

The Denver Foundation



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Equity Continuum Toolkit: Case Study

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Background

Founded nearly 100 years ago, the Denver Foundation (TDF) is the largest and most established community foundation in the Rocky Mountain West. The foundation manages its own endowment, as well as serving as a steward for over 1,000 funds established by donors.

The Equity Journey

The Denver Foundation has prided itself on being a leader on racial diversity and inclusion for 25 years, especially when it comes to diversity of staff, board, and grantees. Four years ago, TDF shifted to an “equity” focus, recognizing that diversity and inclusion were not the only aspects of the work required. TDF’s equity focus has grown in the subsequent years, culminating in their most recent strategic plan (2021), which centers racial equity as the organization’s north star.

Mission & Vision

Prior to the 2021 strategic plan, the Denver Foundation’s vision was of a Metro Denver where “all residents” have the opportunity for a high quality of life. While this vision implied a desire for equity, it did not explicitly call it out. To inform the organization’s next ten year strategic plan, TDF collected perspectives from 8,000 community members. This data, in combination with TDF’s ongoing internal conversations about race, led the board to focus its new [ten-year strategic framework](#) (2021-2031) on racial equity, with the vision of: “A Metro Denver that is racially equitable in its leadership, prosperity, and culture.” Relatedly, TDF now defines its purpose as: “[being] a proactive, collaborative, and resolute leader in reducing racial disparities.” “This was a significant jump for us,” Chief Impact Officer Dace West said, “to decide to really put equity, and explicitly racial equity, into the core of our vision statement.”

Program & Activities

With a mission and vision centered on racial equity, the Denver Foundation shifted its programmatic focus towards community-led grantmaking, which: prioritized BIPOC-led organizations; simplified the grant application and reporting process; and increased the average size of TDF grants. This work was already underway before the 2021 strategic plan; between 2011-2021, the percentage of grant funds distributed to BIPOC-led organizations increased from 26% to 48%. As one example of its equity-focused grantmaking, in June 2020 TDF created the [Black Resilience in Colorado Fund](#) (BRIC), which will distribute \$1 million in grants in its first year. BRIC focuses its support on Black-led and Black-serving organizations working to dismantle systemic racism.

Organization & Operations

In service of its equity vision, the Denver Foundation has made several significant changes to its internal organization and operations. In an effort to attract a more diverse staff and ensure an equitable hiring process, TDF removed educational requirements for candidates and began including salaries in job postings. “This was something that was really intentional across the organization,” said Chief Impact Officer Dace West, “we asked ourselves what was getting in the way of a more diverse set of candidates applying for our jobs.” Since making these changes, TDF has seen its share of BIPOC staff grow (from 39% in 2019 to 47% in 2021), which has contributed to the organization’s efficacy and impact. “A variety of lived experiences brings a different richness to the work,” West said, “there’s a broader range of experiences reflected on our team, which makes us more dynamic.” In 2020, TDF also merged two of its major departments: philanthropic services and programs. This has helped remove silos within the organization and integrate fundraising with community grantmaking. The shift has been positively received by staff, donors, and non-profit grantees alike, all of whom see value in the unified approach. “The new structure allows us to speak with one voice and deliver the same message to all audiences,” said Senior Scholarship Officer Charmaine Brown.

Culture

The Denver Foundation has taken distinct steps to embed racial equity in its organizational culture. “Culture and strategy live together in this journey,” said Senior Scholarship Officer Charmaine Brown, “you can’t have one without the other.” Racial equity has become a “critical competency” at the foundation, and will be part of performance management for all staff. As such, all staff will be evaluated on their contributions to racial equity, as they would be on other key dimensions of their work (like management, for example). This has allowed the organization to clearly communicate its expectations, and to embed racial equity into professional development. “It’s a non-negotiable,” said Senior Scholarship Officer Charmaine Brown, “it’s not that you need to be a full-on racial equity expert when you walk through the door, but you have to be willing to go on the journey with us.” To bring staff together while learning, TDF created an organization-wide book club with a racial equity focus; recently, members of the staff read and discussed Isabel Wilkerson’s book *Caste*.