



Foreword

Working in the area of racial justice requires us to ask big questions: How do we transform our society and our institutions? How do we address interlocking systems of racial inequities? How do we simultaneously address institutional racism and interpersonal/internal racism? How does transformational change occur?

For funders these questions become important as we develop our program areas, work on our theory of change, create partnerships with grantees and forge new alliances. And they become important when we try to figure out how the work is progressing. Are our grantees making inroads into these thorny issues? Are we as a foundation doing our part to support those efforts? Have we seen progress towards racial equity in society and communities? In essence, how do we evaluate our work?

Many people shudder when they hear the word “evaluation.” That is probably because it is often under-resourced, over-taxing to staff, top-down directed and sometimes not useful to anyone. To circumvent at least that last point of criticism, as a field we need to address what is appropriate to evaluate when we are looking for the road to a racially just world. Given the complex and pervasive manifestations of racism in contemporary America, determining what to evaluate, how to evaluate and against what yardstick, is a difficult question.

Foundations Moving to Catch Up

Over the last few years the scholarly work on the analysis of structural racism has grown and deepened. The philanthropic community is catching up to the academic and field work in this area and learning how to apply that wisdom and experience to grantmaking. The grantee organizations with whom we work provide guidance and leadership by articulating ideas, theories of change and strategies for building a racial justice movement. But the sheer enormity and complexity of what we are grappling with behooves us to take a step back and evaluate what we are doing.

When I meet with funder colleagues and grantee partners, we forge a common vision of racial equity that requires transformational change on many levels of our society, our policies and practices, our communications and our ways of interacting. Tackling the many intractable and interlocking issues standing in the way requires multiple strategies directed at multiple flexion points over long periods of time. As strategies are employed, constituencies built and policies implemented, we all want to know that these are the right tactics to get us to the transformational change we seek. A campaign victory is something to celebrate; yet over time it may lead to even greater obstacles. Opposition to our vision runs deep. Success begets retrenchment. One need only look at the rise of racist hate crimes following the election of the first African American president to verify that.

In spite of that, we see progress everyday: African Americans and immigrants forge deep alliances on immigration reform, communities of color win pollution abatements and force the scuttling of discriminatory transportation proposals, Latinos and African Americans unite to fight foreclosures. Each of these efforts creates real reform that makes a difference in people’s lives, certainly a key component of any evaluation. When we get a big victory, we can see the importance of key characteristics that led to it — leadership from the community, strong organizing efforts, clear racial justice analysis, developed communications plans. All of these are important aspects of the work to evaluate.

A Big Victory, Many More Obstacles

Yet, even big wins must be seen in the larger context of interrelated systems imposing multiple barriers and areas of resistance. In Oakland, California, we had a big victory in the educational arena in 2009 when students, parents and teachers organized for an expanded high school curriculum that would prepare students for University of California (UC) admission.

As successful and encouraging as that win is, there remain many obstacles for Oakland high schoolers to attend UC. Students still must navigate through an educational system that does not even provide the basic essentials of an education, such as facilities, books and other resources. Nor does it address the other multiple barriers faced by these students living with violence in their neighborhoods, the lack of transportation and the absence of jobs for them and their parents.

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The advocates and organizers understand this and see their work on this campaign as a piece of a bigger puzzle. When we as funders think about evaluation of this effort, we need to hold the short-term tactical progress and the long-term transformation simultaneously. Our evaluations must focus on a variety of points: the number of students, parents and teachers organized for the effort, a story of the cohesion and endurance of the organizing beyond the campaign, the quality of the campaign communications, the scope of the remaining barriers, the number of students now eligible to attend a UC campus, the importance of electing school board trustees from the community, and so on. Each approach has legitimacy to it, but determining which criteria to use as a yardstick toward progress will be important so that we do not find ourselves chasing reforms that don't add up to substantial transformation.

A Discourse's Starting Point

We should consider a wide range of perspectives and styles of our struggles toward racial justice. Some might approach evaluation through a quantitative approach with data collection, others through storytelling. We are in a stage of experimentation as we grapple with the best means by which to reflect on our progress, critique our missteps and gather evidence of successful practices to tell the story to each other, other funders, organizers and the media. The Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity has brought together the thinkers in this publication to jump-start a broader discussion of evaluation in the field of racial justice, both within philanthropy, and among those directly engaged in the work. The absence of a key perspective could lead us to evaluate, and fund, an aspect of the work that does not lead to the sought-after change.

The world is simply too complex to be able to capture all of the factors and causations leading toward real and substantial change.

As funders, we are limited by the system in which we operate as we seek transformational change, while funding with a short time horizon. Keeping the limitations in mind along with the urge to celebrate and strengthen what works should help bring us together to begin this conversation of how we measure and make progress toward our shared racial justice goals.

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