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D5 at the Midpoint

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By [Kelly Brown](#) | July 18th, 2013



Not long after I took on the role of Director of the [D5 Coalition](#) almost exactly two years ago, I was chatting with my best friend about my new gig. I told her it was running a five-year effort to grow philanthropy's diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). "Hmm..." she said after a pause, "That sounds really hard." Given that at the time she was managing one of the world's largest pension funds through the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, her perception of the difficulty of my new job gave me pause.

Yet it seemed clear to me at the time that the momentum for being successful at this work was on our side. In spite of philanthropy's lack of accountability, its legacy of elite privilege, and its often limited attention span (hence, the five years) there is still an inherent orientation toward strengthening the common good and an often gutsy willingness to tackle difficult, intractable issues. Given that the conversation around diversity and inclusion had been on the table for decades, D5 seemed to me to be an opportunity to push for breakthroughs that might not be predictable or comfortable, but could powerfully transform philanthropy's ability to have meaningful impact.

I entered this conversation in the mid-1980s when my first boss, Randall Robinson, then Executive Director of TransAfrica, made annual pilgrimages to the Ford Foundation to explain why the board of the nation's first and only African-American lobby for Africa and the Caribbean was comprised entirely of African Americans. I doubt he would have to explain this strategy today. So, I'm often frustrated when some of my allies say that nothing has changed. A lot has changed since then about the complexion, direction, style, and approach of philanthropy. While the changes have certainly surfaced new complexities and dynamics in our efforts to make philanthropy relevant and responsive to vulnerable communities—and ultimately effective at addressing systemic inequities—there is no doubt that things are different.

And yet now, at D5's midpoint, while the effort it took to make those changes gives me hope, recent events reflect both profound advances and appalling setbacks. In the 1980s, the effects of the Civil Rights movement, the Women's movement, and the burgeoning LGBT rights movement were still taking root in society, and philanthropy responded to these dynamics from a perspective of social justice. Philanthropy engaged with these movements because it was right.

But as the field matured, became more professionalized, and as diverse perspectives were integrated, philanthropy began to focus increasingly on impact and effectiveness. This was in part, I think, because the newly-included voices highlighted the need for philanthropy to demonstrate real and concrete impact in communities. These previously excluded voices pushed philanthropy to focus not only on what was right, but also on what was smart.

Some may think these strands are at odds but they are, in fact, completely aligned. Those who question whether the effective inclusion of diverse perspectives has a positive influence on smart decision-making should look closer at the evidence. In one of the first studies I posted on the D5 website, research by Dr. Kathryn Phillips of Columbia University (formerly of the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University) and her colleagues showed that when diverse perspectives were fully engaged, the outcomes of decision-making were significantly more effective, even if the processes were perceived by participants as more difficult and less sure. What made for the most fruitful outcomes, in spite of difficult—even painful—negotiations, was the presence of an ally within the “in” group that validated the perspectives of newcomers even when their ideas were not necessarily new.

Professor Phillips' [research](#) showed that the combination of newcomer and ally challenged “standard operating procedures” and allowed for submerged viewpoints to surface, enhancing the capacity and creativity of the perspectives that were often already there, making the space more conducive to breakthroughs in thinking and problem-solving. In many foundation boardrooms and C-suites, these “newcomers” are still often individuals who represent the perspectives of communities most affected by philanthropy's investments, a finding echoed in [CEP's research](#) on [foundation governance](#).

The need for allies within these contexts is essential if we are to make philanthropy as smart as it must be. Recent events in the news that show how far we are from solving systemic inequities make it clear that building philanthropy's capacity to fully include diverse perspectives must be as salient and pressing for foundations as dealing with the much-buzzed issues of “big data,” managing “networked organizations,” “scaling what works,” or fostering “collective impact.” None of these approaches will reach their fullest potential if they cannot effectively manifest in a diverse and complex world that is yearning for equity.

A foundation CEO—clearly committed to advancing inclusion within his own institution—recently told me that in the regular course of business among his peers, issues of diversity and inclusion—much less equity—[did not tend to get raised](#). “So what do you need from me?” he asked, as I was about to leave. I replied, “I need you to raise these issues.”

D5, along with its partners, exists to strengthen the field with the [tools](#) and [data](#) to help make these difficult but powerful processes more manageable. We have nurtured important conversations among trustees and donors about their role in this conversation and commissioned a ground-breaking analysis of “best practice” that reviewed decades of work in the field on DEI. But, ultimately, only leaders themselves can move beyond telling their own stories and be effective, compassionate, and proactive partners for their peers.

By doing not only what is right, but also what is smart, we can fully capitalize on the exciting approaches being generated by the field’s leading thinkers and maximize their power by effectively and respectfully engaging the communities they are intended to impact. When doing what’s right meets doing what’s smart, we get the change and the world we all want to see.

Kelly Brown is the Director of the D5 Coalition. You can find her on Twitter [@D5Coalition](#).

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