Case Study:
A Work in Progress on Racial Equity at The Kresge Foundation

The InDEEP Initiative
Keecha Harris and Associates, Inc.

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Since 2016, Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity in Environmental Philanthropy (InDEEP) has supported environmental grantmakers in cultivating opportunities to increase funding for organizations led by people of color and strengthen grantees across the field to create a more diverse and inclusive environmental movement. It does this by providing racial equity and social justice training on how to get started, shifting the portfolio, building pathways for more equitable funding, leadership development, and the cultivation of a network of peers for support and peer-to-peer learning.

As part of its evaluation practices and in the spirit of sharing solid racial equity practices with the greater field, InDEEP has engaged with some of its funding foundations, past participants and thought leaders in environmental philanthropy to create a series of published articles on the work that's currently being done and the outlook for the future.

The InDEEP Theory of Change

InDEEP's Theory of Change postulates that involvement in a program like InDEEP (including participation in activities like a community of practice, race caucuses, sectoral affinity groups, and tailored technical assistance) can lead to specific individual outcomes that promote organizational change, which can pave the way for sector-wide change around racial equity.

A central component of the Theory of Change is organizational readiness for racial equity, inclusion and diversity.

The Kresge Foundation

For this case study, InDEEP team members interviewed four staff members at the Kresge Foundation, an investing funder in the initiative.

The Kresge Foundation is a private, national foundation that works to expand opportunities in America's cities through grantmaking and social investing in arts and culture, education, environment, health, human services and community development in Detroit. The Foundation is committed to advancing racial and social equity.

In 2016, the Kresge Foundation launched the pilot Fostering Urban Equitable Leadership program (FUEL). They provide support to nonprofits addressing equity issues through a capacity-building program focusing specifi-

THE KRESGE FOUNDATION

cally on leadership development through a racial equity lens.

This was the first time the Foundation invested in the leadership of grantees across all six program areas and the first time they made investments in leadership with an intentional focus on racial equity.

In April 2019, leaders from the Kresge Foundation announced plans to invest 25 percent of its U.S. assets under management in female and diverse-owned firms by 2025.

The four team members interviewed, in order of seniority, were:

- David Fukuzawa, managing director of the Health Program; joined Kresge in 2000
- Lois DeBacker, managing director of the Environment Program; joined Kresge in 2008
- Chris Kabel, senior fellow in the Executive Office; joined Kresge in 2013
- Katie Byerly, program officer in the Health Program; joined Kresge in 2016

"I feel fortunate in that I work at a foundation where there is a pretty sizeable cohort of people who are not only comfortable having conversations about racial equity, but also feel they're necessary," Kabel said.

"I feel like I work in a place where we are constantly challenging underlying assumptions of how the philanthropic sector is supposed to work and how our organization in particular can work better."

A personal journey: The importance of recognizing historical disparities

The first two sections of InDEEP's Theory of Change involve personal change through involvement in special-

David Fukuzawa   Lois DeBacker   Chris Kabel   Katie Byerly

ized programming designed to educate and inspire personal reflection on racial equity issues in the field.

Each of the staff members interviewed expressed the importance of gaining a personal understanding of racism, injustice and racial equity. This involved a combination of personal experience and training.

"There's a personal connection for me just because my parents and grandparents were interned in camps during World War II, and it was only in my adolescence that I began to understand the significance," Fukuzawa said.

"Over the years, there have been more and more things that have come to light about my family that made me realize just how unjust and racialized a lot of it was."

Fukuzawa's understanding deepened even more when he moved to Detroit and began seeing the everyday impacts of racism on the children he worked with in the community.

"This is not a subjective matter," he said. "You can certainly have a subjective response to the racism you see or a moral response to the fact that things are so unequal and not just unequal, but the reasons for the inequality are not just moral. They're factual."

Kabel agreed about the glaring nature of racial inequities and the need to address them.

"I don't see the alternative, frankly. I know there are people who either ignore racial inequities or deny they exist, but both from a health perspective and from an environmental perspective, it's so glaring," he said.

"It's so prominent. It's so in your face that I don't feel I have any choice other than to address them head-on." For DeBacker, having access to anti-racism training allowed her to better grasp the barriers people of color face.

"The conversations I had with people in that training helped me really experience in my gut the personal pain and personal struggles and personal injustice that my friends and colleagues had experienced because of their race," she said. "We currently live in a world where way too many life outcomes are correlated with people's race. That's profoundly unfair.

"Everyone deserves the same opportunities in life, and the ability to achieve their full potential. Racism is an incredible barrier to that."

Byerly said the 'aha' moment in her racial equity journey was framed around a quote from Indigenous Australian activist Lilla Watson: "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

She said, over time, she has come to realize the ways her experience as a southern white woman has been shaped by the "social construction of whiteness and how white privilege and anti-blackness has played out." She now strives to view her work through a justice lens.

"It's really being able, as a white woman, to show up in work around justice and equity and figure out how to participate in a way that contributes and that doesn't unintentionally perpetuate biases that have been there in the past."

A work in progress: Leadership buy-in, capacity building set the stage

For change to happen at the Kresge Foundation and in the larger environmental philanthropy sector, DeBacker said, this personal work was vital. This also is a crucial element of InDEEP's Theory of Change, where personal change comes before organizational and sectoral change.

"I really firmly believe you can't do the work as an organization unless you've done the work as human beings," she said. "You need a core group of committed individuals who will mutually support one another as change agents."

It's also important that the burden of creating change not fall solely on people of color, she said. At the same time, those seeking to create change must be mindful of "who has the right to express opinions" and that "nobody gets to speak for somebody else."

Byerly said one of the steps Kresge has taken that she's found helpful has been striving to create shared language around racial equity work. The existing staff underwent racial equity training, and the foundation is working to include this as part of onboarding for new staff.

"You can't show up to talk about climate change adaptation and mitigation if you don't know what those words mean," she said. "I think the same is true when talking about racial equity. There has to be some shared language to really deepen the conversation. I think that's a big piece of normalizing conversations around race."

As part of the same training, the foundation also created its KORE (Kresge Operationalizing Racial Equity) Team, a group of approximately 20 staff members who examined what racial equity would look like in practice across all areas of the organization.

Kabel noted that across Kresge's seven programs and Social Investment Practice, racial equity work has, to this point, been pretty much on a program-by-program basis, but the foundation has recently adopted an all-encompassing, enterprise-level racial equity statement.

Even though it's a work in progress, the organization already has seen progress.

"Let's say we have an open RFP or initiative, and we get 200 proposals," he said. "One of the things we always look at is, if an organization says that they are working

Leaders from The Kresge Foundation have committed to invest 25 percent of its U.S. assets under management in female and diverse-owned firms by 2025.

in a low-income community of color, is their leadership reflective of that community? Is their board reflective of that community? Do they have credibility in that community? Who are their partners? Are they grounded in that community?"

If the answers to these questions are not satisfactory, Kabel said, the organization that submitted the proposal is unlikely to be funded.

"We'd much rather fund organizations that are reflective of the communities that we care about, in their leadership and their board and their mission," he said.

Fukuzawa said another step forward has been cross-collaboration among the Health and Environment teams, with a focus on communities of color working at the intersection of climate change, health, and equity and in partnership with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

"My hope is that that will send a signal to the field about why this is an important new avenue, and our hope is that many of these sites we fund will become new voices in the field that hopefully can get some traction and attention from the greater environmental community," he said.

What's possible: Sector-level change through an assets-based view of racial equity

According to InDEEP's Theory of Change model, the ongoing efforts of individuals within the Kresge Foundation, along with the foundation's emphasis on providing consistent racial equity training for its whole staff, pave the way for changes across the organization and can have a wider impact across the sector.

> **"We all need the willingness to excavate beliefs that we might not even think we have but that, because we live in a society that has been diffused with racially discriminatory ideas and narratives, it's inevitable that people absorb those at some point in their life. And you've got to do the hard work of finding where those exist within your psyche and excavating them and dismantling them, replacing them with something positive."**
>
> *Chris Kabel*
> *The Kresge Foundation*

Byerly said she's excited about the progress she has seen at Kresge but also eager for the opportunity to do more. She said prioritizing funding organizations led by people of color is a great start, but she believes philanthropy can go several steps further.

"Most institutional philanthropy is based off money that was accumulated, wealth that was accumulated off the exploitation of land and labor," she said. "Now a lot of institutional philanthropies are trying to deal with issues that have been created by the exploitation of land and labor, while our endowments are still invested in the continued exploitation of land and labor.

"There are bigger things than the $100,000 grant that I'm making to an organization led by people of color. I see the investment as a ripple, I see it as a piece of the work to build a movement.

"But there are larger systemic and structural issues that call into question how foundations are either perpetuating those systems or confronting them and see it as something important and essential as a place to push."

DeBacker also expressed optimism at the progress that has been made while noting that conversations and changes must continue to happen.

"A lot of our staff feel this very deeply in their hearts, in their lived experience, in their soul," she said. "I think that we have in our culture a tension between people who feel and understand the urgency and people who think of course it's the right thing to do. We've kind of stirred up ourselves as a culture, with differing levels of appreciation for the urgency and the necessity.

"I think we're sort of all in favor of moving on racial equity, but it still means very different things to different people within this organization. That's a source of tension that we need to work our way through."

Fukuzawa and Kabel both emphasized the need to listen harder, both to people in philanthropy who are having conversations around racial equity and to people of color who are out in the communities most affected by racial-based disparities or who are leading the organizations that are working in those communities.

"We all need the willingness to excavate beliefs that we might not even think we have but that, because we live in a society that has been diffused with racially discriminatory ideas and narratives, it's inevitable that people absorb those at some point in their life," Kabel said. "And you've got to do the hard work of finding where those exist within your psyche and excavating them and dismantling them, replacing them with something positive."

That also means having a willingness to hear different ideas on the way progress will be made.

"Part of the listening to the organizations we're working with is not just hearing sad, weepy stories of oppression, but understanding their ideas about solutions because I think the environmental movement has to understand that this is not simply going to be won by some huge landmark policy change," Fukuzawa said.

"It has to happen all over the country at a community level as well. And in fact, that may be the only way to get to the truly big policy change on the national level, to rack up these victories across the country and state by state by state."