



Commentary by Rip Rapson:

## **The Kresge Foundation Implements New Procedures to Further Boost Responsiveness to Grantees**

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The Kresge Foundation recently implemented 13 new procedures and protocols to enhance our responsiveness and effectiveness with grantees and applicants. These newly established practices were put in place after a foundation-wide response to feedback from grantees and declined applicants collected in a 2014 Grantee Perception Report (GPR) independently administered through the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP).

The GPR is the leading “customer satisfaction” survey in the philanthropic sector, and Kresge has commissioned it three times since 2008. Our most recent results show the foundation continually on a path to improvement. The results underscored the positive impact that grantees perceive we are having on their fields of work, on the places in which we work, and on the organizations themselves. But the results also noted a number of areas in which Kresge could be doing a better job – in particular, enhancing the clarity and consistency of our individual communications and improving the quality of our interactions with applicants and grantees.

We have always taken the GPR seriously, and this version was no different. What was different, though, was the impetus it provided for us to assess possible improvements along the full spectrum of applicant and grantee interactions with the foundation. That, in turn, necessitated an effort unprecedented in our shop to engage each and every corner of the organization in evaluating the input and formulating roadmaps to improvement. We began what would be an almost year-long process by forming a task force comprising representatives from every department to unpackage the report finding-by-finding, map those findings against dozens of staff interviews, and stack up the results against a scan of best practices at other foundations.

The result was a suite of 26 actionable recommendations, which we distilled to 13 priorities. We then created

implementation groups to identify specific policies, procedures and practices that would animate each of the 13 priorities.

We further distilled those into four broad buckets:

- **Clarity** – We heard loud and clear a desire for clear and consistent explanations of our six program strategies and funding methods. Each Kresge program area has subsequently simplified its program description, further detailed its investment focus areas, identified the types of work it seeks to fund (and provide examples of work it does not fund) and explained our funding process. This information is conveniently located on our updated website, *Kresge.org*. We have also grown our External Affairs and Communications team, enabling us more regularly to share information about the foundation with grantees and partners through a biweekly digital newsletter, program-specific communications and more active social media channels.
- **Transparency** – The GPR feedback helped us view our grant application and processing machinery through the eyes of our grantees. This experience encouraged us to use simplified, less jargony, and more straight-forward language for grant agreements and decline letters, as well as for our grant report template. We also introduced into our grant application and grant report documents requests for information that can enlighten our emergent Learning & Evaluation practice.
- **Responsiveness** – We adopted response-time protocols across the life-cycle of a grant – whether general inquiries, letters of inquiry, or proposals and whether formal or informal.
- **Norms** – One of the great benefits of the GPR is that it triggers internal inquiries that often excavate issues that may not have been directly implicated by the findings, but that indirectly contribute to them. One example was the break-down in grantee communications that can occur when a Kresge program officer leaves the foundation or transfers to another role, leaving the portfolio in the hands of others – and creating understandable anxiety on the part of a grantee. We concluded that we needed to establish a formal transition process in those circumstances.

The reaffirmation the GPR survey provided that there is always room for continuous improvement led our task force to recommend, and ultimately formalize, a real-time survey of perception feedback from a sample of our grantees every six months. These annual spring and fall surveys will be much shorter in length than the full tri-annual GPR, but will provide our grantees and partners the ability to provide more frequent feedback with the same level of anonymity. For Kresge, the reports will offer a “pulse” to measure how our actions to improve clarity, transparency, responsiveness and norms are taking hold. And perhaps even more importantly, they will allow us to be nimble and responsive, enabling us to recalibrate in smaller doses and at shorter intervals.

This is the most active response to grantee perception input that Kresge has undertaken. I’m proud of our staff for embracing the feedback with a sense of openness and possibility. I’m humbled that our grantees feel it sufficiently important to provide feedback to our organization about how we can be better partners. And I’m excited to think that the changes we’ve introduced will, in fact, make Kresge a more responsive, transparent and effective organization.

With best wishes,

*Rip Rapson*