



RALPH C. WILSON, JR.
FOUNDATION

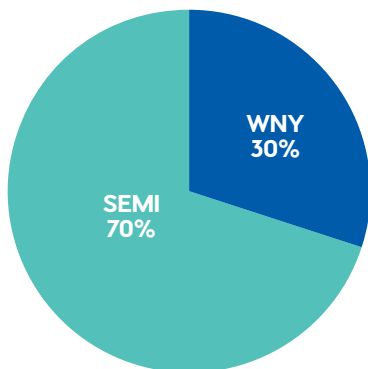
UNDERSTANDING PERCEPTIONS TO CREATE RESULTS

In the summer of 2022, we engaged with the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) to administer their Grantee and Applicant Perception surveys. To complement the survey findings, the Johnson Center for Philanthropy (the Johnson Center) at Grand Valley State University conducted interviews with some of our key partners. Both CEP and the Johnson Center are respected institutions for research in philanthropy and gathering feedback for their philanthropic partners.

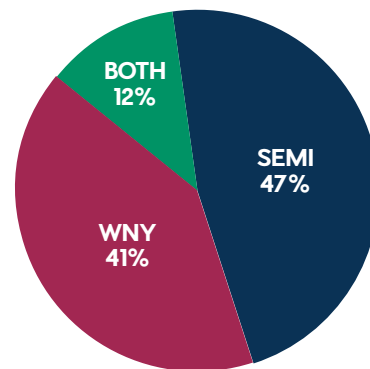
Through the CEP survey, we asked all grantees and declined applicants to give feedback on several topics, including the Foundation's level of impact, staff understanding of the work of grantees and the problems they are working to solve, communication, application, and evaluation. We had a 65% (157) response rate from grantees and a 36% (45) response rate from our applicants. Of the grantee responses, 47% were from Southeast Michigan, 41% were from Western New York, and 12% served both regions. The majority (70%) of applicants who responded were from Southeast Michigan and 30% were from Western New York. Through the CEP survey, we were able to benchmark the perceptions our grantees have as compared to our peer foundations across the country.

The interviews through the Johnson Center focused on assessing the impact of the Foundation on the communities and focus areas we fund, getting input on how to best position communities impacted by the Foundation to be successful after the Foundation closes, and getting feedback on how the Foundation is perceived as a partner. In total, 25 people representing 22 organizations participated in interviews. The organizations represented Southeast Michigan (50%), Western New York (41%), and both regions (9%). This rich feedback added context and detail to better understand the survey findings.

APPLICANTS (DECLINES)
N=45 (36% RESPONSE RATE)



GRANTEES
N=157 (65% RESPONSE RATE)



WHAT'S WORKING

Based on the survey results and interview findings, the following were strengths that our partners repeatedly highlighted:

WE ARE HAVING AN IMPACT.

Grantees indicated that we are making an impact on our grantee organizations, our communities, other funders, and the fields we work in. For example, one grantee said, we are “clearly educated in the issue areas and work to use funds to directly impact those issue areas. As a result, I think they have become leaders in this work on a national level.” The Johnson Center report highlighted areas where we influence other funders, specifically around sustainability, funding areas with less support, and the use of evidence-based approaches.

GRANTEES CAN APPROACH US.

Grantees shared that they felt comfortable approaching us when a problem arose. This was supported by grantees indicating that we show them trust, candor, and respect. One grantee shared, “Having the Foundation’s trust and investment and advocacy around our work has been extremely helpful locally and state-wide.”

WE ENCOURAGE BUILDING NETWORKS AND COLLABORATIONS.

The Foundation’s board, leadership, and program team have been intentional to build collaboratives and network our grant partners or support that work underway as a means of sustainability in our two regions for our eventual sunset. Therefore, we were pleased to hear from our interviews that we have done just that. The Johnson Center report put it this way, “The Foundation has been very successful at getting people at the table together and building opportunities for collaborative work. They facilitated coordination among parks and trails organizations working at the city, county, and state levels. The community-led, co-created projects they have funded in youth sports and recreation and in entrepreneurship have created large, connected stakeholder networks that did not exist before.”

OUR PROCESSES MAKE SENSE.

Our grantees indicated that we have clear application requirements that take an appropriate level of effort given the funding amount. When a grant is underway, we make it easy to make changes, if necessary. For example, one grantee said, “Our program officer was down to earth, direct, and helpful. Willing to be flexible when we came up against a timing issue that delayed the final report of our last grant.” Finally, at the end of a grant, grantees shared that the reporting requirements for funding were straightforward, adaptable, and relevant to their work. One grantee shared, “We have found the Foundation’s application and reporting processes to be fair and appropriate to the support provided.”

AREAS FOR GROWTH

WE COULD BE MORE TRANSPARENT.

The surveyed grantees and interviewed partners want to have more transparency about the Foundation’s goals, strategies, and the path to spend down. One grantee stated, “We do not have a good understanding of the Foundation’s funding priorities and theory of change or logic model... It’s unclear how the Foundation is looking at... factors [that affect our work] and trying to adapt.” Further, the Johnson Center report indicated that “Many interviewees expressed a desire for more communication and greater transparency around the Foundation’s priorities and strategies for its remaining years.” In addition to transparency about grantmaking priorities and our spend-down path, grantees were interested in hearing more from the Foundation about what diversity, equity, and inclusion mean for the work of the Foundation.

WE COULD COMMUNICATE BETTER.

Applicants shared that they wanted program staff to be more responsive, accessible, and fair to applicants. One applicant stated, “I believe it would save them time in the long run if they were to give us a few minutes to share what might be a good fit under their focus area. This feels like a difficult foundation to build relationships with and find out why your projects may or may not fit.” Grantees echoed this sentiment by saying that when they are able to talk with staff they are very helpful. However, “...there were many times when it seemed responses had gone cold and we had to initiate connections repeatedly.”

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Receiving this feedback has been invaluable to the Foundation and integral for our growth; we extend our sincere gratitude for those who took the time to participate in this effort. As we approach 2025, the Foundation will mark its halfway point in our 20-year limited lifetime. We have much to celebrate in what's been accomplished together in this short time and many lessons learned at this key inflection point of our life.

STAFF CAPACITY & GROWTH

Since the time of this survey, we have responsibly expanded our staff within our grants management and program teams to enhance our capacity and improve communications with current and potential grantees. We will continue to evaluate if this meets the needs of our operations and adapt, as needed.

The Foundation has also established a Culture Committee focused on aligning organizational values and behaviors to enable personal and professional growth, so that our team can do their best work, individually and collectively. This important internal process also includes exploring more deeply the role that diversity, equity, and inclusion play in shaping our culture and our work so we can communicate that more formally.

CONTINUE WHAT'S WORKING

As our team has grown, we continue to orient our staff to be approachable and engaged in networks and collaborative efforts. We also aim to be pragmatic in our grantmaking processes and when our staff and partners identify areas for improvement, we act quickly to adopt new procedures or systems to benefit our current or potential grantees.

TRANSPARENCY

We have always operated with the end in mind – looking at how to build and dismantle this foundation in 20 years, in a way that does no harm to our grantees or fields of work, improves quality of life of all residents, and leaves Southeast Michigan and Western New York stronger and better positioned to carry on the great work we are building together.

In our earliest years, the Foundation spent much time engaging community, data gathering, and information sharing, while orientating our work towards experimentation. As we move into this next phase of life, the Foundation will begin narrowing its approach and scaling much of our efforts – often through collaborative and coalition-level work that prioritizes community engagement and provides the greatest impact in our remaining years and beyond.

Our staff and trustees have begun the essential internal work of clarifying a responsible spend-down path and strategy across each of our focus areas. Building that strategy is ongoing and will take several years. While it's difficult to provide a comfortable level of detail at this point, we are committed to being as transparent as possible with our grantees, partners, and communities over our 11 remaining years.

