

# PHILANTHROPIC PATHS

An Exploratory Study of the Career Pathways  
of Professionals of Color in Philanthropy



A Report from an Independent Study to the D5 Coalition  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study, commissioned by the D5 Coalition, provides a nuanced picture of the career experiences of 43 philanthropic professionals of color ranging from Program Officers to CEOs working in an array of foundations. Through an exploration of the perceptions, analyses, and career histories of people of color working in the philanthropic sector, this study aims to advance the field's understanding of the following questions:

- 1) What are the career pathways of people of color in philanthropy in terms of how they enter the field and advance to higher levels of seniority?
- 2) What factors do philanthropic professionals of color view as posing the greatest barriers and contributors to career advancement in the sector?
- 3) What is the perceived value of and challenges to achieving greater leadership diversity in foundations from the perspective of professionals of color in the field?

While not generalizable to the broader population of people of color working in the sector, interviews conducted with these individuals surfaced a set of potentially common points of entry and career pathways among professionals of color in philanthropy, as well as the factors that helped shape those pathways.

### Key Learnings

#### CAREER PATHWAYS WITHIN PHILANTHROPY

- **Multiple pathways of professional advancement.** Among those interviewees who held at least one prior, less senior position in philanthropy, there were three primary career pathways by which they advanced within the sector: 1) Moving up across foundations with relatively few instances of internal promotion; 2) Experiencing the majority of their advancement into more senior roles within a single foundation; and 3) Rising exclusively within one foundation.
- **Upward trajectories within the sector.** The senior-most leaders interviewed as part of this study experienced significant professional advancement within the sector. Of the 18 CEOs and Executive Team Members (i.e., Vice Presidents and Senior Vice Presidents) who held at least one prior, less senior position in philanthropy, 14 began their careers at the Program Officer level or below, and five of these leaders entered the field as Program Support staff.

## FACTORS AFFECTING PROFESSIONAL ADVANCEMENT IN THE SECTOR

- **Significant barriers to advancement.** Interviewees perceived the following as significant barriers to their own advancement and that of professionals of color in philanthropy generally:
  - Limited vacancies due to flat organizational structures and low rates of turnover;
  - A lack of access to hiring and developmental networks; and,
  - Racial stereotypes and unwelcoming and unfamiliar foundation cultures.
- **Positive contributors to advancement.** Interviewees cited a variety of factors they believed positively contributed to their advancement in philanthropy, categorized as organizational, field-level, and individual factors:

**Organizational Factors:** An institutional commitment to diversity on the part of the board and leadership at hiring foundations was perceived as a critical factor in facilitating career advancement for people of color.

**Field-level Factors:** The majority of interviewees cited two factors they perceived as particularly important:

- 1) The presence of mentors that provided advice and coaching, opened doors to opportunities and valuable networks, and helped position their mentees for success within the sector; and,
- 2) Identity-based and funder affinity groups that provided opportunities for networking and mentor recruitment, social support, and greater visibility and potential leadership development.

**Individual Factors:** Interviewees believed the following assets, competencies, and mindsets were of particular importance: valuable relationships and a network of useful connections in philanthropy, visibility and a stellar reputation within the sector, expertise in management practices and substantive areas relevant to their work, familiarity with the “unwritten rules” of philanthropy, political savvy that helped them advance an agenda within their organizations, and a strong commitment to excellence.

## REFLECTIONS ON THE VALUE OF AND CHALLENGES TO DIVERSITY WITHIN THE SECTOR

- **Role of diversity in increasing the effectiveness of foundations.** Several interviewees indicated that diversity is important to philanthropy not only because foundations should reflect the communities they serve, but because diverse foundations are more effective in executing their philanthropic missions. Interviewees believed that diversity brings in new perspectives and innovative ideas that make for better decisions regarding complex challenges, especially those that heavily impact communities of color.
- **Challenges to advancing diversity within philanthropic organizations.** Interviewees noted several important challenges to advancing diversity within philanthropy:
  - Interviewees emphasized that an essential corollary to advancing diversity in foundations is ensuring inclusion such that racial and ethnic diversity is not merely present, but valued with equal power given to diverse voices. Shifting numerical composition alone does not guarantee inclusion.

- For senior leaders of color, advocating for diversity and inclusion is a delicate balancing act between being an insider who is “at the table” and a more “oppositional” proponent for greater diversity.
- Many interviewees noted that board commitment and engagement in diversity and inclusion is critical to its success in foundations because boards have such a central role in hiring and supporting senior leaders, as well as determining the strategic direction of foundations.
- A handful of interviewees contended that diversity policies alone, while necessary and laudable in their intent, are not sufficient to increase diversity and to ensure the kind of authentic inclusion essential to reaping the benefits from these perspectives.

## **Limitations and Opportunity**

While the study design does not lend itself to generalizable conclusions, the insights and perspectives point to important directions for discussion and future research on the pathways and prospects of professionals of color for advancement into the senior-most ranks of the sector.

A major theme that emerged from the findings of this study, which has important implications for future research and efforts on behalf of diversity in philanthropy, can be characterized as “similar, yet different”. Our findings suggest that in terms of career pathways, contemporary philanthropy may resemble other sectors and that philanthropic professionals of color may experience many of the same key challenges and opportunities for professional growth as their white counterparts. Nevertheless, there may be important differences with significant implications for the overall advancement prospects of professionals of color that should be explored further.

Given this, we recommend that future research:

- Document the prevalence of the patterns observed within our interview pool in the broader sector;
- Compare how career pathways and perceived barriers and contributors to advancement differ between professionals of color and their white counterparts; and,
- Assess whether significant differences in career advancement exist along racial and ethnic lines based upon foundation characteristics.

Recommended questions for future research are included in the final section of the report.

# INTRODUCTION

## Aims of the Study

Through an exploration of the perceptions, analyses, and career histories of people of color working in the philanthropic sector, this study aims to advance the field's understanding of the following questions:

- 1) What are the career pathways of people of color in philanthropy in terms of how they enter the field and advance to higher levels of seniority?
- 2) What factors do philanthropic professionals of color view as posing the greatest barriers and contributors to career advancement in the sector?
- 3) What is the perceived value of and challenges to achieving greater leadership diversity in foundations from the perspective of professionals of color in the field?

This qualitative study explores both sides of what might be called the **“diversity equation”** in philanthropy. That is, it considers the **“demand-side”** of the equation, or the potential organizational supports and barriers to hiring, developing, and advancing people of color within foundations. It also explores the **“supply side”** of diversity—the individual resources, experiences, and competencies that help one navigate a philanthropic career within an environment of constrained opportunities. Both of these sets of factors will impact diversity within philanthropy and are therefore of potential importance to practices, policies, programs, and institutions seeking to achieve greater philanthropic diversity.

## The State of Foundation Staff Diversity and Career Pathways to Leadership Roles in Philanthropy

This study builds on years of investment by numerous stakeholders in the philanthropic community to encourage greater understanding, awareness, and action on the issue of diversity among foundation staff and leadership. This significant body of work includes research activities, advocacy campaigns, funder collaborations and sector-wide initiatives, leadership development programs, and organizing efforts on the part of individual leaders, Joint Affinity Groups and its individual partner groups, regional associations, infrastructure organizations, and leading foundations. Such efforts, including the Diversity in Philanthropy Project and later the D5 Coalition, seek to uncover both barriers that impede diversity as well as factors that might facilitate greater leadership diversity among philanthropic staff. One component of these efforts has been a limited number of empirical investigations of philanthropic staff diversity; however, these studies are either more than a decade old or have focused on specific geographic regions (e.g., California, New York, Michigan, and Minnesota) rather than the nation as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

1. See for example, Burbridge et al., 2002; McGill and Bryan, 2009; Bleckley and McDonald, 2009; Delgado et al., 2001.

The results of an annual survey conducted by the Council on Foundations provide the most recent and comprehensive snapshot of philanthropic staff diversity available at this time (see Table 1). Based on a survey of 857 active, staffed grantmaking organizations in 2012, the survey found that while people of color made up more than a third of foundation program officers and nearly a third of middle managers, they comprised less than one in five executives and fewer than one in ten CEOs of foundations.<sup>2</sup>

TABLE 1

<b>Presence of people of color in philanthropy, as a proportion of all philanthropic professionals (2012)</b>			
	<b>All Professionals (N)</b>	<b>People of Color (N)</b>	<b>People of Color (%)</b>
<b>Full-time foundation staff</b>	<b>5,659</b>	<b>1,246</b>	<b>22%</b>
<b>Foundation heads</b> (CEO, President, or Executive Director)	<b>801</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>8%</b>
<b>Executive staff:</b>	<b>466</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>19%</b>
• Associate Director / Executive Vice President	118	14	
• Vice President of Administration	100	12	
• Vice President of Programs	248	61	
<b>Middle managers</b> (Program Director or Senior Program Officer)	<b>802</b>	<b>244</b>	<b>30%</b>
<b>Program officers</b>	<b>727</b>	<b>258</b>	<b>35%</b>
<b>Program support:</b>	<b>672</b>	<b>221</b>	<b>33%</b>
• Program Associate	387	115	
• Program Assistant	285	106	

Source: Adapted from data reported in the Council on Foundations' *The 2012 Grantmakers Salary and Benefits Report* (2013).

In 2009, the Council on Foundations published the results of a study that explored issues of diversity in hiring patterns for foundation CEOs in particular. The study examined 440 foundation CEO hires that were reported in *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* and *Philanthropy News Digest* between January 1, 2004 and December 31, 2008.<sup>3</sup> The authors identified the following patterns for the CEOs hired during this time period:

- Only one in five CEOs hired during the study period was a person of color.

2. These data are drawn from a survey completed in 2012 by a sample of active, staffed grantmaking organizations. While the sample is not random and therefore not generalizable to the entire population of grantmakers, it does provide a sense of demographic staffing patterns for a large sample of foundations in the United States.

3. Council on Foundations, 2009.

- Roughly two out of three CEO candidates held executive positions in their previous job. Roughly 40 percent had been Chief Executives and about a quarter had been Vice Presidents; however, one in five came from the Director/Manager and Grant Program staff levels.
- More than three out of four CEOs were hired from outside the hiring foundations (versus internally promoted into these positions from within), and the percent of CEOs hired externally increased steadily each year from 73 percent in 2004 to 85 percent in 2008.<sup>4</sup>
- Two out of three CEOs were hired from outside philanthropy, with roughly a quarter of the CEOs coming from the business sector and a quarter from the non-profit sector.<sup>5</sup>

Notably, these findings have given further credence to a widespread perception within the sector that upward mobility is limited and senior leaders tend to be hired from outside their foundations and, in many cases, the sector altogether.<sup>6</sup> This study, alongside prior research on career mobility in philanthropy conducted with data from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, all suggest the existence of limited career pathways from more junior to senior roles within the sector, both among professionals of color and their white counterparts.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, while the proportion of external hires for CEO positions in the for-profit sector has increased over the past three decades, just one in four new corporate CEOs were hired from outside their companies in 2000.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, philanthropy has often been regarded as different than other sectors in terms of career prospects—and this emphasis on external hiring has affected the type of efforts proposed to diversify the senior ranks of foundations.<sup>9</sup>

**Despite the hard work of many organizations and individuals over the past few decades, the low levels of diversity at the more senior ranks of foundations has proven a stubborn challenge for the field and one that can be better understood through a richer exploration of how people of color enter foundations, how they advance across their careers, and what factors affect their pathway of advancement within the sector.**

The present study seeks to build on the literature regarding foundation staff diversity and philanthropic career pathways by drilling down into the experiences of people of color in particular. Using a qualitative approach, it takes a more holistic view of foundation career histories by examining the full span of philanthropic positions held by people of color rather than just those held immediately prior to their current ones. It also examines the career histories of philanthropic professionals of color at varying levels of seniority, from Program Officers to CEOs.

4. The trend finding is reported in the authors' subsequent journal publication: Branch et al., 2010.

5. The remaining individuals came from the government, health care, and higher education sectors. It is important to note that although CEO candidates might have been hired from "outside" philanthropy, they may have been prominent persons in the non-profit sector working on issues that were important to the hiring foundation.

6. Delgado et al., 2001; Council on Foundations, 2010.

7. Branch et al., 2010; Burbridge et al., 2002.

8. Murphy and Zabochnik, 2007.

9. Council on Foundations, 2010.



## METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative research design to achieve a deeper understanding of the career pathways of professionals of color in philanthropy. Data for this study were gathered through 43 semi-structured interviews with a non-random pool of philanthropic professionals of color. Interviews lasted between 45-90 minutes and were conducted between June 1, 2013 and October 31, 2013. Interviewees were promised anonymity. While this study sheds light on the type of patterns or themes that might be worthy of subsequent, more systematic study, the results are not generalizable to any population beyond those interviewed for the study.<sup>10</sup>

### Selecting Interviewees

Interviewees were selected from a list of over 600 philanthropic professionals of color compiled from: 1) a scan of foundation website staff listings; 2) a review of lists of participants in activities sponsored by identity-based affinity groups (e.g., Hispanics in Philanthropy) and other infrastructure organizations (e.g., Council on Foundations); and, 3) Google and LinkedIn searches.

Individuals in the final interview pool were selected to achieve representation along the following dimensions (see Table 2 for details):

- Race and ethnicity
- Gender
- Level of seniority
  - CEO (or President or Executive Director)
  - Executive Team Member (i.e., Vice President or Senior Vice President)
  - Middle Manager (i.e., Associate or Assistant Vice President, Director, or Senior Program Officer)
  - Program Officer
- Asset size of foundation employer
- Type of foundation employer (i.e., corporate, community, public, independent, family)
- Geographic region

In addition to the dimensions listed above, interviewees were selected to include a balanced distribution of those who were internally promoted or externally hired into their *current position*. Specifically, interviewees were selected to include those who were: 1) **promoted to their current position from within their current foundation**, which constituted 35 percent of interviewees; 2) **hired externally with prior sector experience**, which comprised 37 percent of interviewees; or 3) **in their first philanthropic position** at the time of the study, which represented 28 percent of interviewees. Since all interviewees were promised confidentiality and anonymity, names and affiliations will not be disclosed in this report; rather, when quoting interviewees, their level of seniority and type of foundation employer is provided.

10. In other words, while a third of these interviewees may have had a certain experience during their careers, it is not possible to conclude from this study that a third of all people of color working in philanthropy have had the same such experience.

TABLE 2

## Distribution of interviewees across dimensions of interest (Total N = 43)

<b>Foundation type</b>				
Corporate	Independent	Community	Public	Family
6	15	7	7	8
<b>Foundation asset size*</b>				
<\$50M	<\$50-249M	\$250M+		
13	13	15		
<b>Race / ethnicity</b>				
African American	Latino/a	Asian Am. / Pacific Islander	Am. Indian / Alaskan Native	
19	11	10	3	
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	Female			
18	25			
<b>Seniority Level</b>				
CEO	Executive Team	Middle Manager	Program Officer	
19	7	9	8	
<b>Geographic region</b>				
West / Southwest	Midwest	South	Northeast	Mid-Atlantic
11	9	5	12	6
<b>Route to <i>current</i> foundation position</b>				
Promoted from within foundation	External hire with sector experience	External hire without sector experience		
15	16	12		

\*Does not sum to 43 because it was not possible to determine the asset size of two interviewees' foundations using publicly available data.

## Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were coded, categorized, and compared by two reviewers using thematic analysis to extract key themes as well as data that could be summarized quantitatively.<sup>11</sup> This approach affords a view of general patterns shared broadly across the interview pool as well as notable or unique perceptions or experiences that give rise to additional important insights.

11. Guest, MacQueen, and Namey, 2012.

## LEARNINGS

### A. CAREER PATHWAYS

To begin to understand the career pathways of professionals of color in philanthropy, this study explored the following dimensions of interviewees' career histories:

- How interviewees came to acquire their current position as well as their motivations and means of entering the philanthropic field initially;
- How they moved through and advanced within philanthropy; and,
- How their ambitions balanced the pursuit of more senior positions with the desire to maximize their impact on the issues and communities they wished to serve through their work in philanthropy.<sup>12</sup>

#### Means of Recruitment and Motivation for Entering Philanthropy

Interviewees found their ways to new jobs in the philanthropic sector primarily through: 1) being directly recruited by a member of a foundation's board or staff; 2) responding to a job posting or opening; or 3) being contacted by a search firm acting on behalf of a foundation.

As can be seen in Table 3:

- The most common means of entering foundations (both their first foundation and the foundation at which they currently work) was by applying to job postings that were either shared with the interviewee by a third party or that the interviewee identified themselves during a job search. About half of all interviewees got jobs at foundations by this route. It was particularly common among the less senior individuals in the interview pool; nearly three in four Program Officers and Middle Managers got jobs by applying to job postings.
- Among those who received the posting from a third party, in some cases, staff from within the foundation had sent the respondent the post; however, in many cases, the posting had been shared by another contact in the sector.
- Reported by a third of interviewees, the next most prevalent means was direct outreach to the individual on the part of the hiring foundation—a finding that is fairly consistent across all seniority levels.

12. A small number of interviewees recently left philanthropy or changed philanthropic positions between the date of their interview and the publication of this report. For these respondents, their most recent philanthropic position was used for purposes of analysis.

- Notably, outreach by search firms was only observed among CEO-level interviewees. Two out of five CEOs in the interview pool were recruited to their current foundations through such means.

When looking at the pool as a whole, relatively few differences emerge between interviewees' means of entering their first foundation compared to their means of entering their current foundation. Overall, there was a slight decrease in the number of individuals who entered their current foundations by applying to job postings or other means (e.g., placement by a temp agency). **The most notable shift was that twice as many individuals were recruited to their current foundations by search firms, suggesting that search firms may be more likely to identify and recruit individuals who are already in philanthropy.**

The major difference observed between individuals' means of entering their first foundation and their current foundation was related to how individuals used their connections in the sector to their favor when they applied to job postings (see Table 4):

- Nearly twice as many interviewees subsequently had someone connected to the hiring foundation support their candidacy with a personal endorsement on their behalf once they applied to the job in the case of their current foundation (11) as compared to the first foundation at which they worked (6).
- Among those who worked at multiple foundations, the difference is even starker: five such individuals used this type of connection to support their application for a position at their current foundation, compared with just one for the position at their initial foundation (not shown in Table 3).

TABLE 3

Interviewees' means of entering their current and initial foundations <sup>13</sup>										
	CEO		Executives		Middle Managers		Program Officers		Entire pool	
	Current	First	Current	First	Current	First	Current	First	Current	First
Direct foundation recruitment	6	7	3	4	3	2	2	1	14	14
Search firm outreach	8	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	4
Applied to a job posting	5	8	4	2	6	7	6	6	21	23
Other means of entry	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	2
Total	19		7		9		8		43	

13. In the case of the 13 interviewees who were still employed at the time of their interview at the same foundation in which they entered philanthropy, the means of entering their first foundation are the same as those of entering their current foundation.

TABLE 4

Subsequent endorsement or recommendation among those interviewees who applied to job postings

	CEO		Executives		Middle Managers		Program Officers		Entire pool	
	Current	First	Current	First	Current	First	Current	First	Current	First
Applied to job postings (total)	5	8	4	2	6	7	6	6	21	23
Secured an endorsement or recommendation after applying to the position	2	1	3	1	4	3	2	1	11	6

MOTIVATION TO ENTER PHILANTHROPY

Roughly half of the interviewees (21 of 43) mentioned one of three explicit motivations for entering philanthropy:

**Having a more strategic or systemic role in advancing social change:** A desire to have a more strategic or systemic role in addressing major problems confronting communities was the most common motivation for entering the philanthropic field, expressed by one in five (9 of 43) respondents. The CEO of a public foundation indicated that she sought to “shift the point of intervention” so that she could “spend time not just combating something, but also trying to invest and build more at a causal level.” In a similar vein, the CEO of an independent foundation shared that it was his “experience with the urban chaos of crack cocaine and the onset of the incarceration pipeline for black and brown young men” that served as a “catalytic event” that put him on a path to philanthropy. As he explained, **“I wanted to begin thinking about solving problems at scale. When you work in government, the service framework is very transactional and I was beginning to think about issues in a more transformational kind of frame. That’s what ultimately led me to philanthropy: the ability to think about issues at the root-cause level and with a transformational, justice orientation, rather than just a service-oriented, transactional framework.”**

**Advancing a particular issue:** A common motivation for entering philanthropy was the desire to focus on a particular issue or to work in that area as a funder rather than as a grant-seeker. Nearly one in five (8 of 43) of respondents described this as their primary motivating factor.

**Greater flexibility and creativity:** After having worked in government and/or the non-profit sector, a handful of interviewees (4 of 43) expressed a desire for greater flexibility and creativity in addressing social problems, which they believed philanthropy would offer. As a Program Director at a public foundation explained, **“When I worked for non-profits, they were dictated by the funders, and in the public sector it was political whims that allowed things to happen. I saw philanthropy as the opportunity to have mission-driven dollars that were focused around changing society.”** The CEO of a community foundation echoed these same sentiments, noting: “What made the

field appealing was the flexibility of the resources that were at the disposal of the foundations' that I worked with when I was in public service. When you're in government, you have so many regulations you have to comply with and your levels of flexibility are extremely limited. Foundations didn't seem to have that level of restriction or lack of creativity when trying to address critical issues that were confronting a community."

Notably, a significant minority of respondents (8 of 43) did not indicate a particular intent with respect to pursuing a position in philanthropy. In fact, many of these individuals were not aware that the philanthropic field existed until they applied for or were offered a job in a foundation. In some cases, informational interviews with experts in a certain field eventually led them to philanthropic organizations, while others reported that peers shared a specific foundation job posting with them or that they had been searching for jobs in a particular topic area (e.g., women's or LGBT rights) when they ran across an advertised position for a philanthropic organization alongside several others listed in the non-profit sector. An additional three respondents reported that they entered philanthropy simply because they wanted to work in the non-profit sector.

## **Patterns within the Sector: Multiple Ways of Moving Up**

Three out of five interviewees (27 of 43) had advanced at least one level of seniority within the sector prior to, or including their current position. For the purposes of this study, positions were grouped into five distinct levels of seniority:

- 1) CEO (CEO, President, or Executive Director)
- 2) Executive Team (Senior Vice President or Vice President)
- 3) Middle Manager (Associate or Assistant Vice President, Director, or Senior Program Officer)
- 4) Program Officer
- 5) Program Support (Program Associate<sup>14</sup> or Program Assistant)

Almost a third of respondents (13 of 43) were still employed in their first philanthropic position at the time of their interview and thus have no history of advancement in the sector. Of these, five were CEOs, two were Executive Team Members, three were Middle Managers, and three were Program Officers. The remaining three interviewees (of 43) made only lateral moves during their philanthropic careers to date (one CEO and two Program Officers). Figure 1 shows the distribution of career pathways for the entire interview pool.

### **PRIMARY ADVANCEMENT PATHWAYS**

In reviewing the patterns of advancement among the 27 (of 43) respondents who moved up within philanthropy at some point prior to, or including their current position, we identified four distinct career pathways that are explained in further detail below.<sup>15</sup> The first three in particular describe almost all of the advancement trajectories observed in our interview pool. It bears repeating that we cannot, based upon this study, suggest that the distribution of these pathways among this study group reflects their prevalence among the broader population of philanthropic professionals, or even for professionals of color. However, their existence does suggest important questions for further research and discussion—particularly

14. Note: Some foundations use "Program Associate" to describe what most foundations consider "Program Officer"; in these cases, the title was reclassified as "Program Officer" for purposes of this analysis.

15. It is worth noting that these same distinct career pathways were observed when we removed interviewees' current positions and looked only at their career histories up to that point.

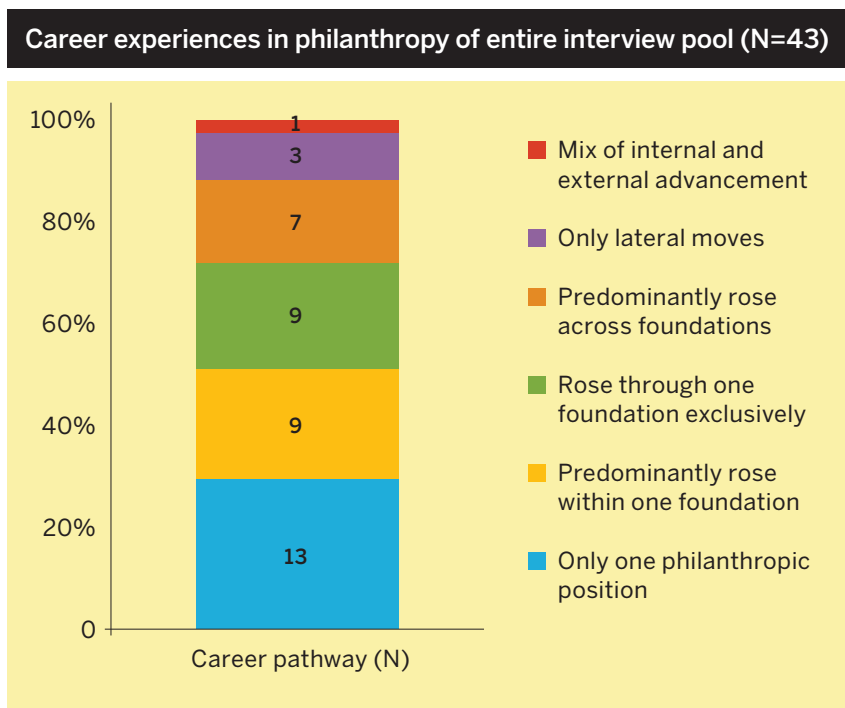
given the findings from prior research that suggest limited upward mobility within the sector as well as widely shared beliefs about the lack of opportunity for advancement into senior roles among individuals working in the sector.<sup>16</sup>

**1. Moving up predominantly across foundations:**

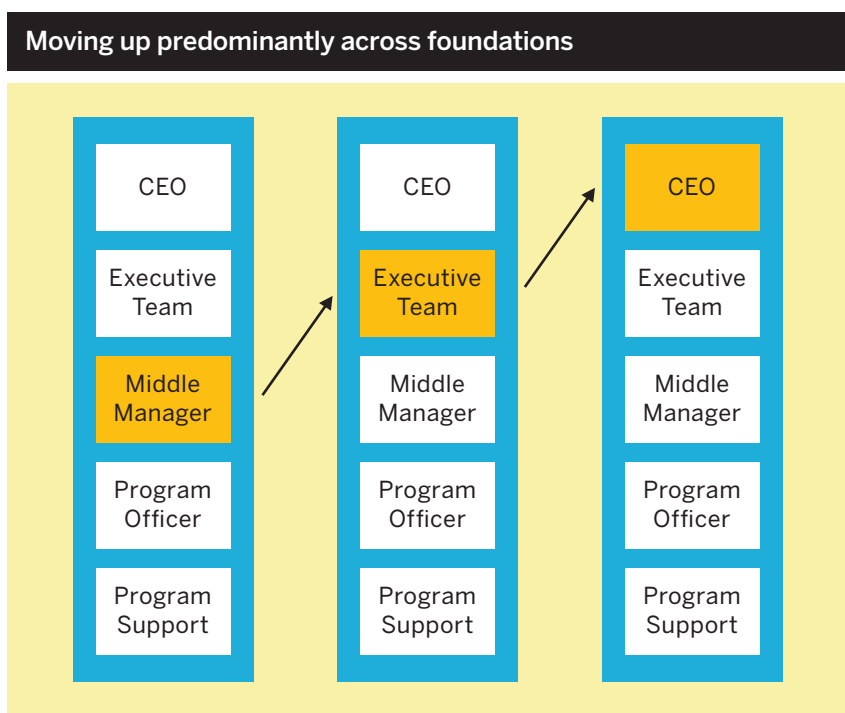
Just over a quarter (7 of 27) of those interviewees who experienced upward advancement in their philanthropic careers did so predominantly by a succession of external hires at different foundations rather than through internal promotion (Figure 2). This included six CEOs and one Executive.

Note: The diagrams that follow provide an illustrative example of each pathway. They do not reflect the actual pathway of every respondent in the category.

**FIGURE 1**



**FIGURE 2**



16. While this study is not designed to compare average tenure and time to promotion between the pathways identified, this is an important avenue for future study.

**2. Rising predominantly within a single foundation:** A third (9 of 27) of those who moved up in their philanthropic career rose through multiple levels of seniority predominantly within a single foundation, although they worked at more than one foundation over the course of their careers to date (Figure 3). This included three CEOs, two Executives, three Middle Managers, and one Program Officer.

**3. Rising exclusively within a single foundation:** A third (9 of 27) of those who moved up in their philanthropic career advanced exclusively within a single foundation (Figure 4). This included four CEOs, one Executive, two Middle Managers, and two Program Officers.

**4. Rising through a mix of internal and external promotions:** One Middle Manager and one Executive rose through a balanced mix of internal and external promotions (Figure 5).

FIGURE 3

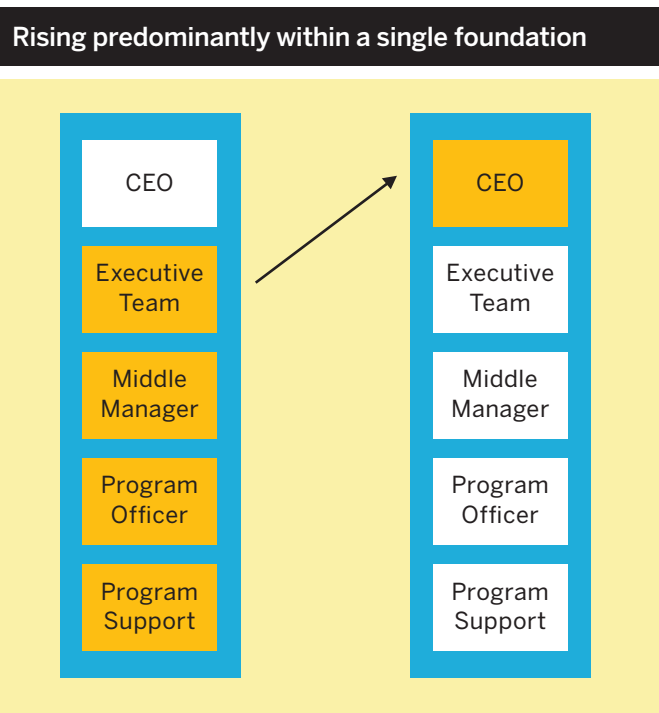


FIGURE 4

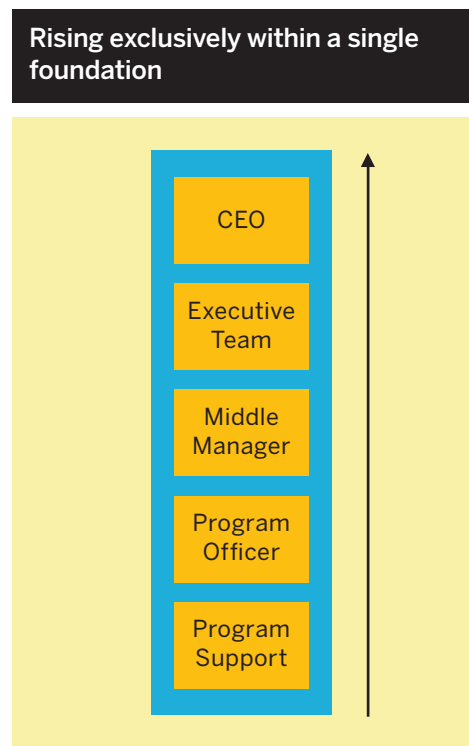
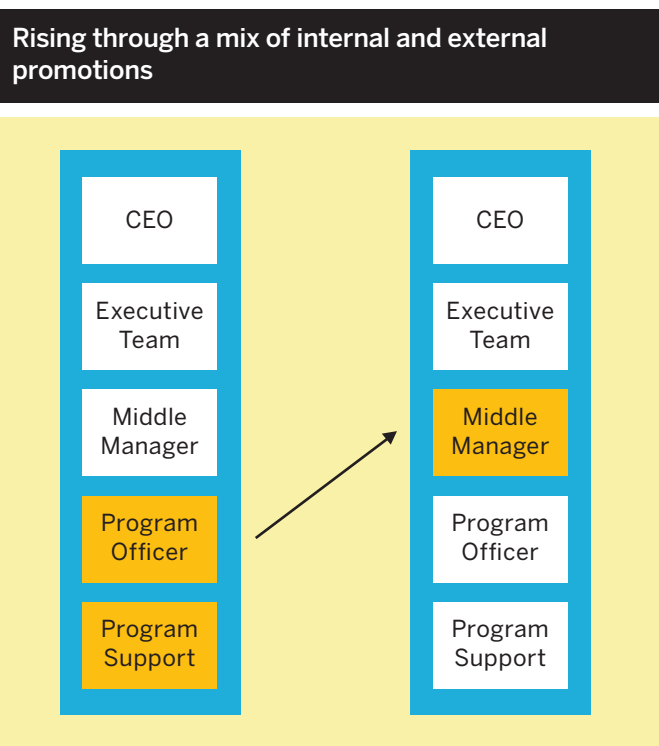


FIGURE 5





## SPAN OF ADVANCEMENT

For the 27 interviewees who had a history of career advancement in the sector, this study also explored their *span of advancement*, or the levels of seniority (e.g., Program Officer, Middle Manager, and Executive Team) that they traversed over the course of their careers in philanthropy to date.<sup>17</sup> Looking at the span of advancement for interviewees grouped by the position they held at the time of their interview:

**More than half of the CEOs interviewed began their philanthropic careers at the Program Officer level or below:** Thirteen (of 19) CEOs included in this study had experienced career advancement within philanthropy. Of these 13 CEOs, 11 had entered the sector at the Program Officer level or below. Four of these CEOs began their philanthropic careers at the Program Support levels as either Program Associates or Program Assistants.

**Those at the Executive Team level (i.e., Vice Presidents and Senior Vice Presidents) who experienced advancement were roughly evenly divided with career starts as Senior Program Officers, Program Officers, and Program Assistants:** Five of seven interviewees who held a Vice President or Senior Vice President position at the time of their interview held a less senior position in philanthropy in the past. Of these five, two began their philanthropic careers as Senior Program Officers, two began their careers as Program Officers, and one began her career in a program support role as a Program Assistant.

**Most Middle Managers (i.e., Directors or Senior Program Officers) with a history of advancement began at the Program Support level:** Six of the nine interviewees who held a Middle Manager position at the time of their interview had a history of advancement. Five of these six (three Senior Program Officers and two Directors) began their philanthropic career as a Program Associate or Program Assistant. One Director began her philanthropic career as a Program Officer.

**Over a third of the Program Officers interviewed began their careers at the Program Support level:** Three of the eight interviewees who were Program Officers at the time of their interviews held prior positions as Program Assistants and/or Program Associates.

## Ambition for Advancement within Philanthropy: Balancing the Pursuit of Higher-level Positions with the Desire for Impact

While just over a quarter of interviewees (12 of 43) indicated a desire to “run a foundation one day,” the vast majority (31 of 43) did not. Rather, they assessed possibilities for career advancement in terms of whether they provided opportunities for professional growth and/or the potential for greater impact in their work on behalf of the issues or communities they served:

- **Most interviewees did not actively plan to rise to the senior-most ranks within their current foundation or any other:** The majority of interviewees (31 of 43) did not expressly seek to rise to the CEO position within their current foundation or any other. Two CEOs noted that their ascent to the senior-most position was not part of a deliberate plan or strategy on their part, but rather unfolded as a series of unexpected opportunities. In fact, a handful of CEO respondents expressed concern with the notion of seeking a career in philanthropy “for its own sake”.

17. For a more detailed breakdown of interviewees’ spans of advancement, see the figures in the Appendix.

- **The desire for professional growth or greater impact were key drivers of the motivation for career advancement:** Although most interviewees did not actively seek to “rise through the ranks” of philanthropy as part of a deliberate career plan, eight (of 43) explained that they often took advantage of opportunities to grow professionally or have greater impact in their work. Thus they did not turn down advancement opportunities that arose. In most instances, however, advancement was incidental to performance rewards or desires for professional development opportunities. Several interviewees noted that they were actively encouraged to seek a Vice President or CEO position by others within the foundation. The majority of respondents prioritized a “purpose path” more than a career one. As one CEO noted, “I don’t really care about being a CEO in philanthropy because I realize there are many different ways to activate resources to achieve the same [ends]. It’s more about how you make sure that assets are activated—whether it be in philanthropy or not.”
- **Staying “close to program work” was an important factor in the career decisions of a handful of interviewees:** A few individuals actively sought to remain in the “program” ranks of foundations to stay close to the work or declined to take a more senior position when it was offered because they felt it would not be a good fit with their skills or aspirations. As the Senior Vice President of an independent foundation explained, “Ambition is really important. It brings fuel and drive. However, ambition also could dull your senses about where your skill sets “fit” best. The tendency is to see the CEO [and say] ‘that’s the top job, and that’s the one I want.’ The reality is that you may not be that good a CEO, but could be a great Chief Operating Officer.” The CEO of an independent foundation also perceived that there are widespread misconceptions about the power of the CEO position: “People assume that you get into these [CEO] positions, have more power, and get to do what you want... but you also have an entirely new set of bosses that you have to argue with and convince and really work with in order to move. It’s [another] ship that you have to turn around.”

What is evident in the perspectives and experiences of several interviewees in this study is that they are actively balancing the goals of achieving greater impact in their work alongside those of career attainment.

**Purpose, as much as prestige, drove their calculations about which positions to pursue.**

## **B. PERCEIVED BARRIERS AND CONTRIBUTORS TO CAREER ADVANCEMENT IN PHILANTHROPY**

This study also explored individual, organizational, and field-level factors that interviewees perceived as barriers and contributors to career advancement in philanthropy.

### **Perceived Barriers to Advancement in Philanthropy**

**Three out of five interviewees (14 of 24) below the CEO level saw little to no opportunity to move up within their current organization.** Indeed, all but one of those at the Program Officer and Middle Manager levels believed this to be the case.

Interviewees were asked about what they perceived to be barriers to their own advancement and to the advancement of philanthropic professionals of color generally. They identified the following factors in particular: 1) limited vacancies; 2) limited access to hiring and developmental networks; and 3) the impact of racial stereotypes and unwelcoming and unfamiliar foundation cultures.

**Limited vacancies:** More than a third of interviewees (15 of 43) believed that a lack of open positions at the more senior levels of foundations, which they attributed to either flat organizational structures and/or low rates of turnover, was a major organizational constraint on opportunities for advancement. A Program Officer at a public foundation commented: **“There are a lot of people at the mid-level, but moving up is very, very hard. There’s nowhere to go unless people die or retire.”** The CEO of an independent foundation explained that, in her view, there is simply not a “career ladder” within foundations as opportunities to advance are vertically siloed: “The opportunities are really limited because the areas are so siloed. If you’re a Senior Program Officer in an area, you are not going to become the Vice President in a different program area. Your opportunity is to become a Vice President in your particular program area. It’s a very narrow range of opportunities.”

**Access to hiring and developmental networks is limited for people of color: A quarter of interviewees (11 of 43) perceived a tendency towards homophily—the preference to interact and work with similar others—among foundation boards and the senior leadership of foundations and believed it contributed to broader patterns of exclusion of professionals of color from hiring networks and developmental relationships.** An executive at an independent foundation asserted that “Networks matter. People in management who have good networks have an advantage despite a commitment to diversity. Moreover, our notions of meritocracy are fueled by networks. A candidate could say, ‘I am the best qualified person for that job’ and that may be correct. But that candidate may not be the best networked person.” The networks through which boards reach out to and recruit potential CEOs as well as the diversity of search firms and their networks were also cited by multiple interviewees as important impediments to achieving greater diversity in leadership positions.

**Racial stereotypes and unwelcoming and unfamiliar foundation cultures were also viewed as persistent barriers to the advancement of professionals of color:** Six (of 43) interviewees believed that stereotypes about the potential of professionals of color to successfully assume senior leadership positions at foundations were a major barrier to advancement. These perceived institutional patterns of exclusion were seen as curtailing opportunities for both hiring and advancement of people of color within foundations. As noted by the President of a public foundation, in her experience, **there is “an assumption that you’re not competent. As soon as you walk into the room, that’s something that has to be settled.”** Again, the tendency toward homophily was also noted as giving rise to patterns of exclusion. **“People of color,” the CEO of an independent foundation explained, “have always been expected to adapt to the culture of the foundation that employs them, with the foundation doing little or nothing to adapt to them. Feeling unsupported and harshly judged, their tenure is often brief.”**

Seven (of 43) interviewees also viewed the dominant culture of foundations as “esoteric”, “elitist”, “out of touch”, and sometimes unwelcoming to people of diverse backgrounds. In addition, a similar number of interviewees (6 of 43) observed the existence of a learning curve required to navigate the “unwritten rules” and power dynamics in philanthropy, which they saw as a barrier to the advancement of people of color.<sup>18</sup>

18. There was relatively little overlap among the interviewees who referenced these barriers (i.e., negative stereotypes; an esoteric, elitist culture; and the learning curve required to navigate the unwritten rules of philanthropy); only four interviewees cited two or more of these barriers. Fifteen individuals referenced only one of these barriers in their interviews.

## Perceived Contributors to Career Advancement in Philanthropy

Interviewees attributed their professional success and advancement in philanthropy to a variety of factors. These can be broadly categorized as organizational factors, field-level factors, and individual factors. Each is described in turn below.

### ORGANIZATIONAL FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTED TO ADVANCEMENT

Interviewees identified aspects of their foundation employers' organizational structure, leadership, or practices that they believed contributed positively to their professional success by facilitating their initial hiring, retaining them at the organization, or promoting their subsequent advancement within the foundation.

#### ORGANIZATIONAL FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTED TO ADVANCEMENT

- An institutional commitment to diversity and inclusion on the part of staff and board leadership
- The departure of bosses or organizational restructurings that created openings for advancement

#### **An institutional commitment to diversity and inclusion on the part of staff and board leadership:**

Almost half of interviewees (18 of 43) believed diversity played a role in their foundation's decision to hire them into their current position. Some believed their organization saw it as an "added plus", while others saw it as an instrumental factor in the hiring decision. According to interviewees, the diversity motivation on the part of their foundations appeared largely to be the result of values held by boards or CEOs rather than the result of a formal diversity program. As described by the President of an independent foundation,

**"I don't know if there's another foundation in the country that would have offered me this job, except [that] on that board there were folks of color who believed in the mission of the foundation and believed in what I could bring to it and decided to give me an opportunity..."** I just don't know [if] I would have had that kind of opportunity absent the kind of ethnic diversity and commitment to social change that the board already had as a value."

Another President of an independent foundation noted that while her board was predominantly white, they had come to appreciate the importance of diversity and believe that "there's a real value to making a bigger effort to have a more diverse set of people on [their] staff."

In addition, seven (of 43) interviewees cited a board's emphasis on diversity and inclusion and/or the diversity of the board or staff as something that attracted them to their foundation in particular.

**The President of a public foundation described the focus on diversity and inclusion as something that she asked about in her interview and was pivotal in her decision to accept the job: "That [focus on diversity and inclusion] was there from the founding of the foundation. It's very much a part of the philosophy of the foundation and the practice of the foundation... Internally, it's something that I don't have to debate.**

It's not something I have to push the board to be [or] to value. It's something there by design—by mission. That was a very attractive thing for me." Others described the focus on diversity as an important reason they chose to remain at their foundations. As a Program Officer at an independent foundation described, "I

think the diversity at [the foundation] did play a role in attracting me to stay on... I [found] that the culture there of diversity was welcoming and very in line with my own views of what philanthropy should be and how it should operate—and that was both at the staff and trustee level... Diversity was a part of everything they were engaged in—a core central and explicit value from internal operations to external grantmaking.”

### **The departure of bosses or organizational restructurings that created openings for advancement:**

Nearly one in five (8 of 43) respondents indicated that the departure of their bosses paved the way for their advancement at some point in their philanthropic career. Two interviewees also noted that structural re-organizations of their foundations led to their advancement into new, more senior positions.

## **FIELD-LEVEL FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTED TO ADVANCEMENT**

In addition to these aspects of their foundation employers, interviewees cited the importance of other external resources that aided them in becoming more successful candidates for these jobs. In particular, interviewees endorsed mentorship opportunities and sector affinity groups as especially important in this capacity.

### **FIELD-LEVEL FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTED TO ADVANCEMENT**

- **Mentorship:** Mentors played a variety of roles in interviewees’ career advancement, including as Advisors or Coaches, Sponsors, Advocates, and Promoters
- **Affinity Groups:** These groups offered critical networking and mentor recruitment, provided highly-valued support and a sense of belonging, positioned individuals for greater visibility and national-level work, and provided opportunities to exercise and develop leadership skills and experience

### **Mentorship**

Mentorship was perceived as essential to career advancement for many interviewees; indeed, 31 (of 43) interviewees cited mentorship as the most critical factor in their career advancement in philanthropy.<sup>19</sup>

This finding is consistent with a broad literature showing that mentorship provides a significant boost to career outcomes, particularly promotions.<sup>20</sup> Among the 34 interviewees who indicated that they had a valuable mentor at some point in their career, 19 respondents reported only mentors external to their organization as important to their advancement, 10 respondents mentioned only internal mentors from within their organizations, and five mentioned both internal and external mentors. **Among the interviewees who only mentioned internal mentors, eight of those mentors were white and six of these were their initial bosses; however, nearly all mentors of the 19 interviewees who only indicated having external mentors were people of color.**

The critical role that mentorship played in career advancement was summed up by one Senior Vice President at an independent foundation who explained, “As some people work their way up the ladder, they are helped along the way by people who’ve seen them and have known them when they were vulnerable,

19. Interviewees reported mentors that were external and internal to the foundations in which they worked; however, since many more interviewees described the importance of external mentors in particular as compared to internal mentors from within their organizations, we have categorized mentorship as a field-level factor for the purposes of this report.

20. For a meta-analytical study of the value of mentorship to career promotions and compensation, see (Allen, 2004, Vol. 89, No. 1).

who trust them with their own vulnerabilities, who pointed out opportunities when they became available and who vouched for them at critical moments. Those are the kinds of things that could be decisive in whether a candidate makes it to the short list.” **Notably, 11 (of 43) interviewees indicated that the mentor most critical to their career advancement was their initial boss in philanthropy.**

**Mentors played a variety of roles in mentees’ career advancement:** According to interviewees, mentors played a variety of roles in their advancement and typically more than one mentor played one (or more) of these roles. The primary roles described were:

- **Advisors or Coaches:** These individuals, both internal and external to interviewees’ foundations, acted as role models and provided guidance and coaching that helped interviewees develop in their careers. They assisted mentees in improving upon their strengths and in overcoming their weaknesses. They also helped mentees make key decisions and guided them in navigating the “unwritten rules” or informal culture at a particular foundation or within philanthropy broadly. As the CEO of an independent foundation explained: **“Culture is both formal and informal and the informal is actually more important than the formal. It is that informal that we often don’t learn, or learn it the wrong way, or don’t learn at all and make a mistake that is fatal to our career. That’s part of the challenge. Mentors help us navigate through these formal and informal cultural norms that we often just do not understand or we are left out of understanding.”**
- **Sponsors:** Sponsors have the internal authority to position their mentees in visible roles or positions, expose them to multiple facets of the work, and provide them with growth opportunities through the allocation of diverse “stretch assignments”, such as leading the launch of an initiative or guiding the development of a new strategy. The CEO of an independent foundation recounted, when referring to his predecessor, that he “actively mentored me. He developed my skills by varying my assignments so that they were increasingly more difficult, requiring an increased knowledge base and the sophisticated use of tools. I grew very fast because he was actively developing me. And that is such a critical thing in this field.”
- **Advocates:** Advocates actively lobbied on behalf of their mentees within the higher ranks of a foundation in order to secure promotions or particular assignments. Their primary focus was championing and representing their mentee to others when they were not in the room. These individuals typically operated inside a foundation, but they could also be external individuals who were affiliated with or connected to the board or senior leadership of a particular foundation.
- **Promoters:** Promoters helped position their mentees for greater exposure and visibility with external audiences, including audiences in a particular issue area or within the field of philanthropy more broadly. These mentors would often exist outside the foundation in which an individual was employed. The social networks of these mentors proved a critical asset in the mentoring relationship as it helped position mentees for larger field initiatives. As the CEO of an independent foundation remarked, in addition to “the skill transfer and broadening of perspective, **an established and recognized leader can sort of give imprimatur to an up-and-coming leader that helps open doors and gives credibility.”**

**The role of mentors evolved over time:** Several respondents noted that the role and nature of mentors was not static, but evolved over time. For example, in the case of the CEO of an independent foundation: earlier in his career he had a wide network of mentors that held more senior positions than he did. However, as he advanced to become the CEO of a large foundation, those prior mentors became peer mentors and fewer in number. There were simply fewer and fewer mentors that could relate to his challenges as a CEO of a larger independent foundation.

### **Affinity Groups**

Nearly half of the interviewees (21 of 43) pointed to sector affinity groups as critical contributors to their career advancement. In particular, they described the important role of these groups in providing connections, visibility, support, and professional development. Notably, in many cases, identity-based and peer-funder groups appeared to play different, but complementary roles in facilitating interviewees' professional success.

**Networking and mentor recruitment:** One in five (9 of 43) interviewees cited the value of affinity groups in providing networking opportunities with others in philanthropy. Respondents saw both identity-based and peer-funder groups as important in this regard. These groups also served as a critical recruitment ground for external mentors and provided a vehicle for staying connected with them.

**Providing support and a “sense of belonging”:** Nearly a quarter (10 of 43) of interviewees cited the importance of identity-based groups in particular for providing valued support, a “sense of belonging within philanthropy”, and a realization that others shared “similar confusions and questions”. Working in what were often “insular and isolated environments”, these groups helped provide affirmation and reduce loneliness for professionals of color. As explained by the CEO of an independent foundation, **“One of the real values [of the affinity groups] was you were made aware that there were other people out there who were engaged in a pursuit similar to yours, facing the same kind of challenges and obstacles as you were, and who [came] together and provided support and fellowship. That made the task a little easier.”** A Program Director at an independent foundation remarked that her work in one of the **identity-based affinity groups “fed a part of me that wasn’t being fed at [my foundation]** because we talked about social justice and advancing [these racial justice] issues and causes—things I didn’t work on at [my foundation]. So it filled [a] void.”

**Positioning for greater visibility and national work:** Participating in affinity groups was also considered critical to expanding the reach of interviewees and positioning them for greater visibility, particularly for doing national work. Peer-funder groups were seen as especially valuable in this regard.

As the Vice President of a corporate foundation explained, **“Being a part of affinity groups is important, especially national ones, because it helps you develop the network beyond your individual boundaries. That is important for someone who wants to really position themselves for a broad set of opportunities in the philanthropic world.** It also gives you an appreciation of how where you sit in philanthropy impacts your approach. It’s very interesting that there’s a culture to certain types of philanthropic groups, whether it’s corporate philanthropy or national philanthropy compared to local groups. Understanding that dynamic and having an appreciation for how those different pieces could work together is very valuable.” Interviewees also believed that these affinity groups helped them “learn what other foundations are doing” and gain “exposure to different ideas and approaches”, which increased the impact and reach of their individual work.



**Providing opportunities to exercise and develop leadership outside of their foundations:** A critical developmental function of affinity groups noted by multiple respondents is the opportunities they afford to participate on boards, assume chair positions, manage budgets, and coordinate professional development opportunities. Both identity-based and peer-funder affinity groups offered interviewees an opportunity to assume formal leadership roles before they were able to do so within their employing foundations, which helped build their qualifications for more senior roles down the line.

## INDIVIDUAL FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTED TO ADVANCEMENT

Interviewees also identified individual competencies that they believed were major contributors to their advancement in philanthropy. These competencies centered on: 1) personal assets, 2) knowledge and skills, and 3) mindsets and perspectives they cultivated over the course of their careers.

### INDIVIDUAL FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTED TO ADVANCEMENT

- **Personal Assets:** Valuable relationships and a useful network; visibility and an excellent reputation; first-hand experience in communities; graduate-level degrees
- **Knowledge and Skills:** Expertise in management and substantive areas; familiarity with the “unwritten rules” of philanthropy; ability to bridge disparate worlds
- **Mindsets and Perspectives:** Seeking out and taking advantage of opportunities for growth; a commitment to excellence; self-awareness and sources of support

### *Personal Assets*

**Valuable relationships and a useful network in the sector:** More than half of the interviewees (22 of 43) cited the importance of relationships and networks to their success and advancement in the field. These connections provided invaluable access to new jobs, sources of professional support and advice, and opportunities to leverage the impact of their philanthropic investments by collaborating with peer funders. While interviewees acknowledged that possessing the right experience and qualifications for the job were important, having a good network was make-or-break in terms of getting ahead in philanthropy. As a Program Officer at an independent foundation elaborated, **“A lot of people have great credentials and experience, but it’s their social capital that gets them the job... Skills matter, but people with [great] skills get passed over because they don’t have relationships with important people.”**

**Visibility and an excellent reputation:** Over half of the interviewees (23 of 43) indicated that gaining greater visibility and establishing an excellent reputation and a strong “personal brand” was critical to advancing their career in philanthropy. Interviewees described two important types of visibility. First, internal recognition of their work within their foundations led to new stretch opportunities and in some cases, promotions up the ranks. Second, external awareness of their contributions and thought leadership facilitated moves into new positions within the broader field. As the President of a public foundation described, “building a platform for myself and the skills I could bring [outside my organization] meant that other people became my PR people. People who had seen my work, or worked with me—they told [recruiters] ‘you need to talk to her for the position’.”



**First-hand experience in communities that are the target of grantmaking efforts:** Nearly one in five interviewees (8 of 43) suggested that having personal experience in the communities that are the target of their foundations' grantmaking efforts was important to their advancement. In some cases, interviewees believed that "having a good story" gave them greater access to positions than colleagues who came from more privileged backgrounds because organizations saw them as potentially useful in strengthening community relations and fundraising. Others believed it enabled them to be more effective in their roles. As the President of a public foundation described, **"As a [person] leading a foundation focused on housing, my growing-up better prepared me for my job than a lot of [my peers'] experiences prepared them for their jobs. When I talk about the experiences of being low-income in communities, I come with more authenticity and direct knowledge that benefits my organization."**

**Graduate-level degrees:** A similar proportion of interviewees (9 of 43) believed that having a master's degree was critical to their advancement, especially as a person of color, for its value as a credential and for the credibility it gave them among their colleagues. The CEO of a family foundation described a master's degree as "your union card" in philanthropy. When asked about the role of her master's degree in her career advancement, the President of a public foundation observed that, **"HR folks are pulling people out [of a candidate pool] who don't have those credentials and as a person of color in particular, you have to have a million times more credentials than anybody else to be able to move forward."** These interviewees also observed the value of the advanced degree increase as their career progressed and they moved further up the foundation ranks.

### ***Knowledge and Skills***

**Expertise in management practices and substantive areas:** Nearly two in five interviewees (16 of 43) highlighted the role of specific management skill sets in facilitating their advancement in philanthropy. The skills most frequently cited included strategy, personnel management and human capital development, finance, and board management. Several interviewees (8 of 43) also honed in on the importance of their deep substantive expertise in specific areas.

**Familiarity with the "unwritten rules" and political savvy:** A third of interviewees (14 of 43) described a crucial developmental process of "surfacing the unwritten rules" and cultures of foundations, so as to learn how to successfully pursue their agendas within their organizations. The Vice President of a corporate foundation spoke emphatically about the necessity of this learning curve: **"You have to recognize there's a particular corporate culture you have to adapt to. Even if you deliver on everything and are a star, you still may not be successful because you're not fitting into the culture** [and] that has significant implications for people of color [in particular]." Interviewees also emphasized the need to learn the most effective means by which they could push an agenda within their organizations. According to interviewees, this political savvy involved acquiring many competencies, particularly as a person of color, including the ability to navigate the "very fine balance between effective advocacy and stridency", perceive and adjust to the dynamics of situations, understand how to reflect the perspectives of their communities without becoming seen as the sole or token representative, and avoid "colorizing"—and thus "marginalizing"—issues.

**Ability to bridge disparate worlds and connect with diverse audiences:** More than one in five interviewees (9 of 43) spoke to the importance of being able to navigate between vastly different audiences.

**Some interviewees spoke explicitly about being able to “cross boundaries” and exist in multiple worlds. They leveraged their experience and self-awareness as someone who is not perceived as a member of the dominant group and became adept at switching between languages and cultures to connect with different audiences.**

A Program Director at a public foundation credited much of his noted accomplishment as a fundraiser within both poor and wealthy communities to being a “bridge builder” and having “skills to relate to anyone in a given range. I can be very ‘community’ and ‘down with the people’, where I spend a lot of time, but I [can] also communicate and interact with high-wealth individuals and powerful people.”

### ***Mindsets and Perspectives***

**Seeking out and taking advantage of opportunities for growth:** While most interviewees did not have explicit ambitions or plans to traverse the ranks of philanthropy to the top jobs, several (8 of 43) did cite the importance of being proactive in taking advantage of opportunities for professional development and advancement that presented themselves organically.

**A deep, personal commitment to excellence:** More than a quarter of interviewees (12 of 43) emphasized that a commitment to doing excellent work was essential to their advancement within philanthropy. In the words of the CEO of an independent foundation, “At the end of the day, no degree of networking or strategizing about how to get to meet the right people... is going to make up for low-quality work.” Interviewees also noted that exhibiting excellence was important for those who will follow in their footsteps. As noted by the CEO of an independent foundation: **“You have to be about exhibiting excellence in everything you do. The obligation there is twofold: not just about what’s necessary for you to advance but also to keep the door open for those who might follow who look like you.”**

**A sense of self-awareness and cultivated sources of support:** Interviewees also spoke of their need for self-awareness while working in a sector that is largely built on the unequal distribution of wealth and often run by those in possession of significant wealth and power. Interviewees described conflicting feelings and a significant personal toll from their participation in philanthropy. According to interviewees, operating as someone seen as an outsider in the “very blue blood society” of philanthropy can be isolating and lonely. Some interviewees also expressed a need to cope with the frustration, stress, and distraction from having to prove themselves repeatedly and being passed over for promotions for which they were eminently qualified.

The Senior Vice President of an independent foundation described the “resentment triggered by having gotten the education, developed the skills, done all the right things, and still [having] to justify yourself or advocate against negative presumptions... rather than being able to spend [your] time, attention and energy doing the job and on the things about which [you’re] passionate.” **Based on their personal experience, interviewees suggested that people of color who want to be successful in philanthropy must find a way to come to terms with these conflicts and frustrations or else they will be unable to stay in the field and advance their career.** Many highlighted the importance of cultivating sources of social and spiritual support to sustain their work in the sector over the long run.

## C. THE PERCEIVED VALUE TO AND CHALLENGES OF ADVANCING DIVERSITY WITHIN PHILANTHROPY

Lastly, this study explored interviewees' perceptions of the value of and challenges to achieving greater diversity in philanthropy, particularly among the ranks of foundation leadership.

### The Perceived Value to Advancing Diversity within Philanthropy

**Diversity makes philanthropy more democratic:** Several respondents indicated diversity is important in philanthropy because the staff leadership of foundations should reflect the communities they serve. As the CEO of an independent foundation said, “[staff diversity] is democratic, it is about parity and equity and it is about making sure that the disparate and varied voices in a community actually do have a place at the table. It’s not just about head counts; it’s about voice and about presence. And that’s just the right thing to do in a democracy.”

**Diversity makes philanthropy more effective:** Interviewees also noted that racial and ethnic diversity brings with it diverse perspectives and ideas that make for better and more innovative foundation decisions regarding complex challenges, particularly those that heavily impact communities of color. As a Program Director at a family foundation explained, “People of color or people who have had similar experiences to those you’re working with think about [solutions] differently...[because] they have a deeper understanding of the issues and conditions.”

### The Perceived Challenges of Advancing Diversity within Philanthropy

**Diversity does not guarantee inclusion:** An important caveat to the value of diversity, as noted by a handful of respondents, is that diversity requires *inclusion* in order to yield the potential benefits for philanthropy. The CEO of an independent foundation explained what inclusion means to foundations: “Diversity is about bringing a wide array of people and their differences to the table. It’s about presence and numbers. In contrast, inclusiveness is about giving equal power to diverse voices and valuing those differences in perspective and experience. Inclusiveness allows those who are different from the majority culture to be comfortable bringing their entire selves into the work place. Inclusiveness gives diverse individuals the opportunity to participate fully as decision-makers.”

**Internal advocacy for diversity is a complex balancing act for senior leaders of color in philanthropy:** One foundation executive described how he experienced the issue of staff and leadership diversity as posing a complex challenge for leaders of color in the senior ranks of foundations, which requires a sophisticated balancing act. In his experience at a large independent foundation, he explained that: “There’s an inside game and set of expectations that come with an [executive] position. Then there are different expectations from others about the level of advocacy and oppositional behavior needed to make diversity meaningful. Negotiating the constraints brought on by the differing expectations is the tight rope we all walk as senior executives. You’re no longer able to throw the grenade into the room when you’re sitting at the table. That’s part of the package

that comes with being a senior executive of color in an organization where there are people who have different views, different access to power, and different levels of job satisfaction.”

**Board support is crucial:** Several interviewees cited a board’s emphasis on diversity and inclusion as critical to the success of diversity in foundations. The CEO of an independent foundation remarked that **“What is most important and what will change diversity is when boards of trustees embrace and live diversity. Until boards are engaged and motivated to seriously engage on this issue, it is very hard to believe that the sector will actually have much success.”** The CEO of a community foundation took a more forceful position, arguing that “the leadership of foundations and their boards have to be reflective of the communities they serve, and unless there is a mandate from government about diversifying philanthropy, we will continue to slowly have initiatives and projects that really don’t move the needle. While they [are] very well-intentioned, there is no sense of urgency.”

**Diversity policies have their limitations:** Interviewees were asked if they were aware of a formal program within their foundation in which an individual or task force was given the formal responsibility and accountability to set and achieve targeted diversity outcomes. All respondents indicated that to their knowledge no such program existed within their foundations. Several respondents, however, noted that their foundations had written diversity policies or publicly expressed board and leadership commitments to diversity. A handful of interviewees, however, suggested that these measures are not enough to successfully improve diversity. A senior executive at an independent foundation argued that “having a policy doesn’t make you bulletproof. The policy is an important statement but it doesn’t settle the issue. There are unrealistic expectations on both sides of the table that once we get this policy we should celebrate and announce ‘mission accomplished!’ Usually, the policy ‘win’ is just the start of the next round of challenges.”

# DISCUSSION AND POTENTIAL DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

## Summary of Key Findings

As described in the introduction to this report, the most recent data from the Council on Foundations show that diversity drops off precipitously at the more senior ranks of foundations. Recognizing this discrepancy, this study sought to delve more deeply into the career histories of professionals of color in philanthropy in order to better understand the patterns of their advancement, particularly into the senior ranks of foundations, as well as the factors that they perceived as most significant in facilitating or hindering their career advancement within the sector. Among the most significant findings, we found the following as related to our initial framing questions:

### 1) What are the career pathways of people of color in terms of how they enter the field and advance to higher levels of seniority?

- Recruitment either directly by foundations or by search firms hired to recruit individuals on their behalf was a prominent means of obtaining philanthropic positions, particularly at the most senior levels of foundations. **The networks of foundation leadership, boards, and search firms thus may figure prominently in access to these types of roles in philanthropic organizations.**
- Among those interviewees who held at least one prior, less senior position in philanthropy, there were three primary career pathways by which they advanced within the sector: 1) moving up across foundations with relatively few instances of internal promotion; 2) experiencing the majority of their advancement into more senior roles within a single foundation; and 3) rising exclusively within a single foundation.
- The vast majority of CEOs and Executive Team Members in this study who had held at least one prior, less senior position in philanthropy began their careers at the Program Officer level or below, and over a quarter of these interviewees entered the sector at the most junior ranks as Program Support staff (i.e., Program Assistant or Program Associate).

### 2) What factors do philanthropic professionals of color view as posing the greatest barriers and contributors to career advancement in the sector?

- Interviewees believed the following factors were significant barriers to their own advancement and that of professionals of color in philanthropy generally: limited vacancies due to flat organizational structures and low turnover, a lack of access to hiring and developmental networks, and racial stereotypes and unwelcoming and unfamiliar foundation cultures.

- Interviewees cited a variety of factors they believed positively contributed to their advancement in philanthropy. These contributors can be categorized as organizational, field-level, and individual factors:
  - a) **Organizational Factors:** An institutional commitment on the part of the board and leadership at hiring foundations to living their value of diversity was perceived as a critical factor in facilitating career advancement.
  - b) **Field-level Factors:** The majority of interviewees cited two factors they perceived as particularly important to their advancement: 1) the presence of mentors that provided advice and coaching, opened doors to opportunities and valuable networks, and helped position their mentees for success, and 2) affinity groups that provided opportunities for networking and mentor recruitment, psychosocial support, and greater visibility and potential leadership development. Notably, identity-based and peer-funder affinity groups appear to have played different, but complementary roles in interviewees' advancement.
  - c) **Individual Factors:** Interviewees believed the following assets, competencies and mindsets were of particular importance: valuable relationships and a network of useful connections, visibility and a stellar reputation within the sector, expertise in management practices and substantive areas relevant to their work, familiarity with the “unwritten rules” of philanthropy and political savvy that helped them advance an agenda in their organizations, and a strong commitment to excellence.

### 3. What is the perceived value of and challenges to achieving greater leadership diversity in foundations from the perspective of professionals of color in the field?

Several interviewees indicated that philanthropy should reflect the communities it serves not only as a democratic value, but because diverse foundations are more effective in executing their philanthropic missions, particularly when they serve communities of color. However, as many noted, achieving diversity is not without challenges:

- Interviewees emphasized that an essential corollary to advancing diversity in foundations is ensuring inclusion such that racial and ethnic diversity is not merely present, but valued with equal power given to diverse voices. Shifting numerical composition alone does not guarantee inclusion.
- For senior leaders of color, advocating for diversity and inclusion is a delicate balancing act between being an insider who is “at the table” and a more “oppositional” proponent for greater diversity.
- Many interviewees noted that board commitment and engagement in diversity and inclusion is critical to its success in foundations because boards have such a critical role in hiring and supporting senior leaders, as well as determining the strategic direction of foundations.
- A handful of interviewees contended that diversity policies alone, while necessary and laudable in their intent, are not sufficient to improve diversity. Rather they can produce unrealistic expectations that give rise to new challenges.

## Potential Directions for Future Research

It bears repeating that due to the study design, the findings presented in this report are not generalizable beyond the participants in this study. Rather, the primary goal of a qualitative, exploratory study such as this is to yield rich new directions and possible hypotheses to investigate through future research. To this end, we offer here an interpretation of our findings and recommendations as to promising avenues for further study as part of a broader, ongoing effort to increase the diversity of foundations and their senior staff in particular.

A major theme that emerges from the findings presented in this report, which has important implications for future research and action regarding diversity in philanthropy, can be characterized as “similar, yet different”. In terms of career pathways, contemporary philanthropy may be coming to resemble other sectors in some ways, and professionals of color in the field may experience many of the same key challenges and opportunities for professional growth as their white counterparts. Nevertheless, important differences with significant implications for diversity efforts remain. A review of some of our key findings illustrates this theme:

- In the case of the career pathways finding, our interviewees’ experiences suggest that internal advancement pathways within philanthropy may exist as observed in other sectors; however, the unusually high rates of external hiring reported in past research, especially at senior leadership levels also suggest that **unequal access to hiring networks likely remains an important issue for professionals of color.**
- With regard to perceived barriers to advancement, interviewees in this study most frequently cited a lack of vacancies as a significant challenge—an issue that may be similarly perceived among their white counterparts in the sector. On the other hand, interviewees also viewed **disparate access to developmental networks, racial stereotypes, and unwelcoming and unfamiliar foundation cultures as significant additional barriers facing professionals of color in particular.**
- In terms of the role of affinity groups in aiding advancement, our respondents frequently cited the importance of peer-funder groups for sector-wide visibility, collaboration, and networking—a finding that would likely also be observed among white philanthropic professionals. However they also spoke at length about **the importance of identity-based affinity groups for social support in what can at times be a lonely existence in their foundations.**
- In addition, while it may be unsurprising that the vast majority of interviewees cited mentorship as critically important to their advancement, what is perhaps more notable is that interviewees were far more likely to describe **the importance of external mentors, nearly all of whom were people of color, as opposed to internal mentors from inside their foundations, who were most often white.**

Given this common thread in the findings of this study, we recommend that future research: document the prevalence of the patterns observed within our interview pool in the broader field; compare how career pathways and perceived barriers and contributors to advancement differ between professionals of color and their white counterparts; and assess whether significant differences in career advancement exist along racial and ethnic lines based upon foundation characteristics. Such research efforts could give a better sense of the most common pathways by which people of color advance in philanthropy and point to potential interventions that could effectively increase the diversity of the senior ranks of foundations.

We believe specific **key questions for future research include:**

- 1) What is the prevalence of advancement and specific career pathways within and across foundations among professionals of color, and how do they differ from their white counterparts?
- 2) How do the desires, expectations, perceived barriers, and contributors to advancement differ between philanthropic professionals of color differ from their white counterparts?
- 3) Are certain types of foundations more likely than others to support and cultivate internal advancement of staff overall, or people of color in particular?
- 4) What is the perceived impact of other dimensions of diversity (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, differential ability) on advancement among professionals of color?
- 5) What are the most effective ways for foundations to expand their networks to recruit, attract, and retain more professionals of color?
- 6) What actions can white colleagues and mentors take within their individual foundations to support the advancement of professionals of color in philanthropy?

## **Conclusion**

This study surfaced a set of potentially shared pathways of advancement in and through philanthropy among professionals of color as well as organizational (“demand-side”) and individual (“supply-side”) factors that interviewees believed help shape these pathways. Given its design, this study cannot offer evidence as to the prevalence or causes of the observed career pathways. However, with further investigation, it might be possible to pinpoint how foundations and the larger field can better support professionals of color on both the demand and the supply sides of the diversity equation. For resources and information about how others are engaged in this work, please see the D5 Coalition ([www.d5coalition.org](http://www.d5coalition.org)).



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## APPENDIX: SPANS OF ADVANCEMENT WITHIN THE INTERVIEW POOL

The charts below illustrate the spans of advancement for each of the 27 (of 43) interviewees who experienced some advancement in seniority level during their philanthropic careers. The “span of advancement” refers to the seniority levels traversed during their career in philanthropy to date. The levels of seniority that correspond to the numbers in the charts below are as follows:

- 1 = Program Support
- 2 = Program Officer
- 3 = Middle Manager
- 4 = Executive Team Member
- 5 = CEO

As an example, Figure 1 shows that CEO #2 entered philanthropy at the Program Officer level (Level 2) and advanced to become the CEO of a foundation (Level 5).

FIGURE 1

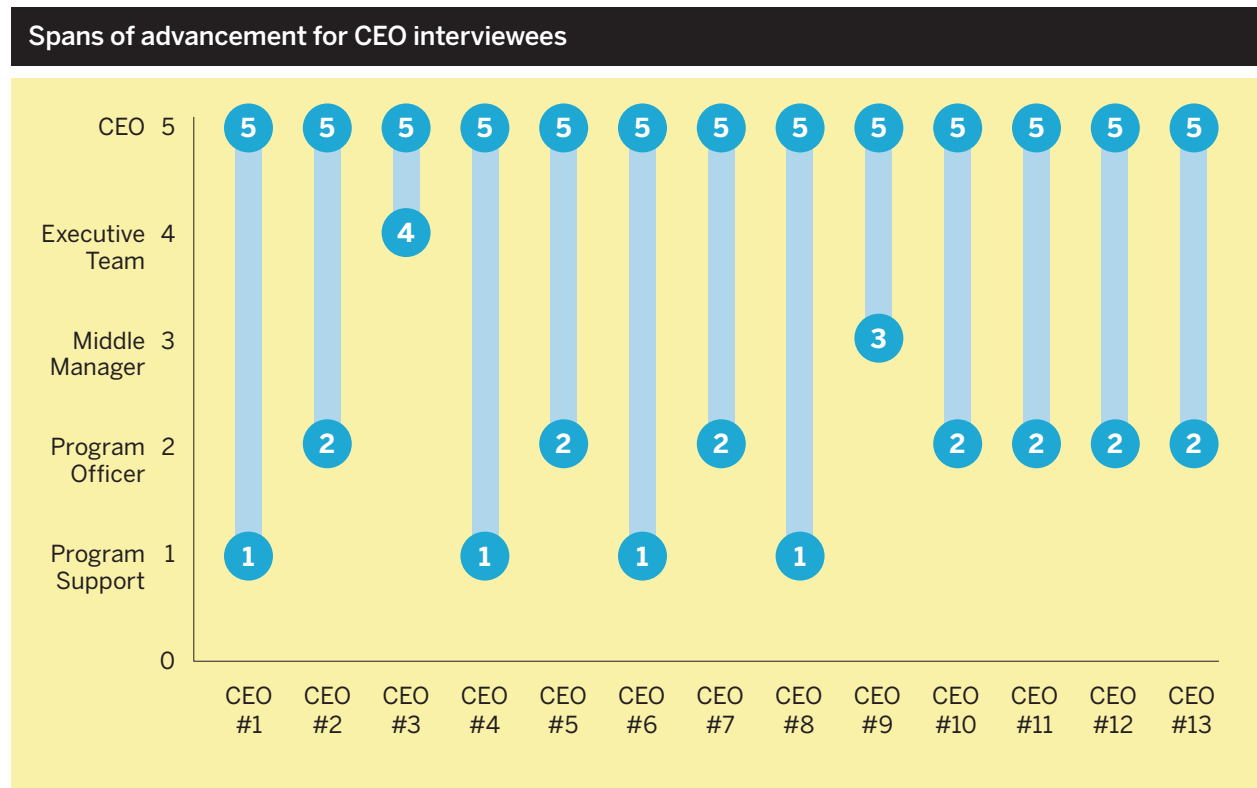


FIGURE 2

Spans of advancement for Executive interviewees

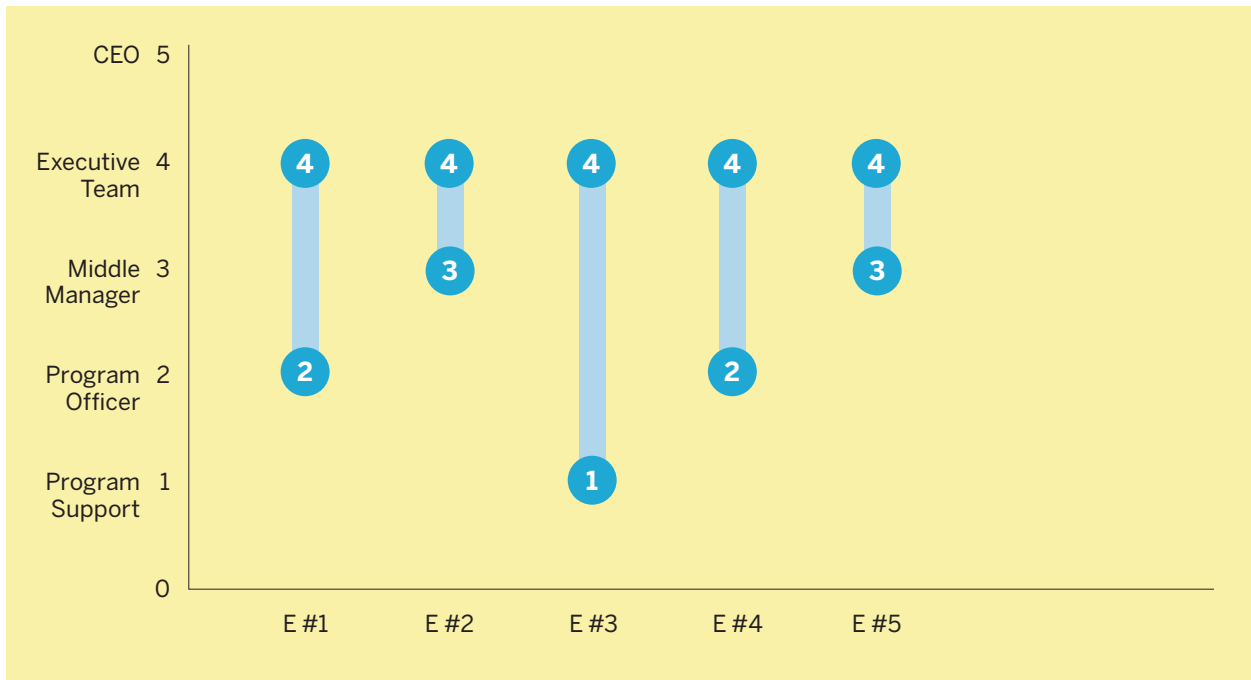


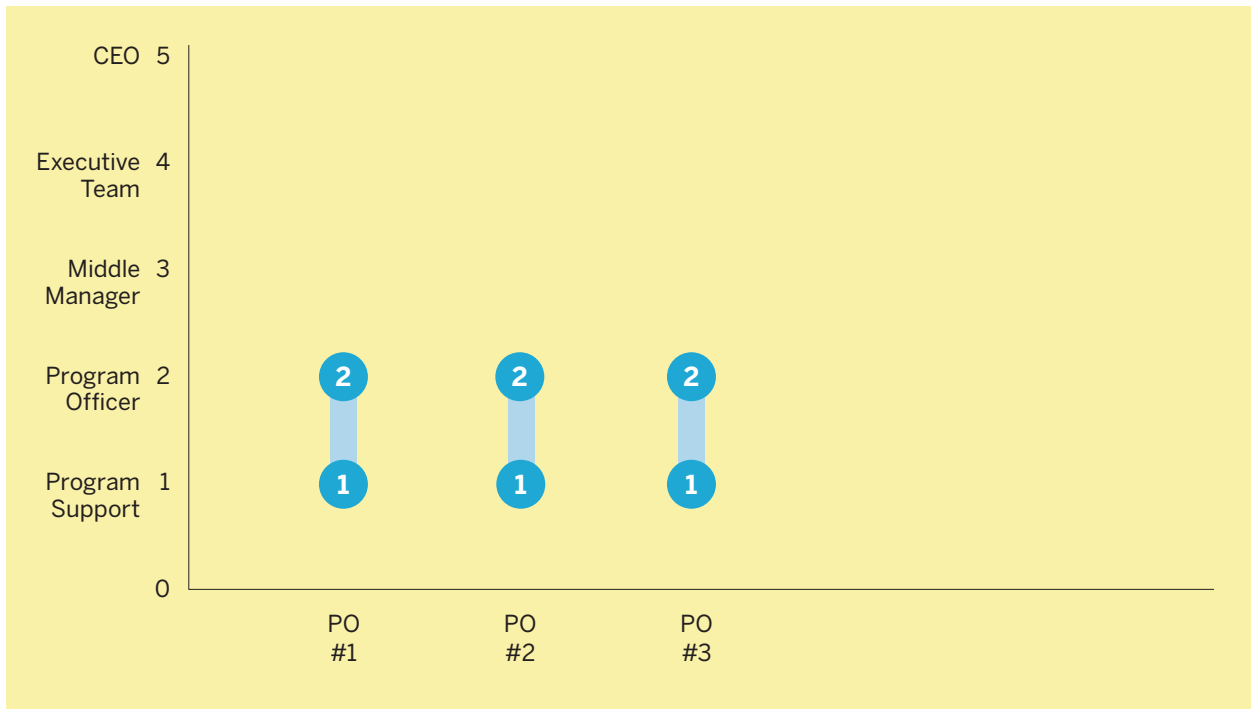
FIGURE 3

Spans of advancement for Middle Manager interviewees



FIGURE 4

Spans of advancement for Program Officer interviewees





Forward Change is a mission-driven consulting firm that helps foundations, community-based organizations, national associations and government agencies improve the lives of children, young adults and families living in disadvantaged communities. We do this by helping our clients develop and implement effective strategies, informed by rigorous research and analysis, to implement and scale equitable social change.

More than a dozen organizations with connections to thousands of grantmakers came together to found the D5 Coalition to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion in philanthropy. Since then, the coalition has grown and continues to grow. For a complete list of allies and partners, please see the D5 website: [www.d5coalition.org](http://www.d5coalition.org). The founding coalition included:

Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy  
Associated Grant Makers  
Association of Black Foundation Executives  
Council on Foundations  
Council of Michigan Foundations  
Donors Forum  
Foundation Center  
Funders for LGBTQ Issues  
Hispanics in Philanthropy  
Horizons Foundation  
Joint Affinity Groups  
Minnesota Council on Foundations  
Native Americans in Philanthropy  
Philanthropy New York  
Philanthropy Northwest  
Philanthropy Ohio  
Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors  
Women's Funding Network

**Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors**  
serves as D5's program office.

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*of Grantmakers*  
Lawrence McGill, *Foundation Center*  
Kristopher Smith, *Funders' Network for Smart Growth*  
*and Livable Communities*  
Sylvia Zaldivar-Sykes, *Lake County Community*  
*Foundation*  
Ericka Plater-Turner, *Council on Foundations*

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