



Commentary by Rip Rapson:

From listening to action: The Kresge Foundation Responds to Grantees' Assessment of the Foundation's Responsiveness, Transparency and Effectiveness

Nov. 18, 2015

The Kresge Foundation enlisted the Center for Effective Philanthropy in the spring of 2014 to conduct a Grantee Perception Report (GPR). The report, which is compiled from a comprehensive “customer satisfaction” survey, is widely commissioned by foundations to gather actionable feedback from grantees and declined applicants and to promote transparency both inside a particular foundation and in the philanthropic sector.

The latest survey represented the third time in the past decade that Kresge has participated in the GPR. Two prior surveys – administered in 2007 and 2011 – were conducted during periods of enormous change at the foundation. In both, the feedback we received was invaluable to the recalibration of our internal processes and external relations.

This most recent GPR report is equally rich. Drawing on the responses of more than 400 anonymous participants, it plotted Kresge among the aggregate data from 23 peer foundations, as well as a full set of nearly 300 foundations that have also commissioned the report. The results are highly constructive, pointing to a great number of areas of substantial strength, while underscoring other areas that can be improved.

Kresge's Perceived Areas of Strength

The respondents' feedback indicates that Kresge's particular strength lies in programmatic strategy and execution and in the impact of our social investments practice. Kresge scored favorably among our peers in our perceived impact on our grantees' fields, on public policy and on the grantees organizations.

Grantees also noted that they valued the intensity and effectiveness of non-monetary assistance provided by the foundation, including participating in Kresge-hosted convenings and having access to networking opportunities. The survey recognized a substantial uptick in these activities since 2011.

We are particularly proud of these results. These comments reinforce our core beliefs about how we should approach our programmatic priorities, including:

- The centrality of enabling non-profit partners to define the tools they believe will best advance their mission –from operating support, project support, technical assistance or other forms of capacity-building support, loans or any number of other forms of assistance;
- The need to embrace our non-profit partners’ pursuit of public policy change, whether through research, communications, advocacy or participation in networks;
- The imperative of taking risks commensurate with the magnitude of the challenges we seek to confront, both by pushing the boundaries of our own strategies and by supporting that orientation among our non-profit partners;
- The desirability of working at the intersection of sectors and disciplines, recognizing the reality of the interrelationships among complex economic, political, social and environmental systems.

Setting on a Path of Improvement

On the other hand, the report identified a number of areas in which Kresge fell below our 2011 results and lagged our peers. In particular, our grantees reported that we could improve the clarity and consistency of our communications and urged us to improve the quality of our relationships with them.

Both concerns are vitally important, and we took them seriously. We broke the issues into digestible pieces and formed workgroups composed of representatives from every Kresge program and administrative function to develop actionable recommendations for improvement.

Over several months, the workgroup members conducted extensive internal interviews to assess how Kresge’s organizational behavior mapped against the GPR findings, tracing the path grantseekers follow as they move through our grant application, approval, implementation and evaluation phases. The workgroups also studied best practices of other foundations.

The resulting report advanced some two dozen recommendations – some that can be implemented immediately and some that will require longer-term commitment – to better nurture grantee relationships and communicate more clearly internally and externally. I’ve accepted each and every one. They range from simplifying and clarifying the program descriptions that appear on our website to updating grant agreements to more effectively help grantseekers self-determine if their work aligns with our six program strategies.

We’ve created an aggressive timetable for the implementation of each of recommendation. Some are near completion. For example, we will include fully updated program descriptions on the new *Kresge.org* website that will launch in the coming weeks. Others will be ready to unveil in the next month or two, such as retooling our grant agreements to ensure expectations are clear around our reporting and learning and evaluation guidelines. And the remainder will be completed by the spring of 2016.

On behalf of The Kresge Foundation Board of Trustees and our entire staff, thank you for taking the time to provide such constructive feedback – both the compliments and the critiques. Your willingness to help us improve is an indispensable contribution to our ability to realize the mission of our founder, Sebastian S. Kresge, to advance human progress and contribute to the expansion of opportunity in America’s cities.

With best wishes,

Rip Rapson