



FOUNDATION LISTENING AND SHARING GRANTS

Results and Takeaways

In 2016, Fund for Shared Insight made 10 grants to organizations who responded to an open RFP focused on “increasing foundation openness in service of effectiveness.” As described in the RFP, “openness” as a term was intended to speak “more to a two-way collaborative process where foundations not only share out information but also listen deeply and engage with what others have to say to inform, change, and improve their work.” Shared Insight supported this work with the underlying belief that “if foundations are more open – if they listen to others and also share out what they themselves have learned – they will be more effective.” As these grants come to an end, ORS Impact interviewed the 10 organizations who received grants to learn more about progress and lessons learned. This memo, created primarily for the Core Funders of Shared Insight, describes the cumulative results of this body of work and cross-cutting observations about lessons learned that can inform work within the updated theory of change.¹

¹ Two things to keep in mind while reading: (1) not all of the work is complete and final reports have not yet been submitted; final outputs and products will be known at a later date; and (2) we are judging the success of this work against the original theory of change and RFP.

Results

Grantees generally completed the activities and achieved the outputs they had proposed for their grants.²

Across the 10 grants, organizations described activities and products that met grant expectations. Grantees have produced research, held trainings, convenings, and webinars, included openness in communications campaigns and conferences, created and released the evaluation vertical, and conducted a human-centered design test of feedback practice acknowledgement on nonprofit GuideStar profiles.

In a few cases, additional products or events have been (or will be) completed, such as additional research pieces produced by First Nations Development Institute (First Nations), a toolkit created by Exponent building from its workshops, inclusion of feedback and openness in upcoming Collective Impact Forum/FSG events this fall, and a set of “process conversation cards” created by United Philanthropy Forum. National Center for Family Philanthropy (NCFP) did not create a Transparency Assessment and Planning tool as proposed, but, based on feedback from focus groups, instead is creating toolkit for its members.³

Across grants, it is fair to say that all grantees met, and in a few cases exceeded, expectations.

Grantees defined and advanced “openness” in different ways, with a majority focusing on funder/grantee relationships.

The 2016 RFP acknowledged that “openness” had been hard to define and that Shared Insight did not have a clear theory of change for this body of work. The round of proposals was open to work that focused on sharing and listening in a variety of ways. Ultimately, across the grant:

- Seven organizations focused on openness between grantees and foundations in some way, including grantee inclusion/inclusive grantmaking; PO/funder-grantee relationships; building trust; and increasing transparency.
- Four organizations included some focus on listening to beneficiaries or constituents in their work, including general foundation understanding of beneficiaries; participatory grantmaking; listening to women and girls before acting; researching foundation giving to Native American issues and communities; building capacity for community engagement; and using feedback to guide foundation strategy.
- Four organizations also tackled other organizational practices around openness, such as sustaining openness, learning from failure, and open sharing of lessons and data about impact.

For those that worked more directly with foundations to change practices through trainings and convenings, most focused on both listening and sharing through their work.

² A more complete summary and assessment of activities and outputs will be created based on grantee reports after they are all received.

³ This change in course is discussed in more detail later in the report.

Most grantees described changes in awareness, knowledge, and prioritization; there were some examples of behavior/practice changes.

The theory of change in force during this phase of work was focused on three short-term outcomes associated with openness:

- Increased visibility of the benefits of foundation openness
- Greater awareness about and prioritization of openness in foundations
- More systems and supports in service of foundation openness

Based on data shared by grantees, these grants did lead to achievement of outcomes in the theory of change: research products and publications associated with trainings/workshops/events led to visibility and increased awareness; IssueLab's evaluation vertical created a new support in service of openness; and most of the grants that focused on trainings/workshops/events increased prioritization of specific kinds of listening and sharing activities among target audiences.

The RFP laid out other, more specific examples of foundation practice outcomes desired, including:

- More foundations sharing out and engaging in dialogue on:
 - Information about their governance, guidelines for funding, and how decisions about funding are made
 - What has worked and what hasn't worked (e.g., results of evaluations, strategy processes, and capacity building efforts; reflections by foundation leaders and staff about successes and challenges in their work)
 - How they assess their own work (e.g., their theories of change, how they define and measure success, how, when, and why they decide to change course)
- More foundations listening to others and acting on what they learn:
 - Listening to feedback from grantees
 - Listening to feedback from the people they seek to help
 - Acting on the feedback they hear
 - "Closing the loop" with those giving/providing feedback

These kinds of changes are less evident as a result of these grants, in part because of the more diffuse nature of the work (e.g., research, evaluation vertical), and/or because of the time and/or resources with which to assess change (e.g., limited ability or resources to follow up with participants from a workshop, the timing of membership surveys that could show changes in practices). However, some examples of changes in individual behaviors or organizational practices, often anecdotal, include:

- The eight foundations in the Action Learning Lab with the Collective Impact Forum reported increased agreement that their organizations engaged in openness practices related to continuous learning, feedback loops, transparency, equity, and community engagement.

- NCFP members who served on the taskforce are willing to be leaders in this area for their peers, champion the idea, and stay involved. They have also heard anecdotal stories of individual members being more open on their websites and engaging more with the community to learn about issues and solutions.
- GEO learned that a participant in their event wanted to use materials from the session to share with other local funders to change practices more broadly.⁴

Most practice changes are resulting from the more intense efforts, which may have implications for strategy going forward.

One positive unintended outcome seems to be some greater connectivity across some of the grantee organizations. While this was not an explicit goal, activity, or focus, some of these organizations self-organized conversations that led to sharing, coordination, and collaborations, including joint webinars and partnerships on dissemination/promotion that might not have happened otherwise.

Relative to the prior theory of change, the grants met outcome expectations; compared to the behavior changes described in the RFP, they fell somewhat short.

⁴ Women's Funding Network's research lifted up practices within their members, and their data collection methods allowed for broader sharing of those practices across their network.

Takeaways

There is some openness to greater listening and sharing, but it may be at the margins, and there are still meaningful barriers to larger scale change.

We do not have final grant report numbers yet to assess the achievement of outputs against the original goal; however, grantees mostly described meeting goals associated with dissemination and uptake of research and materials, participation in trainings, or other activities. Despite this, there were a few key examples of resistance to change that may be informative going forward.

Resistance to sharing more. Resistance to this showed up in a variety of ways. For example, CEP has found over the years that its original study on transparency has never met expectations for downloads. While they have met desired levels of blogging and presentation requests, and the piece has strong use as a reference in other works, the uptake has largely been among other champions of transparency in the field. This is different than the performance of their other Shared Insight-funded work.⁵ Originally NCFP had planned to create a Transparency Assessment and Planning (TAP) tool as an add on to an existing “Pursuit of Excellence” assessment tool for their members. Ultimately, through engagement with a task force group, they decided that their membership was not ready to adopt the TAP tool and that they needed to do more education and sharing of examples and options - as family foundations have - to build greater appetite for uptake of such a tool.

Resistance to listening. In March 2018, First Nations released “Community Foundation Giving to Native American Causes.” They saw this publication as more of a “niche” piece than their piece on large foundations and were pleasantly surprised by higher than expected downloads and interest in the report. However, they have received resistance to the messages about the low levels of funding in general and to the low levels of funding to Native-led groups. Lifting up these examples led to more active pushback from “staunch defenders of the status quo” and some foundations “battened down the hatches, became less open not more so,” versus ambivalence or positive change. They felt that they had tried to message the piece around opportunity and managed the language in the reports so people would not feel attacked or threatened. First Nations has more recently released two additional reports with similar uptake and resistance patterns.

Singing to the choir. Among the networks and membership groups who led trainings and workshops, there was a minor theme in that it was easy to attract the “choir” and that many individuals in philanthropy with interest and buy-in tend to be younger and hold less power. It has been more difficult to get engagement among leaders and decision-makers to opt into these kinds of experiences, especially among larger foundations.

⁵ When asked more about this difference in results, CEP shared that the topic of transparency has different barriers than things like stronger PO/grantee relationships, which may be part of the lower than desired results. They also shared that conversation around transparency with their organizational peers tends to lead to who gets “credit” for originally championing the issue and leads to more “elbows out” behavior versus a more collaborative, problem-solving mindset across the different sector-serving organizations.

Resistance to sharing came up among nonprofits, too. Unlike other grants in this portfolio, Guidestar's grant sought to test whether they could develop a way for nonprofits to share information about their feedback work as part of their organizational profile. They prototyped two approaches: 1) an average score of client satisfaction and 2) a visual depiction of where the organization was in the process of implementing its feedback practice. Using a human-centered design approach, they tested the likelihood of nonprofit participation, the quality/accuracy of responses entered, and the degree to which it would incentivize desired behaviors (including seeking additional resources). They learned that nonprofits would answer the questions but that it didn't necessarily provide a nuanced understanding of their actual feedback practices. Videotaped tests with users who were talked through the questions and shown their resulting profile showed that users did not notice or seem interested in additional resources and that the individuals did not want to include the information about their average score or their progress on feedback practice on their profile. There was a lack of appetite for sharing this kind of information (i.e., it wasn't seen as important, it seemed too prominent, they would rather share other information) and/or people feared it looked like something was wrong. As a result of the test, GuideStar decided not to pursue a feedback profile element at this time. Key learnings included: honest self-assessment would be best done outside of the public profile; new experiences would need to be developed for nonprofits to explore new practices; and for nonprofits to be more willing to reflect there would need to be more demand from funders, and they would be aided by comparing themselves to peer organizations.

While equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) wasn't an explicit focus for this body of work, there are some lessons for future efforts.

The original RFP did not include specific language around an EDI focus or outcomes, however, we wanted to learn from organizations if and how it came into play with their work.

Research/evaluation grants to First Nations and Women's Funding Network had a built-in focus on listening to and learning from Native Americans and women and girls, respectively. First Nations sought to understand what funding to Native populations looked like, how inclusive it was, and the degree to which negative stereotypes existed among grantmakers. Women's Funding Network sought to understand the ways in which women's funds listened to and engaged with women and girls to spread best practices among their members and to philanthropy more broadly. In both cases, the grantees described ways in which their work led to adverse reactions from those with greater privilege. For example, at a recent summit with 100 foundation leaders, Women's Funding Network observed some pushback, negative reactions, and lack of engagement from some white women related to a conversation about listening and giving more power to women of color in philanthropy. As described earlier, First Nations found that issues of bias against Native Americans and Native-led organizations persist, with pushback coming in the form of community foundation representatives questioning the methodology used in the report instead of engaging in greater dialogue and discussion based on the content.

However, both Women's Funding Network and First Nations also shared that their work has spurred new conversations and actions around EDI. Specifically, Women's Funding Network described how within the tough conversations about EDI at their summit, some members - including white women - elevated the importance of shifting power to women of color. That experience led to the organizing of a follow up summit in September 2018, intended to engage leaders from women's foundations in conversations about embedding EDI at the heart of their members' work. First Nations also shared that they have heard examples about local nonprofit organizations bringing the research findings to their respective community foundation to start a new conversation about funding practices, thus creating new discussions about how EDI is reflected in funding and philanthropy more broadly.

For those with less explicit focus from the start, interviewees mentioned last year that they saw EDI as an emerging trend and an area of focus in the sector. Almost all said it was part of their internal focus as an organization. In the projects, there was a mix of explicit and implicit focus. Several acknowledged it was innately in play because of the need to consider and address power dynamics and foster inclusion between funders and nonprofits. Explicit considerations of equity were built into the Action Learning Lab led by the Collective Impact Forum, and several foundations acted when their survey of grantee constituents showed a mismatch between their work and local demographics. Actions included building local leadership capacity for next generation leaders among people of color and diversifying their grantee portfolio. NCFP noted that they have a current set of fellows who are going to be doing some work soon around explicitly tying together accountability, transparency, and EDI.

These experiences show both the opportunity and challenges that may lie ahead for work that has a more explicit EDI focus. As shown with foundations in the Action Learning Lab, listening can lead to new insights about lack of diversity, inclusion, and equity in their work and result in efforts to be more inclusive and equitable. At the same time, messages more directly challenging the status quo of white privilege can face resistance in a myriad of forms, from efforts to question the validity and relevance of the work to re-entrenchment of current behaviors. While there are too few examples to draw any large conclusions, it also seems that there are some responses or activities to support inclusion or equity that are more palatable than others (e.g., next generation leadership development versus greater inclusion in current decision-making).

Considerations and Observations

Based on the data and our engagement with the core funders, we wanted to lift up a few considerations as you think about the current theory of change and future efforts to change foundation practices.

- 1. Network strategy had a lot of benefits:** Shared Insight explicitly decided to work with grantees who had closed networks to see what kind of changes might happen in those settings versus broader sector efforts. The work of these grants shows some positive aspects of this approach: a readier audience, the ability to share messages with those who opt in, and a broader audience through multiple channels (e.g., conferences, blogs, email blasts). While the potential downside of this approach is more silos or less information getting out sector-wide, it seems that the benefits outweigh the risk, and some grantees made specific efforts and succeeded in disseminating learnings beyond their membership. For example, Women's Funding Network published articles in Inside Philanthropy, Daily Kos, and The Chronicle of Social Change drawing more than 5,000 visits, along with social media sharing to a network of more than 85,000 followers. Similarly, Collective Impact Forum shared learnings through email blasts, social networks, other networks, and held a discussion session at the Collective Impact Convening with 120 attendees.
- 2. Clarifying the unit of change:** When reviewing successes and challenges, we noticed differences in the themes among the organizations' lessons about changing foundation practices through trainings and events. Upon further reflection, we realized that this is likely due to focus: among the organizations, two focused more explicitly on changing individual behaviors (i.e., United Philanthropy Forum and Exponent Philanthropy), and two were more explicitly focused on changing organizational practices (i.e., GEO and Collective Impact Forum). GEO and Collective Impact Forum both talked about the benefits of engaging with multiple individuals from a foundation or group participation, the value of an action orientation, and more intensive engagements. Others noted the importance of creating an effective environment for the training/event itself and referenced the importance of leadership and culture. This is not to create a false dichotomy between the two areas of focus, but it may be helpful when discussing how to change foundations to be more crisp around what the primary focus of any intervention is and what that means for strategies, outcomes, and assumptions. Shared Insight would do well to ask: Will change likely arise from changing the priorities and behaviors of a person or set of individuals within an institution? Or will change likely arise from more directly focusing on changing the priorities and behaviors of an organization? This discipline may help sharpen and clarify efforts going forward.

3. **Changing foundations means addressing privilege and power:** From anecdotes shared at the May 2018 Shared Insight Gathering and data coming from the Listen for Good evaluation, to the examples of foundations listening to their grantees as part of the Collective Impact Forum's work, it is becoming more clear that meaningfully collecting, engaging with, and using feedback from beneficiaries can be transformative at a fundamental level for how organizations respond to and include the people they seek to help in their work and organizations. At the same time, listening and responding to the people and communities foundations seek to help means letting go of power. As some of these grants suggest, challenging the current status quo is unlikely to happen without some conflict and dealing with aspects of white privilege that permeate our culture and institutions. This isn't to suggest that the primary goal and focus of Shared Insight is to tackle that; at the same time, going in with eyes open and considering strategies for how to mitigate and address these issues could result in greater success in the long run.

There is also a question raised about the roles of different sector actors. It's worth noting that most of the EDI-related work occurred among identity groups with a core social justice mission and that they faced more active resistance. Could "mainstream" organizations do more to lift up the work of others and help foundations hear the messages more or differently? How can social sector organizations all do more to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion and listen to and lift up the voices of those organizations who have been doing this for a long time already?

4. **Some of the success of this portfolio could bode well for the updated theory of change going forward:** Overall, grants generally met or exceeded expected activities, outputs, and theory of change outcomes, though there were greater results around knowledge, awareness, and intent to act than on practice change. While the theory of change for Shared Insight has changed from working toward greater listening and sharing more broadly to changing foundation practice related to feedback, this portfolio did show some natural alignment and uptake around related work among sector-serving organizations and demonstrated some ways in which practice changes can be supported.
5. **Some feedback may reinforce the field focus going forward:** Some organizations shared that they felt somewhat hampered and inefficient in their work due to lack of a clear, shared definition of openness, awareness of existing resources, and places to go for those resources. This feedback may bolster the decision to explicitly include field-building efforts in the current theory of change to support the efforts to change nonprofit and foundation practices related to feedback. While the focus of Shared Insight's work has been sharpened, these comments suggest that efforts to strengthen the related infrastructure, definitions of quality, and resources available around feedback practice will be useful to supporting practice change.

In Closing

The work of Shared Insight is shifting away from a focus on foundation openness generally to catalyzing foundation feedback practice, specifically for more funders to support nonprofit feedback practice, find Listen for Good valuable, and for Shared Insight to find and lift up stories of how feedback can change funder-grantee relationships and/or foundation decision-making. While this is a more sharply focused body of work than what was previously funded, we think there are useful lessons to take away about the potential opportunities and challenges that lie ahead.

Appendix: Brief Grant Overviews

Organization	Brief Description
Center for Effective Philanthropy	For a research project examining 1) which aspects of foundation/grantee interaction best predict whether grantees think funders understand their beneficiaries needs, 2) whether grantees think that funders prioritize their funding around their understanding of beneficiary needs, and 3) how the perceptions a grantee has of their foundation's understanding of its intended beneficiaries' needs factors into the overall strength of relationship a grantee has with a foundation.
Collective Impact Forum/FSG	To work with a sub-set of 5-8 funders that belong to a funder community of practice facilitated by the Collective Impact Forum as our "learning lab" for improving foundation openness. To then lift up the learning from this group to the broader CI Forum membership to encourage this practice among the 1,700 funders engaged with the CI Forum. The learning and practice of openness gleaned from these collective impact funders will also be applicable to grantmakers beyond the collective impact approach and FSG will adapt the key lessons, tools and resources for broader application and dissemination to FSG's full network of over 8,000 funders.
Exponent Philanthropy	To produce a series of 4-5 regional events (Southern FL, Southern CA, Northern CA, Boston, DC) across the country that elevate and celebrate foundation openness and feedback by exploring and examining exemplary funder-grantee relationships and the practices that are contributing to their success. This initiative designed for delivery to both funder and grantee audiences –in the same setting at the same time –will foster co-learning and collaboration by showcasing a local success story and providing practical guidance on ways each audience can take actions to improve their relationships.
First Nations	To conduct primary and secondary research to instigate a productive dialogue on philanthropic investment in Native communities, so that: 1) Funders (those participating and those who will be informed by the project reports) will increase their openness about funding strategies and reluctance/reticence to fund by articulating why they do or do not fund in Indian Country. 2) Native organizations and tribes seeking philanthropic funding will learn what funders' perceptions are and, in so doing, will learn how to either counter these perceptions and/or learn how to strengthen their organizational capacity to increase their own openness by being more transparent and to inspire funding investments.
Foundation Center	To develop an evaluation "vertical" at IssueLab, a specialized offering of IssueLab's services, platform, and content focused on evaluation and the work of evaluation and learning officers; plan a dedicated communications campaign designed to engage and incentivize key foundation audiences; and develop a thought leadership series that can stimulate and guide the necessary culture change.
GEO	For the Change Incubator: an intensive 18-month cohort program that brings four to six foundation teams together to address grantee voice and inclusion in their organizations; developing a workshop to reach 36 funders around grantee inclusion; and creating a communications campaign around grantee inclusion. GEO will use the experiences of the foundations participating in the Change Incubator as a platform to promote and scale efforts to increase grantee inclusion and create the internal conditions for listening needed for that to happen throughout the GEO community
GuideStar	To prototype a mechanism for sharing beneficiary feedback between grant-seeking and grantmaking organizations at scale.

Organization	Brief Description
National Center for Family Philanthropy (NCFP)	To address areas identified in the CEP report on foundation transparency, including how to encourage family foundation performance assessment, highlighting examples and hosting sessions on the “best mistakes ever made,” and sharing stories of foundations that have made their governance practices and policies public to foster greater relationships between the grantee and grantor. Activities to include: creating a Transparency Assessment Tool (TAP), integrating “Transparency Tracks” into all core educational programming, developing online resources related to transparency and openness, including questions related to transparency and openness in member surveys.
United Philanthropy	To: 1) Offer each regional association an opportunity to engage its foundation members in a regional dialogue on foundation openness by providing training, resources and tools to put on one of three program options including learning from failure, using feedback effectively to guide foundation strategy, and engage in a conversation on how foundations engage with nonprofits to catalyze more openness. 2) Engage up to four regional associations in a deeper dive on foundation openness with a cohort of approximately 15-20 foundation leaders focused on how foundation leaders can learn from failure and/or how foundation leaders can use feedback effectively to guide foundation strategy. 3) Document and evaluate learnings over the two-year period.
Women’s Funding Network	To conduct a holistic analysis of the openness, accountability, and transparency practices of 90 women’s foundations and assess the link between these and organizational effectiveness, and to social change outcomes. As a result of conducting an analysis of women’s foundation openness practices, the WFN expects to understand the practices, strategies and tactics, and challenges of foundation openness being used by its members; increased sharing, connectivity, and collaboration between the women’s funding movement and other social justice movements and the broader philanthropic sector.