



CASE STUDY

Woods Fund Chicago

Adopting Racial Equity as a Core Principle

by Lisa McGill

Leadership	Grace Hou, president and CEO; and Patrick Sheahan, board chair
Year Founded	1994
Mission	Woods Fund Chicago seeks to help create a society where people of all racial and ethnic groups across all levels of social and economic status are empowered and have a voice to influence policies that impact their lives and where all communities are free of poverty and racism.
Current Program Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community organizing • Public policy • Arts and Social Justice (by invitation only) • The intersection of community organizing and public policy
Staff Size	6
Endowment Size	\$68 million
Average Grant Size	\$35,000
Geographic Area	Chicagoland Area



One evening in March 2010, in a crowded room at the Art Institute of Chicago, Deborah Harrington approached the podium to a chorus of applause. The outgoing president of Woods Fund Chicago, Harrington was about to receive the Handy L. Lindsey Award, an honor named for one of the Chicago area’s most distinguished champions of diversity and inclusiveness in philanthropy awarded annually by Chicago African Americans in Philanthropy.

In her speech that night, Harrington took the opportunity to challenge her peers to look beyond diversity. Standing before many of Chicago’s most influential philanthropic leaders, she declared that while diversity and inclusiveness were critical commitments for any foundation, they were “ultimately not powerful enough to drive the changes to ensure advancements toward racial equity¹.”

Harrington spoke of a racially equitable world – one in which the distribution of resources, opportunities and burdens is not determined or predicted by race, and in which structural racism no longer guides policies that limit opportunities among people of color. A commitment to a racially equitable world, she said, is implicit in much of the grantmaking done by Chicago’s progressive foundation community. But what would happen if foundations made ending structural racism their explicit goal? What if racial equity became the unambiguous principle by which their organizations operated?

With her speech, Harrington hoped to inspire the audience to adopt a new way of tackling social injustices that are seemingly intractable. In essence, she was proposing a sea change in the way most foundations and grantmakers approach racial inequity – challenging them to address the roots of structural racism as the direct target of their grantmaking rather than its downstream effects, or hoping that reducing racial inequities would somehow be a byproduct of boosting diversity within their organizations.

Like many metropolitan centers, Chicago is certainly in need of a new approach to tackling structural racism. Despite considerable investments by foundations and others over the last five decades, Chicago remains a deeply segregated city. Metropolitan Chicago’s neighborhoods and schools are almost as racially segregated as they were in 1963, when Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech². Two-thirds of the city’s nearly 1 million African Americans live in communities that are at least 80 percent black. The median income of African-American households in Chicago is \$29,371 – roughly half that of White households³. The median income of Latino households in Chicago is less than two-thirds the median income of White households; that median dropped 13 percent between 1999 and 2008, compared with a decrease of only 8 percent for White Chicagoans⁴. Latinos also rank at or near the bottom among Chicago workers in terms of education and wages.⁵ Meanwhile, racial gaps in academic achievement have been increasing for decades, with Chicago’s African-American students falling behind all other groups at an accelerated rate.⁶

Real transformation, argued Harrington, will require wide adoption of a racial equity lens to bring into focus the ways in which race and ethnicity shape experiences with power, access to opportunity, treatment and outcomes. And it will require a new level of activism among foundations themselves. “Individually and collectively, from the front lines to board rooms, to affinity groups of color and beyond,” Harrington said, “we must advocate for racial equity.” In fact, she was already doing just that. The year before, under her leadership, Woods Fund Chicago had become one of the few grantmaking institutions to name racial equity as the core principle guiding its work.

Making a Statement

Woods Fund Chicago’s roots date back to 1941 when Frank Woods, a prominent Nebraska-based lawyer and telephone company executive, incorporated a foundation called the Woods Charitable Fund. One of his sons, Frank Woods Jr., eventually relocated to Chicago where he created a local office for the Fund and became a nationally recognized leader in philanthropy. Known for his risk-taking and his commitment to increasing opportunities for disadvantaged people by changing the conditions and systems that affect them, Woods Jr. was instrumental in making community organizing the foundation’s core grantmaking strategy. He was also a noted supporter of equal opportunity initiatives before the civil rights era⁷.

In 1993, four years after Frank Woods Jr.’s death, the foundation formally split into two entities: the Woods Charitable Fund in Lincoln, Nebraska, and Woods Fund Chicago. Since then, Woods Fund Chicago has become a nationally recognized leader for its social justice grantmaking – focusing on four core program areas:

- ▲ **Community organizing**, supporting grassroots organizations that shape public policy through activism
- ▲ **Public policy**, supporting policies that address poverty and help low-income people attain higher living standards
- ▲ **The intersection of community organizing and public policy**, strengthening both community organizing and public policy advocacy through an integrated approach
- ▲ **Arts and social justice**, supporting endeavors that combine artistic pursuits with local activism

As its story suggests, Woods Fund Chicago has a long history of funding organizations and initiatives working to combat structural, societal barriers that bar individuals in Chicago’s less-advantaged neighborhoods from equal access to opportunities and advancement. “They have always supported community organizing in Chicago’s low-income communities, making sure that people of color who are most disenfranchised are at the forefront of driving change,” says Jenny Arwade, executive director of the Albany Park Neighborhood Council.

For added historical context, it may be worth noting that the dominant Chicago organizing community used to be hostile to the notion of highlighting race explicitly – it was shunned as divisive, unwinnable and ideological, and derided as “identity politics.” At the same time, Chicago’s philanthropic community (not unlike in other places), with few exceptions, has been virtually silent on race. In recent years, Chicago’s persistent racial inequities, residential segregation, growing economic stratification, political power imbalances and changing racial demographics have prompted more openness to, and interest in, finding new strategies to address racial disparities.

In 2008 the conversation at Woods Fund Chicago about how best to achieve these longstanding goals started to shift for several reasons. First, there was the data. A 1995 independent evaluation of the Woods Fund’s grantmaking found that only a small percentage of its grants were going to minority-led nonprofits, especially those in the city’s predominantly African-American neighborhoods. After Ricardo Millett, who is Afro-Latino of Caribbean descent, took the helm in 2001, and being Afro-Latino of Caribbean descent was the first person of color to serve as president of Woods Fund Chicago, a similar staff-led analysis found that very few of its community organizing grants were going to Chicago’s South Side – which includes the city’s lowest-income communities. In 2004 Woods Fund Chicago created the South Side Initiative, a special grantmaking program designed to increase organizing capacity in those communities. Through this initiative, the foundation awarded \$222,000 in grants to eight South Side organizations over two years. At least four of those groups were so successful in their work that they were later awarded grants in the foundation’s regular funding pool for community organizing. Yet there was a growing sense among the Woods Fund’s staff that one-off efforts of this sort were not enough.

Second, there was the reality check of the 2008 economic recession – which had an immediate and disproportionate impact on Chicago’s low-income communities of color. The systemic barriers that had long limited opportunities and options in these communities quickly became even more blatant. Meanwhile, the election of Barack Obama⁸, the first Black U.S. president, was seen by some as signaling the end of racial barriers for Black Americans – ushering in a period in which the term “post-racial” gained greater currency. But the notion of a post-racial America was sharply at odds with what Woods Fund Chicago’s grantees were experiencing in their communities.

At about the same time, the Woods Fund’s staff realized that while having a diversity checklist on its grant applications helped ensure that its grantees’ leadership and boards reflected the communities they served, meeting those diversity goals did not necessarily track with racial equity outcomes. Indeed, questions about the kinds of work

grantees were doing to promote racial equity weren't part of the application process at all. "On the application, it was all about the [diversity] numbers," says Lori Clark, executive director of the Jane Addams Senior Caucus, a Woods Fund Chicago grantee organization working to preserve and create affordable housing for Chicago-area seniors. "But there weren't questions like what are you doing, and how are you thinking about racial justice? How are you trying to implement that?"

Another realization was that nearly all the issues the Woods Fund's grantmaking aimed to combat – violence, poverty, lack of access to education and affordable housing – could be traced back to the systemic racism that created those inequities in the first place and now allowed them to continue. "The things we have funded for years are all imbedded in it," says Woods Fund Chicago board chair Patrick Sheahan. "The cumulative effect of institutional racism over time has generated policies that have created constriction on the lives of people," adds Jay Travis, a program officer at Woods from 2012 to 2013, who was also a former grantee. "This has limited their ability to reach their full potential and fully participate in society. Woods Fund Chicago wanted to bring that to the forefront of the conversation."

While it was the Wood Fund's staff who created the initial

structural racism into all aspects of their operations.

Woods Fund Chicago is committed to raising awareness in the philanthropic community to support this work.

With this statement, Woods Fund also signaled its intention to lead by example: what it would soon require of grantees it would also require of itself.

Most Chicago area foundations were not particularly surprised by the announcement, given Woods Fund's long history of work at the intersection of race and poverty and its commitment to grassroots change. Neither were the foundation's grantees. "The reality was that it was a natural and welcome progression of what they had already been supporting," says Arwade. But the statement did open up new opportunities for grantees as well. Several grantees commented that they found it refreshing that at least one grantmaker was allowing them to discuss the "elephant in the room" – and, moreover, was willing to fund work in this area. "To have a foundation that not only supports community organizing but supports it in a way that promotes racial justice? We thought – those are people we want to work with," says Katelyn Johnson, executive director of the Action Now Institute. Adds Alie Kabba, executive director and founder of the United African Organization: "Finally, someone was saying we could talk about this. Many foundations don't want to address it. Now, we could finally

“The Woods Fund Chicago believes that structural racism is a root cause of many challenges facing less-advantaged communities and people, and serves as a significant barrier to enabling work and eradicating poverty. The Woods Fund encourages and supports organizations, initiatives and policy efforts that lead to eliminating structural racism.”

push toward an explicit stance on racial equity, most of the board agreed with the shift in direction as they began to understand its importance to the overall success of the work. In 2009, the foundation publicly released its new "Racial Equity Core Principle":

The Woods Fund Chicago believes that structural racism is a root cause of many challenges facing less-advantaged communities and people, and serves as a significant barrier to enabling work and eradicating poverty. The Woods Fund encourages and supports organizations, initiatives and policy efforts that lead to eliminating structural racism. Success in this area will be evident when there is equal distribution of privileges and burdens among all races and ethnic groups, and when a person's race or ethnicity does not determine his or her life outcomes. Woods Fund will support organizations that pay disciplined attention to race and ethnicity while they analyze problems, look for solutions, and define and document success. Ideally, these organizations will incorporate an analysis of

say 'racial equity' in a proposal."

Moving from Principle to Practice

Having made a public commitment to racial equity, Woods Fund then needed to figure out how to operationalize its new core value. How exactly would the foundation infuse racial equity into its overall strategy? And what would the foundation's new racial equity focus mean for its grantmaking?

Almost immediately, the implementation process was slowed by significant staff and board transitions. In March 2010, Deborah Harrington left the foundation, kicking off a transition period that lasted until February 2012, when current president Grace Hou took the reins. During this same period the foundation's board was experiencing natural turnover, with seven new members joining the board between 2010 and 2013.

The arrival of each new board member prompted questions about what the racial equity core principle would look like

in practice. “Every time a new person came onboard, they looked at the statement and asked, ‘What does this really mean, and how do we interpret it?’” recalls Sheahan.

Part of the confusion stemmed from the fact that there are many ways to interpret the term “racial equity” – and not everyone at Woods Fund shared the same understanding. “We realized quickly that the term itself could get in the way if it wasn’t clearly defined,” says Sheahan. “We knew that we needed to define what it meant for the foundation – and particularly what it meant for our grantmaking – so that we could be transparent about how and what and why we would interpret something the way we might, and so that we could ask the same questions in a fair manner of all grantees.” The foundation’s consensus on basic definitions for racial equity, racial justice and structural racism – all terms that have overlapping but subtly distinct meanings – were just recently shared publicly with the larger community.

Woods Fund Chicago uses the following definitions⁹ of structural racism and racial equity:

Structural racism is the cumulative impact of past and present policies and practices. Racial divisions, disinvestment, disenfranchisement and discriminatory policies have produced and exacerbated income inequality and disparate access to resources and opportunities for generations of Chicagoans. This is evidenced by deep racial segregation across communities and severe disparities across nearly every quality-of-life indicator – from education and health to incarceration and jobs.

Racial equity is a multi-issue framework that confronts racial disparities to produce fair outcomes and opportunities for all communities. It provides proactive tools, synergistic strategies and more effective policy to address structural problems. The racial equity framework provides new tools to explicitly address the racialization of policy debates that criminalize communities and limit organizing potential. Racial equity strategies connect leaders and organizations across communities and bring solutions to scale. Racial equity creates crucial spaces for those most impacted by inequities to build power and lead through collective practice and collective voice.

Woods Fund Chicago also made the decision to consider “diversity” and “racial equity” separately within their due diligence process. They look at diversity as part of assessing a grantee’s governance and use a racial equity lens when evaluating program or strategy. Before that distinction was made, conversations about one were mixed up with the other. “It was actually very clarifying,” says board member Josina Morita. “Diversity is something that we value as

good operations of any organization, which is different and separate from whether they are doing racial equity work in terms of their values or explicitly in their organizing and policy work. We still emphasize diversity, but now it’s part of the overall evaluation of good operations of our grantees.”

With its racial equity definitions beginning to take shape and a new leadership team in place, Woods Fund Chicago began to focus its attention on creating a new strategic plan that would carry the organization forward in its declared direction. A key part of that plan would be figuring out how to shift grantmaking strategy so that all of the Woods Fund’s programs and initiatives were in line with its new racial equity focus in order to bring about a new level of impact in Chicago’s communities of color.

Making Headway: The Racial Justice Mini-Grant Initiative

When Grace Hou took over as president in February 2012, one of her first acts was to convene a series of “listening sessions” with clusters of grantees across Chicago. As a former Woods Fund grantee herself, Hou was familiar with the organizing and policy work of many of the grantees in Woods’ portfolio. But now, she wanted their input on how the foundation could operationalize its new core principle – particularly through its grantmaking. “We thought that the sessions would help us, as a grantmaker, to see how our grantees look at this issue and what resources they needed in order to advance racial equity more specifically in their work,” explains Hou.

“They brought us together to lay out what it means for an organization to have a racial equity focus,” says Arwade. “There was a candidness to the conversation, and they did a lot of listening to grantees. They also were very clear that they were evolving as a foundation, thinking about who they were supporting and how they were providing that support.”

Ultimately, more than 70 percent of the foundation’s grantees participated in the Spring 2012 sessions. Several grantees suggested that Woods Fund Chicago start by providing small grants designed to help grantees explore what applying a racial equity lens would mean concretely for their organizations.

Hou and the Woods Fund board agreed. In August 2012, they launched the Racial Justice Mini-Grant Initiative, offering small grants (averaging \$8,000) to existing grantees who wanted to build their capacity to incorporate racial equity analysis into their work. Woods Fund Chicago offered grants (on a six-month cycle) in three categories:

- ▲ Training grants to help grantees develop a shared understanding of racial equity issues and how to apply racial equity analysis to their work
- ▲ Research grants to help them identify the root causes of racial injustice and use that information to inform their



Photo by: Sarah Jane Rhee, www.loveandstrugglephotos.com

community organizing and policy work

- ▲ Communications grants to help them explore how to create effective messaging strategies that could shift public discourse around racial equity issues

The mini-grants signaled the Woods Fund’s first opportunity to put resources behind its racial equity values – and the response among grantees was immediate. “It’s a struggle to get funders to fund this type of work,” says Clark. “There were a lot more of us interested in the racial justice work than they realized there would be.”

Woods Fund Chicago received roughly 35 proposals, ultimately offering small grants to 11 organizations through two rounds of funding.

The Action Now Institute, which focuses on racial justice in the teaching profession, used its mini-grant as an opportunity to carry out additional research in support of its efforts to increase the percentage of teachers of color in the greater Chicago area. The Albany Park Neighborhood Council engaged the Western States Center to run a two-day training – with follow-up consultations – designed to help its leaders and staff further develop their shared capacity for implementing a racial justice framework. The Jane Addams Senior Caucus used its grant – supplemented by additional funding raised by leveraging the Woods grant – to train staff and deeply explore how it might use racial equity analysis in its work.

The Woods Fund’s mini-grant initiative sent a clear message to both grantees and the broader philanthropic community about its commitment to making headway on this issue alongside its grantees – even as it was still figuring out

its own big picture strategy. But learning was by far the foundation’s biggest intention with the mini-grants program. “We presented the mini-grants as a pilot so that people realized we were looking at this as a learning experience, not just for grantees but for us as well,” says Travis, the program officer who oversaw the initiative. “Ultimately, we wanted to use their experience and input to inform our grantmaking.”

To that end, one requirement attached to the grant was that each recipient organization would participate in at least one gathering at the end of the grant period to share their learning with Woods Fund Chicago and with one another. Those sessions generated constructive feedback. Most grantees suggested that a yearlong grant – or longer – would have given them more time to accomplish their work and build out their organizational capacity. Grantees also agreed that coming together at the front end of the grant period would have been extremely useful, so that they could share with one another not just their projects, but also the resources (including the training institutes) they planned to utilize along the way. Several grantees, as documented in a 2013 internal update on the initiative, shared how much they appreciated the authentic dialogue that was emerging around these issues.

“Coming out of the mini-grant, we changed our mission, values and vision statement,” says Clark. She reports that the Jane Addams Senior Caucus’ board recruitment process and staff hiring choices have also changed dramatically. Additionally, the Caucus formed a racial justice leadership team within its membership and even created a new staff position – racial justice organizer – to help ensure that a commitment to racial equity will remain a core part of its identity. “In all our grants now, there is a clear racial justice component, no matter what the grant is,” says Clark. “There is not a funder that does not know we are doing this work.”

Lessons Learned

There is no perfect way to start this work.

Would it have been better for Woods Fund to have had an implementation plan in place before publicly declaring racial equity as a core value? It’s impossible to know, says Woods Fund Chicago president Grace Hou. But she thinks that leading with the announcement helped hold the foundation accountable to it during the period of major leadership transition that followed. Also, announcing its intention first – then figuring out how to translate it into practice – was consistent with Woods Fund’s desire to invite

“Taking on racial equity as a core principle means committing to a living process in which the foundation is in constant learning mode. That principle also needs to influence every aspect of a foundation’s work – from the way it invests its funds and how it conducts and prioritizes grantmaking, to its hiring choices and training for new board members and staff.”

“Still, the Woods Fund’s leadership is quick to clarify that charting the path of racial equity work will remain a generative and iterative process. “We’ve made progress structurally but we’re still in the development phase,” explains Morita.

others into the conversation. “If an organization does not want lots of input, it might be better to have a plan in place first,” says Hou. But the most important thing is to start the conversation, keeping in mind that “there is no direct path to get there.”

Adopting a racial equity lens means that everything will change – not just your mission statement.

“You can’t adopt this mission and not change anything else,” says Morita. Taking on racial equity as a core principle means committing to a living process in which the foundation is in constant learning mode. That principle also needs to influence every aspect of a foundation’s work – from the way it invests its funds and how it conducts and prioritizes grantmaking, to its hiring choices and training for new board members and staff. “It should be explicit to new board members and staff that “this is part of who we are,” she says. “It should be built into discussions about everything.”

Define what you mean by racial equity work.

Sheahan advises doing a thorough literature review, as well as developing an understanding of what has worked for other foundations and what hasn’t, and what is practical in a grantmaking sense. Others on the board add that in defining what racial equity work is, foundations must also decide what it is not. They must grapple with how to get board members on the same page, discover points of contention, and take the time to work through a mutual understanding of the work as it relates to the foundation’s goals. “Working in a community where a majority of people are of color is not racial equity work,” explains Morita. “Health work is not automatically racial equity work without an explicit frame.”

Foundations should leverage grantmaking data to build a case about the need for a racial equity lens.

Woods Fund Chicago had to acknowledge (and address) its own failures of equitable grant distribution in some of the hardest hit (primarily African-American) communities in the Chicago metropolitan area. An independent evaluation of its grantmaking in 1995 showed that only a small percentage of its grants went to minority-led nonprofits, especially those in low-income neighborhoods on the South and West sides. When foundation staff members did a similar analysis in 2003, the dearth of grants in the South Side, in particular, was still glaring. The foundation was faced with its own reality check: How can we say racial

equity is a core value when we don’t empower communities of color to organize and solve their own problems? That data across its grantmaking portfolio became a powerful tool for the Woods Fund’s leadership to develop a structural response to how it needed to change its grantmaking and partner with its grantees to move a racial equity agenda forward.

Announcing a racial equity lens is one thing, operationalizing it is another.

Woods Fund Chicago has a lot more learning and work to do to figure out how to advance racial equity and systems change. As Hou observes, “Through its work and grantmaking, Woods Fund Chicago is trying to play a part in the dismantling of structural racism as it is the root cause of many challenges facing communities. In approaching this work, it has been and will continue to be a learning and evolutionary process – but we intend to have specific and bold next steps soon.”

Most foundations are faced with the same challenge. In addition to becoming clear on what it means by racial equity, there’s still a lot to learn about how to move from organizational change to external impact in partnership with grantees. For Woods Fund Chicago, this will require further collective learning, more experimentation, and more substantive and long-term investments in equitable systems change strategies. It will also require the development of new skills and the creation of more supports to sustain success – as well as more evaluation, documentation and dissemination of lessons, failures and successes. Woods Fund Chicago has laid some important and impressive groundwork, fostering and sharing leadership and learning. With continued support and focus, more strategies and solutions for closing racial gaps can emerge.

The Journey Continues

The listening sessions and mini-grants were just a few of many inputs that helped shape Woods Fund Chicago’s new three-year strategic plan so that it more fully reflects the foundation’s racial equity goals. Finalized by the board in 2012, the new plan highlights six priority areas – financial strength, grantmaking, an engaged board of directors, relationship building, evaluation and institutional culture – and identifies a series of goals and objectives for each area. Not surprisingly, Woods Fund’s commitment to racial equity is most strongly represented in the grantmaking piece of its strategy, where “incorporating racial equity as a priority framework in WFC’s grantmaking” is explicitly named as a key objective.

Still, the Woods Fund's leadership is quick to clarify that charting the path of racial equity work will remain a generative and iterative process. "We've made progress structurally but we're still in the development phase," explains Morita. "It's still an ongoing process to define what it means for us as a foundation." But the foundation has committed to continuing to help grantees explore how to incorporate racial equity analysis into their work through convenings and trainings. It has also revised its grant application process to explicitly ask prospective grantees how racial equity informs their work.

Grantmaking is not the only area that will continue to be reexamined by the foundation. For example, creating an investment policy that reflects Woods Fund's values, notably around the racial equity framework, is part of the new strategic plan. The board recently included language in its investment policy that sets targets for socially responsible investing and investing with fund managers of color. The foundation has also integrated racial equity into its operations – including using racial equity principles in human resources practices and staff evaluations. In October 2012, the staff participated in a racial equity training retreat – another first for the organization.

"We view all of these activities as opportunities to integrate racial equity into all aspects of our work, not just our grantmaking," explains Morita. "It's been a great time to look at how to become a racial equity organization from the inside out."

Woods Fund Chicago plans to extend the kinds of conversations they're having internally and with their grantees to the wider philanthropic community – including other local and national funders – so that a much broader set of organizations begin to examine more explicitly the deep and suppressive role that structural racism plays in so many communities across the United States.

Ultimately, Woods Fund hopes that the next few years and beyond will bring real transformation in that regard, and that the foundation and its grantees are able to demonstrate that sustainable change is possible if racial equity is the central principle guiding one's work. "We want to demonstrate to the field of philanthropy that racial equity is an effective model for grantmaking that gets to the structural inequities that exist in our society and actually changes the equation of what's possible," says Morita. Adds Sheahan, "The only way we're going to get there is keep having the discussion, keep engaging our grantees in that process, and keep learning. We're now on the journey."



Lisa McGill is the principal of LM Strategies Consulting, a firm that works with philanthropies to help them advance relationships and sustain impact in underresourced communities. McGill has consulted on projects for a variety of foundations, including the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Charles S. Mott Foundation, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, and the Kresge Foundation. She has content expertise in youth-to-adulthood transitions. McGill is the author of *Constructing Black Selves: Caribbean American Narratives and the Second Generation* (NYU Press) and the co-author of several publications in the philanthropic sector.

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Endnotes

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