

How Funders Seek and Use Knowledge to Influence Philanthropic Practice



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Executive Summary

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation's [Effective Philanthropy Program](#) seeks to strengthen the capacity of its grantees, and philanthropy in general, to achieve their goals and benefit the common good. One of the program's main strategies—[Knowledge for Better Philanthropy](#)—promotes more effective philanthropy by funding organizations that create and disseminate research-based knowledge about philanthropic practice. This includes support for academic centers, investigative journalism, consulting firms, philanthropy-serving organizations, and others who develop and share knowledge products about philanthropic practice.

In 2020, the Hewlett Foundation commissioned [Engage R+D](#) and [Equal Measure](#) to partner on an evaluation examining how funders find and use knowledge to influence philanthropic practice, with a focus on what role organizations funded in the Knowledge for Better Philanthropy strategy play in that process. This resulting report, *How Funders Seek and Use Knowledge to Influence Philanthropic Practice*, builds on a 2016 study (released in early 2017) also commissioned by the Foundation entitled [Peer to Peer: At the Heart of Influencing More Effective Philanthropy](#).¹ The earlier report examined how staff and board members at U.S.-based foundations find and use practice knowledge, revealing that funders are more likely to seek knowledge from peers and colleagues than from the large volume of knowledge content available from organizations, associations, and publications. This evaluation follows up on the scan in 2016 and adds new findings.

As the world changes around us, this study asks how funders are drawing from a range of knowledge sources in the ongoing pursuit of more effective philanthropy. The answers shed light on what information funders are seeking, which sources are most influential in creating change, and whose voices are included in the process. This executive summary highlights key findings from this study. Further detail on these and other findings from our survey of funders and follow-up interviews can be found in the full report.

What is philanthropic practice knowledge?

Philanthropic practice knowledge is any information about the effective practice of philanthropy. This includes a wide range of topics focused on the craft of philanthropy, including building relationships with grantees, providing flexible or true cost funding, making impact investments, carrying out strategy and evaluation, and more.

¹ Harder+Company Community Research and Edge Research. February 2017. *Peer to Peer: At the Heart of Influencing More Effective Philanthropy, A Field Scan of How Foundations Access and Use Knowledge*. William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Available at <https://hewlett.org/peer-to-peer-at-the-heart-of-influencing-more-effective-philanthropy/>

Knowledge Interests: Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) was the top practice knowledge interest in 2020, followed by interest in evaluation, organizational development, grantmaking, and strategic planning.

- **DEI emerged as the leading topic of interest.** Interest in practice knowledge to advance DEI was unregistered in 2016 yet became the top knowledge interest among funders in 2020, a change that was notable and consistent with increased public attention to racial justice. While DEI was the most commonly selected topic of interest for all respondent types, some—such as female and Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) foundation executives, staff from larger foundations, and staff from community and independent foundations—were more likely to report an interest in DEI than others.
- **Interest in DEI was broad and nuanced.** When asked about their interest in DEI in interviews, funders discussed a broad range of topics that reflected different stages of development around their DEI approaches. For example, those in earlier stages were interested in knowledge that could help them develop a shared understanding of DEI issues. Respondents who were engaged in rethinking organizational practices often sought out sources that could help them apply equitable practices throughout their institution and its operations. Still others were interested in knowledge to support more equitable grantmaking practices to increase grantee voice and power.
- **Other practice knowledge topics of interest included evaluation, organizational development, grantmaking, and strategic planning.** Interest in organizational development and strategic planning grew from 2016 to 2020. Interest in evaluation and assessment remained strong. Funders also reported seeking practice knowledge related to COVID. In general, funders have many of the same practice knowledge interests, but some topics varied by staff position: staff in larger foundations had a greater interest in systems topics—such as DEI, evaluation, and organizational development—while staff in smaller foundations had a greater interest in functional topics such as grantmaking, governance, and trends in giving.
- **Funders found knowledge to be more relevant when it was timely and actionable.** Several respondents commented on the need to manage a large flow of information and favoring knowledge sources that met their desire to take prompt action. For example, funders identified a preference for digestible products and ones that applied or could be tailored to their local context or a specific community.

Seeking Knowledge: While most funders continued to turn to peers as a source of practice knowledge, a mix of sources offered a more nuanced and multi-layered understanding of philanthropic practice.

- **Peers remain the most common source of practice knowledge.** In 2016, 92 percent of respondents reported that peers and colleagues were primary sources of knowledge; in 2020, 89 percent of respondents reported that they seek knowledge from either a colleague or coworker, with 80 percent listing external colleagues and 56 percent listing coworkers at their organization. In interviews, funders explained that trusted peers who are further along in their practice can be a natural and efficient source of philanthropic knowledge. Funders also described experiencing new pressures around peer learning in the COVID context: while in-person learning opportunities became severely constrained, funders underscored the value of peers as a source of rapid information during this time.
- **In addition to peers, funders rely on a number of other knowledge sources.** Of the 12 knowledge sources listed in the survey, funders marked that they seek information from an average of six different sources. Nearly two-thirds of funders reported relying on published research, which they often used to understand broad trends and find applicable tools. More than half of funders also said that grantee interactions and subject matter specialists were primary sources of practice knowledge, providing information that was more community-specific and contextualized.
- **Sourcing knowledge can be multi-layered.** While peers were clearly a compelling source of philanthropic practice knowledge for funders, many of those interviewed also recognized the limitations of relying solely on colleagues and coworkers for information, including the potential for groupthink and insularity. To balance this, funders described how relying on multiple sources of knowledge have helped them go deeper into a topic. For example, some funders contrast perspectives from multiple sources to add depth and perspective to the information they are gathering. Others described how one source can often lead to another, such as a peer recommending an article or tool. Funders also discussed how some formats—such as conferences or interactive presentations—can bring practice knowledge content to life by encouraging conversation and interaction.
- **Funders seek out knowledge sources that are trustworthy and experienced.** With a rise in the use of digital media to find knowledge, funders must contend with information overload and the challenge of finding specific, high-quality information quickly. In this context, they depended on known, trusted sources of knowledge—including peers and reputable knowledge-producing organizations—as reliable resources. For knowledge about DEI practices, however, funders expressed that community voice and lived experience were key signals of quality.

Applying Knowledge: Funders continued to use practice knowledge to inform their work, with some changes facilitated by key events in 2020.

- **Funders put practice knowledge to varied uses.** When applying knowledge, most funders use it to improve current practice, consider a new practice, or question a practice. Funders offered a variety of examples for how they used knowledge to inform operations and programs, update their practices with grantees, and shift toward more inclusive decision making. However, the likelihood of applying knowledge in different ways varied by respondent type, including gender, age, foundation type, and foundation size. For example, while executives overall were less likely than other staff to consider a new practice, female executives were more likely than their male counterparts to do so. Younger staff were also more likely than older staff to consider a new practice as well as to compare their foundation to the field. Participants from community foundations, as well as those from larger foundations, were more likely than others to consider a new practice.
- **Key events in 2020 facilitated knowledge-informed change.** The 2016 *Peer to Peer* study identified bureaucracy, risk-averse culture, lack of accountability, and insufficient time and resources as primary barriers to knowledge use and practice change. However, the study also noted that shifts in the external environment can be key facilitators to overcoming these barriers. Indeed, in 2020, our interviews with funders underscored how the COVID pandemic and parallel economic downturn sparked a swift response among grantmakers, who eased requirements on grantees and worked to provide resources to communities hit especially hard by the pandemic's effects. The groundswell of attention over the past several years to DEI and a heightened recognition of systemic racism and bias also led to shifts in practice. Funders' interest in DEI knowledge has risen sharply, and some funders that we spoke to provided examples of changes their organizations are exploring in internal processes and in working more inclusively with community members to build power and share decision making as a result of this interest.

Implications

The study team raises for consideration potential implications of these findings. First, although peers possess many characteristics that make them valuable knowledge sources for one another, there are also benefits to intentionally including sources beyond this sphere of influence. Specifically, researchers (including Knowledge for Better Philanthropy grantees) can help funders understand large-scale trends as well as produce evidence-based tools and best practices for philanthropy, complementing contextualized knowledge from peers. Community leaders can provide deep understanding and (often) lived experience of community needs and strategies—essential knowledge for developing sustainable solutions and practices. By recognizing their knowledge-seeking routines and habits, funders can actively lift up and benefit from a wider array of rich knowledge in the sector about the practice of philanthropy and reduce the potential for cognitive biases like confirmation bias and groupthink.

The strong increase in interest in topics related to DEI is a related change with implications for practice that has occurred in just a few years. It has likely emerged for a variety of reasons, such as rising attention to issues related to DEI across the broader social context, greater recognition of widespread structural racism, increased external demand on organizations to shift practices, increased internal demand from staff, strengthening DEI knowledge and leadership among philanthropic support organizations, and a reputational risk of lagging in demonstrated commitment to equity. Knowledge producers and curators might consider how the practice knowledge they provide responds to this need for more nuanced information on DEI and helps funders work in more transformative and impactful ways.

Finally, knowledge producers, curators, and users can all take lessons from the effects of global crises on communities. In 2020, social upheaval around racial justice issues continued to press foundations to grapple with DEI and engage more transparently and inclusively with their stakeholders. The twin health and economic disasters of the pandemic have also highlighted the need for organizational preparedness, resilience, and sustainability. Within this context, funders are increasingly relying on digital sources, which will need to be balanced with a hunger for in-person connections that have been curtailed amid pandemic restrictions. With foundations continuing to play a powerful role in the social sector, philanthropic practices and the knowledge that informs them will remain consequential.

Introduction

Philanthropy carries substantial influence in the United States and beyond. Over 100,000 grantmaking foundations exist in this country and, as of 2019, they were responsible for over \$75 billion in estimated giving.^{2,3} Each charitable foundation typically crafts its own funding priorities, operational practices, and grantmaking strategies—functions that evolve over time and are influenced by numerous factors, such as their founders' original intent, historical and current leadership, pressing needs in communities of focus, trends within the sector, and a continuously developing body of research-based and human knowledge. As we see today, larger economic and social forces are also at play, including growth of technology, effects of climate change, widening economic inequality, a rise in attention to racial justice, and the fallout of a global pandemic. Shifts like these place pressures on foundations to respond and evolve their practices.

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation is committed to informing and improving funders' philanthropic practices by supporting the development and use of high-quality knowledge. Through its [Effective Philanthropy Program](#), the Foundation seeks to strengthen the capacity of its grantees, and philanthropy in general, to achieve their goals and benefit the common good. One of the program's strategies—Knowledge for Better Philanthropy—promotes effective philanthropy by funding organizations that create and disseminate research-based knowledge about philanthropic practice. Active since 2007, Knowledge for Better Philanthropy has awarded more than \$51.5 million to academic centers, investigative journalism, consulting firms, philanthropy-serving organizations, and others who develop and share knowledge products about philanthropic practice.

What is philanthropic practice knowledge? *Philanthropic practice knowledge* is any information about the effective practice of philanthropy. This includes a wide range of topics focused on the craft of philanthropy, including building relationships with grantees, providing flexible or true cost funding, making impact investments, carrying out strategy and evaluation, and more.

² Candid. April 2020. *Key Facts on U.S. Nonprofits and Foundations*. Fact sheet. Retrieved from doi.org/dnw9

³ Giving USA. June 2020. *Giving USA 2020: Charitable giving showed solid growth, climbing to \$449.64 billion in 2019, one of the highest years for giving on record*. Retrieved from <https://givingusa.org/giving-usa-2020-charitable-giving-showed-solid-growth-climbing-to-449-64-billion-in-2019-one-of-the-highest-years-for-giving-on-record/>

In 2020, the Hewlett Foundation commissioned [Engage R+D](#) and [Equal Measure](#) to partner on an evaluation examining how funders find and use knowledge to influence philanthropic practice. This resulting report, ***How Funders Seek and Use Knowledge to Influence Philanthropic Practice***, builds on a 2016 study (released in early 2017) also commissioned by the Foundation entitled [Peer to Peer: At the Heart of Influencing More Effective Philanthropy](#).⁴ This earlier report took an initial look at how staff and board members at U.S.-based foundations find and use practice knowledge, revealing that funders are more likely to seek knowledge from peers and colleagues than from the large volume of knowledge content available from organizations, associations, and publications. Engage R+D and Equal Measure have followed up on the 2016 scan and added new findings, examining if and how funders' interests in knowledge have changed, how they seek knowledge, and how they apply knowledge to philanthropic practice. As the world changes around us, this study asks how foundations are drawing from a range of knowledge sources in the ongoing pursuit of effective philanthropy.

A note about philanthropic practice knowledge

The term *philanthropic practice knowledge* describes information about the practice of philanthropy—in other words, information that may influence how funders do their work. Generally speaking, the term *knowledge* is associated with awareness or understanding of a topic and can be acquired in a variety of ways, including through innate ideas, logical reasoning, direct experience, and empirical research. Within the context of philanthropy, people in many roles hold knowledge with the potential to influence philanthropic practice—to name just a few key perspectives: researchers who study trends and effectiveness in grantmaking, community organizations and leaders who know firsthand the critical needs and strategies working in context, grantees who experience the benefits and challenges of grant funding, and grantmakers themselves who practice the craft of philanthropy.

How different sources of knowledge are valued and used is a question with wide-ranging implications in philanthropy and beyond. Indeed, knowledge and related ideas about objectivity and expertise are influenced by cultural and historical orientations that can perpetuate inequities.⁵ In philanthropy, the knowledge that funders use to inform their practices influences, for example, how they approach due diligence; how they build relationships with communities they seek to serve; how they measure success; and how they approach DEI in their work.

The overarching question guiding this study thus holds clear significance:

How do funders find and use knowledge to influence philanthropic practice?

⁴ Harder+Company Community Research and Edge Research. February 2017. *Peer to Peer: At the Heart of Influencing More Effective Philanthropy, A Field Scan of How Foundations Access and Use Knowledge*. William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Available at <https://hewlett.org/peer-to-peer-at-the-heart-of-influencing-more-effective-philanthropy/>

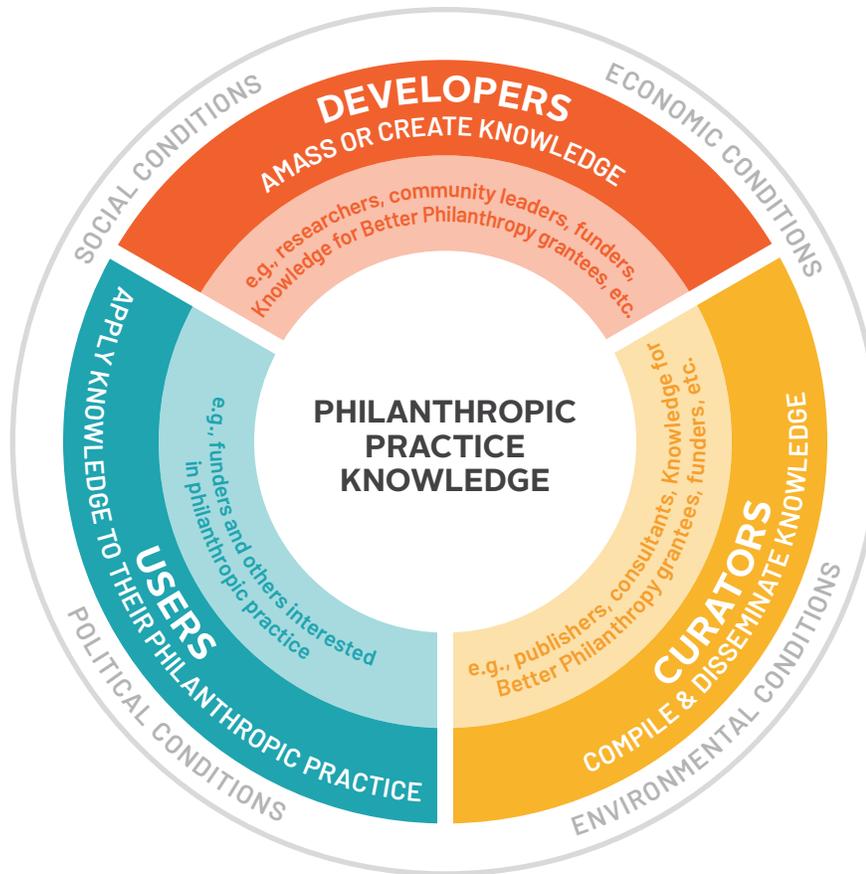
⁵ Equitable Evaluation Initiative. July 2017. Equitable Evaluation Framework Framing Paper. Retrieved from <https://www.equitableeval.org/ee-framework>

Defining terms: The knowledge ecosystem

This report considers different actors involved in developing, curating, and using philanthropic practice knowledge. Taken together, the roles of knowledge development, curation, and use can be described as a knowledge ecosystem that is influenced by larger social, political, economic, and environmental conditions.

As depicted in Exhibit 1, **developers** of philanthropic practice knowledge are those who amass relevant knowledge directly and/or create it through empirical approaches. This category includes, for example, researchers and evaluators, community leaders, funders, and grantees within Hewlett’s Knowledge for Better Philanthropy strategy. **Curators** of this knowledge are those who compile and disseminate it, with some overlap with the actors involved in knowledge development—for example, funders and Knowledge for Better Philanthropy grantees, as well as publishers and consultants. The primary **users** of philanthropic practice knowledge are funders—those who can apply the knowledge to their work. Note that funders are involved in all three roles of developing, curating, and using practice knowledge.

Exhibit 1. The knowledge ecosystem of philanthropic practice



About the evaluation

The findings in this report are the results of a study developed around the Hewlett Foundation's work in its Knowledge for Better Philanthropy strategy. The study was designed to address a set of questions about how funders are using knowledge to inform and improve philanthropic practice, namely:

- What do funders want to know?
- Where do funders find knowledge? To what extent are they accessing knowledge from organizations funded in Hewlett's Knowledge for Better Philanthropy strategy?
- How are funders using knowledge to influence their philanthropic practice?
- What patterns in knowledge use can we detect?

We addressed these questions by gathering a mix of qualitative and quantitative data from a wide range of foundation staff and board members from grantmaking foundations across the U.S. Engage R+D and Equal Measure collaborated with Hewlett Foundation staff, a grantee advisory group of six grantees from Hewlett's Knowledge for Better Philanthropy strategy,⁶ and two additional advisors⁷ to develop the study. The study included an online survey with 1,502 foundation staff respondents and follow-up phone interviews with 20 of them. These methods are summarized below; additional details on the methods, survey response rates, respondent characteristics, and limitations can be found in the appendices.⁸

Funder Surveys. Because of the interest in being able to scan for change in knowledge use and other characteristics, the evaluation team repeated an online funder survey, originally conducted in 2016, with a few updates and modifications. To explore how funders find and use practice knowledge, the surveyed topics included knowledge sources and quality, use of practice knowledge, and familiarity with specific organizations that develop or disseminate knowledge products. The survey was distributed to 20,982 individuals, including foundation executives, program staff, evaluation staff, and operations staff, who met the criteria for participation. The survey received a total of 1,502 valid individual responses (7.2 percent response rate). Survey responses represented approximately 1,000 organizations. Descriptive analyses and an analysis of variance were performed on completed survey data using the statistical software SPSS.⁹

Funder Interviews. To gather deeper data than a survey allows, including reasons behind funders' knowledge seeking and use, the evaluation team conducted interviews with a small subset of funders. A question added to the 2020 survey allowed participants to indicate a willingness to be further contacted for an in-depth interview. Further purposive sampling was used to identify 40 potential interview participants who represented geographically and demographically diverse respondents from small-, mid-, and large-sized organizations. Interviews focused on clarifying information about selected topics, such as finding knowledge sources, use of knowledge sources, and choosing knowledge sources. A total of 20 contacts completed interviews via Zoom. Content analyses were conducted using Dedoose online software through an iterative coding process.

Research during COVID:

The research team collected survey data during July 2020 and interview data from December 2020 through January 2021 during the COVID pandemic.

The summer of 2020 was also a time of increasing recognition of systemic racism across the country. These events may have affected responses. For example, compared to the findings in 2016, survey respondents were less likely to report attending external conferences and hosting convenings of experts, which was more difficult due to social distancing and cancelation of such meetings. In interviews, respondents often referenced knowledge-seeking in a crisis and the need to respond to COVID effects on grantees. They also reported a strong interest in DEI. In the report, we make note of how the current context may have influenced participant responses.

⁶ Advisory members were from the following organizations: Center for Effective Philanthropy, Collective Impact Forum, Equity in the Center, Exponent Philanthropy, First Nations Development Institute, and National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy.

⁷ Expert advisors include Jara Dean-Coffey of the Luminare Group and Equitable Evaluation Initiative and Julia Coffman of the Center for Evaluation Innovation.

⁸ Quotes from interviewed funders in this document have been edited slightly for clarity and brevity.

⁹ We analyzed survey responses for differences between groups, including age, gender, race/ethnicity, and staff position of respondents, as well as size, type, and geographic region of respondents' foundations. Findings of notable differences are included in this report.

About the report

We present the study's key findings in several chapters that each address a question of interest:

- 12 **Knowledge interests:**
What do funders want to know?
- 14 **Seeking knowledge:**
Where do funders find knowledge?
- 29 **Applying knowledge:**
How are funders using knowledge to influence practice?
- 37 **Conclusions:**
What are the overall trends in the knowledge ecosystem?



Findings: Knowledge Interests

What do funders want to know?



An examination of funders' practice knowledge interests can help to identify trends in the field and highlight needs for specific types of information. This chapter explores findings about what funders want to know regarding philanthropic practice and how those interests vary depending on funders' characteristics.

Findings in short

Across the board, funders identified a key set of practice knowledge interests, including diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI); evaluation; organizational development; grantmaking; and strategic planning. Comparing these findings to 2016, DEI emerged in 2020 not only as an interest at all but as the most prominent interest. This is a striking shift if not a great surprise given the rise in public attention to racial justice. Interest in organizational development and strategic planning has also grown. Interest in evaluation remained strong.

Interest in DEI, while broad, varied somewhat by race/ethnicity, gender, foundation size, and foundation type. For example, among executive officers, women and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) were more likely to report an interest in DEI. Participants from larger foundations and those from community and independent foundations (which tend to be larger) were more likely than smaller foundations and family foundations to select DEI as a topic of interest.

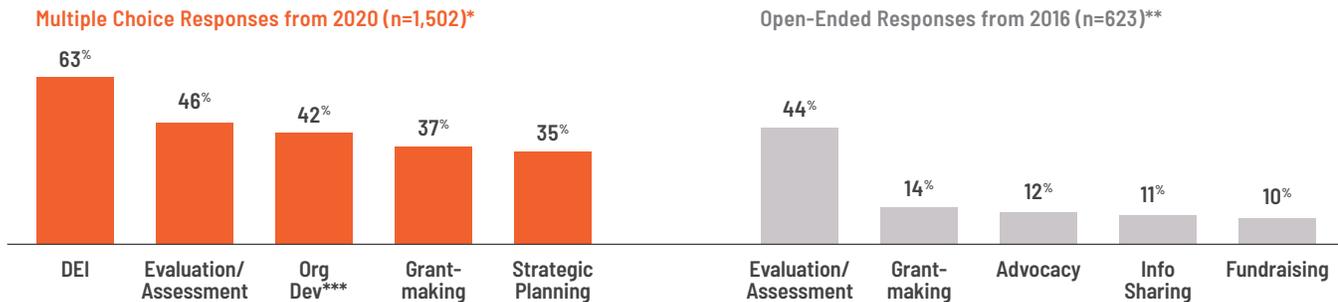
In addition, further follow-up through interviews explored how funders define their DEI interests and reflected how funders are at different stages in developing a DEI approach. Those early in their equity thinking noted an interest in developing a shared understanding of DEI at their foundations, while others reported interest in more equitable organizational or grantmaking practices.

Trends in funders' interests include a) approaches to grantmaking and evaluation that are more nuanced and community-centered and b) practice knowledge related to the impacts of the COVID pandemic. Some topics of interest varied by staff position and foundation size. Overall, funders emphasized their desire for knowledge that is both timely and actionable.

Overall, funders identified a key set of practice knowledge interests

Across funders who responded to the 2020 survey, five practice knowledge topics emerged as the most commonly selected: DEI; evaluation and assessment; organizational development; grantmaking; and strategic planning (Exhibit 2). The trend of identifying these five topics in the same or similar *relative* order (if not at the same percentages, as considered below) was typically true regardless of staff position, foundation type or size, or respondent race/ethnicity.¹⁰

Exhibit 2. Top Five Knowledge Topics of Interest



* In 2020, respondents were asked to mark their top five knowledge topics of interest on the survey. The five items that were marked most frequently are shown here. Responses total more than 100% because respondents could mark up to five responses.

** In 2016, respondents were asked to list their top three knowledge needs in an open-ended survey response. These responses were categorized into the above categories by the evaluation team, and the five most frequently listed items are shown here. Responses total more than 100% because respondents could list up to three knowledge needs.

*** Organizational Development was listed on the survey as Organizational Development/Capacity Building.

The set of common practice knowledge interests identified in this study bears both similarities and differences to the interests that emerged in the 2016 Peer to Peer survey. In 2016, funders were asked to name their top three practice knowledge needs in an open-ended format. In contrast, the 2020 survey asked respondents to choose their top five interests from a list. This shift in survey methods may explain some differences in responses, but the following comparisons also likely reflect some changes in the focus of philanthropic practice over time. Specifically:

- **DEI became widely accepted as a needed priority in philanthropic practice.** 2016 respondents did not identify DEI as a topic of practice knowledge, whereas it was the most cited topic of interest in 2020. As discussed further below, broader social interest in systemic racism highlighted by the COVID global pandemic and the growing racial justice movement may signal a shift in the field's understanding of the need for DEI to be integrated into funder systems and operations.
- **Interest in organizational development and strategic planning has become more common.** Organizational development and strategic planning were common interests in 2020. In contrast, these topics were each mentioned by only six percent of respondents in 2016 (out of 623 participants), ranking below a number of other topics, including advocacy and information sharing.
- **Evaluation and assessment remained a prominent practice knowledge need.** Evaluation and assessment was the most commonly-identified knowledge interest in 2016 at 44 percent, similar to the 2020 percentage, suggesting a continued interest in this topic.

¹⁰ See Appendix B for analysis methods on differences between groups.

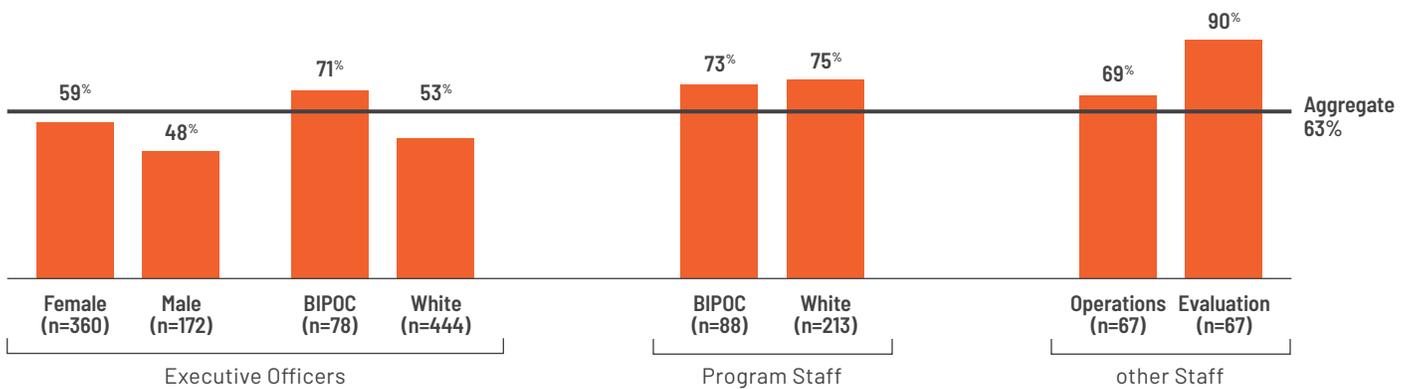
Interest in DEI was broad and nuanced

Though interest in DEI remained the primary interest for all groups, the percentage did vary somewhat by race/ethnicity, gender, and foundation size and type.

Among the practice knowledge interests identified on the survey, DEI consistently topped the list. Moreover, with 63 percent of all surveyed funders selecting DEI as a topic of interest, it far outstripped the second most common topic (evaluation and assessment at 46 percent). However, while DEI was the most commonly selected knowledge topic in most demographics, interest varied between subgroups.¹¹ In terms of participant characteristics, Exhibit 3 shows that:

- Among executive officers, women and BIPOC were more likely to report an interest in DEI.
- Evaluation staff members were more likely to report an interest in DEI than executives, program staff, and operations staff.

Exhibit 3. Differences in DEI interest by participant characteristics



Note: There is evidence that the observed differences are statistically significant. See Appendix B for analysis methods on differences between groups.

¹¹ Of the top five knowledge topics of interest, evaluation was the second most commonly selected at 46%. Although there was variation in how likely different subgroups were to identify DEI as their top interest, even a group such as male executives, with a relatively low rate of selecting DEI (48%), still selected DEI more often than any other topic.

Note: There is evidence that the observed differences are statistically significant. See Appendix B for analysis methods on differences between groups.

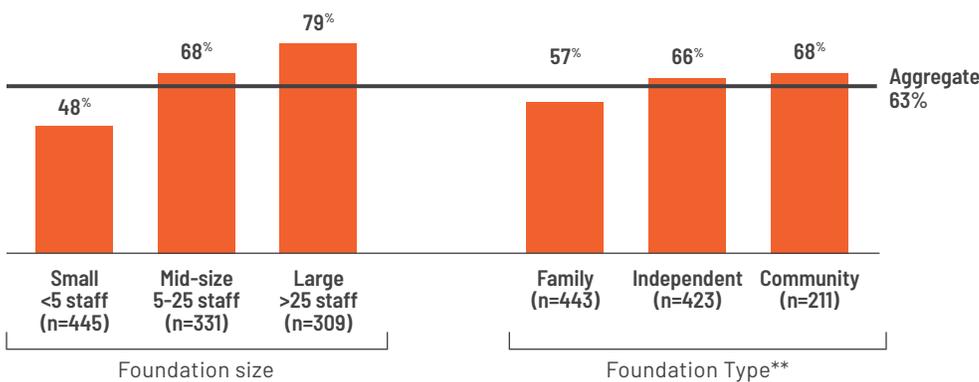
Exhibit 4 presents survey response differences based on foundation characteristics. For this study, large foundations are defined as those with more than 25 staff. They also tend to have larger annual grantmaking: 76 percent of large foundations gave more than \$25 million annually. Mid-size foundations have between five and 25 staff, with 47 percent giving between \$5 million and \$25 million annually. Small foundations are defined as those with fewer than five staff. Of these, 84 percent gave less than \$5 million annually. Regarding interest in DEI, survey analysis shows that:

- Participants from larger foundations were more likely to state an interest in DEI as a knowledge topic than those from smaller foundations, and
- Respondents from community and independent foundations (which tend to be larger) were more likely than family foundations to select DEI as a topic of interest.

Other differences between smaller and larger foundations: In addition to differences in the number of staff and their annual giving budgets, respondents from larger and smaller foundations in this study varied in staff characteristics:

- BIPOC staff (20-30%) and staff under 45 years old (30-40%) were more likely to be situated within mid-size and large foundations.
- White staff (86%) and staff over 45 years old (77%) were more likely to be situated within small foundations.

Exhibit 4. Differences in DEI interest by foundation characteristics*



Note: There is evidence that the observed differences are statistically significant. See Appendix B for analysis methods on differences between groups.

* The categories may include more than one individual per organization (see Appendix B for more detail on methods). While the exact number of participating organizations is not known, for organizations for whom we do have information we estimate that responses from larger foundations included an average of two staff members per organization, while small and mid-size foundations included an average of one staff member per organization.

** These foundation types represent the three most common in the survey, accounting for 76% of all respondents.

Across the board, a high level of interest in DEI related to philanthropic practice aligns with the **rise in public attention to issues of racial justice** in recent years, and particularly in 2020, coinciding with the survey and interviews conducted for this study. Indeed, multiple funders commented during interviews on how current events had influenced their interests in practice knowledge. Echoing others, one participant noted, “I think about what we’re doing differently in light of the wave of concern and awareness of racism and inequities in our world that impacts the work that we support. That’s probably been on the minds of a lot of folks in the last six months or so.” Another concurred, “Of course, this year as highlighted the need for a racial equity lens in every aspect of our work.”

Interest in a broad range of topics related to DEI reflects different stages in developing DEI approaches

During interviews, many funders underscored the idea that their foundation was in the process of developing its DEI approaches, with conversations and learning ongoing. As staff we interviewed shared more specific topics of interest, patterns emerged in the types of information about DEI that related to different stages or aspects of this work within foundations. As depicted in Exhibit 5, those who described their organization as being in the early stages of explicitly addressing DEI spoke of interest in knowledge to help the foundation develop a **shared understanding of DEI issues**, including defining equity and exploring what equity work would mean for them. Other respondents described their foundation as engaged in **rethinking organizational practices** to better reflect foundation intentions and mentioned interests in knowledge about applying equity to the institution and its operations. Still other respondents reported interests in knowledge to support **more equitable grantmaking practices** and how principles of DEI could inform relationships and dynamics with grantees and other stakeholders.

Exhibit 5. A range of funder interests related to DEI topics

Broader Interest: Develop shared understanding of DEI

Definition of terms

“ We still are trying to figure out our own definition of what equality means. [When] you're not clear on where to start it becomes hard to figure out what sources of knowledge you want to pull from.”

How racial justice applies to our foundation

“ Especially in the past 12 to 18 months we're centering race more explicitly than before and even more recently using the language around justice. But as an organization we're still evolving and leaning into what that means.”

How to talk about DEI internally

“ We just hired some consultants to first acknowledge we want to talk about [DEI].”

Broader Interest: Change of organizational practice

Internal diversity and representation

“ We were modestly focused on racial equity. We had already started staff training and more of a focus. But since George Floyd's killing, we absolutely ramped that up both in terms of our mission, vision, values, and strategy, but also our hiring and the communities we're choosing to work in.”

How to center equity in foundation's mission, values, and internal work

“ A big question we've been trying to think about is, 'What does it mean to center equity as a foundation?' That's been a lot of internal and external work.”

Broader Interest: Change grantmaking practice

How to apply equity considerations to grantmaking

“ Once we were able to acknowledge, 'Hey, we are relying heavily on what we call experts and ignoring some other experts,' we were able to take a step back and say, 'Actually, we need to bring different voices to the table.'”

“ What are the opportunities to be more equitable in our funding?”

Increasing grantee voice and power in decision making and evaluation

“ We have talked a lot at the foundation about shifting power to those closest to the problem.”

“Being part of the funder collaborative, we started this conversation around equity, diversity, inclusion in 2015. At that time, there were several funders who had never had a conversation about it at their home institutions. Now you fast forward five years and everybody has to be having these conversations.” –Leader of a large foundation

Interviews provided insight on interests in community-centered strategies and COVID

Some funders want evaluation and grantmaking strategies that acknowledge complexities and center communities

Interviews allowed funders to expand on and be more specific about some of the interests identified through the survey. Regarding evaluation, interviewed funders expressed interest in ways of learning and measuring that center grantee and/or community experience. These respondents described a shift in foundations' perspectives on evaluation, expanding from a focus on quantitative outcomes to broader mixed methods and developmental approaches. As one funder put it, for instance, "Philanthropy had years where it didn't know how to engage around impact. Then it moved too far toward an accountability frame that was about just counting things and showing that something changed and has done a pretty poor job of accepting and embracing the idea that, in complex situations, more can be learned and could probably make philanthropy far more impactful." Another asked simply, "How do we get better feedback from our grantees on what's working and what's not working?"

Funders' comments also connected interest in learning from communities with the growing focus on DEI. Specifically, a number of interviewed funders articulated an interest in knowledge about equitable evaluation practices. One, for example, described how this line of thinking has driven their knowledge-seeking, remarking, "The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights has a guidance note about how to make sure that data collection is human rights-based. I referenced that recently for evaluation purposes and looked again at peer-reviewed articles about inclusive evaluation and what that practice requires." Overall, interview responses suggested that knowledge interests are at least sometimes related to one another, with references to DEI and community experience intertwined with comments about evaluation.

"One of the biggest questions from a knowledge standpoint is not just did we change things, did we move the needle, but did we change who decides. That's one way that DEI comes in."

– Evaluation Officer at a large foundation

Several interviewed funders raised the topic of trust-based philanthropy—an emerging community-oriented approach to grantmaking that involves practices such as unrestricted funding; streamlined applications and reporting; and building transparent, mutual relationships.¹² For instance, a funder said, "One of the really interesting things we are putting on the burner for our 2021 strategic objectives is to be more knowledgeable and transfer that knowledge out into our community around trust-based philanthropy." Another volunteered, "Trust-based philanthropy continues to be [an area of interest]. We are a heavy supporter of unrestricted funding." These comments draw connections between interests in grantmaking approaches and community voice, which are also related to issues of DEI and power dynamics.

Funders reported seeking practice knowledge related to COVID

COVID made its presence known in funders' interview responses. Like the rise in interest in DEI, COVID as a topic of interest reflects a difference from 2016 findings, when the pandemic had not yet emerged as a significant global challenge. Interviewed funders discussed their response to COVID as intersecting with several practice knowledge topics, especially as they were seeking strategies or examples of how to respond to external crises. As one described it, "Definitely we have been trying to be very responsive to needs that have developed as a result of COVID and working with donors to establish funds and then also do fundraising for those funds." Another echoed, "There's been the obvious [need], like many foundations, [for knowledge on] how to respond to crisis and what would be helpful to grantees in the pandemic." Foundations' COVID responses are unlikely to remain a specific topic of interest for funders in the future but could have a lasting effect in terms of interest in preparedness for major unforeseen circumstances.

¹² For further information on trust-based philanthropy and its principles, see <https://trustbasedphilanthropy.org/principles-1>

Knowledge interests varied somewhat by staff position and foundation size

In general, funders aligned on many practice knowledge interests, but some topics varied by staff position

Examining the practice knowledge interests by staff position reveals both similarities and differences.¹³ As shown in Exhibit 6, regardless of staff position, DEI was the most commonly selected topic of interest on the survey. Respondents in different positions also tended to select evaluation, organizational development, grantmaking, and strategic planning at high rates relative to other topics, similar to the most common topics of interest across all respondents.

To highlight notable differences among staff positions, Exhibit 6 emphasizes percentages markedly higher (orange) or lower (blue) than those of other positions. In general, these differences in practice knowledge interests aligned with respondents' roles in the foundation. For example:

- Compared with other staff positions, **executive officers** were more often interested in big-picture giving trends as well as governance and board matters, legal compliance, tax and regulatory issues, and fundraising. Executives were also less likely than other positions to identify DEI and organizational development as one of their top five practice knowledge interests.
- **Program staff** more commonly reported interests in grantee relationships and collaboration.
- **Operations staff** more frequently identified interests in grantmaking, legal compliance, communication, and tax and regulatory issues. Compared to other staff, they less commonly selected strategic planning as one of their top five practice knowledge interests.
- Nearly all **evaluation staff** reported interests in both evaluation and DEI (at higher rates than other positions) and were more interested in organizational development. They were less likely than others to identify grantmaking, governance or board matters, legal compliance, and communication as priority practice knowledge interests.

Exhibit 6. Knowledge interests by foundation staff position

Key: **Orange** percentages are markedly higher than those of other positions; **blue** percentages are markedly lower.

Topic	Executive Officers (n=546)	Program Staff (n=313)	Operations Staff (n=67)	Evaluation Staff (n=67)
DEI	54%	73%	69%	90%
Evaluation/assessment	43%	51%	40%	94%
Organizational development	37%	49%	48%	58%
Grantmaking	36%	38%	48%	27%
Strategic planning	35%	34%	27%	43%
Grantee relationships	24%	39%	24%	28%
Trends in giving	32%	25%	25%	13%
Collaboration	24%	37%	21%	19%
Field-building	27%	28%	21%	25%
Governance/board	32%	14%	15%	9%
Legal compliance	30%	14%	36%	0%
Communication	17%	17%	27%	6%
Tax and regulatory	24%	5%	24%	0%
Fundraising/development	17%	7%	9%	2%

¹³ See Appendix B for analysis methods on differences between groups.

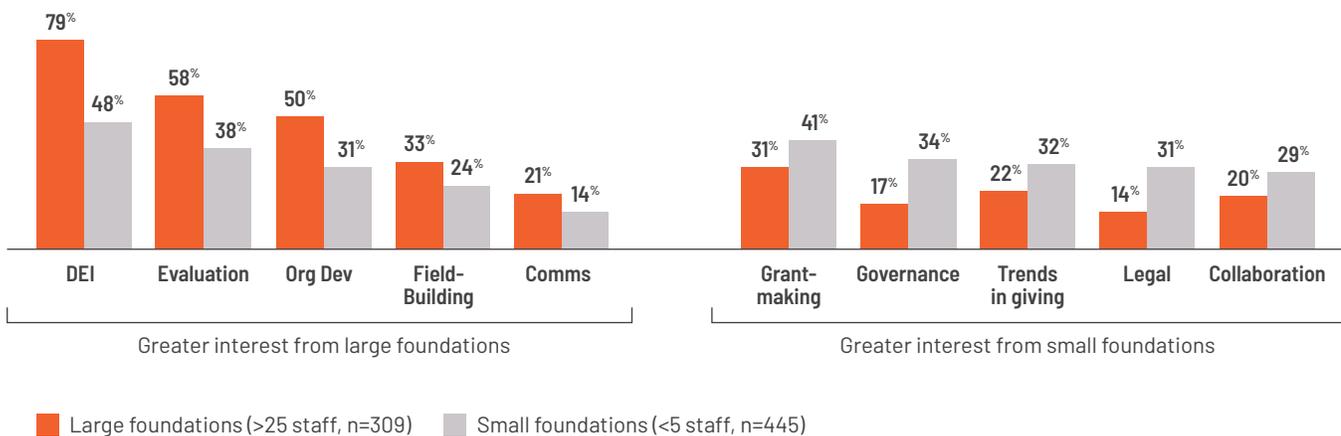
Staff in larger foundations preferred systems topics while staff in smaller foundations preferred functional topics

When examined by foundation size, survey responses about knowledge interests differed, though DEI was the most common interest regardless of foundation size.¹⁴ Exhibit 7 compares practice knowledge interests of staff at small and large foundations to highlight contrasts, including:

- Staff in large foundations (those with more than 25 staff) tended to be more interested in systems topics such as evaluation, organizational development, field-building, and communications.
- Staff in small foundations (those with fewer than five staff) were more likely to seek knowledge on functional topics such as grantmaking, governance, and legal compliance. They were also more interested in what other funders were doing, including trends in giving and collaboration.

Note that survey respondents from larger foundations were more likely to be BIPOC compared to respondents from smaller foundations.

Exhibit 7. Select list of knowledge topics sought by foundation size



Knowledge is more salient when timely and actionable

Interviewed funders expressed interest in information not only on relevant topics but that was practical and actionable in terms of its framing and format. Several respondents commented on the need to manage a large flow of information and favoring knowledge sources that met their desire to take prompt action. In filtering through practice knowledge products, for example, one noted, “I took the pieces that I felt made sense to us and were something that we could execute on and adopted those and threw everything else out.” Another explained, “I’m beyond the point of where I’m really interested in lots of discussion about what the issue is and more interested in a discussion about how we can address this issue.” Echoing a theme from the earlier Peer to Peer study in which funders identified a preference for digestible products, multiple funders characterized products that met their needs for utility, describing them in one case as “short, practical, and timely,” and in another case as “practical and easy to consume. It’s a combination of research and practice, but there’s some real-world applicability.” Further, funders underscored that to find practice knowledge actionable often meant that it applied or could be tailored to the local context or specific community, a criterion explored further in the next chapter.

¹⁴ Note: There is evidence that the observed differences are statistically significant. See Appendix B for analysis methods on differences between groups.

Interpretations: A few thoughts on knowledge interests

DEI has become a widespread topic of interest among funders seeking knowledge about philanthropic practice. It has likely emerged for a variety of reasons, such as rising attention to issues related to DEI across the broader social context, greater recognition of widespread structural racism, increased external demand on organizations to shift practices, increased internal demand from staff, strengthening DEI knowledge and leadership among philanthropic support organizations, and a reputational risk of lagging in demonstrated commitment to equity. This study's finding that some foundation staff members are specifically interested in knowledge about rethinking organizational practices to promote DEI may suggest a realization on their part that foundation practices are not lining up with intentions about equity.

The study also found that staff who hold different positions in a foundation have somewhat different knowledge interests. Because CEOs have an outsized influence on which ideas gain purchase in an organization, the knowledge interests of others may be less visible. These differences by staff position, however, may be useful to inform knowledge developers about how to address the needs of targeted audiences within specific foundation roles.

Findings: Seeking Knowledge

Where do funders find knowledge?



This chapter explores findings on the sources of philanthropic practice knowledge that funders choose to turn to, providing their perspectives on the strengths of different sources and the markers they use to evaluate quality.

Findings in short

Funders rely on an average of six different knowledge sources to inform their philanthropic practice, with peers standing out as the most often reported source by a large margin. Funders also use a variety of other knowledge sources, including published research, community leaders, and content matter experts. They tend to turn to knowledge organizations to understand broad trends and find evidence-based tools, and to community leaders for more local and contextual understanding.

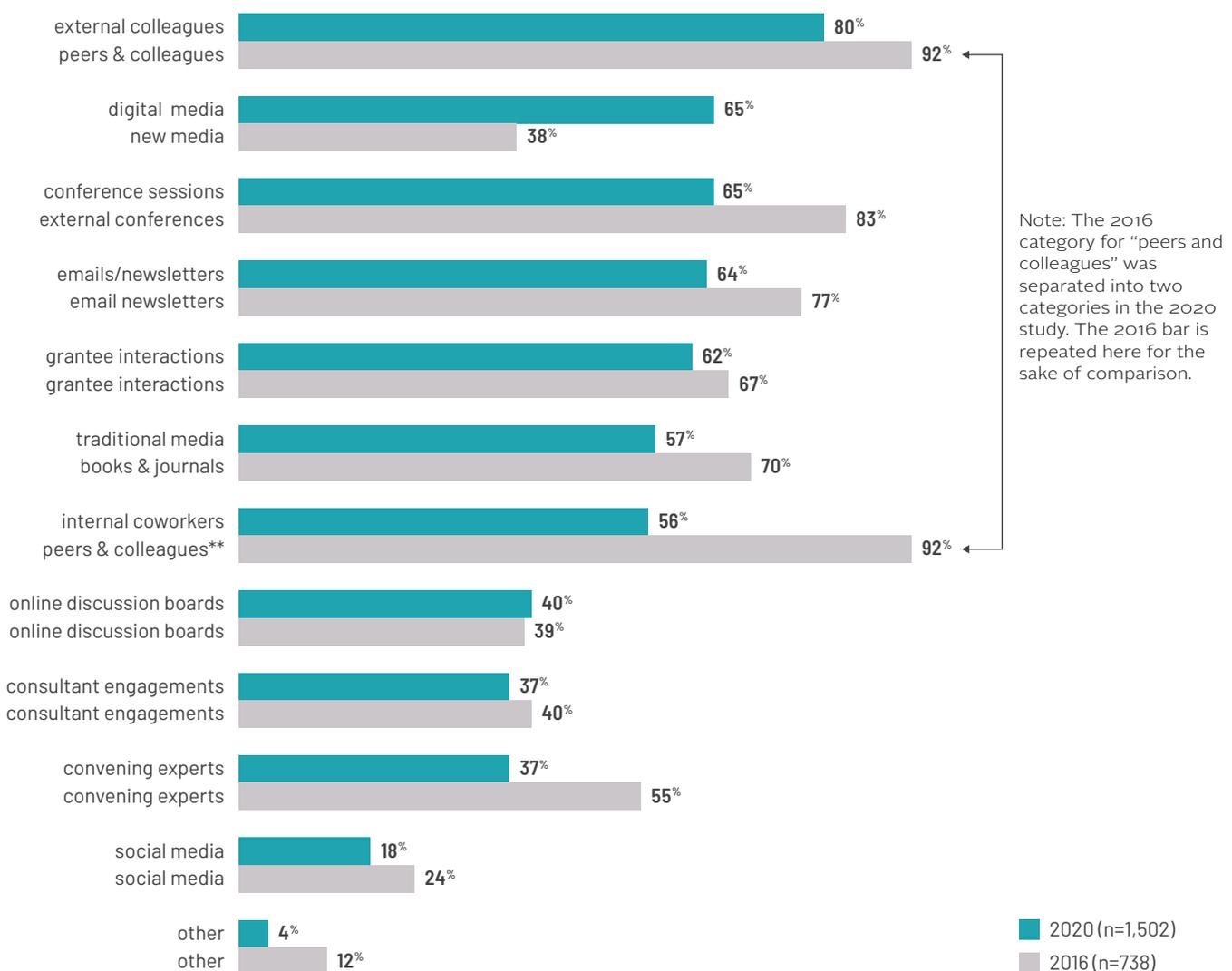
With a rise in the use of digital media to find knowledge, funders must contend with information overload and the challenge of finding specific, high-quality information quickly. In this context, they depend on known, trusted sources of knowledge—including peers and reputable knowledge-producing organizations—as reliable resources. Regarding knowledge about DEI practices, however, funders expressed that community voice and lived experience are key signals of quality.

Funders seek practice knowledge from a wide range of sources

To understand where funders seek philanthropic knowledge, the survey asked respondents to select all of their primary knowledge sources from a list. Exhibit 8 shows funders' primary sources of practice knowledge with comparisons to similar categories from the 2016 survey.¹⁵

In 2020, funders selected an average of six sources. They identified **external colleagues** as their top knowledge source (selected by 80 percent of respondents). **Digital media** became a prominent knowledge source, with 65 percent of respondents naming it as primary compared to 38 percent in 2016.¹⁶ **Email newsletters** (65 percent), **conference sessions** (64 percent), **traditional media** (62 percent), and **grantee interactions** (57 percent) were also common knowledge sources, though respondents were less likely to select them than in 2016. These findings are examined in more detail below.

Exhibit 8. Funders' primary sources of practice knowledge in 2020 and 2016*



* Responses total more than 100% in each year because respondents could mark all that apply.

** The 2016 bar is repeated for sake of comparison.

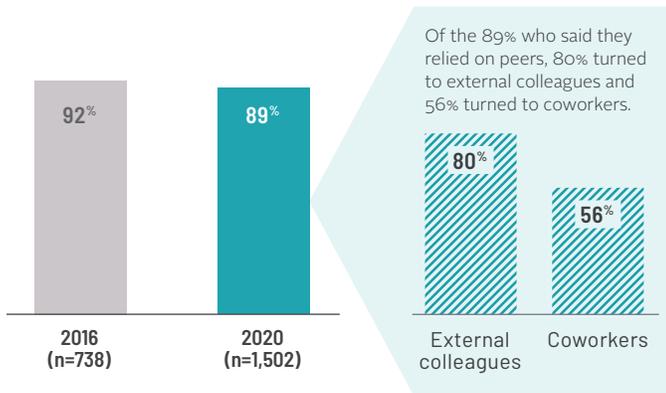
¹⁵ Note that some categories on the two surveys are the same or very similar, while others are less comparable. For instance, "peers and colleagues" on the 2016 survey was divided into "external colleagues" and "internal coworkers" on the 2020 survey—and the 2016 "peers and colleagues" item is used for comparison to both 2020 items in this exhibit.

¹⁶ The 2020 survey distinguished among three types of media: traditional media (books, reports, articles—both print and online, etc.), digital media (web searches, blogs, webinars, slideshares, videos, podcasts, etc.), and social media (LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, etc.).

Peers remain the most common source of practice knowledge

One of the most notable findings of the original *Peer to Peer* survey was funders' strong reliance on peers as a source of philanthropic practice knowledge. The 2020 survey findings confirm that peers—a term that includes both coworkers and grantmaking colleagues outside of one's foundation—continue to be the most common source of knowledge selected among funders. Specifically, in 2016, 92 percent of respondents reported that peers and colleagues were primary sources of knowledge. In 2020, a similarly high 89 percent of respondents reported that they seek knowledge from either a colleague or coworker, with 80 percent listing external colleagues and 56 percent listing coworkers at their organization (Exhibit 9).

Exhibit 9. Funders who reported using peers as one of their primary sources for practice knowledge



Interviews with funders shed light on the reasons they rely heavily on peers as a source of practice knowledge. In general, the funders we interviewed value hearing from people in similar positions and who share common values and interests but may have different experiences, perspectives, and approaches to offer. In one of many examples, a funder explained, “I look to [colleagues in] those organizations that have really made advancement in race and equity because they’re willing to share what they created in terms of policies or activities they do around that. I can learn from that and hopefully it won’t take me as long to ramp up.” To many, the experiences and insights of peers hold clear relevance to philanthropic practice because they understand foundation inner workings. Indeed, as one summed it up, “When you have an issue about your children, you go to somebody else that has children, right? Or if you have an issue about finance, you go to somebody who’s got money. We go to someone who obviously has experience.”

According to interviewed funders, peers provide relevance in several ways. Exhibit 10 breaks down key benefits of seeking philanthropic knowledge from peers.

“[Peers offer] that relevant experience: If they are in the sector that you’re focused on and grantmaking to the types of organizations that you’re making grants to, if they sit within a trusted institution, you can learn from their practices.”

– Leader at a small foundation

Exhibit 10. Benefits of peers as a knowledge source

Peer benefit: Highly specific and contextualized knowledge

“ Some of [our knowledge needs] are specific to our situation, like moving from being generalists to focus areas. Nobody has published on that per se and to learn what we wanted to do; we just asked a lot of funders.”

“ [Peers are] definitely more relevant than reading articles just because all of us have very contextualized and specific issues that arise beyond how to allocate grant capital.”

“ Our program staff have relationships with many other folks in their same positions at other foundations locally. We often call each other to get references on grantees that we are mutually reviewing.”

Peer benefit: Tailored problem-solving

“ I’m finding the one-on-one conversations to be more helpful than structured groups of colleagues.”

“ More informal peer-to-peer [conversation]— I don’t think that happens enough in funder affinity groups. Let’s get to real-time problem-solving and coaching support.”

Peer benefit: Rapid response

“ I definitely didn’t sit around waiting for a convening to happen. I got on the phone with a few people right away to say, ‘What are you guys doing?’”

Peer benefit: Curated connections to other knowledge sources

“ It’s really helpful to have recommendations from other funder colleagues. A couple colleagues referred me to the Equitable Evaluation Initiative and said that it had been useful to them, so that was something I signed up for.”

“ My communications director will curate things for me. We do the same for each other: ‘Oh, did you see this article?’ I really appreciate that people take the time and effort to tell me things that they think I absolutely should be aware of.”

COVID placed new pressures on peer learning

In 2020, although conference sessions remained knowledge sources for most funders, survey respondents were less likely to identify them as a primary source of philanthropic practice knowledge than in 2016. Specifically, in 2016, 83 percent of funders cited external conferences as a primary knowledge source; in 2020, that percentage decreased to 64 percent.

Interview data offered a common-sense explanation for lower conference attendance: restrictions on travel and in-person gatherings during **the COVID pandemic limited in-person opportunities for funders to grow their networks**. Conferences and other convenings provide not only an opportunity for people to learn about different topics but to meet peers and establish potentially ongoing connections for more specific advice and feedback. As one funder described it in an interview, “We learn at the conferences and meetings that we have. But also, you develop a network and if there’s something particular that you see that either you can help with, or they can help you with, you approach the individuals.”

At the same time, interviews revealed that **the COVID crisis underscored the value of peers as a source of rapid information**, especially when alternative sources of knowledge were not yet available or were not meeting specific information needs. Two interviewed funders, for example, offered the following illustrations of peer knowledge informing early and swift responses to the pandemic:

“Community foundations that already had disaster funding in place or had to respond to something else provided very good feedback about how to help people, how to gather information about what the needs were, and how to find different funding sources that weren’t necessarily private funding sources that we could tap into.”

–Executive Officer at a small foundation

In other words, although COVID affected funders’ ability to convene in person (limiting that route of gaining knowledge and connections), the pandemic also had the effect of heightening reliance on peers to quickly share ideas for responding to the crisis.

Some interviewed funders acknowledged drawbacks to reliance on peers

While peers were clearly a compelling source of philanthropic practice knowledge for funders, many of those interviewed also recognized the limitations of relying on peers, including the potential for groupthink and insularity. For some, these limitations were simply possibilities of which to be aware. One interviewed funder, for instance, said, “There’s a danger that you tend to lose diversity in perspectives if you’re cherry-picking who you’re asking for advice and support. That’s just a feature of the kind of philanthropy that we are in right now.” Another acknowledged, “To the extent that these peers and colleagues don’t represent a diverse set of opinions and perspectives, that would be a problem.”

“If you are asking your peers first, it can significantly narrow down the wider scope and perspectives.”

**– Evaluation Officer
at a mid-sized foundation**

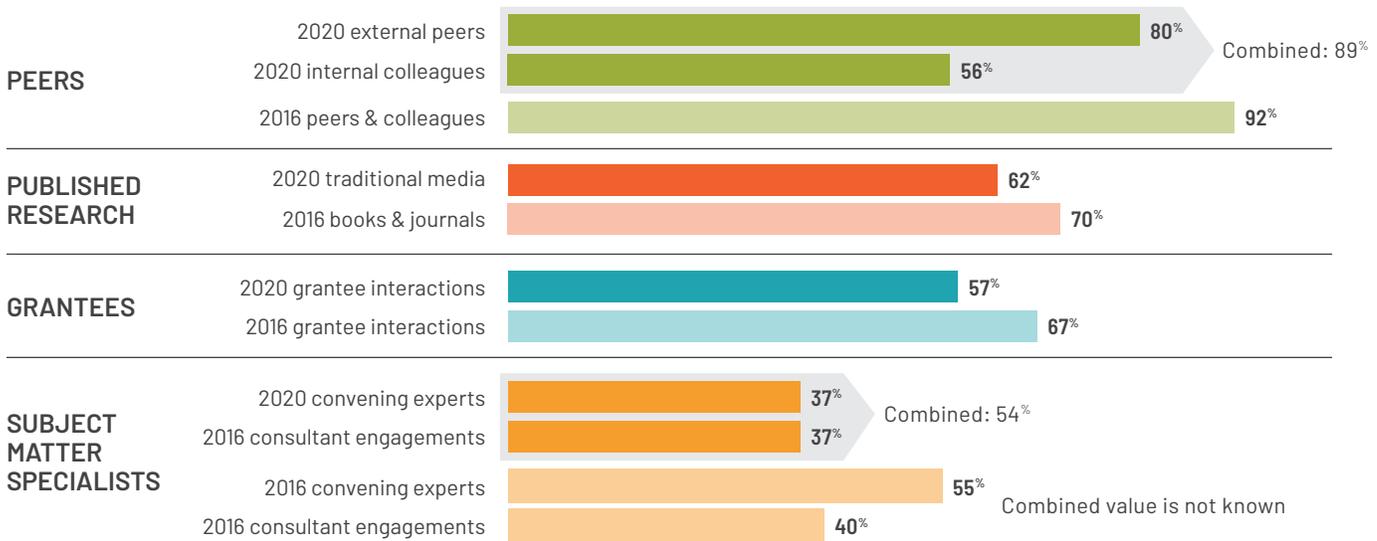
A more common perspective in the interviews, though, emphasized the need to balance peer knowledge more proactively with other sources and to seek out fresh perspectives. “It’s insular,” a funder remarked, continuing, “The more we can cross the interdisciplinary approach to solving problems, the better.” Another added, “I would love it if there was a way to get beyond our echo chamber. That’s one reason our foundation has put such a heavy focus on equity this year because there is a recognition that we have been relying on the same voices over and over again just because we knew them and they knew us.” These funders suggested that potential limitations of knowledge sources could be effectively counteracted by proactive efforts to seek diverse sources and viewpoints.

In addition to peers, funders rely on other knowledge sources

To further analyze funders’ sources of practice knowledge in both 2016 and 2020, we grouped them into four general categories: peers, published research, grantees, and subject matter specialists (Exhibit 11). While funders were substantially more likely to select peers than other sources, it is important to note that they often relied on a mix of sources to gather knowledge on the practice of philanthropy. Notably:

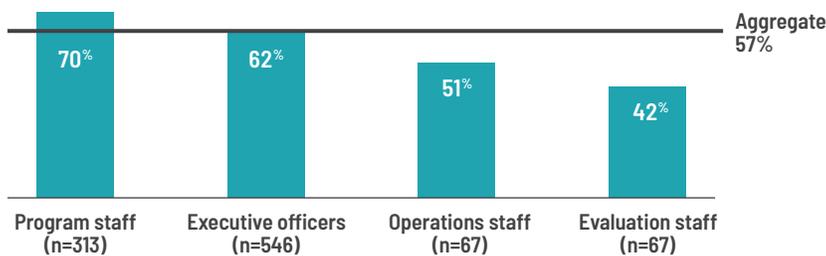
- In 2020, nearly two-thirds of funders reported relying on **published research** in the form of traditional media (62 percent), such as books, reports, and articles (both print and online).
- In 2020, more than half of funders (57 percent) reported that **grantee interactions** were a primary source of practice knowledge.
- In 2020, more than half of funders (54 percent) identified **subject matter specialists** as a primary source of practice knowledge, including convening experts and/or consultants.
- Across all four knowledge sources, percentages of funders identifying them as a primary source declined slightly from 2016 to 2020.

Exhibit 11. Reliance on different knowledge sources (2020 n=1,502; 2016 n=738)



Survey respondents holding different staff positions in foundations did not differ notably in their reliance on these four sources of practice knowledge, except in the case of grantees. Program staff, who often have direct relationships with grantees, were more likely than executives, operations, and evaluation staff to seek knowledge from grantees about philanthropic practices (Exhibit 12).

Exhibit 12. Grantee interactions as a practice knowledge source in 2020, by staff position



Note: There is evidence that the observed differences are statistically significant. See Appendix B for analysis methods on differences between groups.

It is important to recognize that knowledge sources are nuanced in ways that are not always clear from the categories we assign them in this report. For instance, although we frequently refer to funders as grantmaking “peers,” some also see themselves as community members, identifying strongly with the communities they serve. Grantees, while often seen as proxies for the communities their organizations serve, hold key perspectives on the community but cannot represent all community voices. Furthermore, we recognize that the term “expert” is imperfect: while the depth of experience and reflection generates expertise in any circumstance, the term “expert” is not always equitably applied.¹⁷ Research, too, is complex, for example sometimes involving the input of research subjects and sometimes more removed. We use categorical terms to explore trends and opportunities in knowledge-seeking about effective philanthropy but encourage readers to keep in mind that the people who hold knowledge have multiple dimensions and roles.

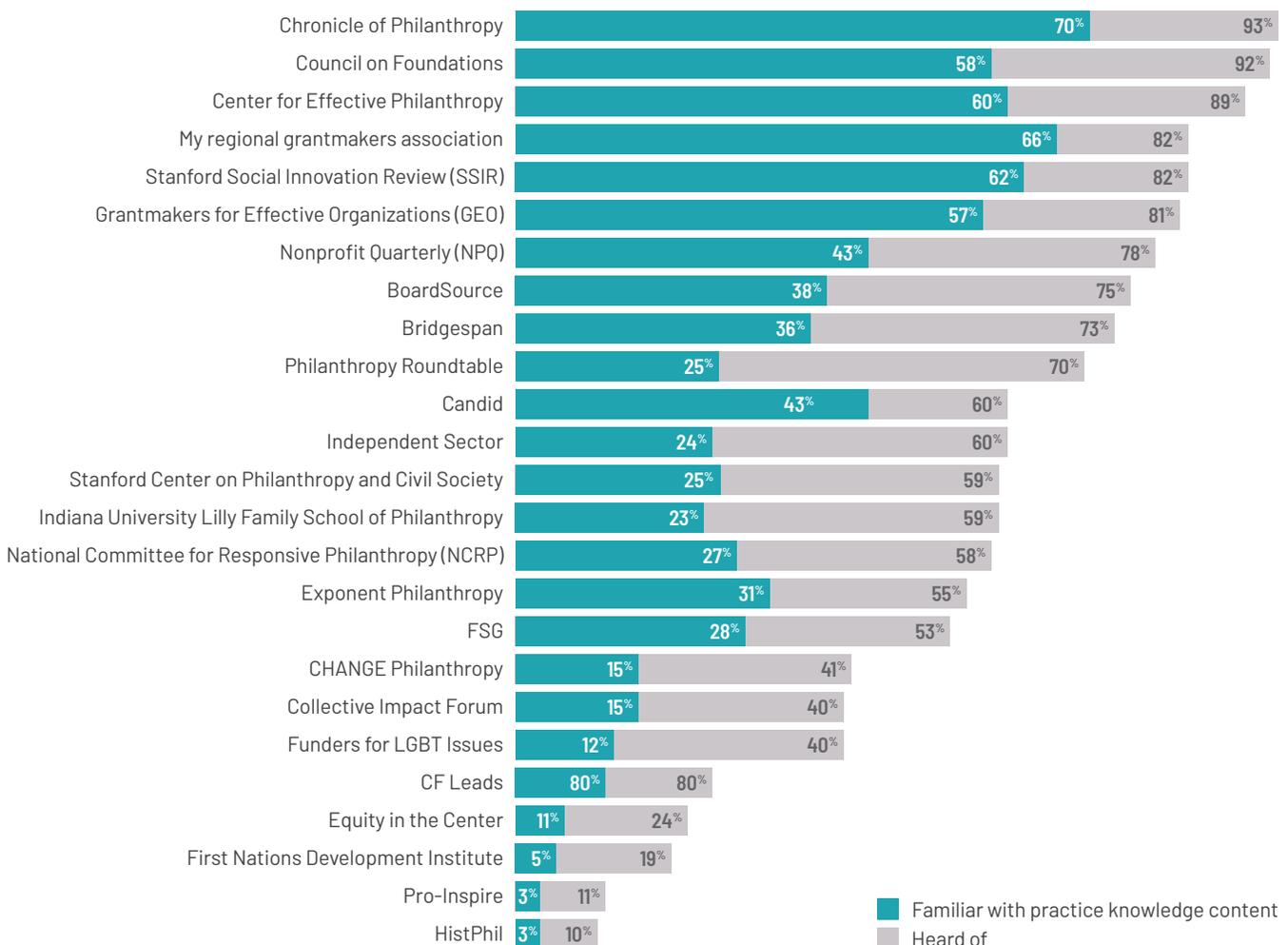
¹⁷ Equitable Evaluation Initiative. July 2017. Equitable Evaluation Framework Framing Paper. Retrieved from <https://www.equitableeval.org/ee-framework>

Funders highlighted key organizations providing research and guidance on philanthropic practice

Some philanthropic practice knowledge is generated by organizations that specialize in conducting research and developing publications on this topic. The Hewlett Foundation's Knowledge for Better Philanthropy strategy provides grant funding to organizations of this nature. Our survey asked respondents about their familiarity with 25 organizations funded by the Hewlett Foundation. These organizations produce and disseminate practice knowledge based, according to the Foundation, on independent, high-quality research about philanthropic practice. As shown in Exhibit 13, some organizations were much better known by surveyed funders than others. The average funder had heard of 14 of the organizations and was familiar with the knowledge products of eight of them. While the percentage of respondents familiar with organizations and their practice knowledge content varied somewhat from 2016 to 2020, in general, organizations maintained their relative ranking from year to year: the Chronicle of Philanthropy, Council on Foundations, and Center for Effective Philanthropy were the most well-known among respondents in both years.

Familiarity with the knowledge organizations varied somewhat by foundation size and staff position. Survey respondents from **larger foundations** were likely to be familiar with nearly three **more organizations** and their products than respondents from smaller foundations. **Evaluation staff** members were familiar with 16 of the 25 organizations listed in the survey and the knowledge products of nine of those organizations. These numbers were higher, on average, compared to program staff (15 organizations and eight knowledge products), executives (14 organizations and eight products), and operations staff (14 organizations and seven products) and likely reflective of expectations for their role.¹⁸

Exhibit 13. Familiarity with knowledge organizations focused on philanthropic practice (n=1,391)



¹⁸ There is evidence that the observed differences are statistically significant. See Appendix B for analysis methods on differences between groups. No other trends emerged from our analysis regarding differences among foundations in familiarity with knowledge organizations.

Funders typically turned to practice knowledge organizations and their products to understand broad trends and find applicable tools

In interviews, funders identified the benefits of practice knowledge organizations as providing big-picture perspectives and tools that are broadly applicable to philanthropic practice. “[Researchers] do a great job of identifying leading trends... They’re out in front of those emerging trends,” one explained. Another also commented on an interest in field trends, saying, “When I see an entity like GEO or even PEAK Grantmaking mention [grantmaking trends], it helps because they are able to help us think ahead of the game.” Speaking to the organizations’ development of tools, an interviewed funder remarked, “Our team is big on things like Exponent Philanthropy in terms of where we go for, say, evaluation of learning or tools for strategic communications.”

Interviewed funders also noted limitations of published research, including the difficulties of applying broad conclusions to a specific situation and filtering through the large volume of information available. A respondent referred to these challenges, saying, “I find some articles here and there, but often I find that I need to commission a consultant to do that for me so that there can be some synthesis and some relevance and insights that the consultant can then bring back for me. It exists, but it’s not as easily digested.”

Funders described a range of interests in seeking knowledge from grantees and community leaders to inform philanthropic practice

When asked about the extent to which they rely on grantees and community leaders to inform their philanthropic practice, multiple interview respondents commented that they routinely ask for grantee input via a survey. A funder described one such survey as designed for **gathering grantee perceptions** “about the relationship between the foundation and the grantees [and] around the type of nonfinancial assistance that we provide, as well as feedback on our new strategy.” Some respondents alluded to a desire not to burden grantees with reporting, a potential tradeoff with a desire for grantee input and feedback.

“Stepping into conversations with the people that we’re investing in—it really is listening and coming from a place of dignity and courtesy and reciprocity.”

– Leader at a small foundation

Multiple interviewed funders emphasized community involvement as essential to their practice. They cited local knowledge as critical to **understanding community distinctiveness** and how funders needed to tailor their philanthropic practice accordingly. Funders passionate about community involvement also described how community knowledge influenced foundation practices to be more effective and how bringing people into decision-making roles could build community power. The importance of **building community power** through valuing community knowledge was mentioned almost exclusively by BIPOC in interviews, an anecdotal finding that aligns with survey and other interview data. BIPOC funders were more likely than white funders (69 percent compared to 60 percent) to report on the survey that they turned to grantee interactions as a source of knowledge. BIPOC respondents were also more likely to discuss in interviews turning to grantees and impacted communities when making a change. Exhibit 14 summarizes the benefits of community leaders as a source of philanthropic practice knowledge, according to interviewed funders.

Community leaders provide a community-specific, contextualized understanding

“ It’s one thing to read SSIR or McKinsey or Kellogg or Aspen, but the truth is that conversations get stuck at the 30,000-foot view. What I do is listen to the community, listen directly to the needs of the visionaries, leaders, influencers at the street level.”

“ We as a foundation particularly value the voice of our nonprofit partners and try to look there first for the most up-to-date and on the ground insight and knowledge and get a sense of where things are trending or heading as sort of the first go-to and then look at other sources from peers and academic partners or whoever to help provide a fuller picture.”

“ [I go] directly to the people that can make impact. I did a lot of town halls and focus groups with stakeholders to find out what was really happening to people.”

“ It’s super important to ask grantees where the gaps are. They know better than we do.”

Community leaders adapt foundation practices to better fit community

“ We’re a participatory grantmaker. Our grantmaking committees are made up of persons with disabilities. When we are trying to get a better sense of what something looks like, or tactics that are effective on the ground, or even our theory of practice, all of that was developed by persons with disabilities or family members of persons with disabilities.”

Community leaders possess knowledge that has often been undervalued in philanthropic practice

“ Our work is all about elevating the voices of people and communities, and especially those who are least heard in our society and bringing those voices into the deliberations and considerations of nonprofits and, more importantly, foundations.”

“ It’s what the grantees are asking for, it’s what Black Lives Matter is asking for and other indigenous groups, they’ve always asked to have a voice and to be included.”

Sourcing knowledge can be multi-layered

Through interviews, funders illustrated how their pursuit of knowledge to inform philanthropic practice can draw from a range of knowledge sources. In some cases, they explained that different knowledge sources offer contrasting perspectives, helping a funder develop a nuanced understanding. In other cases, different sources reference one another, encouraging funders to broaden their knowledge-seeking. In the following instance, for example, a funder described listening to **peers** who recommended a tool developed by a **practice knowledge organization** and using that tool to collect knowledge from **grantees** to inform strategy:

“We decided to go with the Center for Effective Philanthropy Grantee Perception Report because it seemed to be the gold standard amongst our peers. We wanted to hear from our grantees, both those that have been with us under the prior strategy and the new strategy, to see how it’s impacting them and how it’s impacting the field. In their perception, is our strategy headed in the wrong direction? Is it the right direction? How is it impacting them and also peer organizations and sectors that they work in?” **–Executive Officer at a small foundation**

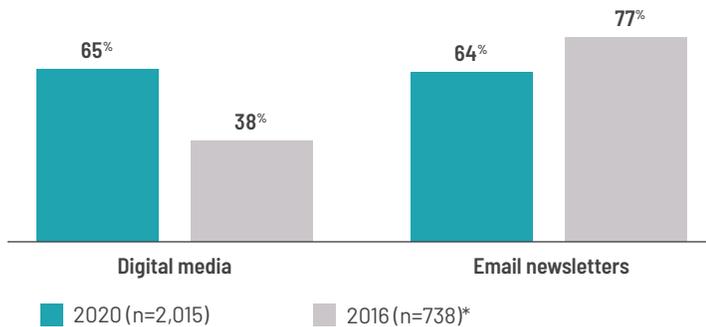
Another funder spoke of the benefit of conferences in terms of bringing **published research** findings to life through interactive communications with **researchers** and **stakeholders**:

“In the youth sector, philanthropy was saying to nonprofits, ‘You need to do better curriculum so your program will stick better with the kids.’ It turns out it’s not about the curriculum, it’s about adult relationships with the kids. I was reading up on it—there were some science journals and a couple of books—but frankly, a conference is where they had the right mixture of people. It’s not just about the research, it’s about how you deliver that message.” **–Program Staff at a large foundation**

Digital media is a growing tool for philanthropic knowledge-seeking

Over the last few years, funders have increased their use of digital media to find philanthropic practice knowledge. Funders' use of digital media, such as web searches, blogs, webinars, slideshares, videos, and podcasts, to find practice knowledge increased from 38 percent on the 2016 survey to 65 percent in 2020 (Exhibit 15). At the same time, email newsletters, while still a popular source for knowledge, decreased from 77 percent to 64 percent. The COVID pandemic may have played a role in pushing people online, but this trend also parallels the long-existing shift to digital reliance and increasing quantity of information available digitally.

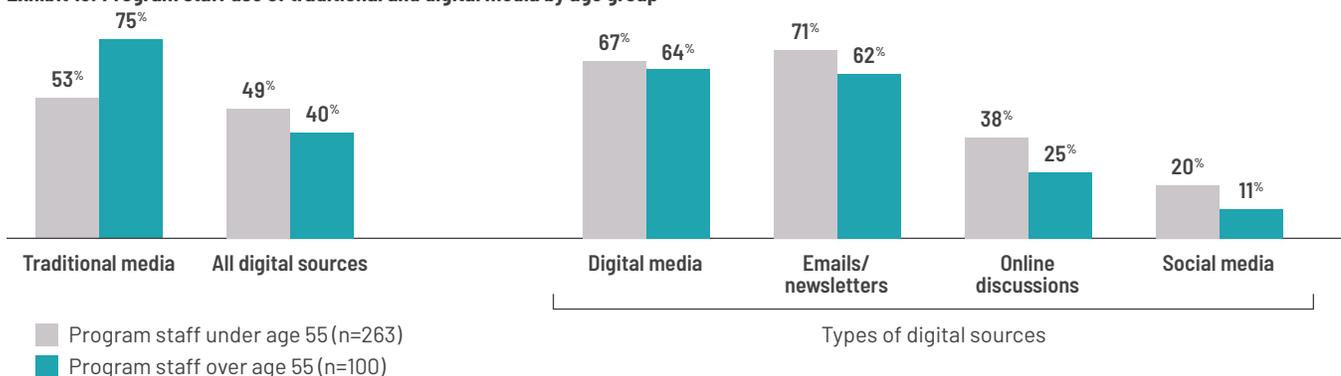
Exhibit 15. Increase in funders who reported using electronic media as primary sources of practice knowledge



* In the 2016 survey, digital media was referred to as "new media (blogs, slideshares, videos, podcasts)".

Also following broader societal trends, the use of digital media by foundation staff was more prevalent among **younger age groups**. On the survey, program staff under age 55 were more likely to access practice knowledge through digital sources, such as digital media, emails, online discussions, and social media (49 percent), compared to those older than 55 (40 percent, Exhibit 16).¹⁹ The younger group was less likely to access knowledge through traditional media, such as books, reports, and articles obtained either in print or online (53 percent compared to 75 percent). **Female executives** and **BIPOC executives**, who also tended to be younger than their male and white counterparts, were also more likely to use digital sources and less likely to use traditional media (not shown).²⁰

Exhibit 16. Program staff use of traditional and digital media by age group



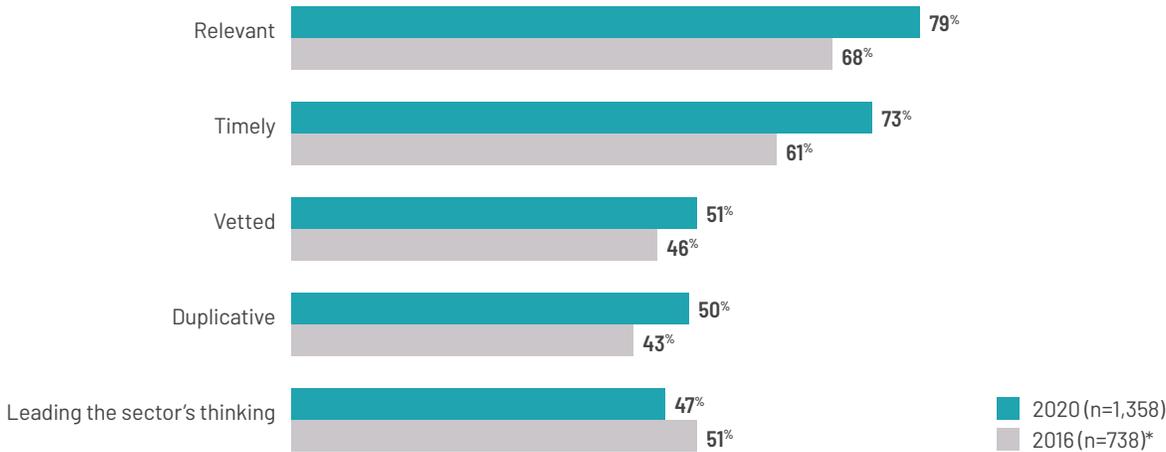
¹⁹ The survey asked respondents to identify their age group (under 25, 25-34, 35-44, etc.). When analyzed by age group, the data on the use of traditional and digital media showed a notable difference in the 55 and older groups compared to the groups younger than 55.

²⁰ Note: There is evidence that the observed differences are statistically significant. See Appendix B for analysis methods on differences between groups.

Relevant and timely practice knowledge is often available but some barriers limit access

Overall, survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the practice knowledge they accessed was generally **relevant** (79 percent) and **timely** (73 percent), and these quality ratings had improved since the 2016 survey (Exhibit 17). However, funders in both years were less likely to report that practice knowledge was vetted (51 percent) and leading the sector's thinking (47 percent). Fifty percent in 2020 reported that the practice knowledge available was often duplicative.

Exhibit 17. Funders' assessments of available practice knowledge (percent agreed or strongly agreed)



* Percentages represent those who marked "Agree" or "Strongly Agree".

In addition, while several interviewed funders in this study commented that they faced no barriers in finding the information they needed, many others identified challenges. Barriers to accessing philanthropic practice knowledge centered on several themes that suggest a desire for strategies to **manage information overload**, more **nuance and lessons learned related to equity** considerations in philanthropy, and increased access to **locally relevant knowledge** (Exhibit 18).

Key barrier: Information overload causes inefficiency

“ There’s so much now but getting it in a way that is digestible and useful is the challenge. It’s challenging because sometimes it’s too much and at the same time you’re not sure whether you’re getting what you need.”

“ I’m not particularly good at reading all of the things that I’m sent. Colleagues are quite prolific sometimes in sending me articles that I should read.”

“ I’m a part of a bunch of philanthropic membership groups and networks that are around the content. All of those have ramped up all these online conferences, videos, webinars, so it’s actually psychologically pushed me away.”

Key barrier: Knowledge related to equity often lacks depth

“ Some of what I have found about how to be anti-racist or how to support equity is: your foundation should be making general operating grants and they should be multi-year and you should support organizations that are led by people of color or Black or Indigenous. There’s a part of me that feels like gosh, that’s what we were talking about 15 years ago and this is what we’re still saying? Is there something else?”

Key barrier: Knowledge related to local context can be scarce

“ There’s probably a decent amount of information, but at the local level, it’s been very difficult. We’ve tried to develop reporting systems or tracking systems. We have outreach people to try to get the information that we need.”

“ Something specific to community [would be] a list of consultants who are people of color and those who are knowledgeable about showing up with a racial equity lens to their work. That would be a great resource to have.”

Knowledge-seeking redirected by COVID

COVID shifted the attention of some funders toward the immediate needs of communities. To be responsive, they turned their knowledge-seeking efforts to staying abreast of grantees' and communities' COVID-related needs and how peer funders were handling the effects of the pandemic. Because of the health, economic, and social urgency of the situation, some funders streamlined knowledge-gathering efforts to focus on accessible, trusted sources rather than spending time filtering through internet searches.

"The last six months were challenging," one said in a 2020 interview, "because grantees and different communities that we serve have had much higher needs. So, I wouldn't say I was spending any time at all looking at the field's best practices online." Another concurred, explaining, "What I normally would have done pre-COVID is take a day and go peruse what's happening and go to conferences and that kind of stuff. You're just not doing that as much. If you've got truncated time, you're trying to get information as quickly and efficiently as you can. Frankly, I go to trusted sources. I'm not just perusing the internet like I sometimes do."

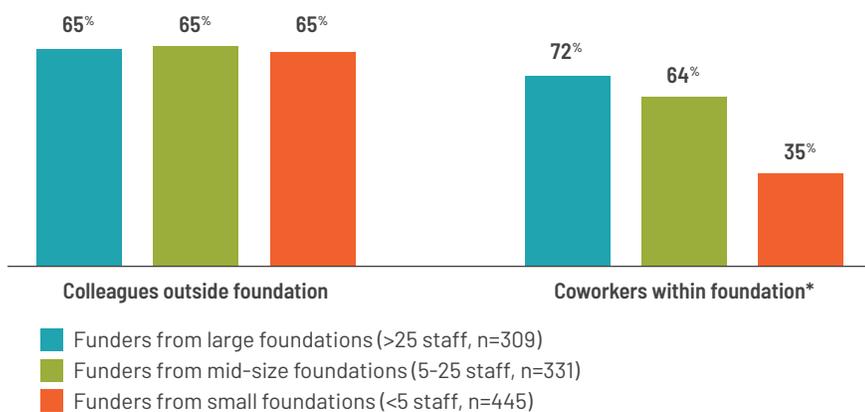
"In general philanthropy has been upended by the pandemic, no matter what issue area you cover. I have been spending a lot of time keeping up on what community foundations are doing and who in the foundation world is doing something differently so that we can all survive this. [Relevant knowledge right now is] issue-based, sector-based, and regional."

- Program Officer at a large foundation

Larger foundations tend to have more resources for some kinds of knowledge gathering

Analysis of survey data by foundation size reveals that larger foundations reported higher engagement than smaller foundations in some types of knowledge seeking. As shown in Exhibit 19, for example, a large majority of surveyed funders, regardless of their foundation size, reported seeking practice knowledge from external colleagues. However, those from large and mid-size foundations were much more likely than their counterparts at small foundations to seek knowledge from coworkers. Funders in small foundations, by definition, *have* many fewer coworkers than those in larger organizations, so have fewer in-house resources in this regard.

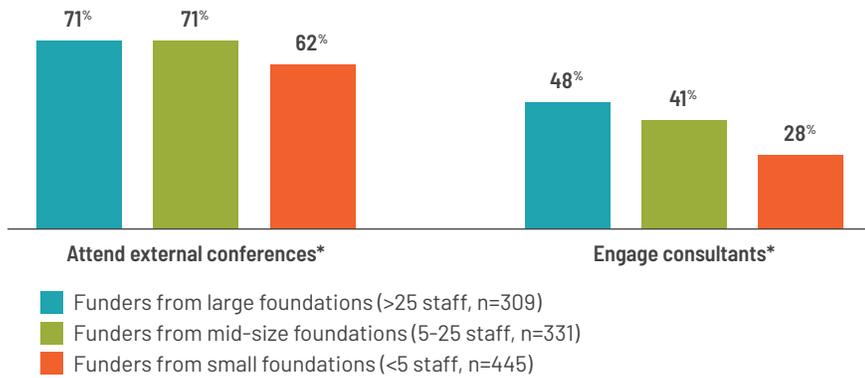
Exhibit 19. External colleagues versus coworkers as knowledge sources, by foundation size



* Note: There is evidence that the observed differences are statistically significant. See Appendix B for analysis methods on differences between groups.

In addition, as shown in Exhibit 20, survey respondents from large and mid-size foundations were somewhat more likely than those from small foundations to report seeking philanthropic knowledge from conference sessions, which require financial resources and staff time to attend. Similarly, funders from larger foundations were also more likely than those from smaller foundations to report engaging consultants, another resource-intensive type of knowledge gathering.

Exhibit 20. Resource-intensive knowledge seeking, by foundation size



* Note: There is evidence that the observed differences are statistically significant. See Appendix B for analysis methods on differences between groups.

Assessment of knowledge quality tends to focus on trustworthiness and experience

Interviewed funders emphasized trustworthiness as a measure of practice knowledge quality

When asked how they determine whether a resource is worth consuming, interviewed funders time and again cited the trustworthiness of the source as paramount. They suggested that relying on trusted sources for practice knowledge relieved some of the burden of vetting individual knowledge products for quality and relevance. What makes a source trustworthy? Funders primarily spoke of trusting people and sources they were already familiar with. When asked how they knew that a resource was worth consuming, one interview respondent replied, “It’s [provided by] someone that I know and have worked with in the past whose judgment I trust and who knows me and my work well enough to be able to curate for me.” Another answered, “Over time you’re starting to get to know the same organizations and publications and trusting that.”

A small number of respondents also alluded to the external reputation of the knowledge source as important. For instance, one explained, “The owner of the publication, the host, the blog website matters to me. It’s got to be a group I trust. I see who’s on the board and who the staff is. I’m like, ‘Okay, this looks solid. It’s a trusted expert or concierge.’” On the survey, when rating the quality of knowledge products in general, funders from **smaller foundations** and **family foundations** (which tend to be smaller) were more likely to give **more positive** ratings of quality.²¹

²¹ Note: There is evidence that the observed differences are statistically significant. See Appendix B for analysis methods on differences between groups.

To find high-quality DEI information, funders look for community voice and lived experience

When interviewed funders considered equity in sourcing practice knowledge, they often prioritized the inclusion of voices from impacted communities. Referring to the importance of knowledge rooted in communities, for example, a funder commented, “People with lived experience have a lot more credibility to me than people who read about something.” Another described “wanting to be more intentional about ensuring that community voice is centered in the types of things that we are funding or in the types of grantees or nonprofits that we’re supporting.”

Interpretations: A few thoughts on seeking knowledge

Coworkers and external grantmaking colleagues continue to be the most common sources of knowledge for funders. For many reasons, these peers make sense as a resource for philanthropic practice knowledge, perhaps chiefly because they can provide a relevant, relatable perspective as insiders in philanthropy. The COVID pandemic underscored the value of a strong network of peer relationships; as it began to have clear implications for communities and the nonprofits serving them, funders we interviewed said they turned to their peer funders for ideas and support as they determined how to respond rapidly to the growing crisis.

However, there are also reasons for funders to seek philanthropic practice knowledge from more diverse sources, for example, to avoid insularity and tap into the advantages of other knowledge holders. Indeed, given what we know about how our social networks tend to reflect and reinforce our views and beliefs, deliberate efforts to diversify knowledge gathering are essential for funders to access alternative theories and new strategies to apply to their philanthropic practice. Funders do report seeking some practice knowledge from other sources, including knowledge organizations and community leaders, that they recognize as offering valuable guidance and perspectives in addition to peer viewpoints.

Findings: Applying Knowledge

How are funders using knowledge to influence practice?



How funders use knowledge to inform their philanthropic practice can shed light on how knowledge can be packaged or disseminated more effectively, as well as targeted to funders most likely to apply it. This chapter explores findings about the ways in which funders apply practice knowledge and factors that serve as barriers or facilitators to knowledge use.

Findings in short

Funders view themselves not only as users of philanthropic practice knowledge but as knowledge curators and sharers. When applying knowledge, most funders use it to improve current practice, consider a new practice, or question a practice. The likelihood of taking each of these actions varies by respondent type, including gender, age, foundation type, and foundation size. For example, female executives, newer staff, and staff at community and independent foundations were more likely than their counterparts to consider a new practice. While some funders look to knowledge to challenge their thinking about philanthropic practice, others tend to seek knowledge that confirms their thinking.

Funders draw on many sources of knowledge to inform foundations' operations, programs, and grantee interactions. Some funders described using knowledge to shift toward involving community members in design decisions. Several factors present barriers to putting knowledge to use, but, notably in recent years, major external events like the COVID pandemic and related economic downturn, as well as the rise in attention to racial justice, have sparked or accelerated change in philanthropic practice. It is yet to be seen which of these trends, if any, will have an enduring impact on the practice of philanthropy.

Funders view themselves as knowledge curators and sharers

In multiple instances, funders who were interviewed described having a role in sharing philanthropic practice knowledge and helping others find and use such knowledge. One respondent who is in an evaluation and learning role at a foundation, for example, described a formal role of supporting colleagues in using knowledge to guide their grantmaking practice, saying, “I am responsible for managing a team that works with programs, helping staff understand how to use knowledge and data to both make explicit what problems they’re trying to solve as well as identify a baseline of what they’re looking to do and then make an explicit theory of change that can be empirically tested.”

Most funders use knowledge to improve current practice, consider a new practice, question a practice, or compare their foundation to the field

At high rates, surveyed funders reported using philanthropic practice knowledge in a variety of ways: to improve current practices, consider a new practice, question or challenge a current practice, and compare their foundation to the field (Exhibit 22). Among these uses, survey participants were most likely to report using practice knowledge to **improve upon current practice** (82 percent) and **consider a new practice** (71 percent). About two-thirds of respondents used knowledge to question or challenge a current practice (65 percent) or compare their foundation to the field (65 percent), though they were somewhat less likely to report doing so than in 2016.

Furthermore, a full 85 percent reported adopting a new idea or best practice or being in the process of doing so in the past two years (Exhibit 21).

Exhibit 21. Funders who adopted a new idea or best practice

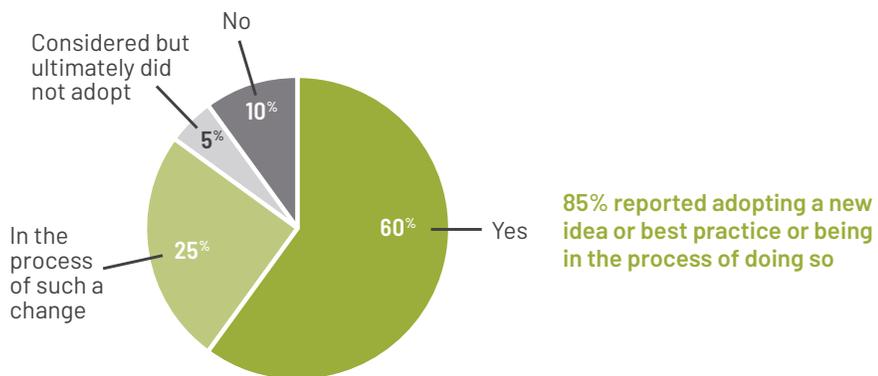
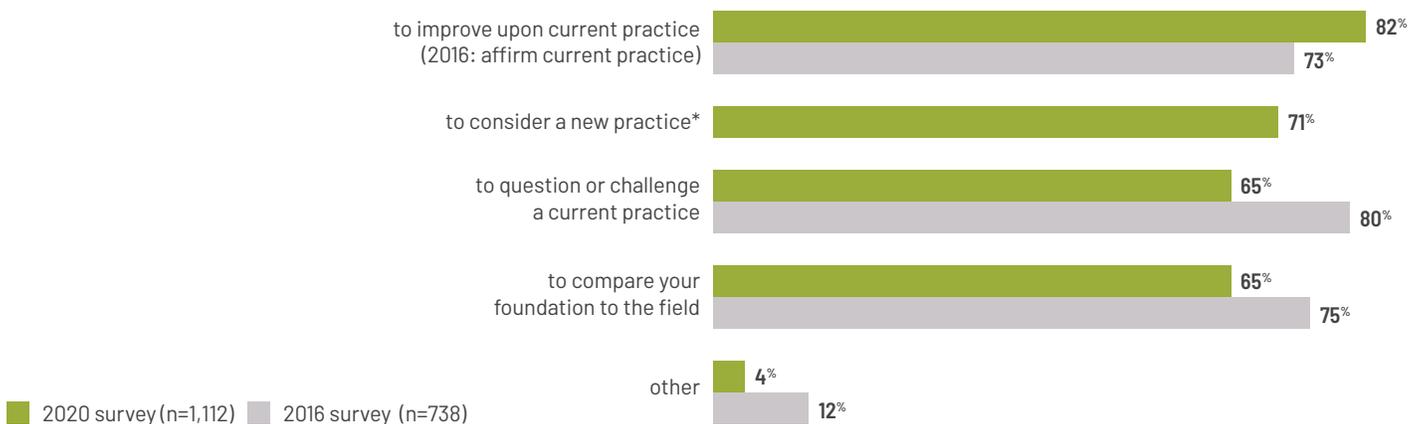


Exhibit 22. Funders’ use of practice knowledge



*The 2016 survey did not include “to consider a new practice” as a response category.

The likelihood of using knowledge in certain ways varied by respondent type

Although all types of staff members surveyed were similarly likely to report using practice knowledge to improve current practice, the likelihood of considering a new practice, questioning a current practice, or comparing the foundation to the field differed by staff type. Notably:²²

- **Female executives** were more likely than male executives to consider a new practice (73 vs. 59 percent) or compare their foundation to the field (69 vs. 54 percent).
- Similarly, **staff under age 55** were more likely than older staff to consider a new practice (77 vs. 62 percent) or compare their foundation to the field (71 vs. 49 percent). Staff with less than 10 **years of experience** were also more likely to consider a new practice (74 percent) compared to staff with more than 10 years of experience (68 percent), though this category is highly correlated with age and position.
- **Community foundations** were more likely to consider a new practice (80 percent) than independent foundations (71 percent), which in turn were more likely to do so than family foundations (65 percent).

In addition, Exhibit 23 shows survey results on the likelihood of different knowledge uses by staff position and foundation size, revealing that:

- Executives were less likely than other staff to consider a new practice or challenge current practice, and
- Larger foundations were more likely than smaller foundations to consider a new practice, question current practice, or compare their foundation to the field. This last point contrasts with the finding (noted above in Exhibit 7) that smaller foundations reported more interest in trends in giving than larger foundations.

Exhibit 23. Likelihood of knowledge uses by respondent type

Staff position	Executive officers (n=546)	Program staff (n=313)	Operations staff (n=67)	Evaluation staff (n=67)
To improve current practice	81%	85%	81%	84%
To consider a new practice*	68%	73%	76%	85%
To question or challenge a practice*	61%	73%	63%	82%
To compare foundation to the field	64%	65%	78%	69%

Foundation size	Small (<5 staff, n=546)	Mid-size (5-25 staff, n=313)	Large (>25 staff, n=67)
To improve current practice	80%	84%	83%
To consider a new practice*	66%	75%	72%
To question or challenge a practice*	54%	71%	75%
To compare foundation to the field*	62%	65%	71%

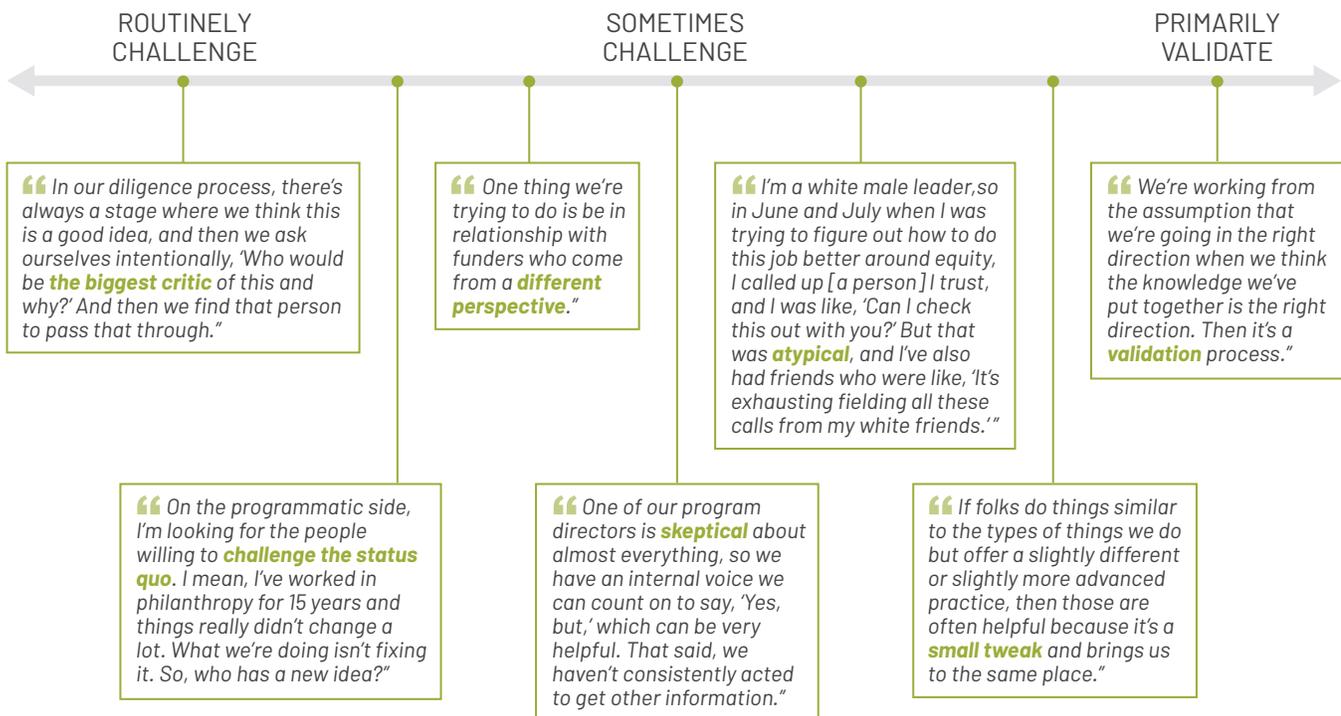
*Note: There is evidence that the observed differences are statistically significant. See Appendix B for analysis methods on differences between groups.

²² Note: There is evidence that the observed differences are statistically significant. See Appendix B for analysis methods on differences between groups.

Funders varied in whether they looked to knowledge to challenge versus validate their thinking about philanthropic practice

Through interviews, funders shared their attitudes and practices toward seeking philanthropic practice knowledge that challenged their thinking. Reflecting the survey data that shows different levels of interest in challenging a practice, funders varied in their openness to diverse perspectives. Exhibit 24 provides examples of how some interviewed funders reported routinely seeking challenges to their ideas, some reported doing so occasionally, and some reported more typically seeking knowledge that aligned with or validated their thinking.

Exhibit 24. Using knowledge to challenge versus validate thinking



Funders draw on various sources of knowledge to inform philanthropic practice

Interviewed funders gave examples of applying practice knowledge gathered from a range of different sources. The anecdotes on the following pages provide windows into funders' use of practice knowledge to inform operations and programs, to inform the grantee interface, and to shift toward more inclusive decision making.

Interviews offered examples of using knowledge to inform operations and programs

Exhibit 25 presents examples of funders using knowledge from various sources to inform internal operations and programmatic changes.

Exhibit 25. Using knowledge to inform operations and programs

Knowledge source: Peers

Facilitate informed adoption of operational tools at a community foundation

“The most important sources were those peers across the state that were using the system. We went and visited them prior to the pandemic. We could see face-to-face how they use it on a daily basis, which is the same as we would be using it, how they enter donations, how they run reports, how they give donors access to the financial information about funds they've established. They were trusted peers. I felt like seeing it in action and then also hearing from people that I trust was the best scenario for us. We could talk to bigger organizations so that if we grow, we know that this program will transition nicely with that growth.”

Knowledge source: Knowledge organization

Guide strategic planning and board engagement

“Based on some of the knowledge that we got from BoardSource, I used some of their best practices to change the way that we not only did our strategic planning and who we engaged in that, but how we report back to our board and make sure that they have full engagement and full understanding of how that strategic planning is informing everything we do as an organization.”

Knowledge source: Grantees

Inform program policies

“We emphasized child protection and the policies on harassment and sexual violence in certain programs that help women overcome that dependency. That came based on our visits and feedback from our local grantees.”

Knowledge source: Consultant

Develop tailored programmatic tools

“Having grantees develop evaluation plans during an application process is really unrealistic. I was looking for ways to identify the extent to which a grantee is a learning organization [so] we wouldn't worry so much about their exact evaluation approach. I funded a consultant to collect knowledge and develop resources around learning organizations. It translated into a question bank that is used by program staff as part of gaining information about grantees and their own learning practices so that we can help strengthen those.”

Interviews offered examples of using knowledge to inform the grantee interface

Exhibit 26 presents examples of funders using knowledge to inform practices with grantees.

Exhibit 26. Using knowledge to inform the grantee interface

Knowledge source: Peers

Inform adjustments to grant application and reporting requirements

“ We had two different peer reviews. That was really helpful. I changed our grant application a lot after that exercise and realized that some of the things we asked for we never even used or looked at, especially in the grant report.”

Knowledge source: Knowledge organization

Influence funding expansion to grantees in need during COVID

“ We typically award grants by developing a request for proposal, receiving letters of intent, and a full application. This summer [of 2020] we actually awarded grants without doing any of that. We didn't have an application. We had four or five organizations whose grants were closing that we gave another two years capacity building grant without them submitting an application. We talked to them about what funding they'd lost and their risk of closure—just having a real conversation with them. Recommendations we'd seen from GEO and others said, 'Please try to support your current grantees that may be losing funding.' That's what influenced our change in that process to get them additional funds.”

Knowledge source: Grantees

Inform responsive adjustments to reporting process

“ [We give an] annual micro survey on a specific topic that grantees literally can complete in two to three minutes, but we get a huge amount of information across hundreds of grantees. The survey this past year was on our grantee reports. We received information from grantees about their experience with the reporting process as well as the content of reports. We are using that information to inform adaptations of how we do our grantee reporting. And we use the annual grantee survey on whatever topic it is to make adaptations and hopefully improvements in our practices.”

Interviews offered examples of using knowledge to shift toward more inclusive decision making

Several interviewed funders described using knowledge to learn about or adopt decision-making practices that include community voices. Exhibit 27 shows examples of funders using knowledge to shift away from more traditional decision-making practices and towards participatory approaches.

Exhibit 27. Using knowledge to shift toward more inclusive decision making

Knowledge source: Research conducted by a knowledge organization

Inform decisions about how to connect with the community

“ In [one of our programs], direct service organizations were asking, ‘How do we elevate the voices of people in communities in advocacy policy work?’ We commissioned [a think tank] to do a landscape review of how advocacy policy organizations are meaningfully connecting with the community. They did an excellent report and on the basis of that report we decided to pursue a participatory grantmaking experiment.”

Knowledge source: Community members

Challenge program strategy

“ When that program was originally created, the idea was that those most affected [in the community] would help define the priorities. The team at the foundation made the decision originally to focus primarily at the state level and work on changing laws. But those most affected started saying, ‘We want to focus on [local] issues and the local deciders.’ Our first reaction was to say, ‘Yeah, but that’s going to be too complicated.’

Then we went back to our principles of listening to the communities most affected and realized if we were going to be responsive and lead with their priorities, it didn’t matter how clean and nice our strategy was, we needed to shift. And so we did. We shifted focus on the basis of what we were hearing and have seen some extraordinary shifts around [local issues]. It’s been amazing.”

Knowledge source: Community leaders

Co-design an initiative

“ I’ve been in the process of designing an initiative. The first step was to form an advisory design group that would help inform some insights around resiliency, connectivity, and sustainability. We invited activists and movement leaders to join. I had the goal of really listening to the design team and being in a more co-government space, so me not just making the decisions but creating a space where the group of six could really speak truth to power, let me know what’s not going well or what they needed, and to show up in a different way as a funder.

That was hard because I found myself wanting to hold onto power as opposed to relinquishing it. I found myself wanting to hold back information about how the foundation was making decisions, but we’re co-governing so they should know that. It was really very interesting to figure out how I show up and how to best support [the aim of the initiative].”

Note that this study used interviews to explore the use of other knowledge sources. The findings here omit discussion of the influence of peers, as this was well-documented in the 2016 study.

Knowledge-informed change can meet resistance but is also facilitated by external events

The 2016 *Peer to Peer* study examined **barriers to knowledge use and practice change**, identifying bureaucracy, risk-averse culture, lack of accountability, and insufficient time and resources as primary sources of resistance and acknowledged long-standing research showing the difficulties of organizational change. Our 2020 data collection focused instead on the knowledge that funders seek and use, understanding that the same barriers likely persist and remain part of the story.

The 2016 *Peer to Peer* study also noted that **shifts in the external environment are a key facilitator of change**, an idea that resonates in the 2020 context. Our interviews with funders underscored how the COVID pandemic and parallel economic downturn sparked a swift response among grantmakers, who eased requirements on grantees and worked to provide resources to communities hit especially hard by the pandemic's effects. One comment, for example, described:

“We don’t have a lot of grantee reporting but at the yearly mark, there’s an online form. We had a wave of grants where those reports were going to be due in May or June [2020], during COVID. In March, we said, ‘If you have an upcoming report, we are going to *postpone all reporting* until September.’ We knew they were all pivoting to virtual services and programming and we didn’t want them to have to stop and do our reports. We told them we would give them their next grant payment as scheduled, so they knew they had that funding coming. That change happened based on what we were reading—that organizations were trying to make these huge shifts in delivery. Loosening up reporting practices was going to help them focus on their mission.” **–Evaluation Officer at a small foundation**

Another funder noted similarly:

“The application process was really accelerated through the COVID scenario. We’re a foundation that had a more extensive application that was pretty robust and, some might say, challenging for nonprofits in light of the current year. We eliminated the application and moved to a proactive invite-only approach, changing our application to a two-question format. We’re still learning how it has impacted program officers’ ability to conduct due diligence, but that was a shift we pivoted to quickly and seems to be working positively for us.” **–Evaluation Officer at a mid-size foundation**

The groundswell of attention to DEI and a heightened recognition of systemic racism and bias over the past several years have emerged as another defining external shift, according to interviews. Funders’ interest in DEI knowledge has risen sharply, and some we spoke to provided examples (detailed earlier) of changes their organizations are exploring in internal processes and in working more inclusively with community members to build power and share decision making.

“The value had always been to minimize burden on our nonprofit partners. The burden was so acute in the pandemic that it really propelled us to make that shift.”

– Evaluation Officer at a mid-sized foundation

Interpretations: A few thoughts on applying knowledge

Our findings suggest that over the long term, gradual shifts in staffing composition at foundations may coincide with shifts in philanthropic practices—younger staff, as well as female executives, were more likely than their counterparts to use knowledge to consider a new practice. The strong increase in interest and knowledge-seeking on DEI is another change with implications on practice, but one that has occurred in just a few years. As foundations explore ways to apply that knowledge to their work, time will tell whether it will amount to meaningful and sustained change in organizational and grantmaking practices across philanthropy.

Several examples that interviewed funders shared about shifting away from more traditional decision-making practices provided at least isolated signs of openness to sharing power with impacted communities that are the focus of some foundations' work. The examples reflected intertwined challenges and rewards of making this change, with funders ultimately concluding that adopting more inclusive decision-making could benefit all involved, including by arriving at program designs that better reflect community expertise.

Conclusions

Summary of trends in knowledge access and use

This study brought to light the following trends in how funders find and use knowledge to influence philanthropic practice:

- **Continued reliance on peers as a source of philanthropic practice knowledge.** This study confirms the 2016 finding that funders see their peers (including external colleagues and coworkers) as a highly valuable and practical knowledge source, with 89 percent of surveyed funders in 2020 reporting peers as a primary source. Our 2020 study adds the nuance that external colleagues are a much more frequently tapped knowledge source than coworkers. On average, funders rely on six different knowledge sources about philanthropic practice. Although other sources were much less common than peers, funders described relying on multiple sources of knowledge in ways that were nuanced and multi-layered. More than half of funders reported relying on published research (including by organizations funded in Hewlett's Knowledge for Better Philanthropy strategy), their own grantees, and subject matter experts, such as consultants, as primary sources of practice knowledge.
- **Strong interest in DEI.** Mirroring the increase in widespread attention to racial justice and systemic bias in recent years, foundations are grappling with addressing equity in their work, both internally and externally. Comparing findings from the 2016 and 2020 surveys, the rise in DEI as a topic is the most notable change in knowledge interests, as noted throughout this report. However, interests in practice knowledge about organizational development, grantmaking, and strategic planning have also grown, and interest in evaluation has remained strong.

Some interviewed funders note that one challenge in addressing DEI at foundations is that readily available knowledge that considers DEI in philanthropic practice lacks depth, with a need for more nuance with regard to how funders can support equity. Related to the trend of interest in experiential knowledge, funders emphasize the necessity of community voice and lived experience to inform DEI efforts.

- **Experience is a key ingredient of knowledge.** The value of experiential knowledge—from peers, grantees, and community members—is a theme for funders, suggesting that they see knowledge as particularly relevant when placed in context. Specifically, peers are a valuable source of practice knowledge for grantmakers in large part because they reflect the experiences of other funders in similar contexts. Funders also see the value of informing their philanthropic practice with the experience that grantees have with grant processes and experience that community members have regarding local needs and strategies.
- **Dominance of digital media.** As digital media becomes ever more pervasive, funders' use of web searches, blogs, videos, and webinars is also expanding, alongside the use of online research articles and reports. Knowledge creators, aggregators, and users all must contend with an information overload, striving to distinguish high-quality knowledge that meets funders' needs of timeliness, relevance, and applicability.
- **Varied uses of knowledge.** When applying knowledge, most funders use it to improve current practice, consider a new practice, or question a practice. However, the likelihood of questioning or challenging a current practice declined from 2016 to 2020, according to survey data. In addition, the likelihood of applying knowledge in different ways varies by respondent type, including gender, age, foundation type, and foundation size. While executives overall were less likely than other staff to consider a new practice, female executives were more likely than their male counterparts to do so. Younger staff were more likely than older staff to consider a new practice or compare their foundation to the field, and community foundations as well as larger foundations were more likely than others to consider a new practice.
- **Effects of COVID on philanthropic practice.** The effects of the COVID pandemic on philanthropic practice and knowledge use cannot be ignored. With profound consequences on nonprofits providing direct services, many funders immediately adjusted practices that posed burdens on grantees, including reducing application and reporting requirements. The pandemic forced funders away from in-person knowledge-gathering opportunities like conferences and convenings and increased the urgent need for rapid solutions for which peers were a strong knowledge resource.

Implications to consider: Supporting funders to draw from a deeper well of knowledge

The evaluation team that conducted this study raises for consideration the following potential implications of the findings based on interpretations of the data and our experience working with foundations and communities.

Funders have a great deal to offer one another as sources of knowledge about philanthropic practice. They possess practical experience, professional judgment, and expertise in grantmaking and philanthropic practice. They often hold deep knowledge of particular subject areas, nonprofit organizations, and/or communities of focus. Further, they may have intimate knowledge of research conducted or contracted by their foundation and a curated collection of other knowledge products and resources they rely on.

For these reasons, it makes sense that most funders turn to their peers as direct sources of philanthropic practice knowledge and trusted conduits to other knowledge resources. Yet our findings show that funders are more likely to turn to their peers than to any other single source, leading to a question of whether knowledge-seeking over relies on peer sources at the risk of leaving critical gaps in understanding.

Routines and habits in how we seek knowledge can reinforce bias. In philanthropy, common cognitive biases include **confirmation bias** (an unconscious preference for information that confirms our existing views over information that challenges them) and **groupthink** (when aligned viewpoints within a group inhibit consideration of alternative ideas and evidence), among others.²³ Funders we spoke to acknowledged a risk of insularity and bias in their reliance on peers.

Our study also revealed the benefits and limitations of other knowledge sources, which could inform efforts to encourage and enable funders to include a greater range of sources when seeking knowledge. For example:

- **Researchers**, including Knowledge for Better Philanthropy grantees, help funders understand large-scale trends as well as produce evidence-based tools and best practices for philanthropy, complementing contextualized knowledge from peers. They can also conduct research specific to a region or area of interest to a funder or group of funders. As knowledge users, funders say that one limitation of the more general nature of most research products is that they can be challenging to apply to specific situations. Furthermore, access to tailored research may be financially out of reach for small foundations. One solution: Foundations' commitments to sharing knowledge openly through user-friendly, searchable databases like [GrantCraft](#) are a promising way to increase access to relevant knowledge products for grantmakers.²⁴
- **Community leaders** provide deep understanding and (often) lived experience of community needs and strategies—essential knowledge for funders committed to supporting the community. Gathering meaningful knowledge from community leaders, though, requires time and intention, facilitated by a foundation's longer-term efforts to build trust and partnership with the community. Increasingly, as the interviews in this study suggest, funders are responding to calls to elevate community voice in their knowledge seeking and decision making. As some foundations make a shift toward more community involvement, the process may become more accessible for all foundations as their peers and researchers increasingly have lessons and guidance to offer.
- The COVID pandemic effectively shut down in-person convenings and conferences where a wide range of **stakeholders, researchers, and subject matter specialists** could converge to share practice knowledge. At the same time, COVID drove more interactions online, where they became more accessible for organizations that have smaller travel budgets or more limited staff time. Virtual meetings and increased digital competence are now ubiquitous in knowledge sector workplaces. While in-person professional gatherings will undoubtedly resume to some extent as the effects of the pandemic wane, greater opportunities for virtual connections to sense-making and knowledge-gathering sessions to inform philanthropic practice are also likely to continue.

²³Beer T and Coffman J. May 2014. *How shortcuts cut us short: Cognitive traps in philanthropic decision making*. Center for Evaluation Innovation. Retrieved from <https://www.evaluationinnovation.org/publication/how-shortcuts-cut-us-short-cognitive-traps-in-philanthropic-decision-making/>

²⁴Nolan C. 2018. *Open for good: Knowledge sharing to strengthen grantmaking*. GrantCraft. DOI: doi.org/10.15868/socialsector.30194

The findings of this study carry implications for different actors in the knowledge ecosystem. The questions below are meant to spark reflection and consideration about how knowledge developers like those in the Knowledge for Better Philanthropy portfolio can contribute to practice knowledge needs in a changing world, and how knowledge users can access and apply practice knowledge more effectively to improve philanthropic practice.

Questions for knowledge developers and curators:

- How might you provide practice knowledge that responds to funders' needs for actionable and customizable guidance, community expertise and local context, and more nuanced DEI approaches?
- How might you target your knowledge products to reach the subset of funders for whom it would be most relevant? How do your dissemination strategies ease the burden of information overload while pointing funders to timely knowledge products?
- Given that funders turn to peers as knowledge sources, how might you leverage and/or disrupt that tendency to ensure that relevant empirical knowledge makes its way to those who can benefit from this type of information?
- What is the role of knowledge developers and curators in contributing to an equitable knowledge ecosystem that includes more voices, values multiple ways of knowing, and expands knowledge access?²⁵

Questions for knowledge users:

- How might your current routines of seeking knowledge and ways of learning reinforce bias?
- What opportunities do you have to diversify your knowledge sources? How could you seek out alternative ideas or skeptics to test your thinking?
- How are knowledge gathering and sense-making about philanthropic practice built into your foundation's grantmaking processes and community partnerships?

Final thoughts: The role of philanthropic knowledge in a changing world

The COVID pandemic provided a stark reminder that the future is unpredictable, having thrown life as we knew it into chaos with little notice. Yet at the same time, observation and reflection show that seeking knowledge of our changing world can prepare us for the next steps. By drawing deeply from the well of diverse knowledge, foundations can take lessons from the effects of global crises on communities and continue to take stock of trends that show how the context of philanthropy is evolving. Funders have clear interests in growing their understanding of how philanthropic practices can be responsive to large-scale shifts, among them:

- Social upheaval around racial justice issues, which continues to press foundations to grapple with DEI and incorporate community voice into their processes;
- Increasing reliance on digital sources, which knowledge ecosystem actors will need to balance with a hunger for in-person connections that have been curtailed amid pandemic restrictions; and
- The twin health and economic disasters starting in 2020, which have highlighted the need for organizational preparedness, resilience, and sustainability.

With foundations continuing to play a powerful role in the social sector, philanthropic practices and the knowledge that informs them will remain consequential.

²⁵ INASP. 2020. Unleash the talent: Towards an equitable knowledge ecosystem. INASP Strategy 2020-2025. <https://www.inasp.info/sites/default/files/2020-05/INASP-2020-Strategy-DIGITAL-Compressed.pdf>

Appendix A: Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation for all those who contributed to this report, including members of the grantee advisory board, our expert advisors, Hewlett Foundation staff, staff at Engage R+D and Equal Measure and, last but not least, all of the foundation members who completed the survey or participated in interviews for this report. We acknowledge some of these groups by name, below.

Grantee Advisory Members:

- Cynthia Schaal, Interim CEO of Exponent Philanthropy
- Jennifer Splansky Juster, Executive Director of Collective Impact Forum
- Kerrien Suarez, Executive Director of Equity in the Center
- Lisa Ranghelli, Senior Director of Evaluation and Learning at National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy
- Phil Buchanan, President of the Center for Effective Philanthropy
- Raymond Foxworth, Vice President of Grantmaking, Development, and Communications at First Nations Development Institute

Expert Advisors:

- Jara Dean-Coffey, Director of the Luminare Group and the Equitable Evaluation Initiative
- Julia Coffman, co-Executive Director of the Center for Evaluation Innovation

Foundation Staff:

- Fay Twersky, President of the Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation
- Lindsay Louie, Program Officer at the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation
- Amy Arbretton, Evaluation Officer at the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation

Engage R+D Team:

- Clare Nolan, Co-Founder
- Pilar Mendoza, Senior Consultant
- Meghan Hunt, Research Consultant
- Katherine Lee, Independent Consultant

Equal Measure Team:

- Seth Klukoff, Vice President of Thought Leadership
- Wanda Casillas, Senior Director
- Victoria Worthen Lang, Consultant

Appendix B: Survey Methodology

This appendix provides details on the methods used in conducting the field survey.

Instrument

As the survey was intended as a follow-up to the 2016 survey, the evaluation team started with the 2016 instrument and made updates based on recommendations from the 2016 study team and in close partnership with the Hewlett Foundation team. A complete copy of the survey can be found in Appendix C. Updates included:

- Adding a screener question to ensure the survey was only completed by the target audience (staff and board members of US-based foundations)
- Expanding on the definition of practice knowledge to provide additional information and examples
- Creating a list of practice knowledge topics based on the 2016 survey for participants to choose from rather than open-ended responses
- Eliminating some open-ended follow-up questions to make the survey shorter (e.g., What types of social media do you use?)
- Consolidating question on knowledge sources and modes and updating the answer choices slightly
- Updating the list of knowledge organizations to reflect the Hewlett Foundation's current grantees
- Adding a question about who participants rely on for information related to COVID-19 response and recovery
- Updating the demographic questions to reflect how the Hewlett Foundation currently captures information and adding a question on race/ethnicity

The survey was first piloted internally and then piloted externally using cognitive interviews. Cognitive interviewing helped the survey team to 1) understand how respondents perceived, thought about, and interpreted survey questions, 2) assess the kind of data that is collected from survey questions and how it aligns with the goals of the data collection effort, and 3) identify where and how questions and their possible response options may need to be revised. Before sending it to the entire list, the survey was sent to a sample of 100 respondents to test the distribution mechanism.

Participants

To compile a list of staff and board members at US-based foundations for the survey, the evaluation team asked Hewlett's Knowledge for Better Philanthropy grantees to share their distribution lists of foundation members who receive their practice knowledge resources. This included foundation staff and board members who receive email news updates, are subscribed to the organization's blog or publication, are "members" of the organization, have downloaded research, etc. Grantees could share multiple contacts at each foundation; participation was not limited to one person per foundation. Non-foundation audiences, such as nonprofits, corporations, and others that were not affiliated with a foundation, were excluded from the list.

From these lists, the survey team created a de-duplicated list of contacts for a total of 37,072 unique contacts. Thirty percent of participants on the list were on two or more lists: 17% were on two lists, 8% were on three lists, 6% were on four or more lists.

Response Rate

Responses

The survey was fielded in SurveyGizmo (now known as Alchemer) in July 2020 and sent to participants via a MailChimp email. The email included a message from the Hewlett Foundation's recent Vice President, Fay Twersky, and a return email address to Engage R+D. The survey was open for a total of four weeks and included one initial email to all participants followed by two reminder emails.

The survey received 1,483 complete responses and 538 partial responses, totaling 2,021 responses. The survey also received 495 responses from people who responded to the screener question that they did not qualify for the survey because they were not a current staff or board member at a US-based foundation. An additional 396 clicked through to the survey and passed the screener questions but did not answer any questions beyond the screener.

An examination of the 2,021 responses paired with the Candid organizational data revealed that 26% (519 responses) were from organizations that did not fit the criteria for inclusion in the survey, despite the respondents having passed the screener question.²⁶ This included 1) public charities that primarily provide direct services, 2) those who make grants to individuals (e.g., scholarships), 3) small grantmakers whose giving is affiliated with an institution (e.g., hospital, university, membership organization), 4) small grantmakers with extremely niche focuses (e.g., for the preservation of a historic building, a city park, etc.), and 5) other nongrantmaking tax-exempt institutions such as schools, civic leagues, employee associations, churches, hospitals, or medical research organizations. These responses were removed from the dataset.

Sample Size

Of the 37,072 unique contacts provided by grantees, the MailChimp system reported that 34,014 were delivered successfully.²⁷ The responses we received from those emails is detailed in the “no adjustments” column below.

Of those who started the survey, 17% marked that they did not meet the criteria for participation, meaning they were not staff or board members of US-based foundations. Using that information, we estimate that 17% of non-respondents would also not have met the criteria for participation and discarded 17% from the total 34,014 sample.

Of those who completed the survey, Candid data revealed that 26% were not from eligible organizations, as detailed above. In addition to discarding these responses, we also used that information to estimate that 26% of those who did not respond to the survey, but would have passed the screener, also would not have been eligible to participate. These figures are shown in the “adjusted” column in Exhibit 1.

²⁶ This suggests some potential refinements that could be made to the screener question in the future.

²⁷ There are several reasons why emails may have been undeliverable, including: the email address is not valid (unsendable), the address does not exist (hard bounce), or the email was blocked for any variety of reasons, including spam and anti-virus filters, full inbox, etc. (soft bounces). Of all email addresses, MailChimp reported that 61 emails were unsendable, 149 emails were hard bounces, and 2,848 emails were soft bounces.

Exhibit 1. Explanation of Response Rate Calculations

	No adjustments	Adjusted
Valid responses	2,021	1,502 (discarded 519 responses from ineligible organizations)
Passed screener but didn't answer any other questions	396	294 (discarded 26%—the percent of estimated ineligible organizations)
Didn't pass screener	495	495 (discarded all who didn't pass screener)
Didn't reply	31,102	19,186 (discarded 17% estimated not to have passed screener then 26% estimated ineligible organizations)
Total	34,014	20,982
Response Rate	5.9%	7.2%

For the purposes of this report, we consider the response rate to be 7.2%, calculated as the number of valid survey responses out of the adjusted total sample size.

Data

Organization Data

Where possible, Hewlett's Knowledge for Better Philanthropy grantees contributed information about each contact who received the survey, including name, title, foundation, EIN, and foundation address. The survey was fielded with unique links for each participant in order to link each response with information about the participant, when available. The survey did not ask participants to share any uniquely identifying information such as their foundation name or location.

Confidentiality

The evaluation team held the email list in the strictest confidence and did not share them with the Hewlett Foundation or any other entities. The data was used only to implement this one online survey. Information about the participants' foundation and demographics were only reported in aggregate to understand variations in experience and knowledge use.

Candid Data

The evaluation team partnered with Candid to gather additional information about the foundations represented in the survey. For each respondent for whom the evaluation team had information about their foundation (as submitted by grantees), Candid appended additional variables about the foundation's annual contributions, asset value, type (e.g., corporate, family, private, community, etc.), and location. This data was sourced from 990-PF tax forms for private foundations and 990 forms for public charities. The majority of this data was from 2017, with more recent information used as available. This information allowed the evaluation team to perform additional analysis to better understand how knowledge practices differed among different types of foundations.

To match the data, the evaluation team sent Candid a de-identified list of respondents (without email addresses, titles, or names) that included, where available, their foundation name, EIN number, and/or address. Because respondent information could have been submitted by more than one grantee, the list included all variations of this data on file. For the entries that included EIN numbers, Candid verified that they were valid and then matched them to the foundation data. For entries that did not include EIN numbers, Candid performed a probabilistic matching process that used the available information (organization name(s) and, in some cases, address(es)) to match to the foundation data. Each match was scored from 0% to 100%. While Candid recommends reviewing all matches with less than an 80% score, the evaluation team manually reviewed all matches with a score of less than 90% (n=273) and spot-checked those over 90% to ensure accuracy.

Analysis

The evaluation team used a standard quantitative analytic platform (SPSS) to conduct an analysis of the survey data. This included general descriptive statistics.

The team also compared differences between groups by doing an analysis of variance. We report significance at the $p \leq 0.05$ level in order to provide insight into the relative strength of different evidence. However, due to the categorical nature of the data collected in this study, more evidence is needed to draw conclusive results and we thus encourage caution when interpreting the implications of significance testing. Categories included in the analysis are as follows:

- Gender of executives: male executives compared to female executives, with executives defined as CEO/ Executive Director/President or Other Executive Officer (e.g., Chief Operating Officer, Chief Financial Officer, Vice President etc.) (as self-reported in survey data)
- Race/ethnicity of executives: white executives compared to BIPOC executives (as self-reported in survey data)
- Race/ethnicity of program staff: white staff compared to BIPOC staff (as self-reported in survey data)
- Age of program staff: program staff under age 55 compared to program staff over age 55 (as self-reported in survey data)
- Staff type: executives compared to program staff, operations staff, and evaluation staff (as self-reported in survey data)
- Foundation type: family foundations compared to independent and community foundations (as defined by Candid data)
- Foundation giving size: foundations with under \$5 million in annual giving compared to those with giving between \$5 million and \$25 million and those with annual giving of more than \$25 million (as defined by Candid data)
- Foundation staff size: foundations with less than five staff, foundations with 5-25 staff, and foundations with more than 25 staff (as self-reported in survey data)
- Foundation location: Northeast compared to South, Midwest, and West (as defined by Candid data)

Note that each category may contain more than one funder from the same organization. The analysis was conducted at an individual level in order to understand the unique perspectives of respondents participating in the survey. Due to the limitations of the data, it is not possible to aggregate responses at an organizational level.

Appendix C: Interview Methodology

This appendix provides details on the methods used in conducting interviews that followed the field survey. The evaluation team conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 20 participants that indicated interest to be contacted when they took the online survey. Interviews were conducted using the Zoom online platform with participants having the option to use only the audio feature. All interviews were recorded and sent to be transcribed. However, confidentiality was promised and maintained throughout the project. Details about the instruments, participant sampling, and analysis are provided below.

Instrument

Interviews were conducted with a novel protocol consisting of nine overall questions, some of which contained probes or sub-questions for capturing nuance and depth to responses. Questions addressed three main areas: finding knowledge sources, using knowledge sources, and choosing knowledge sources. Protocol questions provided guideposts for the kind of information that the interviews were intended to gather but were used flexibly in a semi-structured format.

Additionally, though the instrument was designed to be aligned to survey subject areas to a limited extent, questions within the interviews were designed to further expand on what the evaluation team learned from survey responses. For instance, the survey was useful for identifying that respondents relied on peers for knowledge and information, while interview questions probed on how peers are leveraged and why peers might be perceived as a good source of knowledge.

Participants

Participants selected to participate in the in-depth interviews were drawn from the initial survey respondent pool. Participants that completed the survey were able to indicate further interest in in-depth interviews by responding to the question:

I would be interested in...
[CHECK BOX] participating in a follow-up interview.
[CHECK BOX] being notified of the release of the philanthropic field study.

First Name
Last Name
Email Address

A total of 140 participants indicated that they would be willing to be contacted for participation in interviews. Descriptive analyses were conducted on the list of interested parties in order to sort the list according to geographic region, size of organization, and whether the organization was minority owned. The evaluation team then used purposive sampling to identify a distribution of participants from these categories. Twenty-one individuals were invited to participate in interviews. A total of 20 participants were scheduled and interviewed.

Analysis

Thematic content analyses were conducted on transcriptions of the interviews. The evaluation team employed an iterative conceptual theme coding process using Dedoose online software. A priori codes were inputted into Dedoose software then further refined as additional interviews were completed. The evaluation team held interim data analysis meetings to support refinement of thematic codes. Codes were then applied to all interviews to identify themes and summarized into high-level findings across participants.

Appendix D: Limitations

This section outlines the limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results from this report.

- **Sampling:** The survey was fielded to a list of funders provided by Knowledge for Effective Philanthropy grantees and thus represents a sample of convenience rather than a representative sample of US-based funders. Similarly, participants selected for interviews were drawn from the initial survey respondent pool who self-selected to be interviewed and may be different from those who did not agree to participate. Of the 140 survey participants who opted into the interviews, only 20 were interviewed for this report. The survey and interviews were conducted in English without further accommodations for participants. However, we did not receive feedback or other indications that non-English language surveys were needed. For these reasons, the perspectives represented in this report may not be representative of the larger group of funders in the United States. The evaluation team worked to mitigate this effect by surveying a large number of funders and collecting background information to ensure a diverse pool.
- **Response bias:** Survey and interview respondents were asked to recall activities and describe their rationale to the evaluation team. These types of questions introduce the possibility that respondents may misremember their experiences or respond in a way that they deem more socially acceptable to the evaluators, the Hewlett Foundation, or other funders. To reduce this effect, the evaluation team carefully worded survey and interview questions, conducted cognitive testing, and queried a large survey sample within the identified group of respondents.
- **Point-in-time view:** The responses described in this report provide a snapshot of the perspectives of funders in July 2020 (survey) and December 2020 (interviews). This timeframe overlaps with the COVID pandemic, as well as a time of increasing recognition of systemic racism across the United States, a context that may intersect with how respondents interpret and respond to questions. Furthermore, funder dynamics are perpetually evolving and can change substantially over time. For this reason, the results from this evaluation are compared to the results from the 2016 study, and additional context is provided wherever possible to help with the interpretation of these results.
- **Survey groups and analysis:** Given the type of categorical data collected in the survey, the analysis of differences between groups can be inconclusive. Furthermore, the nature of the matching process with Candid data is incomplete and may include wrongly matched data (see the section on survey methodology for more information on this process). The evaluation team made every effort to ensure the accuracy of this data when performing the matches, including manually checking all data with a match score of less than 90%.

Appendix E: Survey Instrument

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this philanthropic field survey. The survey is part of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation's Knowledge for Better Philanthropy strategy, which makes grants to support the creation and dissemination of knowledge to inform, influence, and improve philanthropy. The Foundation is conducting this research as a follow-on to its 2017 study: [Peer to Peer; At the Heart of Influencing More Effective Philanthropy](#).

Your responses will help the Foundation, the grantees it funds through its Knowledge for Better Philanthropy strategy, and the field to better understand how foundations in the United States gather and use knowledge to inform their work. The results of this survey will be used to strengthen that work.

The information you provide is confidential. Engage R+D and Equal Measure are independent research firms conducting this survey on behalf of the Hewlett Foundation and its grantees. Your individual responses will be kept confidential and will NOT be attributed to you or your foundation.

The survey should take about 15-20 minutes to complete. Thank you in advance for completing the survey. If you have any questions, please contact Meghan Hunt at hewlett.survey@engagerd.com.

Screenener question:

1. First, we would like to confirm your eligibility to participate. Are you currently a staff or board member at a US-based foundation?*

Yes
No

If no: Thank you for your response. This survey is intended for staff and board members of US-based foundations only. For questions, please contact the survey team.

Practice Knowledge in the Philanthropy Sector

For this survey, we are going to ask you about knowledge that impacts your **practice** of philanthropy. By **practice knowledge** we mean any information about the effective practice of philanthropy. This includes a wide range of topics focused on the craft of philanthropy, including building relationships with grantees, providing flexible or true cost funding, making impact investments, carrying out strategy and evaluation, and much more. It does NOT refer to knowledge about programmatic areas (i.e., content or issue areas such as education, climate, etc.). Practice knowledge can be found in blogs, research reports, publications, or social media as well as through conversations, conferences, consulting, and training.

2. Below is a list of topics pertinent to the practice of philanthropy. For which of these topics were you most likely to seek research and information in the past two years? You may select up to five.

[RANDOMIZE:]

- Evaluation/Assessment
- Collaboration
- Communication
- Governance/Board
- Strategic Planning
- Grantee Relationships
- Legal Compliance
- Fundraising/Development/Donor Outreach
- Tax and Regulatory Topics
- Grantmaking, including areas like due diligence, setting amounts and types of grants, etc.
- Advocacy
- Organizational Development/Capacity Building
- Trends in Giving
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Philanthropy
- Other – please specify
- None of the Above

3. What are the *primary* ways that you seek out practice knowledge? Select all that apply.*

[RANDOMIZE:]

- Convening experts/stakeholders at your foundation
- Sessions at external conferences/convenings
- Grantee interactions (via email, phone, in-person, etc.)
- Interactions with coworkers at your foundation (via email, phone, in-person, at conferences, etc.)
- Interactions with colleagues outside of your foundation (via email, phone, in-person, at conferences, etc.)
- Emails/newsletters (from professional associations, membership groups, philanthropy affinity groups, other foundations, etc.)
- Online discussion boards/listservs/learning communities
- Consultant engagements
- Social media (e.g., LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, etc.)
- Traditional media (books, reports, articles—both print and online, etc.)
- Digital media (web search, blogs, webinars, slideshares, videos, podcasts, etc.)
- Other [Please describe: _____]
- None/not applicable [MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE WITH OTHER CHOICES]

4. In general, how would you evaluate the practice knowledge that you receive about the philanthropy sector? As a reminder, you may receive practice knowledge in many forms, from blogs, research reports, publications, or social media as well as through conversations, conferences, consulting, and training.

Would you say the majority of the practice knowledge that you receive is:*

[RANDOMIZE FIRST COLUMN]

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Don't know
Relevant to my work at the foundation						
Timely						
Vetted/It works						
Duplicative						
Leading the sector's thinking						

Awareness/Familiarity

The following is a list of Hewlett Knowledge for Better Philanthropy grantees and partners. Thinking back over the last two years, please mark which organizations you have heard of and whether you are familiar with their practice knowledge content. For those organizations where you are familiar with their content, you will then be asked follow-up questions to explore your engagement with this content.

5. How familiar are you with the work of the following organizations over the past two years?*

Response options:

- **Haven't heard of**
- **Heard of but not familiar** with their practice knowledge content from the past two years
- **Heard of and familiar** with their practice knowledge content from the past two years

[RANDOMIZE:]

BoardSource
 Bridgespan
 Candid
 Center for Effective Philanthropy
 CFLeads
 CHANGE Philanthropy
 Chronicle of Philanthropy
 Collective Impact Forum
 Equity in the Center
 Exponent Philanthropy
 First Nations Development Institute
 FSG
 Funders for LGBTQ Issues
 Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO)
 HistPhil
 Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy

National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP)
Nonprofit Quarterly (NPQ)
Philanthropy Roundtable
Philanthropy Strategy Network*
Pro-Inspire
Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society
Stanford Social Innovation Review (SSIR)

Council on Foundations**
Independent Sector**
My regional grantmakers association**

*This is a fake organization. It was included to help benchmark responses to this series of questions.

**These organizations in were not current grantees in this strategy.

6. Below are the organizations whose practice knowledge you marked that you were familiar with. How influential is each organization’s practice knowledge on your thinking?*

[**SHOW ONLY THOSE ORGANIZATIONS SELECTED AS YES IN Q5** (YES, FAMILIAR)]

Very influential
Somewhat influential
Not influential
Not sure

7. Which of these organizations, if any, have you relied on for information related to COVID-19 response and recovery?

[**SHOW ONLY THOSE ORGANIZATIONS SELECTED AS YES IN Q5** (YES, FAMILIAR)]

8. [NPS METRIC] How likely are you to recommend practice knowledge from each of the following organizations to another colleague in the philanthropic sector for whom it might be relevant?*

[**SHOW ONLY THOSE ORGANIZATIONS SELECTED AS YES IN Q5** (YES, FAMILIAR)]

[horizontal scale from 10–0, with 10 “extremely likely to recommend” and 0 “Not at all likely to recommend” headings/anchors on top; “don’t know” button on right; DISPLAY SCALE LEFT TO RIGHT GOING FROM LOW TO HIGH. KEEP “DON’T KNOW” ON FAR RIGHT.]

Q8 FOLLOW-UP:

Next we are going to ask you to help us understand some of the reasons for the ratings you just gave. For each question please be as specific as you can. As a reminder, a rating of 10 indicates you are extremely likely to recommend; a rating of 0 indicates you are not at all likely to recommend.

[**SHOW ONLY THOSE ORGANIZATIONS SELECTED AS YES IN Q5** (YES, FAMILIAR)]

8B. You rated [INSERT ORG NAME] a score of [INSERT SCORE]. What are your main reasons for giving the following ratings? Please be as specific as possible—tell us what you would say to the colleague about that organization.* [OPEN-END]

Knowledge in Action

[RESUME ASKING ALL]

9. In the past two years, have you used practice knowledge for any of the following purposes at your foundation? Select all that apply.*

- To improve upon current practice
- To consider a new practice
- To question or challenge current practice
- To compare your foundation to the field
- Other [Please describe: _____]
- Not sure/don't know/not applicable

10. Thinking back over the past two years, is there an idea or best practice (from any source) that your foundation adopted or considered adopting—something you were not doing before? In the case where more than one answer might apply, just select the one that you feel is more important to share.*

- Yes
- No [SKIP TO Q13]
- In the process of such a change
- Considered but ultimately did not adopt [GO TO Q12]
- Not sure/don't know/not applicable [SKIP TO Q13]

[ASK Q11 IF Q10 CODE YES OR IN PROCESS, THEN GO TO Q13]

11. To the best of your recollection, what practice knowledge contributed to your foundation's decision to make this change? As best you can, please name all the sources of the knowledge (e.g., specific publication, conference, another foundation, conversation with a colleague, etc.)* [OPEN END]

[ASK Q12 IF Q10 CODE CONSIDERED OR DID NOT ADOPT. THEN GO TO Q13]

12. To the best of your recollection, why did you ultimately not adopt that idea or best practice?*
[OPEN END]

Demographics

[RESUME ASKING ALL]

Finally, we have some optional questions about you. As a reminder, your survey response will remain confidential and will NOT be attributed to you or your foundation. The information below will only be used to understand variations in experience and knowledge use and will only be reported in aggregate.

13. What is your position at your foundation?

CEO/Executive Director/President

Other Executive Officer (e.g., Chief Operating Officer, Chief Financial Officer, Vice President etc.)

Program Staff (e.g., Head of Programs, Program Director, Program Officer, etc.)

Operations Staff (e.g., staff in grants and contracts, communications, human resources, legal, information technology, etc.)

Evaluation/Learning/Research/Strategy Staff

Other [Please describe:]

14. How many staff are employed at your foundation?

No staff

1-5 staff

6-10 staff

11-25 staff

26-50 staff

More than 50 staff

15. How long have you worked in the field of philanthropy?

1 year to less than 3 years

3 years to less than 5 years

5 years to less than 10 years

10 to less than 20 years

More than 20 years

16. Which of the following categories includes your age?

Under 25

25-34

35-44

45-54

55-64

65-74

75 or older

Prefer not to say

17. How do you identify?

Female/Woman

Male/Man

Non-binary
Other
Prefer not to say

18. Do you describe yourself as...

Transgender
Cisgender (not transgender)
Prefer not to say

19. How do you identify? (check all that apply)

Asian/Asian-American
Black/African-American
Middle Eastern/North African
Native American/American Indian/Alaskan Native/Other
Indigenous of Central or South America
Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian
White
Other
Prefer not to say

20. Do you identify as Hispanic/Latino?

Yes
No
Prefer not to say

Thank You

On behalf of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, thank you for completing this survey. The Foundation and its grantees plan to publicly share key findings from the study that this survey is part of in 2021.

If you would be interested in participating in follow-up interviews or receiving a copy of the findings once they are public, please complete the form below. Again, your survey responses will remain confidential and will not be attributed to you or your foundation.

I would be interested in...

[CHECK BOX] participating in a follow-up interview.
[CHECK BOX] being notified of the release of the philanthropic field study.

First Name
Last Name
Email Address