

# YOUTH INPUT IN GRANT-MAKING

By Steve Palmer

Foundations, grant makers and their staff qualify as important players who shape and influence the field of youth work. Perception commonly holds that youth work includes only those working directly with young people. Acknowledging that many stellar youth workers themselves transition from direct service roles to administrative ones within foundations and direct-service nonprofits, I believe that these staff who work on behalf of youth in more indirect roles can also facilitate and participate in youth work via the inclusion of youth input and feedback through a racial equity lens in the grant-making process. This approach connects funders, the agencies they serve, and ultimately young people to allow for a more equitable means for change.

This approach doesn't just take the stance that "nonprofits know best." It doesn't even just take the stance that communities of color deserve representation- it expands the notion to encompass and recognize the fact that youth make up 52% of the focus of all foundation funding focus areas in Minnesota and suggests that the youth served might be among those who know best how to effect lasting change in communities. As the direct recipients of the largesse of a moneyed foundation, it is regrettable that youth voices have often been excluded from this process. This exclusion can also lead to a troubling racial power dynamic in the relationship between funders, nonprofit staff, and youth. In Minnesota specifically, a state where 74% of the population growth comes among people of color (Minnesota Council on Foundations, 2014), it is especially imperative that people of all backgrounds and races are included in the decision-making and operation of foundations and nonprofits, even (and perhaps especially) in a situation where those with the funds or seated at the executive's desk may largely be upper middle class or white.

As there is an increasing tendency to deem foundations and nonprofits equals in the work of making the world a better place, I wonder if the wall between foundations and youth can become more permeable, or be made as thin as possible. The 21st century has already seen commonly accepted precepts and societal norms revised, challenged, or outright discarded, and I see the nexus between funder, agency, and youth as one possible front for further challenge and exploration. Decision-making, particularly when concerned with money, is largely based upon who holds what power.

I want foundations to engage more directly with youth and, in doing so, subvert some of the power dynamic at play. Minnesota, the "Land of 10,000 funders," is in fact an epicenter for some of these progressive approaches, which I will explore later on. To learn more, I conducted interviews and researched reports mostly from local sources to test out my ideas.

## EXPANDING A RACIAL EQUITY LENS

There are as many foundations in the world as there are causes. Foundations are centered on everything from educational equity to environmental issues to health and medical research. The main difference in approach between a foundation and a nonprofit comes in the acquisition and application of resources. Where nonprofits have expertise, human capital, and access to constituencies, foundations possess the financial plenty needed to conduct this work. As a result, many funders of organizations like mine are kindred spirits in our mission of ending the achievement gap, an issue explicitly tied to race.

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*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 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.*

*Health field grant maker in Quiroz-Martinez, Villarosa and Mackinnon (2007).*

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I don’t believe that these foundations can implement youth feedback without first operating through a robust racial equity lens. A racial equity lens is an approach ensuring that an organization includes the voices of the constituencies they serve, and providing means for them to do so. Foundations can and should operate under a racial equity lens, if we are to view them as partners in the missions of nonprofits. In the situation above, the Foundation manager and their organization are using their outsize influence to encourage agencies to implement racial equity procedures. I would also suspect it is a foundation more likely to take youth feedback seriously. To my mind it is sensible to expand the underlying outcome of a racial equity lens—being sure to include constituents—to apply to the inclusion of youth.

Overall, this model suggests that if one demands high standards in the practice of racial equity and the need to include constituents by nonprofits, we as a society should also hold foundations accountable for racial and social equity in their practices, to avoid too great a distance from their target populations, which can result in problematizing clients or “other-ising.”

## **MONEYED INTERESTS**

One can make more anecdotal assumptions about what form this racial equity work may (or may not) take for foundations. Corporate foundations in particular may be more conservative than the organizations they fund. In his survey of the history of American foundations, Mark Dowie notes that while foundations do “bear considerable responsibility for renewing and strengthening the vast and diverse mosaic of organizations that comprise American civil society” this often entails funding organizations “whose aims may not be in the best interest of wealth-based institutions like the foundations themselves.” (Dowie, 2002, p. 211).

Dowie’s scholarship notes that leftist scholars ascribed the interest of organizations such as the Ford Foundation in funding organizations like the NAACP and National Urban League in the late 1960s to a desire to “diffuse black militancy and champion ‘black capitalism.’” This tension between a foundation’s drive for social (or racial) advocacy and the accumulated wealth (and the power structures behind the generation of such wealth) that is inherent in the existence of a foundation causes much debate and while it is not the subject of this paper, I feel this tension is present as I explore the possibilities for other approaches—as wealthy and perhaps more conservative funders try to keep up with the innovators on the ground, the racial and youth advocates of today.

Why does this tension arise? One may assume that foundation boards are often made up of the enfranchised. A white grant maker, quoted in a Foundation Center study, reflected, “Every year I do a calendar check. Who have I met with? Who have I had lunch with? Am I really engaging people of color?” While this grant maker was acutely aware of their position, another white foundation executive said that their concern was 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.” (Julie Quiroz-Martinez). Additionally, as foundations often do not work directly with clients, foundations may by their nature lag behind their nonprofit peers in the practice of racial equity.

Statistics bear this out. Only 23% of grant makers specifically mention particular racial groups when outlining their intended target populations in requests for proposals (RFPs) (Minnesota Council on Foundations, 2014) and I would argue this is a problem in a field where race is a core issue and often the issue, for many African-American advocacy groups like Black Lives Matter. Race neutral practices such as these only reinforce existing (and oppressive) structures. Even aside from funding practices, a perspective that ignores race is also present in the internal functions of foundations: Only 12% of independent foundations have diversity policies on file for their staff, and only 5% of family foundations do so (Minnesota Council on Foundations, 2014).

An intentionally color-blind approach results in perspectives such as this expressed in this troubling quote from one grant maker, who said that because they fund and work in high poverty areas, it “is a foregone conclusion that diverse populations will benefit from our programs” (Minnesota Council on Foundations, 2014). To properly address issues of racial equity, organizations need to first acknowledge that race is a factor. If one includes greater Minnesota, the majority of youth on free or reduced price lunch are actually white. If foundations want to address racial equity, they need to forcefully talk about race and equity and not couch it with loaded phrases arising out of people’s stereotypes. Only when these attitudes shift can they begin the work of integrating youth voice.

## PROBLEMATIZATION

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*Every grant RFP [request for proposals] is a small piece of policy. The language [a foundation] uses becomes the language of the field.*

*—Eric Billet, Minnesota Department of Education.*

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The best way for foundations and nonprofits to approach this racial dynamic stymies many, however. The seeds of this paper and my general thinking about opening up the possibilities for grant-making in this manner originally arose from my (ongoing) quest to find the most in-vogue, up-to-date, politically correct and accurate way to refer to the populations served by my organization, Athletes Committed to Educating Students, or ACES. ACES is a tutoring and mentoring organization working with fourth through eighth-grade students throughout the Twin Cities. A majority (87%) are of color and 90 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, a major indicator of poverty. ACES’ sole mission is to end the academic achievement gap in the Twin Cities.

When applying for funding from foundations, and in speaking about our work in the public sphere, ACES (and all nonprofits) needs a shorthand way to convey the populations we serve in order to succinctly describe our mission and activities. But in philanthropy, a field primarily oriented towards equity and justice, how can foundation staff and nonprofit staff, presumably concerned with the whole humanity of all

people, properly pack their values into an “elevator speech” without condescending, “other-ising,” or making a “problem” out of perhaps vulnerable people? Is any kind of shorthand an acceptable way to speak of the highly diverse array of life experiences of the constituencies of nonprofits? After all, terms such as “juvenile delinquent” and “dropout” haunt the past discourse of youth work.

As a relatively new grant writer, a thought arose in my head. Would I let an ACES student read one of my grant proposals? What about ACES alumni? What might they believe I assume or think about them because of my writing? Then, another thought- why shouldn't I want a youth to be able to read my proposal? I see including youth voice as a way to dispel the power dynamic present in foundations, to reduce the possibility for problematization and make the division between foundations and youth as permeable as possible, as I mentioned in the introduction. Foundations can be key drivers of innovative approaches among nonprofits and should not wait for nonprofits to drive the field forward—yes, in their own way, practicing a type of youth work.

## A PATH FORWARD

One approach in integrating constituencies can be to primarily fund organizations run by people of color. This is evident in the approach of an organization like the Northwest Area Foundation, which in recent years has made conscious efforts to shift up to 40% of their funding directly to Native American organizations. Another organization in the Twin Cities deliberately targeting minority groups already doing positive work in the community is the Headwaters Foundation, which has made racial inclusion not only a goal but a core tenet of its organization. Nausheena Hussain, deputy director of fund development for the Minnesota chapter of the Council on American-Islam Relations, remarked that in situations such as these “both the grant makers and the constituents are stakeholders in the grant. When you give responsibility, you empower that community to make that change and better themselves” (personal communication, May/June, 2016). Here again is the tendency to place foundations and nonprofits as equals, but constituents are also elevated to the stature of equal partners.

Again in my mind however, if the persons who have the lived experience of struggle are essential to ending it, it must logically follow that foundations can integrate the voices of youth into their activities, if that happens to be a focus area. Organizations like Youthprise do exactly this. I will use Youthprise as a sort of case study for how foundations could function, not just in Minnesota or the Twin Cities, but nationwide. Youthprise, an effort the McKnight Foundation began in 2010 serves as an intermediary organization funneling money to youth organizations and focuses on three core areas: Learning and social emotional development, economic prosperity, and health and safety. Notable is that a strong commitment to racial equity practices is present in their mission statement.

Program Officer Rudy Guglielmo, says that by participating in youth panels, young people are empowered to “provide feedback on proposals, and work in committees and do direct funding through that.” He notes that this type of approach allows youth an opportunity to “influence the sector” and says he has seen multiple success stories, not just for the organizations Youthprise funds, but in the personal lives of the youth themselves. Additionally, he said that this approach has continually led Youthprise to become “more inclusive and grounded as to what is happening” in the community” (personal communication, May/June, 2016).

Youthprise philanthropy (re)designer Neese Parker, a former youth panel participant and current administrator, said that involvement on a youth panel can be personally enriching for youth. “A lot of times, in the society we live in, [serving on a youth board] can be so influential because it gives youth such confidence in a society that's built to tear down. They can say they're a philanthropist, and a positive ego

risers up, it's a confidence push and something they can take home, and take home to parents, and parents are proud. Not only does it change the view of themselves, it changes the view of people around them. If you have a young kid, he didn't do so well in the education system, and now he's a part of this program and here comes Youthprise, now he goes home and tells his parents he's in charge of distributing \$20,000, things like that can hit home sometimes." Parker likens the hands-off approach to grant making in some contexts (that I suspect could result from foundations operating at too great a distance from clients) as similar to a driver seeing a car broken down on the side of the road, and "instead of asking what the victim may need, handing them a set of brake pads and driving off" (N. Parker, personal communication, May/June, 2016).

At Youthprise, Neese helps youth create what the application looks like, what questions are asked, which applicants they want to invite, and who they want to fund and by how much. Personally speaking as a grant-writer, the questions on applications like these are far more exciting questions that would really allow me to tell the story of ACES in a way that I might not be able to via the more staid "activities/outputs/outcomes" style to which the grant-making field often gravitates.

Eric Billiet, an expanded learning specialist with the Minnesota Department of Education agrees, saying that "good youth work creates the stage for youth to not act their age." He sees participation in grant panels as a perfect path towards "co-creating an opportunity for young people to create that space or that stage" (personal communication, May/June, 2016). The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), in fact, is the only state agency that allows youth to sit on scoring panels for federal 21st Century Grants. In the last round, the youth scores count as much as the adult scores (often aligning with those of the adults). MDE first reaches out to partner organizations to recruit young candidates and involves them in every step of the process.

By not diminishing the role of youth, and elevating them to the status of equals, I would argue that these foundations and funders are acting as youth workers, and that this is a replicable model for others to follow. I think the 21st century can allow for an expansion of and rethinking of the field. Eric Billiet offered a similar thought, "What is a youth worker? Is it a job of people doing direct service at minimum wage part time? Or is it a value-based way of being in the world on behalf of young people? Can it be an agreed-to set of principles? How [does one] live those out in a life that is respectful of young people?" (personal communication, May/June, 2016).

This notion of living out one's life in a way that is respectful of young people underlies my whole argument. If foundations are mission-driven they must respect and include the humanity of those they serve. Many nonprofits are held accountable for reflecting the diversity of the populations they serve. I argue that foundations have a responsibility to do this as well, and I view expanding the field of youth work into the administrative and decision-making realms to be the path to do so.

## REFERENCES

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Interviews were conducted with the following individual in the months of May and June, 2016:

- Eric Billiet, Expanded Learning Specialist , Minnesota Department of Education
- Rudy Guglielmo, Program Officer, Youthprise
- Nausheena Hussain, Deputy Director of Fund Development, Minnesota chapter of the Council on American-Islam Relations
- Neese Parker, Youth Engagement Coordinator and Philanthropy (re)Designer, Youthprise





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**STEVE PALMER** is the Grant Manager and Development Associate for ACES (Athletes Committed to Educating Students), an after-school and before-school tutoring and mentoring organization working with traditionally underserved youth throughout the Twin Cities. He joined ACES as Site Leader at Green Central School after a two-year stint with Americorps VISTA with the Saint Paul Public Schools Foundation. He served as Volunteer Coordinator at ACES from 2013-2015. Steve graduated from Gustavus Adolphus College in 2010 with a B.A. in History.

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