ELEVATE:2016

EPiP CONFERENCE REPORT

All photos by Olvia Obineme (oliviaobineme.com)

Under the leadership of our 25-member planning committee, we sought to create a space where our community could connect, dig into critical issues in the field, and gain tools to enhance both our professional effectiveness and our leadership for social change.

WHO CAME

Total Registered Participants:

195 from 124 institutions

DEMOGRAPHICS (SELF-REPORTED):

- **55%** People of color
- **75%** Cis Women
- **19%** LGBTQ
- **69%** have 5 or fewer years of experience in foundations

HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION:

- **60%** AT LEAST SOME GRAD SCHOOL
- **35%** COLLEGE
- **5%** OTHER
Together, we dove into some of our field’s most pressing challenges:

- **How foundations** can make diversity, equity and inclusion course-of-business, and the role EPIPers can play
- **How place-based funding** can better advance equity
- **How we can all better lead** for equity in the 21st century.
Select Takeaways

EPIP members could struggle to reach the top of their organizations, according to recent diversity data. Women and people of color are most strongly represented at the lowest ranks of their organizations and decline in representation as jobs get more senior. This has changed relatively little in the last five years. Data presented at the conference can be found here.

Many EPIP members and others in the field face considerable barriers to leading authentically at work, including a tendency not to see junior staff as leaders, implicit bias, and unwritten rules that discourage creative conflict.

Despite these barriers, EPIP members can play powerful roles in moving their institutions forward on DEI. As ABFE CEO Susan Batten said, it’s often the people in the middle of organizations who move these agendas forward.

What EPIP Members Can Do

Find allies within our organizations that share our hopes for change.

Pick our battles and vary our approaches. Saying “no” constantly creates the risk of being seen as a troublemaker rather than an asset. As Frontline Solutions’ Melissa DeShields said, “You can’t always be the hammer. Sometimes you have to be a light bulb.”

Care for ourselves. It’s important to take time to unplug, heal and recharge in order to be an effective advocate over the long haul.
We chose Baltimore specifically to learn more about how equity work takes shape in real places, and how local funders, national funders with local footprints and others are upping their place-based equity game.

Select Takeaways

**Foundations that build trust with communities over time are better positioned to partner with communities in moments of crisis.** The Baltimore Community Foundation developed an explicit anti-racist lens for its discretionary grantmaking and, through that work, could tap relationships they had built following the Baltimore Uprising.

**Local foundations can shift not only how they fund, but also how they use their power.** ABAG’s Jonalyn Denlinger described how local foundations were giving to community organizations with fewer strings attached while also using their credibility to open doors for their grantees.

**Nationally, the foundation field may be opening up in new ways to making equity a greater focus.** For example, Funders for Justice, a project of Neighborhood Funders Group, provides rapid-response funder briefings and peer support to foundations working to support racial equity and community leadership.

**Foundations can devote more of their assets to this work.** For example, many community foundations’ donor-advised funds outstrip their discretionary dollars by a wide margin, but don’t necessarily have an explicit focus on equity goals.

What EPIP Members Can Do

**Lead with personal values.** Plenary speakers described how their ability to tie their personal values to place-based strategies helped others in their institutions connect.

**Call attention to these trends nationally.** Citing national trends can strengthen our arguments that foundation policy and practice can change for the benefit of our communities.

**Share examples internally.** Citing the work of others and connecting colleagues to people who’ve led this work in communities and in other foundations can help colleagues see what is possible.
At a time when a revolution can start with a tweet, but basic practices to support equity are often set aside, what does it mean to lead? We explored this question together at the conference.

**Mentorship matters.** Mentors offer guidance and access to new opportunities, and can help us navigate the subtle, unwritten rules that often shape one’s success or failure in the field.

**Failure and doubt are part of the journey.** Several speakers addressed imposter syndrome, being honest about when they were “a mess,” and working with their community of support to solve problems and lift each other up. This is especially important when painful events rock us.

**Leaders can help their institutions re-examine their roles in solving tough social problems.** While philanthropic innovation can have powerful impacts on society, many participants expressed a desire for their institutions to see themselves more as supporters of movements or of other innovators than as groundbreakers or trailblazers acting alone or “disrupting” grassroots efforts.

**Find mentors and mentor others.** You can ask someone to mentor you formally, or just reach out to them with specific questions or ask them to coffee. It takes a village to raise a leader.

**Call out your own self-doubt.** You don’t have to overshare every thought or worry you have, but just owning the places where you doubt yourself can help you move through it. Mentors and coaches can be very helpful here.

**Get training in internal advocacy or managing difficult conversations.** Leading without formal authority is both art and science and experience comes with study, trial and error.
A SPACE FOR HEALING

For many of us, the day-to-day experience of doing this work, and of coping with what’s happening in the world, can wear us down and leave us feeling raw and exhausted.

So this year, we focused intentionally on creating a space for healing and rejuvenation. Erika Totten, Founder and Principal of Unchained Healing, LLC, led a series of small-group and solo healing activities that helped participants acknowledge, process and move past challenges draining their time and energy. Roughly a third of participants took advantage of the space, and over 80 percent of post-conference survey respondents indicated that they left the conference with renewed energy for their work.

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Feedback on-site, through social media and through our post-conference survey were generally quite positive and occasionally constructively challenging. A few highlights:

- **91 percent** rated their conference experience excellent or above average.
- **Over 95 percent** of respondents made new connections and expanded their networks.
- **Over 80 percent** of participants reported that they deepened their understanding of equity, and/or that they left with new or refreshed strategies for advancing equity in their work.
- **94 percent** of respondents said they would recommend the conference to a colleague, and 80 percent hope to return for the next conference.

### Areas of Strength

**Strong programming on equity:** Participants highlighted the quality of our programming, particularly the plenaries and healing space.

- **Your content on DEI was on par with anything I've seen at GEO**
  
  - Susan Misra, Co-Director, Management Assistance Group

- **The conference had perhaps the best discussion I've seen of equity issues, and I go to a lot of conferences**
  
  - Matthew Trujillo, Program Officer Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

**A safe space for authenticity:** Participants appreciated for having a safe space to show up as themselves and talk honestly about tough issues.

- **EPIP is really the only space where I can show up as myself**
  
  - EPIP Chapter Leader

**Member Leadership:** The conference planning committee shaped the conference tracks, curated speakers, crafted our scholarship fund and even planned the opening reception. While our process can always get better, the degree of member ownership of the space was quite high.

- **The level of member ownership of the conference was unlike any conference process I've ever been a part of**
  
  - Christian Hill, conference planning committee member
Areas for Improvement:

**Format:** Given EPIP’s increasing pivot toward member-driven activity, we may have reached the limits of a standard plenary-breakout conference model. In post-conference surveys, participants requested more opportunities to self-organize sessions and connect with people in similar roles. We also want to be able to explicitly offer organizations the opportunity to test new ideas, tools and strategies in partnership with our members, as one workshop presenter did this year. We will likely experiment with these types of sessions in the future.

**Workshop Consistency:** While many of our workshops were well-received, some participants found particular workshops to be insufficiently engaging or out of line with the way they thought about a particular issue. Going forward, we will seek to tighten curation of any workshops we continue to have.

**Honing an Intersectional Lens:** EPIP takes intersectionality — an approach to equity that looks at multiple forms of identity simultaneously — seriously. At the same time, we are still weaving the nuances of an intersectional approach into our content. For example, a couple of participants said we were not attentive enough to certain disability-related issues. For example, as we discussed the resilience required to lead change in philanthropy, we could have been more attentive to the toxic impact of unhealthy work environments on people’s mental health. These are issues we'll look to keep getting better at over time.

Thank you to our Conference Planning Committee:

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