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## Microfoundations of Institutional Change in the Community Foundation Field

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Community leadership has been supported by philanthropy thought leaders as “a new way forward” for community foundations. This study (of U.S. community foundations) uses a simultaneous qualitative mixed methods design to describe micro-processes and organizational paths to community leadership while considering field-level aspiration toward such change.

Findings suggest that bricolage and localized improvisation, rather than models of strategic change promoted by thought leaders, are driving organizational change in the community foundation field. Future research should examine whether the organizational change processes described in this study reshape the community foundation field as more organizations shift toward community leadership.

[#InstitutionalChange](#) [#CommunityFoundations](#) [#Leadership](#)

### Background & Context



- Demographic shifts, economic restructuring, the rise of online-giving platforms, and growing competition **threaten traditional models of community philanthropy.**
- Place-based philanthropy and **the work of community foundations may need to be re-shaped from a stewardship model** (philanthropic banks for regional interests) to one based on **community leadership** (encompassing a more inclusive understanding of leadership as engaging a wide range of community stakeholders in identifying and addressing community issues).
- Literature on the microfoundations of institutional change suggests that the **process of transformation is not well researched or understood** however anecdotal and empirical evidence suggests that while the extent of field change is limited, individual community foundations are making transformational changes.
- A simultaneous qualitative mixed methods design was used to combine field and organizational level change processes. This involved **analysis of mission descriptions** across the population of U.S. community foundations **and interviews** with a sample of six community foundations, to examine paths that organizations have taken towards community leadership.



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## Take aways & Learnings



- Structured coding was used to examine the degree to which mission descriptions **reflected an aspiration toward community leadership**. Change in frequency of the value proposition and business model codes and descriptions, aligning to the respective stewardship and leadership models, as they occurred in Internal Revenue Service returns of 1227 U.S. community foundations between 2011 and 2016, was analysed.
- A second component of the research involved **interviews with representatives from six community foundations** in order to capture change content, change process and the nature of change.
- Findings indicated a **“slow burn” rather than a “revolution”**: While the community foundation field has emphasized the importance of shifting toward community leadership for years, the process (as with everything associated with community foundations) is context-specific and locally driven and is incremental, evolving from response to community need.
- Interviews also revealed **novel interpretations of community leadership**, suggesting that it takes many forms, making it hard to measure an “outcome of community leadership”.
- With the analyses indicating that a traditional top-down approach has not been effective in bringing about field change, the authors question the role of support organizations, suggesting a **rethink of their approach towards individual institution transformation**.
- Recognising that the interviews captured only a very small sample of an understanding and interpretation of historical processes the authors suggest to fully uncover microprocesses of change, and how they translate to field-level change, **longitudinal inductive study designs that incorporate a wide range of local stakeholders are required**.
- For future research, it would be interesting to also **apply the mission coding field-level analysis in Europe** to assess if there is a discernible difference between U.S. and European models.

ERNOP Research Notes provide easy-to-read, practice-oriented summaries of academic articles on philanthropy and are written by practitioner experts. This ERNOP Research Note 2025/3 is published in March 2025 and has been written by James Magowan from the European Community Foundation Initiative (ECFI). More information can be found at [www.ernop.eu](http://www.ernop.eu).

