

The Foundation Review

a publication of the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University

Volume 16

Issue 2 *Democracy, Equity, and Power*

10-2024

Executive Summaries

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/tfr>



Part of the [Nonprofit Administration and Management Commons](#), [Public Administration Commons](#), [Public Affairs Commons](#), and the [Public Policy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(2024). Executive Summaries. *The Foundation Review*, 16(2). <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1719>

Copyright © Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University. The Foundation Review is reproduced electronically by ScholarWorks@GVSU. <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/tfr>

SECTOR

13

A Philanthropic Theory of Systems Transformation for Advancing Equity in the Polycrisis

Michael Quinn Patton, Ph.D., Utilization-Focused Evaluation, and Ruth Richardson, M.Sc., Accelerator for Systemic Risk Analysis

The term “polycrisis” captures the urgent convergence of interconnected crises — climate change, growing inequalities, disinformation, pandemic threats, armed conflict, and environmental degradation — that disproportionately affect marginalized populations. In this article, the authors challenge readers to reconsider philanthropic strategies in light of these escalating risks. The authors examine the evolution of philanthropic program design over the last 25 years and propose a transformative theory that addresses the complexities of the polycrisis. By embracing integrated theories of change and promoting collective action through philanthropic alliances, we can pave the way for meaningful systems transformation. This perspective serves as both a reflection on philanthropy’s journey and a call to action for its future. The authors present four key premises and corresponding questions to spark dialogue about philanthropy’s role in effectively responding to these pressing challenges to create a more proactive approach to creating impactful change.

DOI: 10.9707/1944-5660.1706

29

Forest for the Trees: Collective Accountability and Trust as Groundwork for Systems Change

Shaady Salehi, M.S., and Pia Infante, M.A., Trust-Based Philanthropy Project

Since 2020, trust-based philanthropy has emerged as a powerful strategy to address the inherent power imbalances between funders, nonprofits, and the communities they serve. By implementing practices such as multiyear unrestricted funding and streamlined processes, this approach empowers nonprofits to define their own impact goals. At its heart, trust-based philanthropy fosters collaboration, shifting the focus from one-way transactional accountability to mutual, relational accountability. This creates a strong ecosystem where funders and nonprofits work together toward shared commitments to their communities. This article shares insights and stories from social-sector leaders to demonstrate how adopting trust-based practices makes philanthropy more strategic and effective. The authors highlight concrete examples of systemic change achieved through partnerships grounded in trust and collective accountability, reimagining philanthropy as a catalyst for meaningful social impact.

DOI: 10.9707/1944-5660.1707

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

44

Resourcing Transformational Strategies: How Funding With the Right Timescales, Places, and Relationships Can Advance Multiracial Feminist Democracy

Lauren Jacobs, B.A., and Elly Matsumura, A.B., PowerSwitch Action; Rachel Rosner, M.P.A., independent evaluator; and Eric Wat, M.A., independent evaluator

This article examines how philanthropy can empower movement organizations focused on long-term power building to reshape who holds governing power. Drawing on insights from PowerSwitch Action, a network of influential advocacy groups in the U.S., the authors share key learnings from a recent evaluation, aiming to benefit both movement organizations and their philanthropic supporters. The authors present three key recommendations for funders: 1) Invest in long-term strategies for shifting governing power instead of expecting quick wins; 2) Recognize the interplay between local, state, and national efforts, and support both grassroots organizations and cross-regional networks; and 3) Prioritize relationships and structures that enhance collaboration and collective success. Philanthropy plays a vital role in these initiatives. This analysis seeks to illuminate the collaborative efforts required among organizers, advocates, and funders to create an economy that serves everyone. As the U.S. faces multiple crises, the need for these transformative approaches is more urgent than ever, and with the right support, meaningful change remains within reach.

DOI: 10.9707/1944-5660.1708

59

Seeding Impact: Shifting From Orchestration to Emergence

Marilyn Darling, M.A., The Emergent Learning Community Project, and Veena Pankaj, M.A., Eval4Learning

The 2016 Foundation Review article “Emergent Learning: A Framework for Whole-System Strategy, Learning and Adaptation” introduced the concept of emergent strategy, which aims to create synergy greater than the sum of its parts. This article examines whether that vision has been realized, drawing insights from interviews with members of the Emergent Learning Community about the practical application and results of this approach. The authors identify key principles that have emerged from community practices and launched a 2022 inquiry to explore how Emergent Learning integrates into practitioners’ work, including factors that facilitate or hinder this process. Through 24 interviews and sensemaking sessions, impact is defined in terms of “micromoves”—small, observable actions that lead to significant changes. This article also shares stories of how practitioners foster change within their organizations and enhance collaboration with external partners. The authors challenge readers to shift from a chess-player mentality to a cohesive soccer team approach, emphasizing collective action over individual expertise. This emergent strategy has become central to the practice of Emergent Learning, showcasing how collaboration can drive meaningful change.

DOI: 10.9707/1944-5660.1709

TOOLS

71

What Practices for Shifting Power Are Core to Advancing Racial Equity?

Kantahyanee W. Murray, Ph.D., Lift Every Voice Evaluation, Research, and Strategy; Ji Won Shon, M.S.P.H., Independent Consultant, Ashley Barnes, M.P.A., Lift Every Voice Evaluation, Research, and Strategy; Natalia Ibanez, M.A., Blue Shield of California Foundation; Karuna Sridharan Chibber, Dr.PH., David and Lucile Packard Foundation; Janelle Armstrong-Brown, Ph.D., RTI International; and Elvis Fraser, Ph.D., Sankofa Consulting

Power-shifting approaches are emerging as effective strategies for funders to amplify the voices and agency of historically marginalized and under-resourced communities. This article, informed by an extensive literature reviews and interviews with funders and thought leaders, identifies four key practices for redistributing power to promote equity: integrating a racial equity lens into decision-making; demonstrating authentic commitment to communities; empowering grant partners to define success; and fostering a culture of systems change. It explores the essential capabilities, mindsets, and resources needed for successful implementation, recommending a learning framework to encourage shared practices across organizations. By adopting these strategies, foundations and communities can work together to create more inclusive and racially equitable solutions, empowering communities to lead their own change.

DOI: 10.9707/1944-5660.1710

86

Strategy for Now

Jara Dean-Coffey, M.P.H., and Jill Casey, B.S., jdcPARTNERSHIPS

We are at a pivotal moment in understanding our identity as a society, both past and present. To thrive, we must rethink the structures and systems that limit us all, moving away from control, competition, and certainty. While there's a growing push towards equity and complexity in our practices, traditional business concepts still dominate strategy discussions in philanthropy and nonprofits. These often overlook the essential truth that change begins with us — humans. For the past three decades, the authors have explored an approach that nurtures both individual and collective curiosity, transforming it into capacity and competence. By redefining strategy, the authors create space for meaningful evaluative inquiry that recognizes learning as an ongoing responsibility within complex systems. This article redefines strategy, integrates it with evaluative inquiry, shares insights from practitioners, and offers fresh considerations for a future-oriented approach to strategy.

DOI: 10.9707/1944-5660.1711

100

Raising the Bar: Improving How to Assess Evidence Quality in Evaluating Systems-Change Efforts

Marina Apgar, Ph.D., Institute of Development Studies; Thomas Aston, Ph.D., independent consultant; Mieke Snijder, Ph.D., Institute of Development Studies, and Tom Zwollo, M.Sc., Save the Children Netherlands

Facing the great scale of societal challenges, philanthropic organizations are increasingly calling for systems change. Evaluating systems change requires innovative approaches that respond to the complexities of such change in ways that support equity and multiracial democracy rather than undermining them. However, traditional notions of rigor — often tied to independence, objectivity, and experimental methods — often clash with the complexities of equity-focused evaluations. Many funders worry that moving away from these conventional standards means losing all standards. This article contends that it is possible to establish more appropriate, flexible, inclusive standards for assessing evidence quality in systems-change efforts. Drawing on a review of existing evidence standards, insights from causal pathways and inclusive rigor networks, and the evaluation of the CLARISSA program, it presents principles and tools to help philanthropic organizations effectively assess evidence quality in their systems-change evaluations.

DOI: 10.9707/1944-5660.1712

RESULTS

114

The Weight of Power: Reframing Evaluation in Philanthropy to Amplify the Voices of Communities of Color

Martena Reed, M.S.W., Reflective Evaluation; Blanca Flor Guillen-Woods, M.A., Strategic Learning Partners for Innovation; Kantahyanee W. Murray, Ph.D., Michigan Public Health Institute; Dabney Brice, M.P.A., Echoing Green; Ashley Barnes, M.P.A., Michigan Public Health Institute; and Liza Mueller, B.A., Echoing Green

This article explores the complexities of philanthropy's engagement with people of color (POC)-led organizations through evaluation and reporting practices. By analyzing these practices, it reveals the root causes of disparities and offers pathways toward equity and justice. Based on research with nonprofit leaders and foundation staff, the article outlines four strategies to redefine funders' measurement and evaluation practices, fostering equity and inclusivity. These strategies encourage funders to adopt methods that genuinely respect the unique perspectives of POC-led organizations. By strengthening evaluation infrastructure for these nonprofits, funders benefit from more accurate data, while organizations gain tools for strategic decision-making, ultimately enhancing the nonprofit ecosystem as a whole.

DOI: 10.9707/1944-5660.1713

128

Advocacy and Bridging Strategies Are Failing on Their Own; Multifaith Nonprofits Embody Six Solutions for a Pluralistic Democracy

Allison K. Ralph, Ph.D., Cohesion Strategy LLC

This article clarifies a strategic dilemma between bridging difference or advocacy strategies for funders and their grantees seeking social change in the context of polarization, putting it in conversation with social science research on intergroup contact theory, on which bridging strategies are based, and advocacy. Based on a set of interviews and surveys, this article posits that multifaith organizations embody six practices that avoid the false dichotomy of bridging and advocacy strategies: “dual-identity” contact, tolerating disagreement, shattering typical binaries, managing shifting constellations of partners, developing local relationships, and possessing extensive reach. In short, they are a micromodel of our society, weathering the hardest of differences, showing the way toward reduced animosity and real improvement in our politics. The article offers recommendations for how funders can better support these organizations to promote a pluralistic democracy.

DOI: 10.9707/1944-5660.1714

145

Enticing Institutions to Become More Inclusive and Responsive: Lessons From The Colorado Health Foundation’s Locally Focused Work

Douglas Easterling, Ph.D., Wake Forest University School of Medicine; Jehan Benton-Clark, M.S.S.A., Impact Practice Advisors; Scott Downes, B.A., and Phillip Chung, Ph.D., The Colorado Health Foundation

Equity-focused foundations have typically aimed to transform institutions through advocacy and community organizing. This article presents a compelling alternative: directly engaging with institutions to enhance their diversity, inclusivity, and responsiveness to the communities they serve. The Colorado Health Foundation’s Locally Focused Work (LFW) initiative, launched in 2017, engages in this strategy. Program officers actively build relationships with a range of community organizations aligned with health equity. In nine LFW communities, they’ve connected with local officials and leaders from over 70 agencies and nonprofits. While fewer than half submitted equity-related proposals, most received funding, with varying levels of institutional change across projects. The authors argue that the “enticing institutions” strategy is crucial for advancing equity but should be complemented by more activist approaches that push institutions to take action. They also note how LFW has guided the foundation’s own journey from health equity to a focus on racial justice.

DOI: 10.9707/1944-5660.1715

164

A Systems and Innovation Approach to Attune Grantmaking for Early Childhood to What Matters Most at the Point of Service

Wally Patawaran, M.P.H., The JPB Foundation

This article highlights how a U.S. private foundation has transformed its strategy for early childhood health equity through multistakeholder innovations. Over the past decade, its coordinated grantmaking and cross-sector partnerships have reshaped the science and public discourse on early life stress. By building trusted relationships, the JPB Foundation has developed a new care paradigm that unites stakeholders to tackle challenges hindering progress. Acting as champions and thought partners, they promote collaborative, tailored care, making high-quality services more broadly accessible. This shift reflects a deeper change in JPB's beliefs, driving an ambitious vision for equity and performance across populations. Early results from proof-of-concept studies show that integrating feedback loops enhances decision-making among stakeholders. Furthermore, new information flows reconcile aggregate performance metrics with personalized care, enabling the public, private, and social sectors to improve equity and performance together. Foundations looking to challenge existing assumptions and expand their impact will find valuable lessons in this case study.

DOI: 10.9707/1944-5660.1716