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A Journey Into Equitable Practice: Doing More, Doing Differently, and Doing Better

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Introduction

Structurally and systemically, community-based organizations have historically relied on support from grantmakers to accomplish their missions (National Council of Nonprofits, 2010). In 2021, for example, U.S. philanthropies invested just over \$484 billion in the nonprofit sector (Giving USA, 2022; Kresge Foundation, 2008). Critics of this culture of giving, however, argue that a characteristic funder–grantee power dynamic ultimately produces such cumulative behaviors as “white savior complex” (Asare, 2022), and that a just and sustainable system of philanthropic giving requires a fundamental shift toward equity in grantmaking (Washington, 2023).

The mission of the Michigan Fitness Foundation (MFF) is to encourage and facilitate active lifestyles and healthy food choices through education, environmental awareness, community participation, and policy leadership. We support the efforts of more than 50 organizations based in underserved communities to identify community members’ health-related needs and deliver programming that meets those needs, primarily via funding from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and its education component, SNAP-Ed (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2023), which is distributed to MFF through the state of Michigan.

The MFF funds a variety of agencies and organizations — including Michigan schools and school districts, local health departments, Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), health system foundations, tribal organizations, and food banks — that serve children, teens, and young adults; families; and older adults in eligible settings and communities. Priority

Key Points

- The mission of the Michigan Fitness Foundation is to encourage and facilitate active lifestyles and healthy food choices through education, environmental awareness, community participation, and policy leadership. The article shares how a three-year engagement with the Equitable Evaluation Initiative led the foundation to see its grantmaking, programming, and evaluation practices anew through an equity lens.
- Through naming and noticing the ways in which traditional grantmaking has contributed to the inequities that philanthropy seeks to address, the foundation was able to change its own way of working — specifically by going beyond the standard written grant proposal to actually sit with prospective grantees and members of the communities they serve and listen as they describe a vision for a healthier future and how to make it a reality.
- With a grounding in the EEI principles, we were able to share ideas, problem solve, discover what worked and, maybe even more importantly, what didn’t, which helped shape our journey, actions, and evolving successes more intentionally. We hope our story will inspire others to take steps toward equity in their work.

populations include Native Americans, people with cognitive disabilities, seniors, the Latinx community, Arab Americans, and immigrants. Priority geographies include rural areas, communities in crisis, and Michigan counties with the highest proportion of SNAP recipients.

Understanding community needs and then aligning programming to meet those needs is core to our approach. As a backbone organization, MFF supports multistakeholder work through training and technical assistance on strategies for meaningful community engagement, collaborative approaches to planning and implementation, the systematic collection of data on community needs and packaging of these data with accompanying solutions, and obtaining evaluation services.

Community-based organizations that receive grant funding are generally held to specific standards or expectations that are known prior to submitting a grant application; often, evaluation is among them (Office of Minority Health, 2010). Grant dollars are commonly used to fund programming that provides social support, so it follows that related activities should also center equity to honor those who receive this support. Philanthropic giving, however, has often served to perpetuate the inequities and inequalities faced by the people seeking such support (Laskowski, 2011/2012). Since benefits and harms co-exist across the levers of philanthropic grantmaking, and since those levers have informed evaluation practices, it is important to name the roots of those harms and document their ripple effects while finding different ways of thinking about and doing philanthropy and evaluation (Zinsmeister, 2016).

The Historical Context of MFF Grantmaking

As a SNAP-Ed grantmaker, MFF is responsible for distributing pass-through dollars to CBOs for their on-the-ground programming. Our grantmaking practice largely mirrored those at the federal and state levels, and we engaged an external consultant to help define the parameters of the proposal process and the related scoring mechanism. The typical funding process, a one-size-fits-all approach designed to ensure objectivity, would begin by announcing a funding opportunity through public channels; CBOs would respond to a standard set of questions, provide documentation, and then submit written proposals if they cleared those hurdles. External content experts would examine those

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proposals, score them against a rubric, and then meet to make funding recommendations.

Historically, grantmaking at MFF affirmed independent pathways to practice more equitable grantmaking. Looking back, however, we noticed how traditional, independent, and more equitable pathways started to converge even though the traditional federal and state grantmaking processes and procedures were our North Star. Upon reflection, we noticed how individual MFF staff were practicing equitable implementation of the program cycle by seeking out community-rooted perspectives on the barriers to active lifestyles and healthy food choices. Yet, there was no common way of applying equitable practice to the program cycle or common language to acknowledge what was happening in the program cycle to honor those practices.

This shift catalyzed new ways of thinking about how best to support our local partners. We saw how other organizations were changing their approaches to funding when our foundation applied for a grant and a conversation with the

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applicant team that included community members was part of the proposal process. Equity was also brought to the forefront by the collective courage of the global #MeToo movement, the bravery of young athletes from Michigan State University bringing years-old sexual abuse to light, and the nationwide uprising in response to the murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

While there are things to honor about the historical approaches of our program cycle, other elements were not aligned with emerging movements and changes in viewpoint among our staff, who were already acknowledging misaligned practices and growing curious about how grantmaking and evaluation in particular could be done differently. External factors were also presenting opportunities to reflect on some critical questions. Federal guidance was widening its focus on direct education programming to include broader public health approaches, for example — an evolution that acknowledged the value of programming at multiple levels with the support of federal dollars.

These changes also shone a light on some fundamental tensions — namely, the historical development of processes and practices, passed down from federal and state ways of grantmaking, that anchored structural biases and perpetuated injustices and inequities. It was with this grounding that we became active, engaged participants in the Equitable Evaluation Initiative (2023, 2020), which provided us with framing and structure to name what we wanted to do and be. We were then better positioned to think and do differently.

Our EEI Journey

Our EEI journey began when six foundation staff members engaged with EEI coaches and thought curators in ways that involved formal yet flexible time for discussions, readings, podcasts, and peer sharing on equity issues. This experience was a departure from our usual way of thinking and doing. [(See Figure 1). Figure 1 was developed after a coaching conversation in 2022 by EEI resident artist who artistically depicted MFF staff reflections of their equity journey.] Our first step was noticing, and the next was naming; without these essential building blocks, there is no way forward. The naming space is where we explored how orthodoxies and mindsets get shaped for an individual person to acknowledge the curation of historical implications. Among the influences we acknowledged along the way for the individuals who make up the Michigan Fitness Foundation:

- Lived experience
- Institutions
- Teachers and academic learning
- Social structures
- Family, friends, and co-workers
- Media representations
- Community contexts
- Cultural, social, and religious norms

One remarkable point in the journey was being able to notice, name, and nurture the elements of Principle Three (EEI, 2023, 2020):

- the historical and structural relevance of how grantmaking and evaluative practices were designed and implemented,
- how and in what ways orthodoxies and tensions of those practices informed systemic decision-making and practices that influenced population health, and

FIGURE 1 Reflections on EEF Coaching Conversation

Source: Equitable Evaluation Initiative, 2022.

- the ways cultural nuances are woven into structural definitions and the micro and macro steps to doing things differently.

To fold those moments in the journey into constructive conversations on developing a mindset shift would make space for orthodoxies to be challenged and tensions to be acknowledged. This sounded like, looked like, and felt like naming the ways in which typical grantmaking has created inequities in the process — not all organizations have the infrastructure, person power, or access to resources to write a successful proposal within the traditional constraints. Through this naming and noticing we came to acknowledge systemic drivers of inequity that come into play as a result of federal funding strings (e.g., types of programming, reporting requirements) and how those have contributed to how we operate and interact with local partners through the funding process, training,

and technical assistance. This exploration also enabled the foundation to acknowledge the ways in which cultural context is tangled up in the structural conditions of grantmaking, thus informing changes to our request for proposal process.

With this grounding in the EEI principles, we were able to share ideas, problem solve, discover what worked and, maybe even more importantly, what didn't, which helped shape our journey, actions, and evolving successes more intentionally. For example, we looked to others in the EEI cohort to learn how they were doing more participatory grantmaking. This was a tangible turning point for us: "If they can do it, we can do it."

These experiences opened us up from binary thinking to multiplicity thinking, and with that came opportunities for different ways

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of practicing the art of moving through the program cycle. Doing differently meant being connected to the people touched by each element of the program cycle so that they could inform the grantmaking process. From there we could move toward a mindset of reciprocity where supporting Michigan communities is the priority. The EEI principles were guiding us to rely on, reflect on, and embody a framework that allowed us to free up space to realign our RFP process to meet CBOs where they are — by centering community voice.

Funding Decisions

Traditionally, CBOs propose a comprehensive SNAP-Ed program that meets identified community needs within federal grant guidelines. Proposals, which include a conversation component, undergo an objective review by external content experts who score each proposal on how well the proposed evidence-based programming meets identified needs and whether the organization demonstrates the ability to independently implement the program. Nonprofits who are approved for funding through the Request for Proposals (RFP) process must first demonstrate through a request for application that they meet eligibility criteria for contracted service vendors; it is through this process that MFF attests to its organizational capacity to deliver SNAP-Ed programming in alignment with identified community needs.

To move from the traditional or historical concepts of the RFP and Request for Applications (RFA), we adopted the notion of play to explore

new ways of reaching alignment. Sometimes we referred to the “SNAP-Ed sandbox” or “SNAP-Ed painting” to explore a spectrum of approaches. Often this sounded like, “OK, this activity is sort of contained within the boundaries, but what can be created within those boundaries, within those parameters?” To that end, we tried to operate, appreciate, and act using a both/and approach to honor the boundaries while remaining committed to curiosity about where fuller alignment could influence practice. That spirit, combined with the experiential journey, deepened and catalyzed some centering and provided some structure — a compass.

In addition to the traditional written proposal, our RFP process now includes a conversation with representatives of grant applicants and their community partners. The impetus for this was the recognition that the written proposal provided only one way of communicating the work — one that disadvantaged smaller CBOs without grantwriting infrastructure. A written application by itself is not an equitable process for competition.

Adding a funding conversation also helped organizations share not only the “what” of the work, but also the “how” and the “why” — allowing their passion for the mission to shine through. Our application process was further refined to account for varying levels of supportive infrastructure across CBOs that want to submit a proposal for a project that directly impacts the community. The shift helped “color in the lines” of what was presented in the written proposal, and the conversations highlighted how grant applicants had determined the needs of the selected populations and were working collaboratively with communities to deliver programming. In fact, eight organizations who applied through the reimagined application process are now moving through the proposal process independently because of increased organizational and community bandwidth.

In addition to creating a more equitable funding approach, this new system helped build positive relationships between grantors and potential grantees. Overall, community teams appreciated

the opportunity to share their stories and felt the conversation helped to start the relationship off on the right foot. This different way of doing allowed reviewers and MFF staff to hear about the assets, successes, commitment, and intentions of local leaders to change their health environment. And in some cases, reviewers who were not inclined to recommend funding based on a written proposal from an organization changed their opinion after a conversation with the community team. Our new learning was that organizations that do not submit a strong written proposal can be worthy of funding — if we just make space for them to talk!

Ripple Effects

The intentionality to practice promoting equity has become layered into the foundation's norms and values while holding space for the anticipation of more ripples. One way the ripples of practicing EEI has shaped the foundation and the staff of its grantees is through professional development defined by consistent, bidirectional engagement with experts who guide us on how to incorporate equitable practices. Conferences and trainings for local partners have been more carefully curated to prioritize topics and speakers focused on equity principles and strategies for integrating an equity lens into our daily work. These topics included health care and defining social determinants of health, Indigenous communities, implicit bias, data design, and storytelling. Attendees expressed their appreciation for these equity-focused sessions, which emphasized practical strategies for local implementation.

Our evaluation practices underwent a significant shift as we reconsidered through an equity lens the ways we collected and shared data, aiming to ensure our evaluation tools and procedures were accessible and meaningful to everyone involved. We questioned the effectiveness of traditional surveys, asking if there were more inclusive and straightforward methods to gather insights from diverse participants. Our workplace culture also evolved, with staff adopting new language and concepts related to equity in a way that transformed our mindset and approach to planning, programming, and evaluation. An internal

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Work Climate Survey further demonstrated the organization's commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging by seeking to learn about the staff's comfort levels, factors affecting retention, and perceptions of workplace discrimination. The findings reinforced the leadership team's dedication to fostering equitable practices within our organization.

Finally, without naming and noticing, the foundation of our communication — word choices, common language — would not have shifted. Language fosters understanding, influences comprehension, nurtures embodiment of feelings, and strengthens cultural practices. The daily language to shape conversations, the choice of words in the practice of grantmaking and evaluation, and the ways of expressing the body of our work across its administration has changed.

We are continually reminding ourselves that the orthodoxies, mindsets, and tensions are about holding space, noticing; that's it's a process — less a reason to catalyze a solution and more to learn ways to normalize the experience and discover postures that happen simultaneously yet with different rates and rhythms. The Equitable Evaluation Framework™ practice is paying attention to what things sound like, look like, feel like, and then acting, practicing, and being present. We are reminded that the practice is emergent and invites curiosity: Who is designing our foundation's practices, and how and to what extent are community members involved? What could be different, and how? At what pace does change feel comfortable?

Conclusions and Implications

We at Michigan Fitness Foundation are doing more, doing differently, and doing better — and being different as we acknowledge and embrace the tensions of releasing orthodoxies and mindsets that are not aligned with the season of our equitable-practice journey. Peer-to-peer interactions developed through the EEI cohort learning model translated into genuine and invaluable connections. If more grantmaking institutions were vulnerable and/or flexible enough to participate in equity training such as the EEI, it could result in an adopted, practiced, and personalized Equitable Evaluation Framework™ that informs the mission, values, policies, systems, and environments impacted by grantmaking dollars.

We spent time learning how to adjust anchored practices of thinking about and doing grantmaking and evaluation to promote and embody equitable, flexible, and honorable practices that more robustly support partners, staff, and community members (MFF, 2023; EEI, 2023, 2020; Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, n.d.; Braveman et al., 2017). As a result of our evolving grantmaking strategy, we are funding organizations that likely would not have been funded in the past based on traditional written proposals alone. Making the written application process more equitable and including funding conversations changed the minds of reviewers, increasing the number of local organizations who received funding. Additionally, the paradigm shift in evaluation has influenced the language used by staff, the methods used with community members, the design of surveys and guides, and the interpretation and dissemination of results.

While the efforts to move from an anchored practice to a flexible practice takes time and commitment, the effectiveness of the work over time has magnified the impact in communities. Changing a grantmaking process to a more equitable one that centers the submitter and not the grantmaker has the power to influence community health outcomes. This is iterative work that has already begun to shape the longevity of partner organizations and influence social

determinants of health. Our internal teams and external partners are engaged in this equity journey together. Over time we have felt a palpable shift in mindset and culture, as evidenced through conversations, use of language, and ongoing self-reflection. This collective journey centers people in communities being served — their needs become the focus of our work.

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