

# GRANTMAKING WITH A RACIAL JUSTICE LENS

AN INTRODUCTION



When the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity (PRE), in partnership with GrantCraft, released *Grantmaking with a Racial Equity Lens*, a few foundations had made racial equity a central focus of their work, but many were still exploring how to incorporate equity into their grantmaking.

Our guide helped surface *how* to advance racial equity in philanthropy, aiming to make it a core practice and goal of grantmakers. Rather than other popular approaches of the time—“colorblindness,” universal approaches, diversity—PRE’s guide defined a racially equitable world as one where the distribution of resources, opportunities and burdens is not determined or predictable by race. We successfully argued that an explicit racial equity lens ensures that the particular needs and assets of communities are taken into account, and that diversity, while important to that task, is insufficient for addressing power imbalances.

PRE, and many other colleagues, largely succeeded in helping funders understand why a racial lens matters and why aiming solely for diversity does not create substantial enough change. The attention to racial equity and funding has helped to nurture a growing field of work that includes philanthropic affinity groups, racial justice advocates, strategic consultants and intermediaries. This evolving, multidisciplinary practice is what we have come to call grantmaking with a racial equity lens.

In the 12 years since the original guide was developed, the country’s political, economic, and cultural landscapes have undergone multiple, dramatic changes, highlighted most starkly by the election and reelection of the nation’s first Black president, followed by the election of the man who essentially launched his political career leading the racist “Birtherism” attacks challenging Barack Obama’s citizenship. Many Americans—perhaps even most—would have found either possibility unimaginable in 2006. Public engagement and organizing against racism has risen to historic levels, driven by the contributions of organizers, communicators, journalists, scholars, and artists. During this time, we saw racial justice concepts take root in such mainstream contexts as *Washington Post* articles on White privilege and wider use of the phrase “systemic racism.” And funders have worked hard to keep up: There has been significant growth in the number of foundations integrating a racial analysis into their work.

Still, in this ever-changing climate, funders face urgent new responsibilities. In response to these conditions, PRE has produced an updated guide. The daily practice of using a racial equity lens in social change as well as in grantmaking has established a baseline understanding of structural racism and has led to new insights, definitions, and nuances. Today, while PRE continues to value the language and progress of racial equity, activists and growing numbers of grantmakers have been calling for an evolution from a *racial equity* lens to a more ambitious *racial justice* lens.

---

## RACIAL EQUITY AND RACIAL JUSTICE

The more than 50 activists and grantmakers PRE interviewed for our new guide speak of their work as dynamic, envisioning a transformation that goes beyond an end to inequity and toward a society that centers a vision of well-being for all. This vision reflects the important distinctions that have emerged between the concepts of racial equity and racial justice. We believe that *racial justice* elevates the positive vision of activists and their communities, and highlights the goal of fundamental systemic transformations. The tools and analysis in *Grantmaking with a Racial Equity Lens* remain important. But in describing a new racial justice lens, PRE invites grantmakers to train their focus on the deepest, most complex ways in which racism permeates political, cultural and economic norms—and what is required to truly uproot it.

The language of racial justice raises the stakes.

In our interviews, activist and foundation leaders alike named vision, history, transformation and self-determination as key features of racial justice that the concept of racial equity doesn’t always encompass. Justice is a stronger, more open-ended word that invites examination of the core assumptions of our society and how our institutions uphold those assumptions. For example, one can design a service-delivery or community-education system to reduce racial disparities that could constitute racial equity without ever engaging the recipients of that service whose lives and leadership are crucial to effective solutions—which would be critical to *racial justice*.

These interviewees described how they see the difference:

- An Asian American activist on immigration issues said: “When I see those words reflected in a funder program, I think of ‘racial equity’ as looking at specific

policy implementation. I interpret ‘racial justice’ as a little more open-ended and supportive of advocacy and organizing.”

- The Black president of a local foundation that lists both racial equity and racial justice in its mission observed:

Equity conversations tend to start with where people of color are today in terms of their social location, their lack of access. Justice really has a **reparative** piece, which requires that we actually try to figure out why those situations exist for these various groups of color, and then use that to inform how we intervene. Justice also includes an element of power building that we don’t think the conversation about equity has been very explicit about.

- A racial equity lens separates symptoms from causes; a racial justice lens brings into view the confrontations necessary for real change. A Black program officer at a national foundation remarked:

“Justice” entails action and a demand for accountability. You can’t say “justice” and not imply that something must be done and must be done now. “Equity” is a good tool for analysis and understanding of where inequity exists, but “justice” commands that there must be action and you must participate in that action to get there.

A racial justice lens, then, requires us to consider power relations, as well as underlying assumptions shaped by culture and history, to develop a transformative strategy. Numerous people we interviewed felt that *justice* offers a more powerful vision than *equity* does. One Black racial justice activist and leader describes one of his organization’s current projects as “designed to be the

embodiment of a new vision of community safety, grounded in restorative justice and economic opportunity.”

While the goal of racial justice is the north star, the language and aims of equity can still be powerful. One White grantmaker involved in a national issue-based funder network recalled:

“The group landed on equity because it was open enough that there was room to define it. That might be an invitation in for foundations who probably, within their own institutions, could not explicitly say racial justice, for example. A racial justice frame is a bit more overt and clear, and maybe more perceived as political by some institutions.”

With decades of progress being interrupted or reversed, the times demand the best of our collective abilities.

Language evolves; words take on different meanings depending on their context. The most important thing that funders, grantees and communities have is a shared understanding of the intent, goals and evaluation of their efforts to create social change. With decades of progress being

interrupted or reversed, the times demand the best of our collective abilities. The national context has been defined by the pendulum shift represented by the elections of Obama and Trump, as well as many lessons learned from the struggles, losses and victories of communities of color. The reversal of civil rights laws and principles underway at the federal and state levels has created for communities of color an undeniable crisis to be met in the decades ahead, regardless of the outcome of future elections.

---

## DEVELOPMENTS IN THE RACIAL JUSTICE FIELD AND IN PHILANTHROPY

The racial justice field has responded to these threats in powerful ways, starting even before the election of Trump. Without question, there has been a visible increase in organizing and activism in the United States. Provoked by the slaying of Trayvon Martin, then Michael Brown in Ferguson, protests swept the country especially in 2014, and grew exponentially with #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName as new victims tragically joined the list of racist killings by police and vigilantes. The struggle for immigrant rights, despite grave disappointments, also widened to include new organizations, expand defenses against deportation and family separation, and continue

the fight for comprehensive reform. Digital organizing has helped grow constituencies among communities of color. Native American organizations and issues gained visibility through multiple struggles over voting rights, adoption, stereotypical sports mascots and environmental degradation. The resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline near the Standing Rock Indian Reservation drew weeks of attention from the national press. The 2016 election and its immediate repercussions generated some of the most frequent and largest demonstrations in the nation’s history, including the continuation of Black Lives Matter protests, the 2017 Women’s March

and rallies nationwide against neo-Nazis and White nationalism. A 2018 poll by *The Washington Post* and the Kaiser Family Foundation found that one fifth of Americans surveyed had attended a rally or protest within the past year; a fifth of that group reported that they had never before participated in such an event.<sup>1</sup>

Also without question, philanthropy has strengthened its racial equity muscle in the last decade. Funders have followed with sincere interest in—if not perfect execution of—adding racial equity work to their missions and portfolios. High-profile grantmaking campaigns have elevated Black and Native American communities in particular, following an assertion by organizers of all colors that these communities had gained too little from earlier patterns of support and needed a serious infusion of resources.

Philanthropic infrastructure organizations, funder networks and regranteeing intermediaries proliferate. Increased interest in racial equity has either sustained existing resources or generated new organizations, networks, staff positions and convenings that now dot the funding ecosystem. These include hundreds<sup>2</sup> of formal and informal funder affinity networks based on issue or identity, geographic associations or functional groupings. While there are networks for every seemingly imaginable grouping, new peer efforts are established almost weekly as new subtopics arise—with the majority now also naming some aspect of racial equity as a key focus of their work. Fifty-one percent of the philanthropy-serving organizations polled in a recent survey by the United Philanthropy Forum said they were at some intermediate level of work on racial equity, while 43 percent were just beginning and a small number were advanced. It is nearly impossible to find a funder association conference that isn't elevating the issues of racial equity, and this simply was not the case even six years ago.

In addition to the layer of infrastructure formed by funder networks, more funder intermediaries, regranteeing collaboratives and donor collectives are developing directly around issues of racial equity or racial justice or strongly building it into their approach. Once again, this is in some ways a promising indicator of success and progress, as innovators are able to experiment and often get smaller grants to organizations more quickly. Yet it is also another layer of infrastructure with its own, often substantial costs, and walking the blurry line of greater access to funders while doing their own fundraising but under the stated goal of getting dollars to the field. How do each of these layers remain accountable to communities, and when do we know if we've passed a tipping point?

An unprecedented number of foundations and philanthropic infrastructure organizations have added racial

An unprecedented number of foundations and philanthropic infrastructure organizations have added racial equity explicitly to their communications and programming.

equity explicitly to their communications and programming. While not without its critics among some progressives, the language of “diversity, equity and inclusion” has been codified as DEI. Dozens of foundations, both public and private and across every region of the country have embraced bold, comprehensive strategies to move racial equity and even racial justice goals. Funding collaboratives have formed to

support work led by and serving specific immigrant, Black, Native American, Latinx and AMEMSA (Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim and South Asian) communities.

Funders are exhibiting a growing understanding of advocacy and organizing, and how these interact with other strategy threads. The mass protests of the last decade have forced the nation to confront the systemic nature of phenomena like police violence and environmental degradation. Dynamic campaigns and strategies have revealed the benefits of direct action, especially in combination with civic, cultural, legal and service strategies in shifting institutional policy and practice. These developments have been accompanied by a burst of creativity in social change methods, with emphasis on engaging real people in meaningful civic action, whether it be voter registration, protest or new forms of community service. A comprehensive ecosystem that centers the engagement of those most harmed by structural

A comprehensive ecosystem that centers the engagement of those most harmed by structural inequity has a real chance of making long-term progress.

inequity has a real chance of making long-term progress.

There has been a significant focus on intersectionality and anti-Blackness in an evolving lexicon and practice of racial justice. While neither concept is new, they now occupy a central space in racial justice discourse. Intersectionality, the phrase coined by scholar Kimberlé W. Crenshaw to advocate for a complex understanding of people of

color, has generated many new connections between race and such systems as sexuality, gender, class and disability. The #MeToo movement exhibits an intersectional take on sexual violence that highlights race and class while still building solidarity among women across identity lines. It is becoming clearer to funders that structural racism affects every issue, and there is more willingness to consider the racial dimensions of issues

that seemed race-neutral in the past. Funders in LGBTQ and immigrant rights, the environment, fiscal policy, health and civic engagement have all stepped up their racial equity engagement. Funders for LGBTQ Issues, for example, have executed a multiyear plan to move money to issues and organizations that affect LGBTQ people of color, including report cards on foundation performance and tools to reshape portfolios.

Scholars and activists have also identified anti-Blackness as an organizing principle of racial hierarchy given the central historical role of slavery and repression of Black self-determination in American politics and culture, and many funders have stepped up to support Black-led organizations focused on social change. To a lesser extent, attention to anti-indigeneity has illuminated the treatment of Native American history and communities.

The racial justice field has also built its communications capacity and pursued culture-shift strategies. In 2006, we were still arguing for the importance of a focus on communications and framing. While persuading funders remained a challenge, enough of them responded effectively that a cohort of organizations grew their capacity at the same time that MSNBC and other media outlets were offering new exposure for leaders of color. The idea of creating cultural shifts emerged from a growing sophistication in approaches to communications. Today, community organizations and networks of

color sit in television writers' rooms; key racial justice outlets and organizations are name-dropped in dramas and comedies; the Associated Press has removed "illegal immigrant" from its style guide. Culture-shift strategies have engaged celebrities and interventions in fields from sports to fashion, bringing racial justice out of the technocratic fields of policy and politics and into more accessible arenas.

Strategists are connecting social-movement activity with other forms of social change, including civic engagement and legal efforts. There is more coordination, overlap and joint work between the social movement and civic engagement sides of the racial justice house in service of building an increasing number of 501c4s. Organizers are also incorporating service provision, new community spaces and the creation of alternative institutions into their strategies.

---

1 [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/national/wp/2018/04/06/feature/in-reaction-to-trump-millions-of-americans-are-joining-protests-and-getting-political/?utm\\_term=.2fd00a317962](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/national/wp/2018/04/06/feature/in-reaction-to-trump-millions-of-americans-are-joining-protests-and-getting-political/?utm_term=.2fd00a317962) Much of the new activism is progressive and organized at the grass-roots, without regard for the political party establishment. <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/how-a-new-generation-of-progressive-activists-is-leading-the-trump-resistance-204281/>

2 In 2004, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations and Funders Network for Trade and Smart Growth surveyed more than 325 funder networks and there has been exponential growth since then, with many formal organizations then breaking down into multiple but relatively independently operating working groups and networks producing their own programming, research, advocacy and convenings.

---

## QUESTIONS FOR DEEPENING PRACTICE

As is natural and productive, each of the developments above have generated new challenges, tensions and dilemmas. In such a diverse field, players hold multiple definitions and assumptions, and both the players and the ideas are constantly evolving. We offer the following questions as starting points for ongoing discussions involving both funders and the field.

### **1. How do we ensure we have shared meaning, understanding and commitment around racial justice?**

Even foundations that have worn the racial equity mantle for a long time face challenges to consistent effectiveness. Turnover in staff and leadership, investment downturns and dramatic news cycles can all affect the depth of collective knowledge within a foundation. Consensus around racial equity principles can never be taken for granted, and the knowledge base of a foundation must be constantly renewed. It is still common, for example, to find foundation staff conflating POC leadership with a systemic racial equity analysis, or people of

color served with people of color organized. And of course, as communities of color are continuously shifting, younger leaders bring in new perspectives, further increasing the complexity.

### **2. How can we increase funding to ensure a healthy racial justice ecosystem?**

A solid ecosystem requires that all of its parts are strong. Funding helps determine the strength of an issue sector (i.e., immigrant rights, decriminalization, climate justice) or strategy sector (i.e., civic engagement, legal defense, community organizing). Philanthropy is still too often a zero-sum game. Investments in one community often mean disinvestment in another, when in truth all the parts of the ecosystem need sustained and growing support. Racial justice efforts clearly require both community-specific and multiracial spaces, for example, but funding isn't always available for both. And as a result, the connective efforts that tie different constituencies together in a meaningful way can be neglected, limiting the ability of these constituencies to work

through ideas and conflicts or to sustain coalitions over the long haul.

### **3. Are there unintended consequences to the proliferation of new organizations and networks, particularly on the funder side? If so, how can we reduce harm and optimize benefits?**

Recognizing what many refer to as the “nonprofit industrial complex,” we need to more critically self-examine the proliferation and possible negative indirect impacts of efforts that arose to meet real needs. As a field, we should examine the size, quality and nature of the racial equity philanthropic support infrastructure. While networks and intermediaries can help get money out, sustaining a large infrastructure adds expenses to the entire project, in some cases competing with current or potential grantees for funding. The need among philanthropic support organizations or networks to distinguish themselves may fuel siloism, making it harder to collect joint lessons and create complementary strategies. Lack of coordination between these players can create duplications or other inefficiencies. Finally, this proliferation can add another layer of barriers for smaller, newer or more experimental leaders, organizations and projects.

As the demographics of foundations change, how can we keep addressing the power differentials embedded in philanthropy? More people of color and progressive White allies are moving to foundations which have a growing interest in racial justice, many coming directly from campaigns and organizations. The power relationships between foundations and grantees remain, but they can be difficult to navigate when funders are former leaders from the field.

### **4. What constitutes appropriate funder leadership in this era?**

Activists and philanthropic colleagues alike have been calling for explicit, visible, courageous funder leadership in racial equity and justice. Some funders have interpreted this as a charge to focus more on developing their own programs, convening grantees before starting a new initiative or creating new resources and tools. Such efforts, however, may not only compete with the very fields they support, but because they are created in an environment fraught with unequal power relations, funders may not receive truly deep or honest feedback from the field about the value of that work. Foundation-led convenings can take up enormous amounts of grantees’ time, often in the service of unclear goals and impacts. New programs operated by foundations sometimes replace or stand in for grantmaking. These dynamics are hard for grantees to name without fear of consequences, so the burden of awareness is on funders themselves.

Most grantmakers would applaud or repeat the sentiment expressed by one Latinx foundation president:

“Our role as philanthropy is not to direct our grantee partners in what we will support and tell them what they should do, or create programs that we make them fit into. Our job is to listen, provide resources and provide a space for people to come together and hear from each other and learn and understand one another better than they do.”

And yet, in the past decade we have witnessed increasing numbers of foundations either developing more directive programs within the frame of strategic philanthropy or increasingly treating grantees as contractors in service of the funders’ own strategies.

### **5. What is the most helpful role for White-led organizations in racial justice work?**

Increasing interest in racial justice has generated commensurate growth among predominantly or historically White-led institutions in recognizing or being incentivized to increase their diversity and expand their equity work. In some cases, this has resulted in major shifts in governance, including co-leadership between White directors and new leaders of color, new mission statements, and more explicit racial equity approaches and strategies among predominantly White organizations. In other cases, however, it has led to problematic colonizing of the work of communities of color, with funding received by the majority-led institution to do outreach to, to subcontract to or, in some cases, to simply repackage and market the work of POC-led organizations.

### **6. What are the indicators of success appropriate to various strategies?**

One challenge posed by increasingly complex strategies is setting measurement processes. Outcomes around shifting power relations and changing a culture introduce data sets—such as changing news coverage, public support for a new idea, or the development of innovative participation structures—that are unfamiliar to many funders. Each strategy has indicators beyond turnout and policy change. While it remains critical for funders to look at the issues of representation, distribution of resources and other aspects of a racial equity lens, communities are leading the call for philanthropy to further deepen institutional understanding of power building and continue to pursue multipronged strategies and transformative visions that hold the best potential for lasting change.

As another Black grantmaker and former practitioner said:

“Justice is where we’re living in a world free from harm, where people have the ability to reach their own potential and be self-actualized. I think that’s harder to measure than equity.”

# IDEAS AND CONSISTENT PRACTICE MATTER MOST

Within all of the complexities examined here, there remain some clear components that can help funders support efforts for transformative interventions in our society.

Our original guide describes four key elements of a racial equity lens. Each of these elements is preserved with a racial justice lens.	<b>It requires analyzing data and information about race and ethnicity.</b>
	<b>It requires understanding disparities and the reasons they exist.</b>
	<b>It looks at the structural, root causes of problems.</b>
	<b>It names race explicitly when talking about problems and solutions.</b>
But we would add these elements to raise the stakes toward racial justice.	<b>An explicit focus on power building in multiple forms, centered on those people who are most impacted</b>
	<b>An emphasis on transformative, high leverage systemic advances, including fundamental changes in policies, establishing new norms, or designing alternative systems</b>

It is also critically important to distinguish between improving the process of grantmaking with a racial lens and improving the actual grantmaking itself. While more respectful relationships between funders and grantees are a great thing, the ultimate measure has to be grants that are aimed specifically at advancing racial justice in communities or society as a whole, with commensurate attention to societal power hierarchies, foundational systems change and transformative strategies that increase the health, well-being and self-determination of communities of color.

Throughout the guide, you will find insights and lessons from racial justice practitioners and funders who share stories about how they address these concepts and strategies in their grantmaking, argue for a racial justice lens in their own institutions and work more closely with practitioners. At the end, you will find additional tools and resources.

*Grantmaking with a Racial Justice Lens: An Introduction* was developed by the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity (PRE) and draws on interviews with racial justice practitioners, grantmakers, 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. PRE also convened focus groups of racial justice practitioners, grantmakers, and other philanthropic field infrastructure organizations to gather stories and ideas for making this document as useful as possible.

*Grantmaking with a Racial Justice Lens: An Introduction* was written by Rinku Sen, PRE Senior Fellow, and Lori Villarosa, PRE Executive Director. It is based on interviews, research and editing for the full guide conducted by Lori Villarosa, Lisa McGill, Maggie Potapchuk, Makani Themba, Natalie Kabasakalian, Julie Quiroz and Kalpana Krishnamurthy and proofreading, copyediting, design, project management and support by Domenica Trevor, Chaitali Sen, Tuan Do, Linda Guinee and Aisha Horne. A complete list of people who contributed to this effort can be found in the online version of this document, on PRE's website at [www.racialequity.org](http://www.racialequity.org), and will appear in the full guide and in several companion components.

We thank the racial justice practitioners, grantmakers, and infrastructure partners who generously shared their experiences and insights, and all those who contributed their time, talent, and perspectives to this project. We also thank the funders who have supported PRE's work in this project's development as well as our core work, including the Kellogg, Ford, Annie E. Casey, and Marguerite Casey foundations and Borealis Philanthropy.



The complete *Grantmaking with a Racial Justice Lens* guide will include:

- **What Is Grantmaking with a Racial Justice Lens?** Racial justice practitioners and grantmakers who have deep experience applying a racial analysis to their work share their insights into what they define as grantmaking that advances racial equity and racial justice.
- **Why a Racial Justice Lens, and Why Now?** In recent years, racial justice activism has driven momentous shifts toward broad recognition of the harms of structural racism. Activists and grantmakers at the leading edge of this transformation, and on the frontlines fighting the backlash against it, relate their analysis to the particular challenges of this historical moment.
- **How a Racial Justice Lens Works.** Concrete examples illustrate how the lens allows a different approach to supporting the work of grantee partners, and to identifying structural barriers within funding institutions.
- **Getting to a Racial Justice Commitment.** What strategies can racial justice grantmakers use to get their colleagues and boards to understand and embrace racial justice grantmaking at an institutional level?
- **Effective Grantmaking Practices with a Racial Justice Lens.** Once the commitment is made, what grantmaking strategies help grantee partners realize the transformational work they envision? What might be hindering this, and how can funders recognize and disrupt harmful practices?
- **Measuring Success.** When you make structural transformation the object of your grantmaking strategy, defining and measuring outcomes is a challenge. How do grantmakers devise and utilize meaningful tools that determine whether strategies are moving the needle on racial justice and are in service to grantees and communities, rather than a burden or diversion?
- **Using Tools and Resources.** There is now a considerable array of tools, consultants, and networks devoted to advancing racial equity, racial justice, or “diversity, equity, and inclusion” within philanthropy. How can grantmakers make most effective use of such resources? What is best practice to assess, adapt, and engage, and what are the cautions and limits?

[www.racialequity.org](http://www.racialequity.org)