

The term “equity” is spreading like wildfire in some philanthropic circles.

by *Elizabeth Russell & Kris Putnam-Walkerly*

It is showing up more and more in organizations’ mission and values statements. It is making its way into the titles of conferences, plenary and breakout sessions, and meetings at the national, state, and local levels.

“Equity” is one of those terms that everyone seems to understand at some visceral level, but few people share the same definition. This is particularly true in philanthropy.

We recently conducted in-depth conversations about equity with 30 staff members of 15 foundations whose peers named them as leading “equity work” in the field. We found that funders not only are confounded by the definition of equity but also highly desirous of one that resonates—both within their organization and for the field as a whole. Very few foundations had a clear definition of what equity meant to them internally, and absolutely no one saw any common definition emerging from the field anytime soon.

Why is a shared definition so hard to come by? Merriam-Webster’s “simple definition” of equity is “fairness or justice in the way people are treated.” But then, what exactly is fairness? How do we define justice? If these concepts are not absolutes, but shaped by each individual’s worldviews and experiences, then the definition may be a perpetually moving target.

Some funders are leading the exploration of what equity is and *isn’t* in philanthropy. The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s *Race Equity and Inclusion Action Guide*, for example, describes equity as distinct from “diversity,” which is a numerical representation of different types of people. It also distinguishes equity from “inclusion,” which the foundation defines as “the action or state of including or being included within a group or structure ... [Unlike diversity,] inclusion involves an authentic and empowered participation and a true sense of belonging.” **Under this thinking, inclusion may be a definite step toward equity**—and many grant makers are embracing it—but even those who feel included may not experience equity.

We believe equity is also different from “equality,” in which everyone has the same amount of something (food, medicine, opportunity) despite their existing needs or assets. In other words, whether you are two feet tall or six, you still get a five-foot ladder to reach a 10-foot platform.

So, if equity is not diversity, inclusion, or equality, then what is it? It describes something deeper and more complex. It is about each of us getting what we need to survive or succeed—access to opportunity, networks, resources, and supports—based on where we are and where we want to go. Nonet Sykes, director of race equity and inclusion at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, thinks of it as each of us reaching our full potential.

Understanding equity is somewhat like the proverbial blind men describing the different parts of an elephant they touch but failing to “see” the whole animal. True understanding will come by gathering multiple perspectives. As one program officer at a national foundation so astutely put it, “The fact is that we don’t know what equity looks like as a society, because we’ve never actually had it.”