

The Foundation Review

A publication of the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University

15th Anniversary Author Roundtable Synthesis

The Author Roundtable was held on Feb. 15, 2024.

by **Domenica Trevor**

To mark the 15th anniversary of the founding of *The Foundation Review*, a group of esteemed contributors were invited to share their reflections on the evolution of philanthropy over the last 15 years and assess the journal's role in shaping practices across the field. The work of these authors represent the most downloaded and viewed articles from *The Foundation Review*. Housed at the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University and the nation's first peer-reviewed journal in philanthropy, the journal's mission is to share evaluation approaches and results, tools, and knowledge about the sector to improve grantmaking practice and support foundation efforts toward greater impact on the creation of a more equitable society.

In her welcome to members of the Author Roundtable, Hanh Cao Yu, *The Foundation Review's* new editor-in-chief of special issues, spoke to the contribution of philanthropy to social change, various critiques of the field, and the importance of a long-term approach to addressing root causes of inequality. And she acknowledged the accomplishments of founding editor Teresa Behrens, who retired this year: "This journal represents a trustworthy and experienced source of peer-based knowledge." The 15th anniversary of *The Foundation Review*, Cao Yu noted, "written by and for foundation staff and boards and by those who have had extensive experience in philanthropy ..., provides an opportunity to reflect upon the strengths of the journal and where we still need to go."

As the Roundtable participants examined the impact *The Foundation Review* has had on philanthropy and its practitioners and discussed the issues most important to bring to the forefront in the years ahead, a number of themes emerged:

Philanthropy and Systems Transformation

- "We're in a polycrisis," **Michael Quinn Patton** warned. "And the foundation world is still going on as if it's business as usual," failing to "come to grips" with endemic violence, vast inequality, glaring weaknesses in public health systems, and other global threats. He

emphasized the need for foundations to work collectively and align their trajectories toward addressing these fundamental issues, moving away from traditional program-based funding strategies administered by autonomous grantmakers. “Transformation of systems is a very different agenda,” he argued, “and it requires interorganizational networks of foundations if they're going to really make a contribution. And I don't see that happening.”

- **Jewlya Lynn** emphasized the importance of making visible the harm caused by philanthropy when it reinforces destructive patterns through grantmaking or implements superficial changes within systems without addressing underlying issues. Learning from those instances is essential, she argued, if the field is to create effective strategies for systems change. And, in a later discussion, **Michael Quinn Patton** observed that “any effort to change the system intentionally is doing harm to the people who benefit from the current system. ... We ought to be doing harm to the power dynamics of the way things are.”
- “I don't actually believe that we get someplace new by focusing on all the things that are not right,” **Jara Dean-Coffey** said. “So how do we balance? ... How do we somehow find some harmony between what has been, not what we would want, and being able to aspire and inspire towards something new?”

Evaluation and Learning

- **Brandon Youker** noted a greater openness to goal-free evaluation in the wake of the pandemic. “So many programs that were doing whatever they were doing before COVID, all of a sudden shifted focus — sometimes completely shifted their activities and even their goals,” he said. Youker described feedback from organizations that made it apparent to him “that goal-free evaluation was even more relevant today, where you had such instability in what your program actually was going to be” in relation to the original proposal. He highlighted its value in situations where outcomes are unclear and emphasized the role of goal-free evaluation in prompting organizations to define and measure outcomes effectively, particularly in the context of diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- “Evaluation is a weird beast,” **Jara Dean-Coffey** observed, “in that it's one of the only places where we use words like ‘rigor,’ ‘objectivity,’ and ‘validity’ with such fierceness and also with

a lack of understanding of where they came from and what they meant in the original place in which they were designed to be used.” Dean-Coffey’s articles on centering equity in philanthropic evaluation “led to a different body of work which continues to resonate with folks,” she said — a recognition that “there’s something fundamentally not quite right or not quite appropriate about how we know things.”

- **Jewlya Lynn** offered a similar take: “I actually think the gap here is that evaluation forgot to change even as people moved forward. And we’re now doing such complex work in philanthropy, and we are making so many assumptions and we’re holding onto them so hard, even when there’s kind of vague feedback in the environment telling us we might be wrong.” She argued for a new way to define “who is driving the questions and who is starting the conversation and who is an expert in the room — and have the methods and the methodologists be the tool that those on the ground are able to use to ask and answer the questions that they care about.”

Support for Nonprofit Organizations

- **Sam Marks** brought up the chronic financial insecurity faced by so many nonprofits and emphasized the need for philanthropic support to bridge funding gaps and help nonprofits to do their vital work free of the anxiety that the money won’t be there to support it. “How could nonprofits benefit from building up their balance sheets, not just having grants that help them operate in the black for the year,” he proposed, but also with “equity-like investments in nonprofits that have a longer-term horizon and are building up the financial capacity of the organization, not just funding a program or their annual P&L?” Marks and other Roundtable participants noted in particular the difficulties nonprofits face with government contracts — late payments, cash-flow issues, etc. — and Marks suggested that *The Foundation Review* encourage authors to explore opportunities for collaboration between government agencies and grantmaking foundations on stable, sustainable funding streams for the nonprofit sector.
- “Nonprofits are not robots or machines that you put dollars in one end and out comes social change,” **Rusty Stahl** observed. “They are entities made up of people, and we have to support those people in order to get the change we want to see.” He challenged the focus on

results and outcomes, advocating a more holistic approach that involves strategy, program design, and organizational capacity: investing “in systems, policies, and practices that enable people to have meaningful work and stay in it even when it's hard.”

Amplifying Impact and Practical Action

- **Sam Marks** shared early positive feedback on his article, including inquiries from foundations and nonprofit borrowers interested in low-interest loan funds and pooled funds for developers of affordable housing. Having worked at the intersection of donor advised funds and impact investing for three decades, he recognized “it was time to export our practices. ..., change attitudes and values, let people know what's possible, shift minds — and that means providing thought leadership.”
- **Rusty Stahl** and **Jane Wei-Skillern** discussed how the impact of their work was amplified by incorporating their articles for *The Foundation Review* into online toolkits and podcast episodes. Stahl said that enabled him to keep his article “alive in different ways and include it in a practical set of tools that help people take action.”

Ethical Practice and Culture Change

- **Rusty Stahl** raised the issue of ethical practice in philanthropy and argued that *The Foundation Review* is in a position to help professionals in the field as well as foundation board members to “think about the ethical implications of their decisions and behaviors. I think that’s what a journal like this should strive toward.” Touching on an earlier conversation with **Jewlya Lynn** about the “duty of care” central to many professions, Stahl also pointed to the need for a balance between humanistic and technocratic approaches to grantmaking and program development.
- **Jane Wei-Skillern** sees “a tremendous opportunity for a culture change in social impact work that's less about individual organizations and their strategies. My wish is that funders could look to what's already succeeding in communities and put support into those existing successes, rather than trying to create new entities or new collaborations that they can label and name just for their own sake.” Pointing to the impetus for her article with co-author

Nora Silver, “Four Network Principles for Collaboration Success,” she observed that “our funders, our board members, some of our partners, they don't get what we're talking about” and that research shared in *The Foundation Review* “is helping make that space” to pursue that approach: “When you talk to people who are very close to the problems, they know this is the way to work.”

- After working in philanthropy for decades, **Amy Celep** said, she and colleagues Rachel Mosher Williams and Sarah Brenner decided to write their article about the internal culture of foundations because “we weren't seeing a lot of other articles about it and yet we felt like it was a really, really critical conversation to be having.” In particular, she said, there is a place in *The Foundation Review* for an exploration of the role of board members in shaping the culture — how the board “can advance the kind of culture that's going to help that foundation make really significant change — or it can hinder it.”
- “What I think we need to work more on in the foundation world is transparency,” **Marilyn Darling** argued. “One of the principles of emergent learning is making your thinking visible, and it's just quite striking to me how little of that happens — and not just inside of foundations,” she said, but “between funders and grantees, between other external partners, between executive teams and their boards, between executive teams and their organizations, their staffs. It's just stunning to me how much that gets in the way of us doing the kind of work that we need to do in this sector.”