

**Learning and Equity in Foundation Practice:
A discussion starter about engagement and university learning partnerships**

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Organizational Context

The William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund is a family foundation focused on giving within Connecticut with the mission “to improve the effectiveness of education in fostering both personal development and leadership.” Discovery, the primary initiative of the Memorial Fund from 2001-2015 provided grants to more than 50 Connecticut communities that each committed to developing a local community collaborative to coordinate efforts to address the education needs of their children birth through eight. The Memorial Fund approach included infrastructure support and capacity building to communities and also supported advocacy organizations statewide to help amplify the voice of local communities. The Discovery theory of change is based on the idea that the needs of children are best addressed when the community itself comes together to do so, and that local efforts at collaboration will develop a critical mass of connected and committed individuals, that, in turn, will form the necessary base for broader policy and systems change.

Knowledge Development Portfolio background

Almost eight years ago the Memorial Fund created a Knowledge Development Position. The scope and evolution of the knowledge position is documented in the Foundation Review at <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/tfr/vol6/iss2/10/> and the theory of change and programmatic documents for the specific university partnerships expected to be shared publically later this summer in our web based decision timeline <http://discovery.wcfgmf.org/about/timeline>. In the following brief, I share thoughts about one particular aspect of the knowledge development portfolio which invited university-based scholars, as learning partners, into the broader Discovery network. Here I document some of the understandings and questions that surfaced in this work in relation to notions of equity, power and voice as the partnerships sought to spanned the two ivory towers of philanthropy and academia and residents in community. For purposes here, community refers to geographically bound spaces with particular attention to Connecticut towns and municipalities that include areas of poverty as identified by related indicators such as low academic achievement based on state and national assessments, high crime, high poverty, low household incomes.

Foundation investment in place-based initiatives is not new. Neither is a focus on foundation supported capacity building, evaluation, and other learning processes. However, traditionally, foundation investments in

the “knowledge” space have been presented as neutral, objective, and solely benevolent support. In the past few decades, as United States society entered into an information economy, information production has increased along with the plethora of choices and leaning techniques that foundations can introduce to communities.

This brief begins with the awareness that, no matter how gentle or well-intentioned, any philanthropic offering to support knowledge development must be questioned in relation to issues of power and privilege. This questioning is particularly important when the knowledge efforts are intertwined with commitment to co-creating change by investing in communities that have been marginalized or under-represented.

When first creating the Knowledge Development portfolio, the following statement became adopted as an initial way to speak internally about proposals, to describe the work to potential scholar partners and to serve as a reminder of an initial interpretation of how the Memorial Fund’s long held values of engagement and collaboration could be embedded within any knowledge development activity.

Knowledge development at the Memorial Fund attempts to be about: **meaning making**, not just information gathering; **conversations** about data, not just data collecting; **participation and sharing** in knowledge activities, not just report writing; and **contributions** to the fields of philanthropy, education and community change benefiting children, not just internal discussion.

In reflecting on the five years plus of investment into university based scholars as learning partners within the Discovery arena, four categories seem useful to the informing the field of philanthropy: the ***language used in knowledge work, myths about university life, knowledge design, and ethics***. These are areas where I have learned lessons in the past few years or drawn from past experience and come to a deeper understanding of how these can play out in philanthropic investment. Decisions in these areas can position philanthropy to show up as either a partner for change or truly the second ivory tower.

As I reflect here, I am also attempting to explore how my early training to question knowledge work in terms of power and privilege can connect to the language and field now taking center stage in philanthropy and being called “equity.” This is a language that is evolving and also is newer to me.

The language we use

Within philanthropy there are many approaches to knowledge work. I came into philanthropy without training in the field of philanthropy and also brought with me a whole host of unexamined assumptions about what I really meant by the terms I was using. These are still evolving, and I share them here only to point out how important it is to try to unpack one’s own definitions. For me, not doing so early on in my current position as a program officer, caused a great deal of confusion, misunderstanding and even mistrust -- probably in ways that I have not yet even uncovered.

- Learning - that process that we do naturally as human beings that enables us to adapt and adjust and survive. We can learn implicitly or have awareness of our learning explicitly. It is about absorbing and

making meaning. Learning can be formal or informal, designed or haphazard and serendipitous. It can be individual or collective.

- Inquiry – refers to intentional processes for learning that come attached with an explicit decision about if and how the learning will be shared and by whom. The question of publicness of the learning is a decision point.
- Social Research – encompasses a systematic and intentional process for constructing knowledge that is situated within a specific arena, and draws from, recognizes, and contributes to an intellectual tradition or body of knowledge.
- Knowledge -- is learning as it interacts with the social context -- whether knowledge is spoken or not, is systematically developed through a rigorous process, or whether it is gained solely through experience, it is public. This means that it is expressed or represented beyond the individual or group. Knowledge, whether it is explicit or held unconsciously is always about a deep embodiment of learning that ties directly to action in the world.

For me, these terms and understandings are enmeshed with a strong value that the core of being human involves the ability to act upon one's world (which I call "work") and the power to consciously do so in connection to others is key to fulfilling potential -- in other words knowledge itself is an act of social construction. My beliefs about humanity, knowledge, and social interaction resonate in relation to a quote that I recently encountered:

Equity is just and fair inclusion. An equitable society is one in which all can participate and prosper. The goals of equity must be to create conditions that allow all to reach their full potential. In short, equity creates a path from hope to change. -- Angela Glover Blackwell

Surfacing questions about power and privilege are key to understanding the ways in which philanthropic investment can support or hinder the potential of individuals and communities to construct knowledge together. As a community members emphasize early on in my work in philanthropy --(paraphrased) knowledge is power; professionals have it, researchers have it and foundations have it but the people in community often don't have that access.

I have now spent about twenty years examining knowledge construction from various vantages – the private sector, public sector, nonprofit sector; in philanthropy, academia and the intermediary spaces of evaluation and research, and in local, state and national arenas. In my opinion, philanthropy's ability to tap into the power and knowledge resources that are housed in the ivory tower for the purpose of community partnership requires understanding that there are constraints as well as opportunities.

Myths about university life

Ivory towers have people working in them. In conversations about the halls and walls of academia, I often hear the term "ivory tower" used disparagingly to refer to higher education institutions. I made a comment once to an academic advisor that had to do with the notion of institutional values and he cautioned me to always

remember that institutions don't have values; only people have values. It wasn't until I worked as faculty in a university that I started to understand the structures and dynamics that constrain individuals. Some aspects of university life seem particularly relevant in connection to thinking about how university scholars interact with knowledge in the realm of equity.

- As a scholar on the pathway to university life, I was schooled in thinking of my work as related to **“teaching, research, and service”** and to know that these areas of activity were valued and supported differently in various types of higher education institutions. In some institutions, the notion of service has more to do with service to an academic field or to the university community itself. In others, the notion of service can be more about outreach to the public.
- Examples of **types of institutions** of higher education include community colleges, liberal arts colleges, private universities, public land grant universities, teaching colleges. Each of these also comes with an institutional culture and policies that reward or emphasize certain areas of scholarly life. How a faculty member spends their time has a lot to do with the economics of the institution and the specific type of faculty position that the scholar has.
- University scholars, especially in the early years, and especially in publically funded universities, need to show that **there is a demand** and related funding for their expertise. This funding attracts credit within the various institutional structures and hierarchies of departments, colleges, research centers or cross university endeavors.
- University researchers have access to various types of institutional **resources that can be leveraged** for learning partnerships. Beyond the scholar's time itself, universities house student resources, physical resources like library materials and software packages, space, and administrative and support staff time. Access to leveraged resources will differ from scholar to scholar depending on their relationships and the perceived value of partnerships to the university.
- Leveraging resources may or may not be dependent on **providing overhead costs** as part of a grant. Even if foundation policy prohibits overhead costs to universities, it is reasonable to expect that some of the scholar's time will be spent on university processes required for taking in grants. Every university structure will be different as to how the grant process is handled internally.
- In preparation for university life, scholars tend to be trained in **disciplines**. In the social sciences, the disciplines represent different ways of looking at the world. Very generally, for example, anthropologists focus on cultural aspects of life; sociologists on group patterns, political scientists on issues of governance, power and authority; and then there are economists, philosophers, historians and any hyphenated combination – socio-political scholars, socio-economic, political historians, social anthropologists.... As scholars become known for their expertise in a discipline, they also may develop narrow, even though perhaps important and relevant, lenses for their inquiry.

- Scholars within universities may also be housed in **professional fields** such as social work or education. Here they bring disciplinary perspectives to looking at the work of those fields. Their research agendas, regardless of disciplinary lens, will need to demonstrate a relevance to that professional field.

Even with the above realities and constraints, folks who work within higher education institutions and those that have doctoral credentials for doing research are often attributed some authority, credibility and clout within policy and professional practice arenas that ultimately affect communities. This credibility is enhanced when they conduct or draw from evidence-based research.

A critical factor though in the types of partnerships that are possible, rests on the individual scholar's **methodology**. Beyond an overall lens for looking at the world, a methodological stance is what governs how a scholar has decided to interact with participants and to speak about their own location to the knowledge construction. Here there are endless names and approaches and these are evolving as I write – constructivists, feminists, ethnographers, grounded theorists, action researchers, critical scientists.... Asking any scholar to unpack their stance will give key clues to how that scholar will engage participants in learning processes.

Even when seeking to partner with scholars whose values and approaches are linked to ideas of community engagement and equity, it is important to consider the constraints that the specific university structure may put on an individual within that structures. Ivory towers can be places of privilege and they are also places where individuals are constrained, by institutional and outside forces, in terms of the work they do.

What about knowledge design

Knowledge design is a key place to ensure that the needs and desires of the inquiry or learning process can actually be conducted given a scholar's constraints and skills. There are some specific places where equity can be immediately surfaced in relation to knowledge investments. Humility tells me that are many more that I have not yet thought of.

Challenges about **urgency**. Any attempt at knowledge construction, no matter how action-oriented, requires some time for reflective processing. When the inquiry entails systematic data collection or the producing of evidence, the time outside of direct action is increased. Some argue that the time in reflection and data processes is actually a key part of making meaning together and thus is itself action. However, in communities where need is great, the urgency to act to get resources to residents is palpable.

Beyond process and timing, questions about voice are critical to think through and discuss up front. Too often voice is understood as something that comes into play at the end of an inquiry process in the reporting or public sharing. However, agreements about whose voice and how voice will be used are key to design from the start.

Economic or other nontangible gain is a category that is rarely discussed and thus a place where assumptions can be quite varied. University based scholars do benefit from the perceptions of the ivory tower, professional credentials and expertise. The writing scholars do for academic journals and even for book companies often generates little to no royalties. These works are used to build up credibility which then provides career

advancement and stability. Raising questions with participants in inquiry processes about who benefits, in what ways, and when is important.

Closely aligned with questions of gain are questions of **participant role**. Participants working on knowledge construction with scholars can have roles that are solely informant based. Here participants share information to contribute to the inquiry. Sometimes participants are involved with setting the learning agenda and carrying out various aspects from asking the questions to design to data collection to public sharing. These latter roles move more directly to the question of who is authoring the research. No matter the role, clarity, agreement and transparency about how decision are made in learning together are critical and all the ethical points about engaging participants should be taken into account.

Value and ethics in practice

There are various concepts that come up in relation to values and ethics and these cut across all types and methods of research and are important regardless of the scholar's institutional location.

Intellectual property refers to the ownership of a thought or idea, particularly ideas that have been written down and developed as part of scholarly research. Although there may be creative agreements with university scholars who want to be equitable in collaborative knowledge endeavors, there are also often university and legal regulations that scholars must address.

The acronym **IRB** refers to Institutional Review Board. Within higher education, when a scholar is seeking to do research, their research design and activity automatically comes under the purview of an institutional review process. Institutional review processes are a beneficial in that they are designed to monitor the activity of scholars specifically in relation to treatment of research subjects and thus to prevent abuse of human beings in the name of knowledge. Often human subject's terminology and parameters are difficult to apply directly to collaborative work that treats all participants as powerful partners. Nevertheless the sentiment behind protection of human beings, and scholar responsibility for foreseeing possible negative impact are all absolutely essential to value based scholarship.

Within IRB and also often within the parameters of specific research approaches are ethical behaviors. One example being upfront about the processes of the research and being absolutely clear that participation is **voluntary** and can be given or stopped at any time. **Anonymity and confidentiality** are concepts that have to do with how identifiable individuals and groups are for their sharing of information and also with whom direct data, such as interview data, will be shared before and after analysis. Transparency is necessary upfront with all participants who are sharing information directly for research purposes. It is even important to be open with participants about what information the scholar will be sharing with the funders and funders should not assume that they will have access to individual data unless the activity is clearly stated as part of foundation required evaluation. Even then, access should not be assumed unless clearly stated to participants before they share any information as it is the scholar's ethical responsibility to honor that understanding.

Given these understandings, it is important for foundations to note and discuss where the practices that surround research are aligned or not with requirements of grants. It is also important to note that once a process for data collection is identified as part of a university-based scholar's research, that data process and the data itself is subject to all the rules and oversight as outlined by that university. The notion of **academic freedom** and the professional community of scholars both help to ensure that individual scholars feel supported in the practice of ethical behavior if they experience any pressures to do otherwise.

Questions for philanthropic investment

Incorporating university scholars into community action work might be considered for many reasons. There may be a belief that these scholars have the credentials and skills to engage in rigorous research. It may be that there is a desire to access publically supported resources of the universities for communities that often go overlooked. It may be that there is a desire to influence university life itself or the preparation of professionals that may ultimately be in service to marginalized communities.

At the Memorial Fund, when we decided to invite university scholars into partnership with the communities we had been working with for over a decade, it was critical that we based our partnerships in a shared commitment to the notion of engagement in knowledge construction. As such, as part of a request for qualifications and then later in any request for proposals, we first looked for and then directly asked how meaningful engagement would be accomplished with community participants. Even though we did not require that every inquiry process have full engagement from start to finish, transparency with participants about how they would be involved, about how their input was being represented, and about the ways they could contribute to the work, were key throughout the processes.

The results at one end of the spectrum were community participants engaged as informants about particular programmatic investments. In the middle of the knowledge construction spectrum were processes that involved participants as users of an learning approach and provided space and time for them to reflect on the value of that involvement and to provide input into the future design of capacity building. Also somewhere in the middle of the engagement spectrum were communities and groups that were involved in giving information and then having that information shared back with them both for clarity of their interpretation and also for their own reflection and use. At the other end of the spectrum were processes that started with community identified topics and involved participants in framing the issue, collecting data, analyzing data and co-authoring and speaking about their interpretations.

It would not be surprising, although the Memorial Fund has yet to document it, that participants who are treated honestly in research processes that are transparent and clear about role and decision making will both engage more deeply in the learning process and apply the experience and learning within their action contexts. However, it is critical to accept that the tensions related to who gets credit, who gains and in what ways, who makes decisions and how data and inquiry are represented and used never go away.

These are tensions inherent to knowledge construction processes and are also what makes knowledge construction itself a process that is about the shared meaning making, public voice, and collaboration across institutional contexts that are important to equity focused change.