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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



# ROOTED IN RELEVANCE: THE POWER OF PLACE-BASED LEARNING

THE  
**KRESGE**  
FOUNDATION

**EQUIVOLVE**  
CONSULTING

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**THE KRESGE FOUNDATION**, in partnership with [Equivolve](#) and through its American Cities Program (ACP) alongside Strategic Learning, Research, and Evaluation (SLRE), has embarked on an ambitious endeavor to redefine learning in place-based philanthropy. By integrating equitable and adaptive learning and evaluation practices, the Foundation aims to foster transformative change in under-resourced communities across American cities.

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The Kresge Foundation's work recognizes the unique challenges and opportunities within each community, aiming to enhance quality of life and economic mobility for all residents. At the heart of Kresge's approach is a commitment to continuous learning and iterative improvement. By leveraging diverse evaluation methodologies and incorporating equitable evaluation principles, the Foundation seeks to understand the impact of its investments and inform future strategies.

**The evolution of place-based approaches** to community development has seen significant changes since its beginnings in the late 19th-century settlement house movement. Originally created to help new immigrants in urban areas with services such as health care, education, and job training, these early efforts often struggled to meet the diverse needs of all community members, especially failing to support Black Americans migrating

to northern cities. After World War II, the federal Urban Renewal program aimed to revitalize urban areas, but its mixed success led to a shift towards more community-centric initiatives in the 1960s and 1970s, notably through the Community Action Program.

The involvement of philanthropic organizations, such as the Ford Foundation with its Gray Areas program, signaled a notable shift towards tackling urban challenges through philanthropically backed place-based efforts. However, the emergence of Comprehensive Community Initiatives (CCIs) in the 1990s highlighted the complexities of achieving sustainable community transformation, often hindered by insufficient funding and challenges in coordinating multiple stakeholders.

Today's place-based efforts emphasize a more collaborative and integrated approach, seeking to leverage the

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strengths of local communities and address systemic issues through structural changes in policies and practices. This includes acknowledging the importance of Indigenous knowledge-sharing practices in North America's Indigenous communities, ensuring a more balanced and inclusive approach to community development. These efforts reflect a profound understanding of the nuanced challenges facing communities and the potential for innovative, inclusive strategies to create lasting, meaningful change.

**The evolution of place-based evaluation practices** signals a profound shift towards methodologies that are more adaptable, innovative, and inclusive, aiming to grasp the intricate dynamics and unique characteristics of community contexts. This shift acknowledges the limitations of traditional evaluation methods in capturing the complex outcomes of initiatives designed to foster systemic change through collaborative, interconnected efforts. Modern evaluations have begun to emphasize the importance of engaging community members and stakeholders in every phase, from design to interpretation, actively working to correct historical power imbalances and ensure evaluations are both equitable and reflective of community voices.

Evaluators are now adopting more flexible and adaptive approaches to better understand the effects of initiatives within the complex social, economic, and political contexts of specific places. This

involves moving away from standardized methods in favor of customized evaluation designs that blend quantitative and qualitative data, storytelling, and other approaches thus providing a richer, more comprehensive understanding. Furthermore, there's a growing recognition of the power dynamics at play in evaluation processes, leading to more intentional efforts to share decision-making power with community members and stakeholders.

**Literature and interviews point to many lessons and considerations** summarized in four key takeaways for those seeking to initiate or invest in evaluation, learning or measurement of place-based efforts:

- 1. There is no one-size-fits-all approach.** The approach to place-based evaluation and learning varies based on local context, evaluation purpose, and the type of investment. Sometimes using quantitative and qualitative measures are useful, other times storytelling or formal evaluations are useful. Despite the learning tactic, engaging multiple groups in the process can strengthen and improve the place-based effort.
- 2. Honoring local expertise is important.** Whether a valuing of local expertise is demonstrated by the evaluation consultant who is selected or the inclusion of local community members in the design, conduct, and reporting of the evaluation, local expertise is

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an important factor for place-based evaluation.

3. **Acknowledge power differentials.** Even the decisions to engage or not engage community members in the design and implementation of an evaluation is a position of power. Successful place-based evaluation, measurement and learning activities appear to acknowledge that power differential and include power sharing tactics where possible.
4. **Learning is an intentional iterative process.** Choosing a measurement or learning tactic alone will not lead to learning from a place-based efforts. Funders should apply additional strategies that are focused on sharing findings, making meaning of them, and identifying ways to incorporate them into the work.

**This report presents strategic recommendations** for philanthropic practices, with a focus on place-based grantmaking and learning. These recommendations highlight the importance of valuing community wisdom, maintaining transparency and accountability, and enhancing internal evaluative capabilities to facilitate meaningful and lasting change in communities. Foundations are urged to transcend their roles -to act not just as funders, and instead serve as partners, learners, and facilitators in a collaborative process of change. Key strategies include:

1. **Centering Community Learning:** Foundations should prioritize the lived experiences, insights, and aspirations of community members in all learning endeavors. This involves recognizing and valuing nontraditional forms of knowledge and ensuring they are weighted equally in decision-making processes. Immediate actions include

adopting participatory evaluation practices and facilitating community workshops to harness local expertise. Over time, standardized participatory evaluation and ongoing community advisory boards can ensure continuous feedback and participatory decision-making.

2. **Practicing Transparency and Accountability:** Initiating open dialogues with communities and stakeholders about the intentions, strategies, and developments of projects is crucial. Early actions entail defining community boundaries, identifying key local stakeholders, and establishing platforms for continuous knowledge exchange. Longer-term actions involve developing transparent reporting mechanisms and co-designing evaluation measures with grant-funded partners to assess funder performance.
3. **Building Internal Evaluative Muscles:** Enhancing internal capacities for evaluation and learning is essential for adapting to evolving community needs and making informed strategic decisions. Early actions include creating spaces for staff to share learnings and integrate evaluation into the planning stages of initiatives. In the long term, fostering a culture of inquiry and reflection and institutionalizing reflective sessions can help analyze successes and failures, ensuring lessons are integrated into future planning.
4. **Adapt, Bend, Don't Break:** Philanthropies are urged to cultivate an environment of adaptability and resilience, recognizing the fluid nature of community dynamics and the necessity for strategies that can evolve in response to unforeseen challenges and opportunities.

This approach emphasizes the importance of being prepared to modify plans based on new learnings and community feedback. Immediate actions include embracing developmental evaluation methods that support real-time learning and adaptation, as well as establishing mechanisms for flexible funding to swiftly respond to emerging community needs. In the long term,

philanthropic organizations should strive to institutionalize adaptability within their operational and strategic frameworks, ensuring that they can not only withstand but also thrive amidst the complexities of social change efforts. By fostering a culture that views change as an opportunity for growth, foundations can more effectively contribute to sustainable, impactful community development.

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**THE KRESGE FOUNDATION'S APPROACH** to place-based philanthropy represents a forward-thinking model that prioritizes equity, community engagement, and strategic learning. By embracing adaptive strategies and centering community voices, the Foundation can address immediate challenges but also contribute to the broader field of philanthropy with valuable insights and practices. The lessons learned and the framework proposed in this report serve as a guide for Kresge and other philanthropic organizations seeking to make a meaningful and sustained change through place-based initiatives.