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PRACTICAL WISDOM FOR GRANTMAKERS

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# GRANT MAKING WITH A RACIAL EQUITY LENS

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# grant making with a racial equity lens

## **PAGE 2** **What Is a Racial Equity Lens?**

For grant makers and foundation leaders, using a racial equity lens means paying disciplined attention to race and ethnicity while analyzing problems, looking for solutions, and defining success. Some use the approach to enhance their own perspectives on grant making; others adopt it as part of a commitment endorsed across their foundations.

## **PAGE 4** **How a Racial Equity Lens Works**

A racial equity lens is valuable because it sharpens grant makers' insights and improves the outcomes of their work. People who use the approach say it helps them to see patterns, separate symptoms from causes, and identify new solutions for their communities or fields.

## **PAGE 9** **Applying a Racial Equity Lens: Skills and Strategies**

Where, specifically, does a racial equity lens get put to use by individual grant makers? The answer is simple: everywhere. A keen awareness of

race and ethnicity, and of their impact on access to power and opportunity, is a distinct asset when applying the classic skills of effective grant making.

## **PAGE 13** **Implementing a Commitment to Racial Equity: Policies and Practices**

When a foundation decides to focus on racial equity, how does that commitment get translated into the organization's goals and routines? Foundation leaders and program staff share examples of what they have learned about applying a racial equity lens to their programming, operations, and external affairs.

## **PAGE 22** **Looking Inward: Using a Racial Equity Lens Inside Your Foundation**

Grant makers who have championed racial equity within their foundations describe a handful of tactics for getting over the predictable hurdles. Ground the discussion of racial equity in the foundation's mission, they say, be open to learning, and be upfront about your goals. But don't lose sight of the possibility of resistance and setbacks.

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**IN THIS GUIDE,** grant makers explain why a focus on racial equity gives them a powerful “lens” for understanding and advancing their work. Drawing on firsthand experiences, the guide offers advice on promoting and deepening your foundation’s commitment to racial equity, both internally and in the programs you support.

*This guide was developed by GrantCraft in partnership with the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity (PRE). It was written by Julie Quiroz-Martinez in collaboration with Lori Villarosa for PRE and Anne Mackinnon for Grantcraft. It is part of the GrantCraft series.*

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*Publications and videos in this series are not meant to give instructions or prescribe solutions; rather, they are intended to spark ideas, stimulate discussion, and suggest possibilities. Comments about this guide or other GrantCraft materials may be sent to Jan Jaffe, project leader, at [j.jaffe@grantcraft.org](mailto:j.jaffe@grantcraft.org).*

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# What Is a Racial Equity Lens?

**F**or grant makers, a “racial equity lens” brings into focus the ways in which race and ethnicity shape experiences with power, access to opportunity, treatment, and outcomes, both today and historically. It can also help grant makers think about what can be done to eliminate the resulting inequities. Today, an increasing number of foundations are discussing and addressing racial inequity, both internally and within their fields or communities.

Many grant makers say that a commitment to equity for people of all racial or ethnic groups is essential to effective philanthropy, yet embracing that commitment explicitly can be difficult for a foundation. Why is that true? First, as one grant maker of color explained, the problem of racial inequity can seem so complex and intractable that it’s hard to imagine how a foundation could address it. Second and more simply, race is a difficult topic to discuss; people avoid it in foundations just as they do in other sectors of society. A white foundation executive put it this way: “My concern,” he said, “is that foundations are not pushed, nor do we push ourselves, hard enough on the issue of racial equity. We stand above

the fray when we should be deeply involved in it.”

So, what’s a good way to get thinking and discussion started? How do grant makers make the case for racial equity as a priority in a foundation’s grant making agenda?

One approach is to begin by describing a racially equitable society. Here’s a useful definition: a racially equitable society would be one in which the distribution of resources, opportunities, and burdens was not determined or predictable by race. A white grant maker at a Midwestern community foundation translated that vision into practical terms for his region: “When we look in the long term, 20, 30 years

## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY RACE?

This guide treats race as a social construct, not a biological one. We understand the term “race” to mean a racial or ethnic group that is generally recognized in society and, often, by government. When referring to those groups, we primarily use the terminology “people of color” (or the name of the specific racial and/or ethnic group) and “white.”

We also understand that racial and ethnic categories differ internationally. In some societies, ethnic, religious, or caste groups are oppressed and racialized. These dynamics can occur even when the oppressed group is numerically in the majority.

down the line, we hope to see no statistical differences in key indicators — such as education, or health, or economic opportunity — based on race.” His explanation makes clear that a racial equity lens is not about particular groups; rather, it is about how race shapes the allocation of power and the distribution of benefits and burdens among all groups within society. It also illustrates why diversity and inclusiveness are important commitments — but ultimately not powerful enough to drive the changes his foundation hopes to advance.

“Racial equity” stands in contrast to the notion that the best approach to issues of race is “colorblindness.” A Latino grant maker who set out to reorient his foundation’s education programming to address racial inequities ran up against that perspective repeatedly. He recalled: “We were told left and right, ‘You’re looking at it the wrong way. Why don’t you take a rising-tide-raises-all-boats sort of approach?’ The problem is, we have such deep segregation in our public and parochial school systems that the boat the black and brown kids are in isn’t good to begin with.” As he sees it, despite undeniable progress over the last few decades in dismantling state-sanctioned racial discrimination in the United States, affirmative efforts are necessary to counter long-term patterns. Seemingly race neutral practices will simply keep in place historical advantages and disadvantages.

As many grant makers explained it, racial equity grant making begins with

a question about objectives: “How are existing racial disparities standing in the way of the goals we seek to fulfill?” Then, perhaps the more challenging and unspoken questions are, “What do we see as the forces behind those disparities? And what forces are perpetuating them?” The questions seem simple, but they often go unasked. An Asian American program officer at a regional family foundation explained, “Issues of race are all over the work. But people approach their grant making as if they’re not.” Without an explicit line of questioning, solutions may be elusive or incomplete.

Thinking of racial equity as a social outcome measure also highlights the reality that one cannot know whether or not solutions have been achieved, or are even being approached, without an ability to measure racial or ethnic data. By examining data and openly asking the right questions, some grant makers are putting a racial equity lens into operation in developing strategy and programs, shaping guidelines and criteria, working with grantees, and promoting racial equity within their institutions.

This guide draws on the experiences of grant makers and foundation leaders who are attempting to apply a racial equity lens in a range of fields and institutions. It outlines some core issues and ideas they’ve grappled with and gives specific examples of what some have done to put a racial equity lens into practice within their foundations, in their grant making, and in their communities.

**A RACIAL EQUITY LENS** involves many components, including:

- Analyzing data and information about race and ethnicity
- Understanding disparities — and learning why they exist
- Looking at problems and their root causes from a structural standpoint
- Naming race explicitly when talking about problems and solutions

# How a Racial Equity Lens Works

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A racial equity lens helps grant makers look at a problem more clearly so that new solutions to old problems become visible. Here's how it works:

■ **A racial equity lens sharpens the focus on outcomes.** A racial equity lens can help grant makers clarify their real objectives, then shape strategies and align resources to meet them. This is an area where a colorblind or race-neutral approach often falls short.

For example, a grant maker at a large national foundation told about watching two grantees tackle the same issue — teacher retention in urban public schools — and come up with completely different strategies. One considered the problem and decided to advocate for incentives to keep teachers in their jobs. The other, looking with a racial equity lens, discovered that teachers with short tenures were often white teachers who gained their initial experience in inner city schools but then relocated to jobs nearer their suburban homes. The latter organization funded a strategy to create a “teacher of color pipeline” to recruit and develop teachers with roots in urban communities.

The first strategy, the grant maker explained, could easily have the unintended consequence of directing resources to mainly white suburban communities: the incentives might persuade teachers living in the suburbs to stay in urban systems somewhat longer, but in all likelihood those teachers would eventually seek jobs close to home. The second strategy would direct resources to the creation of a lasting

teaching infrastructure and greater access to the teaching profession for young people growing up in urban communities of color.

The same grant maker pointed to another example from education: “The education reform discourse has been dominated by the idea of ‘raising standards.’ But the standards movement has not paid sufficient attention to unequal access to high-quality educational experiences and curricula — an inequality that is highly correlated with race. The absence of a race lens often leaves this basic question unattended to. Some community organizations, many of them led by people of color, have responded in recent years by fighting for college-bound curricula in their public schools.”

■ **A racial equity lens uncovers patterns of inequity.** A racial equity lens helps reveal how society's benefits and burdens are distributed such that race predicts privilege and disadvantage. It also aids in thinking about what can be done to change the equation.

A woman of color described using a racial equity lens when she designed a program for a national foundation that would champion artistic excellence while also reflecting the changing demography of the United States. As she began her research, she looked for structural explanations for the lack of diversity in the foundation's existing arts grant making. “In the arts,” she noted, “cultural diversity is concentrated in small and mid-size organizations. That's the result of racial inequities. Most large arts institutions have not

been very diverse, and most diverse communities have not had access to the funding and other assets that are needed to create large institutions.”

She therefore structured the program to focus specifically on small and mid-size organizations, where artists of color are more numerous. She combined that structural decision with guidelines asking arts organizations to reflect deeply on “how [their] work is responsive to demographic and cultural changes” in their communities. Artistic excellence, not inclusion, remained her primary goal: “I wanted to promote imagination about the future, not just ‘representation’ of people of color.”

■ **A racial equity lens separates symptoms from causes.** Individual attitudes and behavior are often easier to describe and understand than structures and systems, yet attitudes and behavior are usually symptoms, not causes, of racial inequity. An African American grant maker at a national health care foundation explained how the distinction applies in her field: “We’re often looking for a ‘magic bullet’ to deal with disparities in health based on race. It’s easy to see that people of

color are treated with bias and say, ‘Okay, let’s reduce bias.’ It’s harder to see that ‘bias’ is endemic to the health care system, so that nothing but poor quality is available in some communities.” Understanding racial health disparities means looking at how patients are treated, she maintained, but it’s also important to look at systemic forces that determine patients’ options.

To illustrate, she told a story about engaging a grant seeker in considering both individual and structural explanations: “A network of health care providers was finding racial disparities in the quality of care for diabetes. The aggregate data showed that some groups were doing badly but Latinos were doing okay. Rather than just looking at how individuals were treated in the system, I encouraged them to look at the site of care to see if where people go makes a difference. The city is very racially segregated, and Latinos were going to one particular facility for care. It turned out that the facility accessible to Latinos happened to have a nutritionist on site. We found that an organizational issue was making a difference and that we needed to

“In the arts, cultural diversity is concentrated in small and mid-size organizations. That’s the result of racial inequities.”

## WHERE THE EXAMPLES COME FROM

This guide was developed by GrantCraft in collaboration with the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity (PRE) and draws on interviews with grant makers, consultants, and foundation executives working in all parts of the United States, in many fields, and in a wide range of international, national, community, and family foundations. GrantCraft and PRE also convened focus groups of grant makers in New York and Chicago to gather stories and ideas for making the guide as useful as possible. In addition, many grant makers, foundation executives, consultants, and other colleagues generously shared written reflections on their own work and commented on drafts of the guide. A list of people who contributed to the guide’s development appears on page 29.

“People would tell us that racism was not a problem because there were no people of color in their community.”

focus on providing nutritionists at other sites.” In this case, applying a racial equity lens opened the door to an intervention with potential benefits to all racial groups.

■ **A racial equity lens reveals how race is relevant to all groups.**

“Like everyone,” said one program officer, “grant makers sometimes fall back into very narrow definitions of racial equity.” As an example, she cited the reaction within her foundation when a Korean American organization applied for a grant for a grassroots advocacy project. “The response from the funding committee was really surprising,” she recalled. “They didn’t think the grant request fit our racial justice criterion. They asked, ‘How is this a racial justice issue? What oppression does this community face?’” The questions prompted an internal discussion of “the myth of Asians as the ‘model minority.’”

The same grant maker told about a grant to an American Indian tribe that sought to regain its recently revoked U.S. government recognition. “It was the first time we’d done a grant to a tribe,” she explained, “and at first it didn’t seem to fit that well with what we’d usually think of as community organizing. They’re a tribal government that provides services and carries out basic governance functions. They have a very sophisticated analysis of tribal sovereignty and what it means for tribal communities. It’s very different from a ‘civil rights’ framework, but it’s very much about racial equity for a colonized people struggling for sovereignty.”

Recognizing the significance of race can be challenging for grant makers and grantees in regions or fields with few people of color or where racial equity seems far removed from their work. The white director of a community foundation serving a predominantly white region of the United States described the bewildered reaction of many local organizations when the foundation took on racial equity as a core focus. “People would tell us that racism was not a problem because there were no people of color in their community.” The foundation responded by trying to be as clear and explicit as possible about the relationship between racial equity and the foundation’s mission, asking grant seekers to respond to racial equity questions in their proposals, and offering grantees technical assistance in the form of anti-racism training. When it came time to renew grantees’ funding, the foundation asked them about the training. “Offering those workshops has contributed to some real success stories in this predominantly white region,” the director reported. “Groups showed what they learned and how they tried to act on that, even if it was baby steps — like an AIDS group that decided to do a conference on minority health disparities or a coal miners group that decided to urge the public library to get more black history books.”

A grant maker of color, working in the area of international human rights at a US-based foundation, made a related point about the role of whites in the United States and members of dominant cultures in



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other societies: “The struggle for racial equity is too often relegated to people of color, but it should not be their burden primarily. If privilege is going to be redistributed, those with privilege must be part of the discussion.”

■ **A racial equity lens can be used with other lenses.** A racial equity lens sheds light on racial dynamics that shape social, economic, and political structures. Other lenses illuminate other important dynamics that shape issues grant makers seek to address. “Intersectionality” — of race, class, gender, sexual orientation — is key to identifying the dynamics at play in a particular situation and how they combine and converge.

One grant maker described how gender and racial equity lenses can intersect to provide a more complete view of a complex situation, such as the response to Hurricane Katrina. Funders need to understand the influence of racism, she argued, yet “a gender analysis complements our understanding of what is happening around race and helps inform funding strategy in really important ways. If you apply a gender lens to Katrina, you see that black women are having the hardest time returning to New Orleans. Many of them have children, so they need to have the infrastructure rebuilt around things like childcare and stable schools.”

Another grant maker told about providing a grant that helped an anti-poverty organization enhance its racial equity analysis and its connection to communities of color: “This was an extremely effective organization that had won important state policy victories on hunger. They came to us for a three-year capacity-building grant to deepen their understanding of racial equity and its connection to the class-based work they were doing.” The grant enabled the organization to expand its staffing and work in communities of color. The organization went on to campaign successfully for a city ordinance to provide public financing for grassroots electoral candidates, a victory that was widely attributed to an expanded constituency.

A danger of intersectionality is that race can get lost in the interplay. As Rinku Sen, co-author of *Short Changed: Foundation Giving and Communities of Color*, observed in a recent dialogue, “Most of the issues we’re dealing with in low-income communities of color and marginalized communities are about a combination of race and class and often gender as well.” Yet, Sen pointed out, a class lens often gets used to the exclusion of others: “People tend to start with race and class and end up only with class. I see that much more than people starting with race and class and ending up only with race.”

## Your Race/Your Role: Reflections from Grant Makers

### FROM INTERVIEWS WITH GRANT MAKERS OF COLOR

#### *On raising issues of racial equity –*

I'm often the only one [at the community foundation] raising issues like, "Why don't we try to develop more upper middle class donors of color, rather than only extremely wealthy people who are generally white?" Engaging donors of color would have an impact on who we support, what relationships we build, who we are accountable to.

People often think that raising race issues is divisive and unnecessary. When I raised issues of race at my previous foundation, I was told, "We are not a diversity foundation," meaning we took a colorblind approach. The colorblind approach goes hand in hand with unconscious racism. Because people don't realize their biases or society's, they don't feel there is anything to correct.

#### *On the role of race in professional interactions –*

There are times where I feel the pressure as being "the Latino." I'm expected to answer on behalf of my community, and my community expects me to give resources that it may not have gotten in the past because I'm the one they go to.

#### *On the risk of being pigeon-holed –*

As people of color we need to avoid becoming "Johnny one-notes" by making race issues the only thing we speak up about. We need to build our credibility by also succeeding in other ways as a program officer.

In taking this job, I basically defied all the advice I got from my community, which was, "Whatever you do, don't let them pigeonhole you and only work on Latino issues." I said, "I don't care. I'm going to work on these issues no matter what." As my role expanded, it was no longer a question of wading in deep water and watching out for the sharks. It was about learning to swim smoothly, knowing I had the support of leadership.

### FROM INTERVIEWS WITH WHITE GRANT MAKERS

#### *On raising issues of racial equity –*

The messenger matters, and we can all hear different things from different people, so the question for me is how I can use not only my position but also my race to help people see things they might otherwise not be able to see.

White people need to be challenged to take this issue on. I try to be as forceful, explicit, and persistent as I can be because I think that's what people need to see. It helps prevent the issue from getting marginalized as an issue for people of color to deal with.

#### *On the role of race in professional interactions –*

Racial equity grant making takes a much higher tolerance for personal discomfort and ambiguity than most grant making. You feel vulnerable to criticism that isn't just about what is traditionally thought of as "good grant making," but also criticism about your entire view of the world, from both white people and people of color.

I'm getting more confident in my understanding of racial equity and more comfortable, even when I'm criticized by people of color. This is my struggle, too.

#### *On developing a racial equity lens –*

My experience is that you need to start from within the foundation first and really examine all aspects of your work. Programming is only part of that examination. When you hit resistance, it's possible to move forward using a step-by-step process based on values that reflect equity and inclusion.

I try to find opportunities where I can be in conversations with people of color talking about race. The main thing I do is just listen. I've never lived racial injustice in the same way as a person of color.

# Applying a Racial Equity Lens: Skills and Strategies

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A focus on racial equity can increase a grant maker's effectiveness at every stage of the grant making process, from information gathering to working with grantee organizations to evaluating impact. As the following examples illustrate, some foundations support those grant making skills with explicit policies and procedures, applied both inside and outside their own institutions. But the habits of mind and tactics of racial equity grant making are valuable even when your foundation hasn't made a clear institutional commitment.

## Use it to > SCAN THE LANDSCAPE

Understanding the "racial landscape" can help grant makers frame questions in new and productive ways. For example, one African American program officer intentionally used a racial equity lens to scan for new work outside her existing group of sustainable agriculture grants. "We wanted to see where new ideas and strategies were emerging in the field," she explained, "so we did a survey of community organizations focused on access to healthy food to see if we could find people of color who were working on sustainability in a way that was accountable to their communities. Initially we didn't find many, but it opened the door to looking at food security issues and how people of color were defining the field."

A community foundation commissioned a research report that looked at the demographics of its region, a program officer explained, "which is viewed as predominantly white. It was pretty basic stuff, but it showed that the presence and growth of communities of

color was not marginal, but central to our social justice work."

## Use it to > GET PEOPLE TALKING

Asking grantees and grant seekers if they've thought about how race contributes to outcomes can lead to new ideas. A white grant maker with a national foundation argued that it's up to foundation staff to take the lead in opening up issues of race. "Grant seekers are often scared to talk about race with a foundation," she explained. "They assume it will not help them get funded. In that power relationship, a program officer 'authorizes' whether race can be talked about or not."

"What we're finding," said a grant maker whose foundation has embarked on an explicit course of racial equity grant making in education, "is that we're getting more people and different people to the table. By engaging in this conversation, we're getting people who would have been afraid on their own to come forward" to talk about racial disparities in student performance.

Raising explicit questions about race doesn't mean testing grant seekers or being dogmatic. "We don't believe we have all the answers," one grant maker noted, "and we don't expect grantees to have them, either." A grant maker in the health field described a gathering her foundation organized to get grantees talking: "We recently held a grantee convening on cultural competency, which we called a 'conversation,' to connote a low-key approach. We didn't have any 'experts,' but we asked grantee organizations to talk about different aspects of organizational cultural competency they had worked on. Some grantees in the

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audience who had done little thinking about race and culture saw that their peers were doing much more than they were and learned a lot. Most importantly, they received a clear message from the foundation that this is an important issue and that there's an expectation that they be thinking about it."

#### **Use it to > ENCOURAGE NEW APPROACHES**

Making a public commitment to racial equity grant making can stimulate innovation. As a grant maker working in education reform recalled, after learning that arrests are disproportionately common in schools with heavy concentrations of minority students, she began to ask grantees if they saw a connection between arrests and academic achievement. Those questions led to projects exploring the impact of arrests on the school experience of youth of color.

Another grant maker found that her foundation's recently adopted racial equity focus enabled her to be "there at the right time" for a white-led organization that was beginning to examine how a racial equity commitment would strengthen and change its work. Knowing of the foundation's willingness to invest in racial equity, the organization approached them for support in undergoing a three-year transition that resulted in new organizational leadership and increased leadership by communities of color in developing programs and setting priorities for the organization. "Our explicit commitment to racial justice affirmed and supported their decision to move in this direction," she said.

#### **Use it to > CULTIVATE NEW LEADERSHIP**

Effective grant making can't happen without the inclusion and leadership of people-of-color organizations contributing perspectives and solutions in a field. But, depending on the field, finding their voices may require extra effort to get beyond well-recognized networks and strategies. "Every year I do a calendar check," said one white grant maker. "Who have I met with? Who have I had lunch with? Am I really engaging people of color?"

Another grant maker told a story about diversifying a field by looking to people of color in grantee organizations, perhaps in positions below the top level of leadership, for new ideas and innovations: "My portfolio was teen pregnancy prevention. My strategy was related to documenting and evaluating best practices in the field. One very influential organization – which was white-led, like most of the field – had an African American associate director. I met with her to find out her ideas about where the field should be going, what she thought would bring value to the work. She wanted to see more research on social and cultural competence to bring more African American and Latina teens into teen pregnancy clinics. I invited a proposal on that and ended up getting out a significant grant that the associate director headed up. It led to new knowledge and enabled her to take up a greater leadership role in the field."

#### **Use it to > RETHINK "MERIT" AND WHO GETS TO DEFINE IT**

Some grant makers said that a racial equity lens helped them reassess more

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rigorously their own assumptions about what constitutes “quality” or “merit” and in the process see that certain supposedly “objective” criteria actually reflected deep-seated racialized norms. It’s common, they explained, for foundations to use criteria for assessing projects and grantees that privilege some groups and disadvantage others without actually encouraging meaningful consideration of what will make a strong project.

In the case of the teen pregnancy project mentioned above, for example, the associate director needed to select a subcontractor to conduct a set of focus groups. She was struggling to choose between an established, white-led, Washington, DC-based marketing firm and a new marketing firm led by relatively young people of color. While the people-of-color organization offered unique expertise with youth of color and had made a name for itself in understanding the “hip-hop generation,” the other group had a longer track record and was well-known and respected by the predominantly white advocacy and research field.

The grantee asked the grant maker, also a woman of color, for help in making the decision. “If part of the goal was lifting the associate director’s profile among her peers,” the grant maker recalled, “it might have been easier to go with the established group, whose reports might have been more polished and, by some definitions, higher quality. But, in reality, since the true deliverable was having the information about what teens of color were thinking, the odds that the marketing firm with hip-hop experience was going to draw that out more accurately made it an easy call.”

An easy call, perhaps, but the process took time and reflection. “It was important,” the grant maker explained, “that we were able to go through the discussion together and not blindly dismiss any of the dynamics about who had the power to define what was ‘merit’ on the part of the subcontractor, the associate director, or myself as the foundation representative. I was able to change the risk factors somewhat by clearly communicating both internally and externally what was valued in that project: a more accurate accounting of teens’ views.”

#### **Use it to > ASSESS IMPACT**

For a grant maker running a national initiative in juvenile justice reform, a racial equity lens helped identify a rigorous way to trace the impact of a program intended to improve “a broken system that relies much too much on incarceration and does not produce good results, either for kids or for public safety.”

Given the foundation’s underlying objective, he explained, “it would be very easy to reduce the number of kids in detention just by treating the white kids more leniently. That was something we were really concerned about when we started this initiative – that judges would say, ‘Okay, we want to have fewer kids detained? We’ll have fewer white kids detained.’” He and his colleagues realized that “if there’s going to be genuine change, there has to be measurable change on indicators of racial equity. There has to be less disproportionality and fewer disparities.”

Collecting and discussing data on juvenile incarceration by race and ethnicity has become the norm within

**“If there’s going to be genuine change, there has to be measurable change on indicators of racial equity.”**

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**“Applying a racial equity lens upfront [is] taking a more systematic look at problems.”**

the initiative, but that didn't happen automatically. “Sometimes,” the grant maker recalled, “we would get push-back from folks within the system, like judges or prosecutors or the people who ran detention centers, who would say, ‘Look, we’re just catching the action that the cops bring to us. We didn’t decide who got arrested. Once a kid gets arrested and comes to us, we try to deal with them in a colorblind way.’ But in most jurisdictions, that’s not what happens. ... The disparities, in fact, typically worsen. So one of the things we tried to do was data analysis that enabled people to examine how the disparities grew or didn’t grow once kids got brought into the system.”

**Use it to > ADDRESS SEEMINGLY INTRACTABLE PROBLEMS**

In some communities and fields, a racial equity lens has renewed people’s willingness to attack difficult problems – especially problems that seemed intractable precisely because they had a racial dimension. As a grant maker at a community foundation reflected, “I think this racial equity approach is having some traction with

folks because they realize that everything else we’ve tried hasn’t worked in our community. When we focus exclusively on early education or some other issue, we can get certain things done over a three- or four-month time period. We move the needle a little bit. But a year later, our community leadership is sitting there scratching their heads, asking, ‘Why did everything devolve and degrade?’”

“A big part of it,” he continued, “is that we hadn’t addressed the basic underlying issues in our community and the racial divide that’s here.” Moreover, the failure to identify those issues explicitly has tended to provide an excuse for inaction: “When we bumped up against challenges and problems that seemed intractable and unsolvable, usually people would walk away from the table saying, ‘You know, it’s race relations.’” Applying a racial equity lens upfront made it possible to engage community leaders in getting beyond the “race relations” explanation and taking a more systematic look at problems like poor housing, job loss, or the underperformance of the school system.

# Implementing a Commitment to Racial Equity: Policies and Practices

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When a foundation adopts a racial equity focus, it makes sense to institutionalize that decision in policies affecting internal operations and external affairs. No single set of “best policies” works for every foundation and situation, but grant makers did offer some guidance for thinking through the choices.

## STRUCTURING RACIAL EQUITY PROGRAMMING

A foundation that decides to pursue a racial equity focus will almost certainly face what might seem like a tough decision: create a dedicated program on racial equity, or infuse the commitment across all its programs. Several grant makers made a strong case for doing both.

“A foundation really needs to have a dedicated program on racial equity and a racial equity lens that informs all programs,” one argued. “Unless you have a dedicated program that goes deep on racial equity, you won’t have the tools and knowledge to apply to other areas. If you start out looking at every program area, the consciousness gets watered down because applying the lens takes real skill and experience.”

One large national foundation operates a race and equity program while also requiring staff in every program area to address race and equity in their work. According to a program officer there, “We’ve been able to infuse a race/equity lens across all portfolios. For example, we have a mandate on all budget write-ups that asks each program officer how his or her work will address issues of race and equity.”

Another national foundation introduced a dedicated program and a cross-

program perspective in sequence. “It was never our intent to just set up a separate program,” noted the grant maker who manages the stand-alone program. Although successful, that program has not yet made itself felt across the foundation’s programming to the extent the president had hoped. She therefore plans to establish discretionary funds within each program area for work connected to the dedicated program. “It was critical,” the program officer reflected, “that we had the focus and time we needed to develop the new definition and structure. Now that we have those in place, we can think about integrating them across other program areas. But if we had focused on integration right at the start it wouldn’t have worked.”

A community foundation embraced racial equity as an overarching goal but began by focusing on its education portfolio. “We had to start somewhere,” a grant maker explained. “Although we’d like to tackle everything from homelessness to health, right now we’re really focusing on education as a start. We recognize our limitations.”

## GATHERING DATA ON GRANTEES AND GRANT MAKING PATTERNS

Many foundations take time to analyze patterns in their own past and current grant making. As one program officer described, “In order to focus on racial equity, we knew we needed better, more accessible data about the racial composition of our grantees.

We decided to go through all the grants and see what percentage of grants made were focused on people-of-color-led organizations. The results gave us a useful picture and a

**“Considered alone, diversity or inclusiveness figures tell us nothing about whether a grant is going to challenge racial disparities in a community.”**

baseline with which to measure our progress.”

Gathering data consistently isn't necessarily straightforward or easy. A grant maker at a regional foundation admitted that, despite their good intentions and fairly extensive efforts, he and his colleagues still lack a “standard, uniform way to collect diversity data from grant seekers and funded organizations. Sometimes we ask questions about board diversity and make increased diversity a grant condition, but it isn't something we do routinely. For organizations that explicitly identify themselves as serving a specific racial or ethnic population, we ask them to give us a break out of who they serve. But if the organization doesn't identify itself that way, we don't actually ask.”

A national foundation recently revised its intake form and intentionally made information on institutional diversity the first thing it asks grant seekers to provide. “Some people are really taken aback,” reported a grant maker who helped develop the form. “They'll say, ‘I've never had to do this before!’ and think that the conversation is happening because the program officer is a person of color. One of our objectives is to begin this from the very first conversation to make sure it isn't seen as an afterthought.” It also helps, she acknowledged, that the impetus for the new questions had come from the top. “It's good,” she said, “to be empowered to say, ‘Our president has asked us to examine these issues.’”

The larger and more important question, several grant makers noted, is this: What does a foundation do with race or ethnic data once it has been gathered? “My sense,” said a grant

maker at a large, national foundation, “is that several foundations, including ours, collect this data but haven't yet figured out how to use it well to promote the end result of racial equity.” Referring to the growing practice of asking all prospective grantees to submit a diversity table along with their letters of intent, a consultant and former grant maker said, “Often, these forms are an opportunity missed. Potential grantees are required to fill them out, but it sometimes seems as if they're submitted into a void. The grantee never gets any feedback, positive or negative, about what's presented in the form. I think there needs to be more attention given to ensuring that program staff have skills and strategies for reviewing the data and asking constructive questions.”

Several grant makers argued that diversity figures don't mean much on their own but can be an important first step toward examining whether programmatic strategies are addressing racial equity goals. As one grant maker noted, “Considered alone, diversity or inclusiveness figures tell us nothing about whether a grant is going to challenge racial disparities in a community.”

It's also a mistake, said another grant maker, to assume that racial equity organizations are more likely than others to do well in terms of diversity. To illustrate his point, he described an organization that specializes in racial justice litigation but has very few people of color on its board. The problem, he explained, is that the grantee tends to draw its board members from a group in which people of color are underrepresented — law firm partners. That recognition led the grant maker



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and grantee to ask a further question: Assuming that board diversity is a worthy goal, how might their board recruitment practices be modified?

Some foundations are seeking to go deeper, attempting to assess not only patterns of grantee diversity but the diversity of grantees doing different types of work. As one former grant maker noted, “We need to ask ourselves, Are we primarily funding people-of-color-led organizations to do services, or are we also ensuring, for example, that they’re getting advocacy grants so they can play a role in shaping public policy?” Examining grants to see which organizations get multiyear funding or what size grants go to organizations led by people of color versus predominantly white-led organizations can also reveal important patterns.

### **MODELING DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVENESS**

“As you’re unpacking this issue and trying to figure out what to do,” a white grant maker suggested, “it makes sense to start by asking, ‘How do we increase diversity in our own organization? Do we need a more diverse board? Do we need a more diverse staff? Do we need a more diverse vendor base? Do we need a more diverse fill-in-the-blank grantee base?’ But ultimately,” he concluded, “the issue is not about numbers. If you don’t have a welcoming environment, if you don’t have an environment that’s culturally competent, you will turn away folks pretty quickly.”

A Latino colleague concurred: “At the end of the day, the foundation should reflect what your community looks like. You should probably not just hit

the numbers, you should fly through the numbers. You want people on your staff and board who really, truly get it and buy into the direction.” Then, he went on, “that direction needs to be solidified within the institution in your strategic planning, from tactical plans at the staff level to regular discussion at board meetings. It should be part of the performance measures of the institution, just as any other commitment would be.” Or, as a former foundation CEO put it, “tinkering does not work.”

An Asian American grant maker warned, however, that “diversifying takes an extremely conscious effort to reach into different networks and re-evaluate the often unconscious biases that are built into the hiring process and selection criteria.”

Once a foundation hires people of color onto its staff, she continued, it takes intentional strategies to retain them. Fortunately, retaining a diverse staff and reaping the benefits of diversity are closely related: “The value of diversity is realized only when a foundation allows staff to bring to bear skills, abilities, and insights that are directly related to their cultural, racial, linguistic, economic, gendered, or other experiences. By combining what staff members know from their respective perspectives, foundations can come up with solutions that are more effective than what a single person could generate. Too often, however, this doesn’t happen. Sometimes the problem is in the way we make decisions – for example, when we erroneously assume that it’s most efficient to allow a single person to come up with a solution to a problem. Sometimes, it’s that what’s valued most in a program officer is her ability

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to present grants in a way that appeals to the board of directors.” Program staff who “spend time building relationships in the community and are highly regarded by grantees” may find that those efforts gain them little recognition or reward within the foundation.

### REVIEWING PROPOSALS

A few foundations have built racial equity questions into the scoring systems they use to screen proposals. “We established a criterion that makes up about 25 percent of a grant seeker’s overall score,” said one foundation executive. “The criterion requires that the organization work for or benefit communities that experience oppression or discrimination and have that as part of their analysis.”

Some foundations have gone farther and struggled explicitly with how to interpret what’s in a grant proposal. As a program officer at a foundation with a major commitment to racial equity observed, “We often get proposals that are very weak in their discussion of racial equity, then find that the organization is actually using a racial equity lens in interesting ways.” This sort of disconnect makes sense, she contended, if grant makers remember that “foundations rarely ask organizations to talk about racial equity in a proposal. It’s not surprising that so few are good at it.”

Keeping that larger issue in mind, the foundation searched for ways to ask grant seekers about racial equity that would encourage organizations to describe both their thinking and their practice. “Now,” she explained, “instead of asking, ‘What’s your racial equity analysis?’ we ask, ‘How does

your thinking about racial equity inform how you develop and implement programs?’” As a result, she observed, the foundation is doing a better job of assessing proposals and at the same time learning more about the actual practice of racial equity and how it is evolving.

### COMMUNICATING CONSISTENTLY

Foundations with a strong racial equity commitment routinely scan their communications, especially their websites and annual reports, to ensure that they’re communicating clearly and sensitively about race and ethnicity. In fact, just about everything a foundation does — from gathering information from a prospective grantee to publishing a report on a completed project — has powerful communications potential.

To be effective, a foundation’s message on racial equity should reflect a commitment that is clearly understood and demonstrated across the entire organization. As one grant maker warned, “unless a foundation takes the time to create value statements, the focus tends to be on political correctness” rather than real objectives. “Without dissecting what you mean” by racial equity, said another, “you can’t communicate.”

Others argued that, bottom line, a foundation’s commitment to racial equity needs to be demonstrated at the top. The white former CEO of a West Coast community foundation explained what it took to get the message across: “I basically put myself on the line and said to the board, staff, donors, grantees, vendors, and other stakeholders that we were going to lead on this issue. I spent years pushing it. It was not easy, nor was I always success-

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ful. But, by the time I left, the foundation had moved from being concerned about equity and inclusion to being committed to operating with a racial equity lens. That commitment was reflected in our board and staff.”

### **EXERCISING COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP**

Bringing a racial equity lens to bear within a community or field is another way to make a difference. As the white director of a community foundation pointed out, “We have a lot of resources that go well beyond our grant making” — resources that include personal and institutional credibility and relationships.

His foundation has used those resources thoughtfully to change the racial equity picture in the city and region. For example, after commissioning research on community needs and developing recommendations, he and his staff presented the results to other local donors, especially corporate funders. “We started off with objective information,” he recalled, “so it wasn’t just me coming with my personal or professional bias toward this issue. What I brought to the table was an ability to push others in the community on what’s important to their organization or corporation, what is it that they’re trying to achieve. If I had gone in there and said, ‘You know, here are 10 things that we think you ought to give to,’ it wouldn’t have worked. They would have shut down and said, ‘You know what, that’s great but it’s not us.’ I just had a two-hour conversation with the leadership of a major corporation in town, and we talked about racial equity in a very direct way.”

Others, including a consultant who advises foundations on racial equity issues, agreed that a foundation with a commitment to racial equity can make a genuine contribution by using its “convening power” to bring people together to talk about racial equity — and even invite comments about what the foundation could do to be “a responsive community stakeholder — one that supports the community being equitable and inclusive.”

### **COLLABORATING WITH OTHER FUNDERS**

Some foundations have formalized their desire to expand racial equity grant making in their communities or fields by establishing funders’ collaboratives that explicitly embrace racial equity principles and goals. A consultant who works frequently with foundations explained that joining a collaborative can be reassuring to grant makers or foundations new to the field of racial equity, since they “know they’re in good company with other mainstream, respected funders. Being aligned with others allows them perhaps to take on risks that they may not have been able to on their own.” A funders’ collaborative can also be “a place to have discussion and ask difficult questions about racial inequities” in a field or community.

Yet one white grant maker cautioned that “collaborative grant making offers both pros and cons to someone who’s newer to race grant making and less sure of themselves and their analysis. On the one hand, it can be a fantastic experience to join with others and eavesdrop on how such challenging issues are handled. On the other hand,

**“Instead of asking, ‘What’s your racial equity analysis?’ we ask, ‘How does your thinking about racial equity inform how you develop and implement programs?’”**

there's a learning curve to this type of work, and a newer grant maker might easily feel overwhelmed and unsure of themselves, and therefore uncertain about how to contribute and explore, when grouped together with stronger voices on race."

Still, she thinks the opportunity to learn is too valuable to pass up: "All funders

need peers with whom they can honestly sort out their strategies and biases. The need is infinitely greater when the subject is race." As an alternative to a funders' collaborative (or, better yet, in addition to a collaborative), she endorsed the idea of developing joint projects and convening informal conversations about racial equity grant making on a regular basis.

### **About the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity**

The list of resources on the facing page was compiled by the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity (PRE), our partner in developing this guide. Produced by and for foundations, the resources are intended to help grant makers learn more about how to apply a racial equity lens in particular aspects of their work. Check PRE's website ([www.racialequity.org](http://www.racialequity.org)) for frequent updates to the list.

PRE is a national, multiyear project intended to increase the amount and effectiveness of resources aimed at combating institutional and structural racism in communities through capacity building, education, and convening of grant makers and grant seekers. Since its inception in January 2003, PRE has conducted numerous local, regional, and national events, through which it has engaged hundreds of foundation representatives (including program staff, managers, board members, and individual donors) in discussions of racial equity. Those discussions have yielded a wealth of new understanding about how an emphasis on racial equity can strengthen philanthropic efforts and advance foundations' overall mission. PRE is based in Washington, DC, and is a project of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education, which works to increase public awareness about the need for strong civil rights and social justice policy. PRE gratefully acknowledges major funding from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

## **Racial Equity Resources**

### **INTERNAL DIVERSITY, INCLUSIVENESS, AND EQUITY**

California Tomorrow and CCFY. *Leading by Example: Diversity, Inclusion and Equity in Community Foundations*. [www.ccfy.org](http://www.ccfy.org).

Community Foundations of Canada. *Building Bridges: A Tool for Engaging Diverse Communities*. 2006. [www.cfc-fcc.ca](http://www.cfc-fcc.ca).

Donors Forum of Chicago, Minnesota Council on Foundations, New York Regional Association of Grantmakers, and Northern California Grantmakers. *Building on a Better Foundation: A Toolkit for Creating an Inclusive Grantmaking Organization*. 2001. [www.mcf.org](http://www.mcf.org).

Effective Communities. *Becoming a Catalyst for Social Justice: A Tool for Aligning Internal Operations to Produce Progress*. 2006. [www.effectivecommunities.com](http://www.effectivecommunities.com).

Expanding Non-Profit Inclusiveness Initiative. *Inside Inclusiveness: Race, Ethnicity and Non-Profit Organizations*. 2003. [www.denverfoundation.org](http://www.denverfoundation.org)

### **CREATING WILL OR MAKING THE CASE FOR A RACIAL EQUITY LENS**

Annie E. Casey Foundation. *Race Matters Toolkit: "Is It About Race?"* (chart). 2006. [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org).

Community Foundations of Canada. *Diversity Scanning Tool for Community Foundations*. 2006. [www.cfc-fcc.ca](http://www.cfc-fcc.ca).

Effective Communities Project. *Moving Past the Silence: A Tool for Negotiating Reflective Conversations About Race*. [www.effectivecommunities.com](http://www.effectivecommunities.com)

Expanding Non-Profit Inclusiveness Initiative. *Inside Inclusiveness: Race, Ethnicity and Non-Profit Organizations*. 2003. [www.denverfoundation.org](http://www.denverfoundation.org)

### **DEVELOPING RACIAL JUSTICE GRANT MAKING STRATEGIES**

Applied Research Center. *Racial Justice Leadership Training Institute*. [www.arc.org](http://www.arc.org).

Annie E. Casey Foundation. *Race Matters Toolkit*. 2006. [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org).

Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change. *Project on Structural Racism and Community Building: Racial Equity and Society Seminars and Learning Forum*. 2004. [www.aspeninstitute.org](http://www.aspeninstitute.org).

Effective Communities Project. *Choosing Promising Ideas and Proposals: A Tool for Giving that Closes the Gaps*. 2006. [www.effectivecommunities.com](http://www.effectivecommunities.com).

### **MEASURING EFFECTIVENESS**

Applied Research Center/Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity. *Racial Justice Grantmaking Assessment Tool* (Piloted in 2007; final version available in 2008. Contact [Villarosa@racialequity.org](mailto:Villarosa@racialequity.org) for information.)

Effective Communities Project. *Choosing Promising Ideas and Proposals: A Tool for Giving that Closes the Gaps*. 2006. [www.effectivecommunities.com](http://www.effectivecommunities.com)

### **COMMUNICATING WITH A RACIAL EQUITY LENS**

Annie E. Casey Foundation. *Race Matters Toolkit*. 2006. [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org).

Center for Social Inclusion, a Project of the Tides Center for the Kirwan Institute. *Thinking Change: Race, Framing, and the Public Conversation on Diversity*. 2005. [www.diversityadvancementproject.org](http://www.diversityadvancementproject.org)

Hunter Cutting and Makani Themba-Nixon. *Talking the Walk: A Communications Guide for Racial Justice*. 2003. [www.akpress.org](http://www.akpress.org).

Source: Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity (PRE), [www.racialequity.org](http://www.racialequity.org).

# Three Foundation Tools for Activating a Racial Equity Lens

How does a foundation make racial equity a priority – and do it consistently? One approach is to introduce policies that get people thinking and talking regularly about race and ethnicity through activities such as collecting diversity data from applicants or, at a deeper level, discussing diversity objectives with grantees. For a more systemic approach, foundations may create tools that encourage reflection on racial equity when considering program strategy.

The tools shown here demonstrate what three foundations have done to establish routines that help everyone get on the same page and build a common understanding and practice. Although not a recipe for racial equity grant making on their own, tools like these (and others listed on page 19) can promote explicit discussion of race – an important first step, said many grant makers, in taking up a racial equity lens.

## Table for Collecting Diversity Data

### THE SAN FRANCISCO FOUNDATION

More and more foundations are routinely collecting data on the diversity of current and prospective grantee organizations – an activity that invites exploration even if it doesn’t necessarily lead to explicit racial equity grant making. The San Francisco Foundation, for example, asks organizations intending to apply for funding to supply information on the race or ethnicity of people to be served by the project they have in mind, people served by the organization as a whole, and the organization’s staff and board. The data inform the application process and help the foundation keep current with the diversity of the local nonprofit sector and its constituencies.

	# people served by project	% people served by project	# people served by organization	% people served by organization	# people on staff	# people on board of directors
<b>RACIAL /ETHNIC</b>						
African American/Black						
Asian American						
Hispanic/Latino						
Native American						
Pacific Islander						
White (Non-Hispanic)						
Other						
<b>TOTAL</b>						
<b>GENDER</b>						
Female						
Male						
Transgender						
<b>TOTAL</b>						

## Protocol for Discussing Diversity with Grantees

### FORD FOUNDATION

The Ford Foundation articulates its commitment to diversity in terms of the quality it seeks to achieve, both in desired results and the “talent pools” from which it draws. In reviewing proposals, program staff work through a set of open-ended questions with potential grantees on a case-by-case basis to clarify the connection between diversity and quality. Grant makers may also take certain steps, including providing additional support, to help grantees meet diversity goals.

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What forms of diversity (gender, racial, cultural, religious, immigrant/refugee background, linguistic, etc.) do you think are important for strengthening the quality of the work proposed and why? Does your organization’s staff and governance reflect this diversity?
- How do you propose to draw upon diverse perspectives in the community or field that the proposed work will serve?
- What diversity challenges does your organization face in its work overall?
- What progress has your organization made to increase its diversity in the last two to three years?

#### MENU OF SUPPORT STRATEGIES

- Establish specific goals for increasing the representation of under-represented groups in the organization’s board or staff
- Ask the organization to form a project advisory committee that better represents underrepresented groups
- Make a linked grant to an organization that better represents under-represented groups to promote its participation and involvement in the project
- Provide support for staff and board recruitment activities designed to improve the diversity of the organization
- Work with other grant makers supporting the organization to establish expectations and support work to improve the diversity of the organization
- Condition subsequent grant payments on progress toward diversity goals
- Involve senior foundation leadership in discussions with the organization to highlight the importance of diversity and the inclusion of underrepresented people in foundation-funded work

## Racial Equity Programming Check-up

### ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

To build a commitment to racial equity into their work, grant makers at the Annie E. Casey Foundation routinely rate aspects of their programming for alignment with the foundation’s overall commitment to eliminating disparities in children’s well being. The ratings help the foundation develop thoughtful policies, which in turn enable staff to design programs and make individual grants that address racial and ethnic disparities.

*On a scale from 1 to 7, please indicate the extent to which you agree with each statement:*

- We have *access to data* on racial/ethnic disparities to guide our work and investments in this area (that is, the data on relevant indicators of well being are broken out by race).  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- There is an explanation and/or *theory of change* regarding disparities specific to the intent of grant making in this area.  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- Our grant making in this area incorporates *investment strategies* that address disparities specifically based on the theory of change (for example, close the gap, gap plus, race-based strategies, etc.).  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- Our grant making includes *performance measures* to determine how well our investments are addressing racial disparities. (Please list the performance measures used.)  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- Our grant making includes *people* (grantees, TA providers, etc.) with specific skills or experience in reducing disparities. (Please list who they are.)  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

# Looking Inward: Using a Racial Equity Lens Inside Your Foundation

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Whether you're hoping to introduce a racial equity commitment or sustain one, encouraging people inside your own foundation and on its board of directors to think deeply about racial equity can be challenging, grant makers said. Their universal advice was to ground the work continuously in the foundation's explicit goals and priorities. Or, as an African American grant maker suggested, try to "engage your institution in a conversation about what you are trying to achieve programmatically and the role race plays in preventing that outcome."

How have grant makers gotten the conversation started with colleagues and board members? How have they kept it going, even when the process seems slow and incremental? And how have they built from talk to understanding to real commitment? Here are their words of advice.

**Don't look for "one size fits all" solutions.** "Remember that a foundation is made up of people with many different roles and responsibilities," urged one grant maker. "They are at different levels of readiness to use a racial equity lens." She learned this lesson while working with an internal committee responsible for developing a new program area focused on race relations and racial justice. "We knew that we wouldn't be successful unless our committee members had a chance to establish shared experience and language around issues of race and racial justice," she recalled. "We also knew that whatever we did would need broader institutional support in order to move forward."

Committee members attended a training session together, then used the

shared language and ideas they had gained to develop activities relevant to each sector of the foundation. For example, they prepared a special session for the board, in which the directors viewed a video (the committee chose excerpts from Anna Deveare Smith's *Twilight*) and participated in a discussion afterward. For administrative and financial staff, the committee focused on promoting community events and dialogues where their concerns as local community members could be identified and addressed.

**Bring the outside in.** Some grant makers have brought in outside perspectives to inform the internal discussion. For example, a Latina grant maker involved in developing a program to increase the engagement of women of color in public policy advocacy recalled that she and her colleagues learned a lot at the beginning by holding a series of "listening sessions," in which women activists around the country shared their ideas and concerns with the foundation. Once the foundation decided to create a new program, it invited women of color from the listening sessions to serve on a steering committee to develop and oversee it.

As this example illustrates, structured input and leadership from communities of color can be an important element both in planning new work and in keeping ongoing work on course. Another grant maker concluded, "Foundations can talk about racial equity until they're blue in the face, but they have to find ways to bring perspectives of communities of color into their thinking and decisions if they really want to make a difference."



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**Frame the strategic opportunity.**

Grant makers told of various ways to make the case for a racial equity lens. For many, the process began with evidence from an existing or emerging program area.

One program officer described her success in moving her foundation to expand its reproductive rights commitment to include the emerging field of reproductive justice. Most reproductive rights funding was going to predominantly white-led organizations that focused on resisting attacks on abortion rights. At the same time, a small but growing movement of women-of-color-led organizations was focusing on reproductive justice issues, such as the right to affordable health care, the right to have children, and freedom from sexual violence and abuse.

The white women on the foundation's board of directors were not closely connected to women-of-color reproductive justice issues and organizations. In addition, some board members argued that funding reproductive justice organizations would "take attention away from pro-choice efforts." Others were concerned that investing in a small number of tiny organizations would have little impact.

The program officer addressed these challenges by drawing on external expertise to present an analysis of women of color as central, not marginal, to the field and frame a strategic role for the foundation. First, she brought in a series of respected speakers to help make reproductive justice issues familiar and compelling to the board. Second, she presented a solid rationale for funding reproductive rights as "smart and strategic":

that abortion rights work would be strengthened by connecting it to broader issues and growing constituencies. Finally, she argued that their small foundation could make little difference in the mainstream world of reproductive rights but could have a disproportionate impact by leading the way in supporting women-of-color organizations.

**Create space for learning.** Because racial equity is such a charged issue, grant makers often need to create opportunities to explore issues of racial equity with each other. Ideally, those should be structured so that they can eventually seed larger institutional investments in racial equity.

One grant maker recounted the process by which an internal affinity group ultimately emerged as an institutional catalyst: "A number of black program officers, including myself, were feeling uncomfortable about the capacity of our foundation to understand black families in our overall commitment to families. We wanted the foundation to look at issues of black families in terms of race, class, culture, and power, so we started to work together to bring in speakers who could frame the issues in that way. Our meetings were also an open space for candid conversation. Other staff of color began to join us. Later, when the foundation's strategy moved toward place-based community change work, our group was in a strategic position to influence the institution in a more formal way."

An African American grant maker at a regional foundation found that expressing concerns of her own led to structured discussion within her foundation. It began, she said, when

**"We started to work together to bring in speakers who could frame the issues. . . . Our meetings were also an open space for candid conversation."**

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she decided to explain to her white supervisor that she had been disturbed at a foundation-sponsored theater fundraiser to see that all the characters played by women of color were in supporting roles: “I’m tired of being in settings that are supposedly ‘for all women,’ but they’re not.” At first, her boss “couldn’t understand and seemed totally put off by what I was saying. The conversation sort of grew from there, and we ended up developing a staff dialogue on what worked and didn’t work in the show. As it turned out, a woman of color donor also raised concerns, so there ended up being a focus group on it that included our board chair.”

Some people look to colleagues in other foundations. As another African American program officer described, “I sent out a memo to an affinity group and said, ‘I’m having a hard time bringing diversity and racial equity into my portfolio. Are you?’” The memo sparked several conversations, through which she identified allies in her field with whom she can now strategize.

Yet several grant makers noted that people of color can be particularly vulnerable within their foundations if they become known for raising racial equity issues. “In particular,” said one grant maker, “we saw that the person identified as leading the racial equity committee would get marginalized.” His foundation’s committee therefore established protocols to safeguard individual staff — for example, specifying that the chair must rotate every two years. At another foundation, a committee on racial equity was jointly chaired by two members of the program staff, one white, one a person of

color. As other grant makers of color cautioned, it’s important not to be a lone voice — or “to be seen as predictable, with only one note to play.”

**Interpret grant guidelines from a fresh perspective.** Because a racial equity lens reveals new ideas, new forms of work, and new networks, it can prompt foundation staff to rethink their funding guidelines and criteria. For example, an African American grant maker who inherited grants for work in sustainable agriculture found that few grantees were focusing on equity issues. Foundation resources were not reaching new sectors, such as the fast-growing population of Latino farmers. Moreover, it appeared that a narrow interpretation of the foundation’s guidelines was excluding work in communities of color and limiting impact in the field. “I realized I needed to expand how we were thinking about the field,” she recalled.

She began to examine the foundation’s guidelines for ways to broaden their application. She found, for example, that the foundation generally funded groups organizing for policy change at state, regional, and national levels — a practice that had the unintended effect of disqualifying many people-of-color-led groups, which tended to work at a more local level. The foundation’s board approved a change to allow grants to be made to local groups if they showed an interest in engaging with state, regional, and national networks and if their engagement would diversify the field. She also saw that the foundation’s definition of “policy” work might be expanded beyond traditional legislative advocacy. Using a new, wider definition, the founda-

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tion now funds projects such as a Latino farmworker group that promotes a social justice label certifying fair prices for farmers and decent wages and conditions for workers. “That,” she concluded, “was a type of ‘policy’ work I might not previously have been looking for.”

**Respond (don’t react) to resistance.**

Most people who try to advance the cause of racial equity grant making inside their foundations run into resistance at some point. Sometimes the pressures are overt. For example, a woman of color who was introducing a racial equity lens into her foundation’s arts programming recalled meeting with the board members of another foundation. At one point, “one of the trustees leaned over and said, ‘When is this whole multicultural thing going to blow over so we can get back to the business of making good art?’” The question was insulting, she felt, yet she answered with an explanation: “Multiculturalism is a reality. Demographics tell the story. It’s not going to blow over.”

More often, the pressures are subtler. A grant maker at a family foundation described an ongoing, candid, but occasionally tense dialogue between the foundation’s staff and board during the first few years of a new youth development program with an explicit racial equity lens.

The program got its start in a planning process that involved “listening closely to what communities said their problems were. We heard a lot about discrimination” and how it was affecting young people’s sense of their own chances of failure or success. Conversations with “the more activ-

ist, analytic, and policy-focused youth organizing groups” revealed that they had come to believe that it was important, in working with youth, to “take the burden off individual young people by widening the political analysis to a more systemic one.” Based on those conversations, the foundation articulated and adopted a racial equity agenda built on a “set of values consistent with the core American values of equity, fairness, inclusion, and involvement in decision making.”

Over the next several years, the board raised questions about “some of the analysis that was put forward by our grantees, which struck them as incendiary and difficult.” Board and staff talked through those concerns as they arose — and kept funding the organizations. As a result, the board’s commitment grew, and the foundation is considering adding racial equity criteria to its grant guidelines.

How did the conversation move so far? First, the grant maker suggested, “I’m not sure we would have been as effective within the foundation if we had put our own perspective out front and center very powerfully rather than trying to elicit the perspectives of grantees.” Second, he and his colleagues were often mindful of a need to “proceed in ways that the board would be able to experience as successful.”

**Resist the temptation to stay under the radar.** Given the challenges and complexities of applying a racial equity lens, it’s not surprising that grant makers may resort to “under the radar” tactics. Looking back on her own experience as a program officer, one Latina foundation president said, “I stretched my portfolio to bring in

“We launched a program on grassroots leadership that I knew would bring people of color in the door in ways we hadn’t ever done before.”

**“The fact that a foundation says ‘Race is important’ provides real leverage.”**

people-of-color organizations, but I never told the board what I was trying to do. My intention was to get money out the door, not to change their thinking. When I left, things just snapped back into place.” Today, she advises program officers to be explicit but also “very practical. You need to present clear evidence that a focus on race will help your foundation be effective.”

Although many grant makers have encountered clear resistance when they tried to address racial equity issues explicitly, more often the pressures were subtler. “Most people don’t actually know what they think on race,” observed an African American philanthropic consultant, “and most foundations think they’ve already got a racial equity lens.” That view can block progress, or it can be an opportunity: “The fact that the foundation says ‘Race is important’ provides real leverage that you can use to move them in a different way.”

Staying under the radar can sometimes mean foregoing valuable support. One foundation president described

his experience: “At our foundation, we launched a program on grassroots leadership that I knew would bring people of color in the door in ways we hadn’t ever done before. I’ve been quietly achieving my goal of diversity, but I’ve only now begun to make those goals explicit. Now that I’ve explained them directly to my board chair, it turns out that he supports the vision.”

**Look for natural allies.** For one grant maker, the turning point in getting the board interested in racial equity came when he recruited a younger board member to serve on a planning committee. “We provided her with a set of readings on structural racism,” he remembered, “and it just blew her away. She’s an accountant, so she was very sensitive to numbers. She couldn’t believe what she was reading. She knew a lot about the longstanding effects of poverty, but the research opened her eyes to a structural analytic framework. She might have been particularly open because she’s 10 or 15 years younger than most of our board members. She’s living in a world with greater cross-race comfort.”

## Questions to Ask Inside Your Foundation

### ABOUT YOUR FOUNDATION'S OWN POLICIES AND PRACTICES

- How is a commitment to racial equity reflected in our mission, vision, goals, and workplans?
- How diverse is our own staff? How about our executive leadership and board? Are we doing enough to establish or maintain a diversity of voices inside the foundation?
- Is our staff experienced in talking about race? If not, what internal staff development might strengthen our ability to discuss issues of race and act on racial inequities?
- Do we have criteria and policies in place to assess the racial and ethnic diversity of grantees? Do we have protocols for discussing the role of racial equity in shaping their organization priorities? What data do we gather about the race/ethnicity of their boards and staff? What do those data tell us, and are we doing enough to respond?
- What do we know about the racial and ethnic diversity of our contractors and suppliers? Do those relationships reflect our commitment to racial equity?
- How can we ensure that we stay open to new ideas and diverse voices? Do we have criteria and policies in place that seem race neutral but may be barriers to potential grantees of color?
- Are foundation staff assessed and rewarded for their ability to connect with diverse grantees and community members?
- How should our commitment to racial equity be reflected in the foundation's own performance measures? What should the foundation be held accountable for?
- If we're a community foundation, how do we celebrate and support philanthropy by people of color?

### ABOUT YOUR GRANT MAKING STRATEGY

- What might racial equity look like in the arenas where we work?
- How could a racial equity lens strengthen our own understanding of the problems we're trying to address? How could it strengthen the understanding and practice of grantees? What quantitative data would help clarify the problems that matter to us?
- How is our grant making strategy responsive to demographic changes in our community?
- Are we consciously asking if there are racial disparities in the arenas where we work? If so, why do they exist? Do our strategies align with our reasoning about the disparities? Are they targeting the right problems?

## Ways to Use This Guide

We hope this guide will be a useful starting point for conversations that help grant makers, foundation executives, trustees, grantees, and other colleagues understand how racial and ethnic disparities affect programmatic goals. In particular, we hope that reading and discussing the guide together will lead to clearer policies and more systemic approaches to grant making with a racial equity lens. Recognizing that conversations about race and racial disparities can often be challenging, we offer a few suggestions for getting started with discussion, inquiry, and planning:

■ **Check your assumptions.** We all use a racial lens whether we chose to or not, so why not do it consciously and well?

Ask yourself: When was the last time I checked my own lens for acuity? Can I articulate my views on racial disparities and the factors I believe contribute to them? Can I engage colleagues in discussion? Read through the PRE collection of resources on page 19 to select materials, speakers, or consultants to help you and colleagues improve your skills. Check out *Peers Suggest* at [www.grantcraft.org](http://www.grantcraft.org) for recommended readings and videos related to racial equity. Invite colleagues to read or watch them together asking, What does this mean for our foundation's grant making?

■ **Look "upstream" at past grant making decisions.** In a staff meeting or retreat, choose a core program or activity and ask what impact a racial equity lens might have had on its design. Would you have chosen different strategies, grantees, or intended outcomes? What hurdles might you have encountered along the way? How could they have been managed?

■ **Borrow tools and adapt them to your context.** Pick a program and try using the Annie E. Casey Foundation tool on page 21 to see if additional information or strategies might improve its effectiveness. Ask: Do we need to know more about the role of race or ethnicity in the problem we're trying to address? What could we learn and what data could we collect to sharpen our perspective?

Or take a look at The San Francisco Foundation and Ford Foundation diversity tools. If your foundation already collects diversity information, ask if you're using it well to promote racial equity. What strategies do you use to help grantees increase the quality of their work by increasing their diversity? Try analyzing data from several key grantees over time or looking at data from grantees in a particular field to learn more about diversity and its implications for programs.

■ **Share the guide with your trustees.** A foundation's board of directors may want to read the guide and discuss the ideas that stand out for them. To prepare for the possibility that they'll want to learn more or adjust policies to make the foundation more conducive to using a racial equity lens, read and discuss *Questions to Ask Inside Your Foundation* on page 27.

■ **Organize a discussion with other funders.** Using the guide as background reading, convene a conversation about racial equity grant making and its potential impact on thinking and practice within your field or community. What does a racial equity lens tell you about the problems you are seeking to address as funders? How might it change your priorities? Does it suggest new opportunities for collaboration?

■ **Open up conversation with grantees and other constituents.** Host an informal meeting with grantees or others working in your community or field; send them the guide in advance. Ask them: If your foundation was planning to adopt an explicit racial equity lens, how would it affect their own strategies? In what ways could your foundation better support the use of a racial equity lens in their organization and in their field? Do they know of other partners, including funders, who share your interest?

■ **Look beyond your usual networks.** Using a racial equity lens might mean getting ideas from new people and funding organizations you haven't worked with before. For a quick overview of strategies that can help you broaden your network and diversify who you know and what organizations are on your radar, see *Scanning and Networking* in GrantCraft's *A Closer Look* series at [www.grantcraft.org](http://www.grantcraft.org).

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