

Center for Effective Philanthropy Conference

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It would be almost impossible for anyone who attended the recent conference of the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) to argue convincingly that CEP is not having an impact on how philanthropy is practised in the United States. The CEP mantra is that foundations need to have clear goals, employ strategies designed to achieve those goals and analyse performance indicators to know if they are making progress. This approach is clearly being adopted by an increasing number of foundations, and the effect is - for the most part - positive. But some at the conference raised questions about whether the CEP approach to effectiveness is at odds with important foundation efforts to pursue social change. This critique is worth exploring.

But first, let me say clearly that the conference was extremely well run and well attended. It was enriching to engage in conversations with the thoughtful and influential people in attendance. The size - about 275 people - was large enough to be interesting and not so large that you could not find the people you wanted to talk to. One of the highlights of the conference for me was to hear clear examples, in plenary sessions and in breakouts, about how individual foundations have improved their practices as a result of their engagement with CEP or followed the goals/strategies/indicators framework that CEP promotes. The rigorous analysis of data, and the emphasis on having clear goals and strategies, is undoubtedly helping many grantmakers do their work better. This is, overall, a tremendous step forward for foundations, non-profits and the communities they serve.

To the extent that people voted with their feet, however, it appears that the leading social justice grantmakers in the US did not generally find a lot of value in CEP's conference and chose not to attend. By my count, using CEP's attendance list and comparing it to NCRP data, only seven of the top 35 social justice grantmakers (ranked by percentage of grant dollars for social justice) were represented at this year's event. Two of those seven were foundations based in Los Angeles. When expanded to include the top 100 social justice funders, only 20 were at the conference.

Why did so few social justice grantmakers choose to spend their time and their travel dollars attending CEP's conference? Where do effectiveness and social justice overlap? How do we prevent the analytic nature of the CEP approach from making philanthropy sterile and transactional? ...

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