Infusing Equity into Collaborative Practice
Landscape Scan

About the Scan
In early 2015 Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, and FSG came together to explore grantmakers’ role in bringing an equity lens to collaborative efforts. Given GEO’s experience in convening and serving grantmaker communities and FSG’s role as co-founder of the Collective Impact Forum and advisor to grantmakers working collaboratively, the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund provided a grant to explore how we might build equity considerations into community collaboration efforts, such as collective impact. Our first step was to conduct an environmental scan to inform consideration of a potential community of practice.

What GEO and FSG Learned from the Scan
Place-based and collaborative efforts, particularly those following a collective impact model, are well suited to supporting work aimed at reducing inequities. Grantmakers involved in collaborative work have historically highlighted the importance of relationship building, trust, and community engagement in creating conditions for success. In particular, collective impact involves bringing together cross-sector stakeholders to align on a common agenda, an activity that is most effective when the full range of perspectives affected by an issue have a voice at the table. The collective impact model also emphasizes the importance of using data to determine where interventions may be most meaningful and to assess progress against shared measures of success; this data is most effective if disaggregated to pinpoint inequities. It is also important to note that while collective impact and community collaboration efforts often focus on creating “systems-level” change, these efforts may inadvertently reinforce inequities unless they intentionally address longstanding and structural forms of bias and marginalization.

We defined equity as a lack of disparity in life outcomes among groups of people classified by group identities, and were intentional in using a broad definition that encompasses a variety of group identities, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability and class. Interviews quickly surfaced racial equity as a particularly important lens, and interviewees largely focused their thoughts and recommendations with this frame in mind.

Infusing equity into collaboration can be challenging
Infusing an equity lens throughout a collaborative approach is challenging to implement, even for actors with explicit intentions around reducing inequity. Our research pointed toward several reasons why this work may be challenging:

- Fully committing to reducing inequity often requires changes to grantmaking practices and organizational culture. Several interviewees emphasized the importance of training staff and reviewing internal practices to understand how grantmakers may be
supporting equity or inadvertently reinforcing inequity through norms, policies, and procedures. As one example, existing request for proposal (RFP) processes may inadvertently reinforce inequity if response times are too short to allow organizations with leaner staff or less proposal writing experience (but deeper community context or equity expertise) to respond. Systematic review of organizational culture and practices may illuminate opportunities for grantmakers to be intentional about committing to equity while also improving grantmaking outcomes. Funders may also have an opportunity to be more intentional about considering power and privilege as part of the grantmaking process, for example making explicit efforts to ask for partners’ input before finalizing decisions.

- **It can be difficult to even start conversations about inequity.** The culture in the United States is heavily focused on individualism and meritocracy. Tensions around inequity, particularly when dealing with racial inequities, often run high and involve strong emotions. Partners in collaborative efforts are often already working hard to develop relationships and find common ground among competing interests and agendas; beginning a discussion about equity gaps can feel divisive and therefore may be avoided. Without explicitly identifying equity as a priority, collaborative efforts run the risk of inadvertently reinforcing the status quo or even deepening equity gaps.

- **Committing to equity may require investing time up front to develop trust and relationships; this can feel difficult for funders eager to jump quickly into programmatic work.** Developing the ability to productively raise and address issues of inequity among community stakeholders may require multiple meetings to develop trust, respect, and a sense of common purpose. Interviewees and publications noted the need to slow down in several areas. Interviewees highlighted relationships as critically important in collaborative work, particularly when concerns exist about equity gaps. Such relationships take time to develop, and will be perceived as more genuine when they are built to endure beyond a single grant or programmatic event.

- **Disaggregated data may not exist or may be too limited to be meaningful.** Interviewees noted that data that can be disaggregated by social group identity (e.g., by sex, race, ethnicity, income) is critical to understanding local experiences of inequity. Without this data, inequities cannot be as clearly defined and the collaborative can't pinpoint where to prioritize actions or how to target strategies so they can be most effective. Data may not be available due to capacity constraints, or may simply never have been collected in a way that can be effectively disaggregated.

- **Even for collaborative efforts with an explicit focus on equity, results (in terms of reduced equity gaps) are not yet clear.** Interviewees were generally cautious about whether there is “evidence” on what works. This is long-term work, and identifying direct linkages to population-level results will take time. Some interviewees suggested that interim or leading indicators, especially process indicators, may be more reasonable to assess (e.g., increased representation of diverse perspectives among decision makers, application of equity assessment tools). Several interviewees noted it would be helpful for the field to apply mixed-methods evaluation and learning approaches to better understand what practices appear promising, as this could encourage grantmakers to take up an equity lens.
Ways Grantmakers Can Approach Equity

While there are several challenges in applying an equity lens to place-based, collaborative work, interviewees also suggested grantmakers can address inequity in multiple ways. One interviewee, an equity expert, also cautioned that each of these actions can inadvertently reinforce inequity if care is not taken to assess grantmakers’ processes with an equity lens.

- **Providing funding to advance equity.** Grantmakers can provide financial support to organizations that are directly working to reduce inequity in communities. As noted above, grantmakers can also examine the ways in which they disburse all grant funds to ensure that they are supporting equity both directly and indirectly.

- **Deploying capital beyond grant funds.** In addition to funding, grantmakers can enable capacity building for community organizations that reflect the lived experiences of those affected by the challenges a collaborative effort is looking to solve (particularly organizations that are equity champions or advocates). Such organizations may have experienced historical marginalization and may not have had opportunities to invest in building infrastructure for data analysis, fundraising, or other core functions. Grantmakers may also have several other forms of “capital” that can be applied to facilitating social change, such as the ability to influence stakeholders to come to the table for discussions, decision making, and support and resources to push for policy change.

- **Applying equity frames or approaches as a lens to all activities.** If a grantmaker does determine they want to infuse their collective impact or community collaboration efforts with an equity lens, how might they begin to do so? Several key “frames” or approaches emerged as helpful in our research, including structural racism, targeted universalism, power analysis and intersectionality. Although a comprehensive review of each was out of the scope of the scan, our research and interviews suggest that it is important for grantmakers to develop an understanding of these concepts as an entry point into efforts to promote greater equity. Building competency around these concepts can help by providing a common language for dialogue and enabling more informed selection of appropriate tools to support equity analysis and implementation.

- **Leveraging equity-focused tools and resources.** Interviewees pointed to several specific resources as useful when embedding equity considerations into their work. For examples, see http://collectiveimpactforum.org/resources/equity-resources. Interviewees were explicit that success depends less on the specific tools selected than on how they are interpreted and applied to a local context.

Next Steps

From this scan and other conversations with members of GEO and the Collective Impact Forum, we know that there is great interest among grantmakers in more deeply exploring grantmakers’ role in bringing an equity lens to collaborative efforts. GEO and FSG are exploring the possibility of launching a peer learning group on this topic. At this stage, we are reaching out to interested funders to determine possible questions to focus on, getting a deeper understanding of related work already happening in the field, and connecting with potential content partners. If we decide to move
forward, a grantmaker peer learning group could start in Fall 2015 or Winter 2016. For more information, contact Lori Bartczak at bartczak@geofunders.org or 540-948-6123.

Landscape Scan Interviewees

Funders/Practitioners
- William Buster, Kellogg Foundation
- Sam Whiting and Dan Torres, Thrive Washington
- Sandra Witt, The California Endowment
- Juan Sebastian Arias, Living Cities

Expert Advisors
- Kelly Brown, D5 Coalition
- Joanna Shoffner Scott, Race Matters Institute
- Paula Dressel, Just Partners Inc
- Marc Philphart, PolicyLink
- Lori Villarosa, The Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity