Hanging a Question Mark

WHAT WE STAND FOR — AND WHAT WE STAND AGAINST

By Rip Rapson
President and CEO

The Kresge Foundation seeks to advance opportunities for low-income people in America’s cities. That commitment stems from the belief that the challenges confronting cities — deepening racial fault lines, stagnant economic mobility, accelerating climate change, severe disparities in educational and health outcomes, calcified patterns of neighborhood disinvestment — interact and intertwine to fence off meaningful opportunity for far too many people.

It is a consummately human tendency to attack these problems in ways in which we’re most familiar. Yet, the urgency, severity and complexity of the challenges cities face require that we move into less familiar and comfortable terrain. So, we take with good measure the sage advice of humanitarian Bertrand Russell, who said, “In all affairs, it’s a healthy thing, now and then, to hang a question mark on the things you have long taken for granted.”

For more than 80 years, the foundation provided challenge grants for capital projects. Some 12 years ago, we began a pivot away from that approach — a pivot born of a conversation between our trustees Elaine Rosen and Lee Bollinger, who were co-chairing the board’s search for a successor to our distinguished and long-serving president John Marshall. After a first round of candidate interviews, Lee turned to Elaine to suggest that the foundation needed to elevate its aspirations — to migrate from practices that had become narrow and calcified toward approaches that held promise of penetrating the defining issues of our time. In a word, Lee suggested that we look to Russell and “hang a question mark” on both what we took aim at and how.

Elaine agreed, setting in motion the fundamental long-term recalibration of how The Kresge Foundation would fulfill its founder’s directive to “promote human progress.”

We began by establishing six programmatic areas and retooling every dimension of support necessary to operationalize them — human resources, finance, communications, grants management and otherwise. From the outset, we committed to four principles: taking an integrative, long-term view; embracing risks commensurate with the magnitude of the challenges
we sought to address; developing a more complete toolbox; and addressing the root causes of disparities facing low-income people. The changes proceeded quickly, accompanied by a deepening commitment to our hometown of Detroit and the creation of a Social Investment Practice to supplement our grantmaking with loans, guarantees and other financial instruments. But some six years in, another trustee, Irene Hirano, precipitated our next iteration of strategy. At a board retreat, she cloaked within a compliment a deceptively simple question: “Our six programs are clear and effective, but what makes us more than a holding company?”

Talk about hanging a question mark. To answer the question, we had to identify what unified our work — what principle could and should animate every part of the organization. The answer around which we coalesced was urban opportunity: using the full spectrum of the foundation’s resources to pursue the dismantling of the structural obstacles to equitable opportunity in American cities. We would create in their place pathways to full participation in the social and economic mainstream.

The implications of crystallizing our aspirations in these terms was both straightforward and multifaceted. On one hand, each of our programs and the Social Investment Practice would be defined by their progress in reducing urban disparities. On the other hand, the interbraided nature of those disparities required an interbraided set of responses.

We accordingly took three fundamental steps. First, we created an American Cities Practice to arc across our six program teams and thread through them, identifying investment, convening, research and other approaches to take aim at enhancing structures of urban opportunity across America.

Second, we elevated the centrality of our Social Investment Practice. Rather than standing apart as a separate node of activities, it would work hand-in-glove with the program teams to develop investment instruments advancing those teams’ priorities.

And third, we underscored the desirability — indeed, the necessity — of working across disciplines. Just as people in cities don’t live their lives in vertical silos, neither could Kresge rely exclusively on hermetically sealed vertical funding silos.

These three changes added up to a reverse-engineering form of problem-solving — deconstructing a challenge and its underlying
drivers so as to assemble the appropriate combination of disciplinary strategies, talents and funding tools in correct doses at the right cadence. Each challenge requires that we hang a different set of question marks — that we take a different perspective. I invite you to spend time with the remainder of this report to see some compelling examples of this approach.

The Primacy of Values

Breaking from our safe and secure moorings has never been more important than in the current environment. In the wake of the November 2016 election, Kresge has been forced to look inward, to interrogate our values.

The foundation’s privileged position carries with it elevated responsibility to ensure that there is no equivocation about what Kresge stands for, and what we stand against:

- We stand for the pursuit of truth — not for fealty to the indefensible or depreciation of reasoned discourse.
- We stand for opportunity structures that dismantle the persistent and pervasive racial, economic and political barriers that impede pathways to equality and justice — not for the enshrinement of those barriers in public policy ... in the perpetuation of racial and ethnic division ... or in the corrosion of compassion for the least fortunate among us.
- We stand for the stewardship of our shared destiny and the promotion of structures of mutual support — not for a machinery of feigned outrage and continual vilification that undermines confidence in our most fundamental democratic institutions.

- We stand for the power of creative problem-solving that calls on community wisdom, intergenerational exchange and respect for difference — not for the comfort of facile judgments, bombastic certitude and rhetorical hyperbole about complex, interbraided problems.
- We stand for the embrace of every individual’s inherent dignity, worth and decency — not for a denigration of those whose skin pigment, gender, physical conditions, sexual orientation or faith differs from our own.
- And we stand for an abiding optimism about the possibilities of the human spirit — not for the dismal brew of a calculating and cruel cynicism placed in service of self-advancement.

Those are our values. But the true test of those values is how we behave when they come under assault. In those cases, we intend to be guided by three ethical imperatives of action.

First, we must bear witness.

It’s understandable for community workers, nonprofit organizations and philanthropists to question whether their voices matter in an environment saturated with misinformation. Generated with calculating precision and distributed with bot-powered efficiency, wave upon wave of social media fictions and public distortions create an intellectual flotsam and jetsam intended to obscure the real issues of the day. It is imperative that we not be distracted, let alone silenced, by these diversionary feints. Our collective voices do matter — enormously.

More than ever, we must encourage our partners to give voice to their values — our values — for a just and humane society. We must continue to tell the stories of ordinary people and exceptional
The Memphis Riverfront Development Corp. is revitalizing its Mississippi riverfront, which has been a long underutilized asset.

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation’s pre-development work for pilot projects demonstrates how using innovative finance mechanisms can advance green infrastructure solutions in low-income communities.

The Center for Good Food Purchasing encourages public institutions to consider local economies, health, a valued workforce, animal welfare and environmental sustainability in food production.

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organizations working in dignity to improve the economic, social and political conditions of community life. In the surfacing and amplification of those stories, we deny the power of an insidious, nascent sense of defeatism to smother authenticity and conviction.

Second, we must create space to demonstrate our courage.

Libraries, community centers, social service agencies, places of worship and countless other places of public gathering and sanctuary already play a central role in safeguarding individual and group expression and in affirming the power of informal networks of mutual assistance. Their importance will only grow as threatened and disempowered communities look for physical, spiritual and emotional safe harbor and support.

We need to fortify these and other parts of the civic membrane that enable us to hold acts of courage. These are the organizations closest to those most affected by injustice. They are vehicles to amplify community voice and build community agency. As the demands on them multiply, we must support them generously and without hesitation.

Third, we need to forge alliances around the nonnegotiable.

Although foundations can’t lobby or advocate for legislation, we can help build and strengthen the alliances necessary to advance those truths of equity, fairness and justice that we know to be inviolable:

- That the machinery of public decision-making must be calibrated to ensure that city residents have full agency not only to engage in, but also shape, the policies, practices and investments that create the map of neighborhood life.
That every city in America must play a role in, and reap the benefits of, the evolution of equitable, inclusive regional growth and prosperity.

That the arts can refract the infinite varieties of creativity and cultural identity into a kaleidoscope of community-building possibilities.

That unequal educational attainment is an injustice no civilized society can tolerate.

That climate change is a social justice issue.

That moving upstream to eradicate the social, economic and environmental determinants of health disparities is an essential predicate of our nation’s approach to public health.

That the work of human-serving organizations needs to be recognized as moving beyond charity to providing the essential supports that families require to achieve economic mobility and social well-being.

Institutions like Kresge must accordingly recommit to ensuring that individuals, organizations and movements possess the tools they need to organize and mobilize, to educate and advocate, to rebuild social capital and strengthen citizen-based problem-solving.

Fortifying the Architecture

Our concepts of risk and safety have been turned on their head. Acts that were once risky are now elementary and insufficient. Fundamental democratic norms that were once safe are too often trivialized as transitory or out of touch.

I choose, however, to view this moment as a time to adjust our perspective, not to make our peace with a new normal. It is a time to reassess, recalibrate and recommit. The nonprofit and philanthropic sectors have spent decades trying to create and assemble enduring and resilient building blocks of opportunity and justice. Although that architecture is still incomplete, we have nevertheless created a complex, dynamic and durable infrastructure to fit together those building blocks in an increasingly coherent, impactful way. This is no time to put down our trowels and mortar. We need to keep building and rebuilding. Even when the building inspector tells us we don’t have a permit — even when the demolition crew drives onto the site.

My father was an architect and a planner. In this climate, we all need to be. We all need to take a stand for our values and fortify the architecture of opportunity and justice.

For nearly a century, through changing times and shifting political tides, The Kresge Foundation has continually adjusted our perspective and recommitted to carrying out Sebastian Kresge’s directive to promote human progress. Today, that commitment is deeper than ever. By hanging a question mark on how we do our work, we open new possibilities for the ways we fulfill that commitment.

These challenges aren’t going away any time soon. Neither are we.

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