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Grantmaking Through A Racial Justice Lens

What does it mean to do grantmaking through a racial justice lens? How is your class ensuring grantmaking is equitable?

Historical injustices, stemming from slavery and continuing on through many forms of structural racism such as land theft and housing discrimination, have resulted in the current racial disparities that we see among unhoused populations. Black and Indigenous populations experience homelessness at higher rates than their white counterparts. For example, the [2020 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress](#) found that African-Americans represent 13 percent of the general population, but account for 40 percent of the people experiencing homelessness and over 50 percent of unhoused families with children. In Washington, D.C. specifically, [86.4 percent of adults who are experiencing homelessness are Black, yet they only represent 46.6 percent of the city's population](#). This imbalance is only continuing to increase over time, especially with housing insecurity being exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The [GW Arc Foundation](#), a foundation that was created in partnership with the [Learning by Giving Foundation](#) and is run by the George Washington University's [Human Services and Social Justice Senior Capstone](#) course students, recognizes that ending homelessness cannot happen without addressing racial inequity. Thus, our focus this year is to support individuals experiencing homelessness in the Washington Metropolitan area (DMV) by providing funding to nonprofit organizations working to alleviate homelessness and its contributing factors. However, it is not enough to simply say that since our grant is focused on the issue of homelessness, an issue that disproportionately impacts BIPOC communities, we are grantmaking through a racial justice lens. Just as there is an inequity in the populations that experience homelessness, there is an inequity in the populations that receive funding from foundations.

A 2020 [study](#) done by The Bridgespan Group found that BIPOC-led organizations win less grant monies and have greater restrictions on their ability to make their own decisions on how to spend those funds than white leaders who focus on the same or similar issues. For example, the researchers examined Echoing Green's applicant pool, a group that is considered among the sector's most promising early-stage organizations. They found that "among organizations in Echoing Green's Black Male Achievement fellowship, which focuses on improving the life outcomes of Black men and boys in the United States, the revenues of the Black-led organizations are 45 percent smaller than those of the white-led organizations, and the unrestricted net assets of the Black-led organizations are 91 percent smaller than the white-led organizations — despite focusing on the same work" (Dorsey et al., 2020). This practice is known as philanthropic redlining, a term coined by the [Association of Black Foundation Executives](#). On top of this, leaders of color often face barriers in getting in the door to receive foundation funding due to lacking the social networks that often connect organizations and

foundations, as well as the interpersonal biases — conscious or unconscious — that foundation executives carry that can prevent them from building and sustaining relationships with leaders of color.

Given these disparities, it is of the utmost importance that we as the leaders of The GW Arc Foundation do not contribute to furthering philanthropic redlining. In order to prevent this, when researching the organizations we wanted to invite to apply for our grant, I was intentional in making sure that the organizations I put up for consideration had BIPOC leadership. We had all agreed that if the organization did not have leadership that included those that previously experienced homelessness, the organization may not truly understand the needs of that community. Similarly, if the organization was not founded by a person of color, it was important that the board, executive leadership, staff, and constituency included that representation. Since our issue area focus is homelessness which disproportionately impacts people of color, specifically Black communities, it is important that leaders of color are a part of leading these initiatives as they can bring strategies that specifically address the racialized experiences of homelessness.

I encourage foundation executives to conduct an internal audit to gauge whether they are grantmaking through a racial justice lens, and ask themselves the following questions:

1. Do you view BIPOC leadership as valid leadership?
2. Are you finding the tables where this leadership is present?
3. Who is on your team? Do you have members (teams and boards) that represent the community, but not in a tokenized way? Do you only have one person of color focusing on equity in a back office?
4. Who are you allowing to be decision makers?
5. Where do you sit on social issues? Do you understand the historical context that allows for these issues to persist? Are you working to change the system that upholds these issues?

The systemic change and population-level impact foundations seek cannot occur without ensuring that the grantmaking process is equitable, so I ask you philanthropists, what are you going to do about that?