategies into parallel lanes for grantmaking and for foundation initiatives. They are respectful and responsive when engaging with applicants and grantees, while also acting assertively in carrying out their own equity work. In some situations, the foundation leads, while in other situations, the foundation follows the lead of its partners. This selective approach is consistent with Hersey and Blanchard's (1969) Situational Leadership model, where leaders diagnose situations to decide when to be directive and when to be supportive.

The practical question faced by an equity-oriented foundation is when to lead and when to follow the lead of others. Interviewees answered that question by referring to different spheres of influence. They pointed out that the groups they fund have much more influence than the foundation when it comes to many of the things that need to occur in order to advance equity (e.g., changing policy, creating more responsive service-delivery systems, mobilizing communities, raising consciousness, bringing more diverse people into elected office and other leadership positions). In contrast, foundations, by virtue of their stature and assets, can influence institutions and leaders that are beyond the reach of funded groups. This can be accomplished through strategies such as convening, strategic communications, and advocating for equity issues when interacting with institutional leaders.

Dividing social-change work into the foundation lane and grantee lane allows a foundation

to express both a yin and yang orientation, but this is only a first step. The foundations in our sample have learned that to be truly effective in advancing equity, the goal is not to steer clear of its grantees, but rather to carry out work that directly complements and reinforces the strategies of their grantees. Constance Harper described how this has happened at Deaconess:

With our advocacy strategy, we work with our partners to determine exactly how and which assets to deploy at given times. ... In partnership with them, we determine when and how to engage to use Deaconess' voice to advocate for the cause. ... Is it through an opinion editorial in the local newspaper, an address during a press conference, or a podcast appearance?

Interviewees indicated that their foundations have been able to develop complementary strategies because they have developed strong partnerships with their grantees. Through ongoing conversations, foundations and the groups they support have been able to identify where each of them has influence and expertise, as well as where there is value in coordinating their strategies.

Advancing the Paradigm of Equity-Centered Philanthropy

Much of the writing on equity-centered philanthropy has emphasized the need for foundations to be more respectful and supportive with the groups they fund. This is certainly an important reform — one that groups like the NCRP advocated long before equity became a hot topic in philanthropy. At the same time, foundations should not lose sight of the fact that they are in a unique position to add value to the work that these groups are doing. This can be accomplished by connecting grantees to one another for networking and peer learning, by elevating their visibility and credibility among elected officials, government agencies, and other funders, and by offering relevant and culturally appropriate forms of training, consultation, and coaching.

In addition to strengthening and connecting groups that are on the front lines of social

change, foundations have the means and the standing to carry out their own work to advance equity. This is particularly true with regard to raising public and political awareness around important equity issues and remedies that can actually make a difference. They can also influence their peer organizations in philanthropy and government to be more inclusive, diverse, equitable, and responsive to the communities they serve. This foundation-initiated work can be designed to complement and reinforce the strategies that funded groups are using to achieve change.

Rethinking Equity-Centered Relationships

In theory at least, foundations and the groups they fund can be more effective in reaching their equity goals if they align around shared goals and collaborate with one another in carrying out their strategies. This sort of synergistic strategizing occurred when the Appalachian Funders Network invited a network of funded organizations to attend its annual meeting and participate in an interactive session focused on reciprocal learning and collective planning (Easterling, 2013). However, funders and grantees rarely collaborate in this way because of the dynamics surrounding grantmaking. Funders have the power to determine who will receive funding, what activities will be supported, and how grantees will be held accountable. This imbalance in power means that funders and grantees can never be truly “equal” partners when they meet to coordinate their strategies.

The NCRP’s Power Moves model and Trust-Based Philanthropy seek to change the practice of philanthropy so that foundations share power with grantees, show more respect, and come into conversations ready to listen and learn. While respectful listening is certainly important to collaborative strategizing, our perspective is that neither partner should defer to the other. Productive collaboration involves an active exchange of ideas and perspectives among the partners, which in turn requires open, direct, give-and-take interactions where all partners are comfortable presenting their perspectives and revealing their expertise. In other words, foundation staff should not hang back and wait

In addition to strengthening and connecting groups that are on the front lines of social change, foundations have the means and the standing to carry out their own work to advance equity. This is particularly true with regard to raising public and political awareness around important equity issues and remedies that can actually make a difference.

for funded groups to propose solutions, but instead should bring their own knowledge of the context and possible approaches into the conversation. Learning should be reciprocal. In addition, foundations and grantees should feel empowered to push one another to think more strategically and to act more boldly. These principles are the core of “evocative grantmaking,” which was proposed as a means of building the adaptive capacity of both foundations and grantees (Easterling, 2016).

To date, advocates of equity-centered philanthropy have generally called for more listening, respect, receptivity, and responsiveness on the part of foundations when they engage with the groups they fund. In other words, the emphasis has been on expressing more yin. This is important, but it can inadvertently breed caution and inhibit foundation staff from bringing forth their knowledge, experience, and perspective. Holding back on the expression of yang energy can undermine both the foundation and its grantees in being effective in advancing equity. It goes without saying that too much yang on the part of the foundation, especially arrogant yang, will be counterproductive.

Transcending Traditional Foundation Roles and Expectations

The grantmaking paradigm erects a variety of the obstacles to forming open, give-and-take relationships. Program officers are decision-makers (or at least recommenders) when it comes to awarding grants, as well as monitors of the foundation's grant expenditures. This dynamic makes applicants and grantees naturally cautious and guarded in revealing information and opinions.

One way to break through these obstacles is for foundation staff to interact with nonprofit and grassroots organizations in other venues. Three of the foundations in our study encouraged their staff to engage directly in equity work within their own communities, including serving on the board of groups funded by the foundation. When we described this approach to others in the philanthropic field, the typical first response was the question of how these foundations managed the potential conflict of interest. Interviewees from those foundations expressed confidence in the relevant policies and procedures that their foundations have established.

The deeper issue, and potential discomfort, we heard from other foundations involved the blurring of boundaries between funder and grantee. This, however, may be one of the most telling indicators of whether a foundation has truly centered equity. One of the critical first tasks in centering equity is for foundation staff and board members to move further along on their own personal understanding of equity, and then commit to equity-oriented actions that are feasible given their position, influence, and skills. Another key task is to show up fully

when engaging with teammates, grantees, and other partners. Succeeding at this means that foundation staff are transcending their role as grantmaker and engaging in action-oriented work that bears at least some similarity to the work that funded groups are carrying out.

Conclusion

One of the most important and challenging aspects of centering equity involves the foundation's relationships with the groups it funds, especially community-based groups and groups that are led by people of color. We made the case here that foundation staff need to bring both a yin and a yang orientation when engaging with grantees. Strong working partnerships depend on open, honest, give-and-take conversations where all partners feel free to speak up with their ideas and to bring their knowledge to whatever issue is at hand. This allows for reciprocal learning and collective strategizing, which in turn sets the stage for innovative, breakthrough solutions. Only then will foundations and their partners be successful in producing the fundamental shifts in policies, systems, culture, and behavior that are necessary for equity to be a reality.

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APPENDIX Study Details

The six foundations profiled here participated in a study of equity-oriented philanthropy commissioned by the Colorado Health Foundation. The CHF adopted health equity as a defining principle in 2016 and has taken a number of steps to incorporate equity within its hiring practices, organizational structure, accountability metrics, staff development, board development, strategic planning, grantmaking, communications, and policy advocacy. The current study was commissioned as a means of assisting the foundation in extending its grantmaking approach to support groups that are more grassroots and oriented toward social change than had been historically funded by the CHF. The foundation was specifically interested in learning what other foundations had done to build these groups' influence and amplify their political power.

In line with the available budget, the study was framed as a modest scan of the field of equity-oriented foundations, focused specifically on foundations that:

- had established an identity and reputation as an equity-oriented foundation;
- focus their grantmaking and initiatives on supporting activist-oriented, community-based groups;
- establish strong, long-lasting relationships with funded groups; and
- had not previously been profiled in journal articles or publicly available evaluation reports.

The sample for the study was determined through conversations between the study team and CHF staff. Together, we generated a list of 12 foundations from across the United States that had a reputation in line with the aims of the study. A study team member reviewed the websites of these foundations and the team used the available information to determine which foundations were likely to yield findings relevant to the CHF's expectations. At this stage, three of the 12 were eliminated from the list: one operating foundation and two health

foundations that were relatively new in their equity journey.

Email invitations were sent to the nine foundations that were deemed to be eligible. For foundations where the study team had an established relationship, the email was sent by the principal investigator. For the others, the email came from the CEO of the CHF. Six of the nine foundations responded positively and were included in the study: Con Alma Health, Deaconess, Marguerite Casey, Meyer Memorial Trust, Northwest Health, and Vitalyst Health. Each of the six participating foundations emphasizes equity in its defining documents, vision and/or mission, strategic goals, grantmaking priorities, and organizational practices. (See Table 3.)

For each participating foundation, the study team conducted semistructured telephone interviews with from one to three representatives who have been directly engaged in the foundation's strategies for advancing equity. (See Table 1-A.) For four of the foundations, we interviewed the CEO and at least one additional representative. For the remaining two foundations, we interviewed the staff person who oversaw programs. In the case of Con Alma, we interviewed the CEO, a former board chair, and the executive director of the state-wide association of grantmakers.

Interviewees were asked about the origins, rationale, and assumptions underlying the foundation's equity-oriented strategies, as well as how the strategies have been carried out, what has happened in response, and what has been learned in the process.

Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Transcripts and programmatic materials available to the study team were analyzed to characterize each foundation's approach and to summarize what is known about implementation, outcomes, successes, and challenges. Foundation-specific data were pooled to allow for a more macro-level analysis of the similarities and differences in approach among these equity-oriented foundations.

TABLE A-1 Individuals Interviewed for the Study

Foundation	Name	Position at the Time of Interview
Con Alma Health Foundation	Dolores Roybal*	CEO
	Valerie Romero-Leggott	Former board chair
	Frank Lopez*	Executive director, New Mexico Association of Grantmakers
Deaconess Foundation	Cheryl D. S. Walker	President & CEO
	Kiesha Davis	Director, partnership and capacity building
	Constance Harper	Director, policy, advocacy, & strategic initiatives
Marguerite Casey Foundation	Jonathan Jayes-Green*	Vice president of programs
Meyer Memorial Trust	Kaberi Banerjee Murthy*	Chief impact officer
Northwest Health Foundation	Jesse Beason	President & CEO
	Jen Matheson	Director of programs
Vitalyst Health Foundation	Suzanne Pfister	President & CEO
	Jon Ford*	Director of strategic initiatives

*Individuals who have since left their respective organization