**How Foundations in an Aligned-Action Network Start to Move to Equity in Philanthropy: Findings from a Year of Observations and Interviews**

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**Key Points**

* Community foundations across the United States hold a powerful role in leading meaningful social change toward an equitable future. Despite their unique leadership role at the intersection of place, race, wealth, and inequality, we understand little about how these foundations understand and implement efforts that are responsive to issues in their communities, especially those that have been historically marginalized.
* This article examines how community foundations within an aligned-action network are engaging in philanthropic efforts through their shared commitment to advancing social and economic mobility. Using data from interviews with foundation staff, network meeting observations, and network documents over the course of a year, we sought to answer three research questions: how community foundations define equity; what structures, processes, and activities were perceived as supporting their equity-related work; and how membership in Network for Equity + Opportunity Nationwide can help highlight these efforts. Findings illuminate a model of philanthropic efforts along two dimensions: foundation focus (internal and external) and expression type (implicit and explicit).
* This article unfolds the process within collaborative efforts among community foundations and offers insights for other foundations to better understand expectations and prepare for the conditions necessary to meaningfully engage in social equity and justice efforts with internal and external community stakeholders.

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# Introduction

Philanthropy is facing growing critiques that it is elitist and inattentive to the needs of marginalized communities. Philanthropic practices can perpetuate racial disparities, as highlighted by the fact that Black-led organizations and Black-serving organizations led by white people receive fewer resources than white-serving, white-led organizations (Dorsey et al., 2020). Amid these concerns, numerous philanthropic support organizations have launched efforts to promote greater diversity in foundations and attention to principles of equity and justice.

Given their unique leadership roles at the intersections of place, race, wealth, and inequality, community foundations play a central role in social justice efforts. They can lead change through their access to powerful institutions and resources that can advance policymaking on the local and national level (Suárez et al., 2018). In this case study, we explore how one such initiative, the Network for Equity + Opportunity Nationwide, has supported the efforts of nine community foundations to reduce the opportunity gap in the United States by dismantling structural racism (Daniels, 2020).

Through an aligned-action network, these foundations have committed to focus on two levers: building power and leadership among unrepresented people while building wealth and income. Our research team has followed NEON since October 2021 by observing network meetings, reading network documents, and interviewing employees at participating foundations. Our questions of interest evolved iteratively and focus on the following:

1. How do NEON members describe equity in philanthropy?
2. What structures, processes, and activities are community foundations adopting to support equity-related policy work?
3. To what extent are the member foundations aligned within the NEON action network?

This article offers insights into the complexity of foundations’ efforts to address opportunity gaps by dismantling systemic racism, as well as how aligned-action efforts may advance this work. Our research can help inform philanthropic efforts for other foundations who are committed to working toward an equitable future.

**NEON as an Aligned-Action Network**

Much organizational work occurs through networks of individuals and organizations. Networks offer multiple benefits, including mechanisms for information transfer that contribute to shared or similar attitudes as well as the creation and diffusion of innovations (Brass et al., 2004). There are many types of networks, including service provision (Provan & Kenis, 2008) and information-sharing networks.

NEON is an aligned-action network initiative launched by the Community Foundation Opportunity Network in January 2021. Bradach (2016) described an aligned-action network as a group of organizations from different geographic regions coming together with a “core set of design principles and operating practices” (para. 4) to achieve a collective goal. Without committing to replicating a program or model, aligned-action networks support innovations in practice that respond to local contexts. Aligned-action networks take an emergent approach to strategy development. They serve as a community of practice for members to share insights and data and use evaluation as learning. Participants in aligned-action networks “are bound by a shared narrative for change, fueled by a set of principles for what matters and motivated to measure, learn, and adapt along the way” (Muoio & O’Donovan, 2016, para. 24).

NEON is governed by a network administrative model (Provan & Kenis, 2008) in which a network broker who is not a member of the network oversees the network’s activities. NEON is supported by part-time staff and consultants who coordinate and facilitate convenings for member foundations, produce baseline reports and communications for the network, organize collective fundraising efforts, and manage collective data collection, analysis, and reporting. NEON is co-designed by its members: six individual community foundations and a collaborative that comprises three proximal community foundations. These members are located across the United States and were selected by the Community Foundation Opportunity Network based on the foundations’ perceived commitment and progress toward dismantling structural and systemic racism.

NEON’s coordinators initially laid out four phases of development: design, build, test, and scale. During the design phase, members made a collective commitment to advance equity in social and economic mobility through investing in wealth-building and power-shifting approaches to place-based philanthropy. As organizations that sit at the intersection of community and white wealth, NEON members committed to create new narratives of racial equity and justice engage residents and leaders who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color in the co-design of local solutions, and co-invest community resources in ways that advance racial equity. These aligned strategies are built on the traditional strength of community foundations, which is to bring people and institutions at all levels of community together (CF Leads, 2013). While their strategies are emergent and tailored to their local communities, as an aligned-action network they should exhibit commonalities. Indeed, a network’s collaboration effectiveness can be heavily influenced by whether the developmental stages of the network reflect a strong mutual understanding and commitment among all network members that they are working toward a collective goal that they recognize could not be achieved by themselves (Provan & Kenis, 2008). By the end of the design phase, NEON members agreed to align their commitment and actions focused on shifting systems of wealth, income, power, and leadership.

During the build phase of NEON’s development, foundation members focused on setting expectations and creating the infrastructure required for alignment around the shared goals of shifting systems of wealth, income, power, and leadership. Informed by the research and findings of the U.S. Partnership for Mobility from Poverty,[[1]](#footnote-1) network members identified broad, commonly shared strategies of changing economic, political, and social systems that perpetuate inequities. By the end of the build phase, NEON members agreed on aligning strategic actions around common goals, common strategies, common metrics, and common narrative.

However, an aligned-action network neither prescribes nor requires adoption of a uniform solution. Instead, as part of the aligned-action network model, foundation members discussed areas where they could remain loosely aligned to specific tactics to be implemented by each community foundation to achieve these shared goals. For example, while all foundations are tightly aligned with the redistribution of income and wealth through wage gains and work supports that provide increased access to living wage jobs, member foundations are implementing specific tactics in their local communities around policy work, grantmaking, promoting community awareness, resident engagement, and convening to support these policy efforts. This flexibility allows participating foundations to design solutions that are appropriate to their foundation and community. As the network moved from design to build, network meetings (virtual and eventually in-person), working groups, and accountability partnerships provided ongoing opportunities for shared learning from national initiatives and peer participants.

# Our Case Study Methodology

Our research team collected data through observations, interviews, and review of archival documents. Our research coincided with part of NEON’s build phase and its transition to the test phase. We observed monthly and bimonthly NEON meetings beginning in October 2021; attendees included NEON facilitators, a changing set of participants from participating foundations, and guests from partner support organizations. These gatherings included two multiple-day meetings in March and August 2022 and 90-minute virtual meetings throughout 2022.

The bulk of these meetings focused on the meaning of participating in an aligned-action network and the process of establishing shared goals. The virtual and in-person agendas were thematically similar: working on stabilizing or tight factors (seeking cohort agreement on the commons frameworks) and figuring out where there can be dynamic or loose factors. The in-person meetings allowed for more trust building, cooperation, and “doing the work” as a collective, whereas the virtual meetings tended to be check-ins/resource sharing on progress, accountability, and troubleshooting.

In March through June 2022, we interviewed 16 key staff members representing six foundations.[[2]](#footnote-2) Staff members were selected based on their operational roles within their respective foundations and were not necessarily regular participants in NEON meetings. This pool gave us context in which to explore how these respondents experience the realities of this work and the meanings they employ [(Rynes & Gephart, 2004)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?5jtUTg). We used a semistructured interview guide co-produced with NEON’s staff, allowing the approach to remain emergent and flexible [(Van Maanen, 1998)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?puUMPG). We organized our questions around the following themes (with optional follow-up prompts in parentheses):

1. Definitions
   1. How does your foundation define equity?
   2. What are the structures and systems of racism that your foundation has identified and are focused on? (Distinguish between equity/inclusion/justice/diversity, use of equity principles and connection to NEON’s conceptualization of equity principles)
2. Organizational identity: How have your foundation’s efforts to foster racial equity influenced the way you frame and communicate the organization’s work? For example, has this changed the vision, mission, and values of your foundation? Please share evidence/tell me how this came about. (Narrative change, changes in communication practices, internal discussions)
3. Organizational operations, processes, and strategies: How has your foundation’s pursuit of racial equity (in philanthropy) changed the operations of your foundation? Please share evidence. (Internal change processes, culture, indicators of progress, establishing a baseline, local data partner, strategies, timelines)
4. Community stakeholders and relationships
   1. How has your foundation’s pursuit of racial equity changed your foundation’s relationship or ways you work with various community stakeholders? For example, grantees or other peer civic institutions? What about with community members? (Active discussions with specific stakeholders, building trust, increasing participation, paying residents for time/expertise, shifting control of grant dollars to community members, fiscal agency granted to recipient organizations, primary sources of resistance)
   2. What are the responses from other funders?
   3. How has your adoption of equity principles changed your relationship with donors? Please share evidence. (Increasing donor participation, new opportunities for alignment with foundation’s focus on equity, attracting BIPOC donors)
5. Support structures
   1. What support structures/resources have helped your foundation refine your thinking and adapt practices?
   2. What are you doing differently as a result of your participation in NEON?
   3. What about participating in NEON has been most beneficial in advancing your work? (Impact on giving trends, challenges to meeting NEON’s expectations)

We supplemented our observations and interviews with a review of NEON documents, including presentations, media coverage, and prospectus. These observations and the review of internal documents allowed us to understand NEON’s goals and structures.

**Please place Table 1** Inventory of Foundation Activities **and Table 2** Alignment Within NEON

**about here**

**Analysis**

Our analysis proceeded in three steps: coding each activity, aligning it within the NEON framework, and identifying dimensions of equity work. NEON has a set of agreed-upon common actions: narratives, metrics, strategies, and goals. Guided by Corbin and Strauss’ (2014) approach, we began our analysis by coding each activity and assigned themes that were based on NEON’s common actions. We identified 49 distinct activities that foundations have carried out that reflect the equity work undertaken to support NEON’s policy goals. At least five foundations showed evidence of the same 19 activities. (See Table 1.)

In the next step we aligned foundation practices with the NEON framework. (See Table 2.) The most common alignment coalesced around strategies. We found 25 strategy-related activities, four of which were adopted by all six organizations in our interview sample. While three of the 25 activities were only found at one foundation, the remaining 18 were present in at least three foundations. The next largest area of alignment occurred around common narrative. Half the community foundations displayed evidence of all 12 concepts of which this theme comprises. Less alignment was apparent around both metrics and goals. While common metrics comprise 11 concepts, none of the foundations exhibited evidence of all of them. Common goals were reflected in three concepts, none of which were universally present. Given the lack of a shared definition, the lack of common goals and metrics across all participants is not surprising but does illustrate both gaps and challenges for small networks attempting to address systemic issues.

**Please place** **Figure 1** Dimensions of Equity Work **about here**

Finally, through axial coding — an examination of relationships between phenomena, context, conditions, and contexts ([Corbin & Strauss, 2014)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?kqsxYJ) — we found two dimensions along which the foundations’ specific activities could be mapped: expression (implicit/explicit) and focus (internal/external). (See Figure 1.) Explicit expression refers to the ways in which activities center, name, and directly address racial equity. Implicit expression refers to the ways in which activities are understood to be related to racial equity but not named as such. Implicit expression may imply general buy-in or consensus regarding addressing racism.

The second dimension, focus, differentiates activities with an internal focus, which emphasizes the well-being and development of the people within the foundation, from an external focus, which emphasizes the well-being, development, and empowerment of the community the foundation serves. For example, internally focused activities might include performance goals, performance management, and communities of learning within the organization. Externally focused activities might include resident-liaison positions, community conversations, and donor communities of learning.

We shared the findings from these interviews with NEON participants and Community Foundation Opportunity Network facilitators in March and August of 2022, providing an opportunity for the participants to provide feedback to the research team and reflect on what these findings meant for their work. Their receptive responses to our initial findings have subsequently informed our recommendations for other foundations and networks.

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# Key Findings

Together, Table 1, Figure 1, and Table 2 demonstrate the challenges of this work at both an organizational and network level. Table 1 shows the depth of alignment among common activities. Figure 1 displays this alignment graphically, underscoring the external nature of many of the foundations’ activities. Our analysis suggests that most of the activity to align foundation activity with NEON’s equity policy commitments focused on explicit expressions with an external focus. However, Table 2 demonstrates that members’ activities are scattered across the NEON commons. Most organizations show alignment for 40% of the activities mentioned in our interviews. However, organizations are not aligned around 60% of the work they are undertaking, including those actions relating to goals and metrics.

We identified four key findings that emerge from our analysis. We describe these findings in detail and discuss their implications for practice for individual community foundations and broader collective efforts.

1. *Locally Sensitive Narratives About Equity*

Early foundation activity focused on communicating a commitment to equity to external stakeholders, most notably residents and grantees, through the adoption of explicit language and publicizing commitments to equity. Generally, respondents’ definitions revolved around equity as the acknowledgement of providing opportunities to overcome inequalities caused by systemic barriers. Respondents often used the equality-versus-equity cartoon[[3]](#footnote-3)3 — three people of varying height using boxes to see a baseball game being played behind a fence — to describe their personal understanding of equity. As one respondent observed:

*My first thought when I think of equity is that … comic or cartoon that depicts the three kids looking over the fence, you know, with … boxes. … That speaks to me pretty well in … that equity is not equal in terms of resources and needs and what folks need in order to participate fully in our communities.*

While observing that NEON had supported “some internal conversations about how that [equity] would fit with our work in the community,” another respondent described a lack of shared definition:

*There’s no field knowledge or agreement on the definition of equity — how we measure movement and power building, how do we measure shift in power, how do — I mean, that doesn’t exist. It’s new and so we’re all struggling through it and working together to[ward] sort of a common framework going forward.*

Other respondents, however, noted that their foundations specifically named racism:

*We believe that racial inequities are a key driver for the challenges that we want to solve in the region …, and so we believe that unless we target racial equity, we won’t [be] able to have those outcomes. And we aim to be intersectional. So, while we are explicit about race, we also bring in other inequities around gender, disability, socioeconomic status, and other factors, and we see the connections between all of those.*

Localized definitions of equity have implications for foundation practice and the network.

* *Implication for foundation practice:* This loosely aligned approach to defining equity allowed the foundations to define issues of race and equity in their own communities in ways that are sensitive to local context. For example, staff from one foundation noted that race meant something different in their community in which no one racial/ethnic group is in the majority, whereas in another community with a large white majority population, equity was an issue of race and class. A third community focused on equity as an issue of historical oppression of marginalized cultures. However, failure to explicitly name racial equity makes goal-setting harder and may lead to organizational staffing, structuring, and resource allocation insufficient support the work.
* *Implication for the aligned-action network:* While this loose alignment to a shared goal of racial equity, which is inherent within NEON’s framework, provides for local responsiveness, it potentially dilutes a broader national commitment to racial equity, challenges collaborations with other racially oriented initiatives, and muddies the message to potential donors to NEON’s efforts. From a practical perspective, loose alignment hinders efforts to develop common metrics.

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### 2. Perceptions of Concerns About Donor Response to a Racial Equity Focus

Consistent with NEON’s emphasis on explicit narrative change, respondents described shifts in how they communicated their commitment to racial equity to the community. Though the message may have varied across communities, all foundations engaged in the following three outreach practices: publicizing racial equity efforts, promoting visibility of their collaborators, and providing opportunities for community conversations. However, only four foundations described actively engaging donors through emerging equity initiatives. Prioritizing commitment to “the community” over donor engagement may represent an emotional response and early efforts to demonstrate solidarity with the justice movement. Any delay in reaching out to donors may also reflect concerns about polarized reactions to the racial justice movement, as some foundations who did introduce anti-racism language faced questions and concerns from existing donors about how their support for these new initiatives would be seen by the community. As one foundation leader observed:

*I mean, this discussion around power shifting and power building, we’ve certainly got questions, but they haven’t been direct. Some of the questions have been around, you know, “If we invest in power shifting, does that power then point back at me as a donor or a corporation, or … some wealthy actor in the community?… And am I going to be seen as … a philanthropist but also the enemy at the same time if I’m investing in power shifting and power building?”*

In some instances, responses to these shifts went beyond expressions of concern, with some foundations losing donors because of their stated commitment to equity. But in other instances, efforts to engage new and existing donors in the equity work were successful:

*Sometimes we have seen our traditional community foundation work where people come in with kind of a set idea of where they want to give and how they want to give it, and when we have those conversations [about the equity work], we are able to … give them options. Sometimes they’re set in what they want to do, and we have to work to honor their wishes on that front. There’ve been others who have been pretty open to the concept and want to learn more and come with us as we go on this journey.*

However, equity work may have also presented new opportunities for support:

*We’re missing out on folks that we think actually want to learn with us if we didn’t do this [racial equity grantmaking]. And so, we did see some donors that were like, “Finally, you’re doing this! This is great! I’ve wanted to work with you, but now I’m excited that you’re actually making this move.” And then, we did not see a huge exodus … on it.*

* *Implication for foundation practice:*The lag between early commitments to the community and securing equity commitments from donors may create a lack of credibility for those foundations whose words and structures for community participation become symbolic and are not matched by changes in funding priorities and increased funding support for grassroots organizations and those led by people of color.
* *Implication for the aligned-action network:* Just as individual foundations need financial resources to pursue this work, so too does the aligned-action network. Network coordinators seeking donations may run into the same resistance their members face, weakening their ability to facilitate this work.

### Supporting Equity Commitments Through Formal Structures and Processes

All foundations mentioned having discussions on racism within their own foundation. This included foundation leadership championing diversity, equity, and inclusion values; the use of external DEI consultants; and the discussion of DEI goals in staff and board meetings. As noted earlier, not all the participating foundations explicitly named racism in their local commitment to equity. In part this reflects the social and political contexts in which the foundation works. However, as respondents noted, it may also reflect the challenges of having conversations that are explicit about racism within organizations and philanthropy. While at least half of the foundations emphasized the use of informal methods to recruit diverse staff, few foundations mentioned identifying systems of racism within their foundation, such as the use of incentive systems and performance management practices that sustain inequity (Amis et al., 2020). And while most foundations have supported staff learning opportunities through workshops and peer-learning groups and few had supported explicit conversations about implicit racism and biases in their organizations in 2020 and early 2021, the rapid rate of staff turnover in many foundations meant that new staff were often not part of the earlier journeys of racial learning.

Formal changes to foundations’ structures and processes lagged changes in language and practices oriented to external audiences. While most foundations had incorporated advisory or ad-hoc structures to engage residents, only half of the foundations had created a formal staff position to serve as a resident liaison. Similarly, many foundations began to center feedback from their grant applicants, grantees, and grantee beneficiaries to create more equitable grantmaking processes for subsequent grant cycles, allowing for more representation in grants for organizations rooted in communities of color. However, it is unclear if these grantmaking changes also encouraged inclusive participation in foundation decision-making by staff members from different programs and various positions. Finally, consistent with NEON’s focus on policy change supported by common metrics, with the encouragement from NEON, all foundations were in the process of evaluating their data structures to increase their capacity to better understand and address equity within their communities, with all foundations reporting having an existing data partner. However, no foundation had conducted an internal audit of its own equity values and practices.

* *Implication for foundation practice:*Limited attention to explicitly identifying implicit biases and changing internal structures and processes to support DEI poses many risks for foundations. Staff who were attracted to the foundation because of its commitment to stated principles of equity and justice may perceive that the work environment does not match the rhetoric. This risk may be accelerated during times of CEO and leadership transition if the foundation has not institutionalized these values in policies and structures.
* *Implication for the aligned-action network:* While NEON is committed to policy changes that support increased opportunity and the redistribution of economic, social, and political power, such change does not come without internal changes to members’ own practices and policies. Efforts to support peer learning through dialogue and mentoring can help facilitate internal changes by emphasizing the importance of being explicit about racial equity.

1. *The Values and Challenges of Aligned Networks and Collective Action*

Despite the competing commitments and often loose alignment with NEON, respondents identified many individual and organizational benefits to participating: NEON provided a space to create a common narrative and practice language and terminology associated with equity and race. Respondents reflected on how NEON also encouraged all foundations to rethink their philanthropic approaches to align to a similar model with one another. Because change may create suspicion in the community foundation field, participants felt that NEON provided cover for their work, enabling them to point out to key stakeholders that we “are not alone” in our commitment to racial justice:

*It was just great to learn, “Oh, we’re all working on this. Oh, you’re doing that, too? Oh, how are you doing that?” And that’s important at the [foundation] because our board loves to know …: “What are the other community foundations doing?” And in a lot of ways, we don’t resemble a lot of other community foundations; nonetheless, it gives us that, you know, we can go back and say, “What we know is that there are at least five other community foundations that we interface with on a regular basis that are also doing X, Y, or Z,” and that’s really important to our board for decision-making purposes.*

Finally, NEON members recognized the value of collective efforts to seek large-scale external funding to support member capacity building and funding for policy work. And more broadly, participants increasingly recognized that addressing structural barriers to equity requires both local and national solutions, which can best be achieved through collective action.

However, respondents from all six foundations also believed that aligning actual practices with NEON’s commons may be difficult to achieve. Respondents acknowledged that their foundation’s participation in the NEON network was one of many competing priorities and their commitment to NEON was often crowded out by other work responsibilities. Only two NEON members had hired a person to coordinate NEON activities. As a result, NEON work fell as one more job responsibility. NEON members, like many other foundations, were facing high turnover rates, including CEO and staff transitions, which limited the ability to institutionalize values and new practices. In addition, only one foundation CEO regularly attended NEON meetings and participated in task forces, raising questions about organizational commitment to and capacity to align with the NEON framework. Some respondents also observed that NEON’s focus on policy impact and outcomes missed the opportunity to provide support for the hard emotional work that needs to be done to address structural racism and codesign practices to support these initiatives.

* *Implication for foundation practice:* The lack of designated liaison positions within participating foundations to support participation in NEON created many practical tensions for staff who balanced NEON commitments with their everyday responsibilities. It may have also weakened the alignment between the NEON frameworks and foundation goals.
* *Implication for the aligned-action network:* Aligned-action network facilitators need to be cognizant of the demands they are placing on their members, as well as the resources needed for foundations to carry out network-oriented aims.

**Recommendations**

Our findings suggest the following recommendations for foundations and similar networks.

* For foundations committed to racial equity:

1. Clearly define what equity means for your foundation and community.
2. Conduct an equity audit that assesses implicit and explicit alignment between foundation values and practices.
3. Based upon the audit, formalize policies, practices, and structures that support DEI within the foundation and align external commitments with internal practices.
4. Seek to build buy-in from donors for equity-related work but be willing to risk losing donors whose values do not align with the equity values of the community foundation (Kania et al., 2009).
5. If engaged in a collaborative, empower a broker tasked with — and resourced to — serve as a liaison between the network and the foundation. This person could coordinate membership responsibilities; facilitate communication of network goals, narratives, strategies, and metrics to their foundation, and report back to the network on organizational activities.

* For networks committed to racial equity:

1. A focus on policy change should be accompanied by support for individual level emotional labor and redesign of participant organizational practices.
2. Create clear guidelines that clarify minimum organizational alignment necessary for cohort membership, including commitment to be an anti-racist organization, supported by equitable and inclusive practices in human resources and board development, grantmaking, donor recruitment and mobilization, including donor advised funds, communication and resident engagement, and evaluation and decision-making.
3. Invest in capacity building for network members to support not only informal peer learning, but also organizational capacity building. Foundation policy work to close gaps in economic, social, and political opportunities must begin with inclusive and equitable foundation practices and processes.

# Closing Thoughts

Through this inductive, iterative process, our case sheds light on how community foundations and networks of foundations can shape their approaches to dismantling systemic, institutionalized racism in philanthropy. Networks can serve as vehicles for innovation. Amid polarized political and social environments, aligned-action networks can unite members around a collective goal by creating both tight and loose couplings. However, the tensions between shared aims and local contexts present challenges. Unless foundations connect narrative to change internal practices and recognition of implicit biases, foundation efforts could be deemed performative, done for appearances’ sake without leading to significant change. These activities could even perpetuate rather than alleviate inequities, leading to what Villanueva (2018) argues as philanthropic reinforcement of injustices.

For many foundations, especially those in our study, this work is just the beginning. So, too, is the research in this area. This study highlights examples of the difficult internal work that community foundations undertake as agents of social change. This study also points to an increased need to under power foundations — how and to what lengths foundations will redistribute economic and social power to residents. In addition, important questions remain about how public foundations balance values and interests with donors with broader commitments to racial justice. While foundation staff may implicitly value racial equity and inclusion, the field would benefit from a greater understanding of when and how foundations’ implicit commitments are made explicit through practice and alternatively when explicit verbal commitments to residents acknowledge the implicit racism within organizational practices. Finally, questions about the value of collective work arise. Beyond common strategies and approaches — how do networks benefit members — philanthropy practice would benefit from an increased understanding of how network participants can balance the costs and benefits of network participation.

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**FIGURE 1** Dimensions of Equity Work

**A screenshot of a computer screen

Description automatically generated**

**TABLE 1** Inventory of Foundation Activities

|  | **Concept** | **Total** | **Connection to NEON Strategic Framework** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1 | Community assessments of foundation’s progress in achieving equity-related outcomes | 5 | Common Metrics |
| 2 | Racial equity-focused education/training | 6 | Common Narrative |
| 3 | Community-informed strategic direction or plans | 6 | Common Strategies |
| 4 | Additional work-support structures to encourage racial equity learning (e.g., affinity groups) | 5 | Common Strategies |
| 5 | Maximized internal communication processes on equity-related progress (e.g., emails and newsletters) | 5 | Common Strategies |
| 6 | Mutually beneficial relationships reflecting norms prioritizing racial equity | 5 | Common Goals |
| 7 | Leadership development opportunities for community partners and leaders from communities of color | 5 | Common Strategies |
| 8 | Collecting and prioritizing feedback from applicants/grant beneficiaries for funding cycles | 5 | Common Metrics |
| 9 | Seeking intentional engagement with residents | 6 | Common Strategies |
| 10 | Community-led advisory board/group with decision-making abilities | 6 | Common Strategies |
| 11 | Assessing collaboration results and choosing the necessary next step (e.g., disengagement with a donor/funder/partner) | 5 | Common Strategies |
| 12 | Space for community conversations with information sharing on new initiatives and feedback seeking (e.g., coffee hours, town halls) | 6 | Common Strategies |
| 13 | Participation in work groups, committees, or task forces with other organizational leaders to routinely discuss race in organizations | 5 | Common Narrative |
| 14 | Explicit language in communications (e.g., peer conversations, media statements) | 5 | Common Narrative |
| 15 | Open boundaries and flexibility in redesign processes (e.g., redefining task forces) | 5 | Common Strategies |
| 16 | Executive-level leaders (e.g., CEO, VP) championing DEI values | 5 | Common Narrative |
| 17 | Publicized efforts (e.g., press releases, regular public meetings, public forums) | 6 | Common Narrative |
| 18 | Promoting visibility of collaborative groups | 6 | Common Narrative |

**TABLE 2** Alignment Within NEON

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Theme** | **Number  of Concepts\*** | **Number of Foundations Exhibiting All** | **Maximum Number of Foundations** | **Minimum Number of Foundations** |
| Common Goals | 3 | 0 | 5 | 1 |
| Common Narrative | 12 | 3 | 6 | 3 |
| Common Metrics | 11 | 0 | 5 | 1 |
| Common Strategies | 25 | 4 | 6 | 1 |

\*Sums to 51 because two concepts were coded as two themes each.

1. See https://www.mobilitypartnership.org [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. While we secured participation from the community foundations, the collaborative could not accommodate our external request, due in part to logistical challenges its members face in coordinating schedules for their own needs. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 3 See https://interactioninstitute.org/illustrating-equality-vs-equity/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)