

Patterns *and* Pattern Breaking *in the* Diversity Profile *of* Nonprofits *and* Philanthropy: *A Conversation with Kelly Brown*

IT NO LONGER IS NOR EVER HAS BEEN ENOUGH TO SIMPLY COMPLY WITH LAWS AIMED AT DIVERSIFYING THE WORKPLACE. THE CULTURE OF THE WORKPLACE ITSELF MUST SHIFT IN ORDER TO TRULY EMBRACE DIVERSITY. AS KELLY BROWN, DIRECTOR OF THE D5 COALITION REMINDS US, “THE POINT ISN’T TO JUST HAVE PEOPLE WHO OSTENSIBLY LOOK DIFFERENT OR SEEM DIFFERENT—IT IS TO MAKE THE SPACE ITSELF DIFFERENT.”

Editors’ note: *Kelly Brown is director of the D5 Coalition, which is deeply immersed in trying to help philanthropy hold itself accountable for its own practices and outcomes in the area of diversity and inclusion. She is also an astute observer of the way these issues play out not only in nonprofits but in other sectors as well. In the following interview, Brown talks about where we are and how far we still need to go vis-à-vis diversity in the workforce.*

Ruth McCambridge: *Let’s start at the very beginning, which is the place your knowledge base flows from. Can you talk a little bit about where the D5 Coalition came from and what it has done over the years?*

Kelly Brown: D5 was launched to try to move the needle in four areas related to equity, diversity, and inclusion within philanthropy: first, to push for the leadership of foundations to more

closely represent the foundations’ communities, but with a particular focus on senior leadership; second, to ensure that there was more equitable access for diverse communities to philanthropic dollars; third, to build the field’s capacity for data and research, so that it could better understand where it was and what needed to happen to address diversity and inclusion in a more substantial and organized way; and fourth, to encourage and support foundations in taking action to move



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beyond values statements and make changes in their policies, practices, and programs that would allow them to reap the benefits of a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. We wanted to promote good practice in this area and encourage more foundations to take on these issues, not only in terms of looking at their internal work on leadership and staffing but also with respect to their grantmaking.

In retrospect, obviously those are very large and aspirational goals for a five-year period, so we chose strategically to place the philanthropic infrastructure at the center of implementation—and not just the folks who had been doing this for years, like the affinity groups and the population-focused funds, but also some of the more mainstream institutions, like Foundation Center, Regional Associations, and Council on Foundations. Those institutions are key places where foundations come to learn good practice and also to build their social and professional networks. This makes them good arenas for facilitating the diffusion of these principles, practices, and values into a broader field. So, that was what D5 was conceptualized to do and what we executed on over the five years.

RM: *So how has that gone?*

KB: I think that we learned fairly quickly that we had to consistently test the strategies we had laid out and then assess whether or not they should be revised or updated, or had to evolve relatively quickly. We were able to do that by expanding the range of our partners, engaging current partners differently, seizing moments of opportunity, and investing in strategic framing and alliance building. Another thing we realized was that vis-à-vis a lot of the goals—such as senior leadership changing, more resources going to certain communities, and even good practice—the level and nature of data around these issues was so poor that we really couldn't speak to change in any meaningful way. So, we executed on some goals more quickly than others.

I think we made the biggest impact in helping to build the will and the mechanisms for collecting sound data across all the goal-related

spectrums. Taking advantage of the partnerships and leadership that were ready to engage with us—like GuideStar and the Foundation Center, and some folks who were researching the same issues in the environmental sector—helped us seize the opportunity to advance the work on demographic and diversity data as a tool of knowledge and power as well as accountability.

RM: *There seem to be relatively consistent patterns across the studies that have been done by the environmental groups, some studies done on museums by the Museum Association, and the studies that you've been doing on philanthropy. Can you talk a little bit about that?*

KB: You're absolutely right—there is a pattern that does transcend all of these different fields and beyond, to the private sector and other arenas as well. Simply put, when you're looking at the, quote-unquote, "hierarchy" of these institutions—whether it is the hierarchy of an individual institution or the size of a particular institution relative to its field—you will generally see much more diversity at the more entry level in an institution or at the smallest organizations relative to their fields. As you move up the hierarchy, you see less and less diversity—particularly with respect to race and ethnicity but also with respect to gender, although to a lesser degree.

On some level, I think, that pattern is understandable, because people at the top tend to turn over much less. And as you move up, it becomes more of a pyramid, and options and opportunities narrow. But, as a result, this means that as you look into achieving diversity and inclusion at that level, there is a need for much more intentionality, much more nurturing, much more coaching, and much more extra effort to really bring more diverse perspectives and individuals into those roles—and so the bar in terms of effort becomes much, much higher.

What we hear a lot in philanthropy—and I think also in the nonprofit sector—is that we need to strengthen the pipelines, and I think there is something to that. To get to a senior level in philanthropy, people must have a fairly intentional career trajectory. But I think in addition

to looking more closely at the pipelines, there's a much more nuanced need to look at what people are doing—what strategies they are employing to really identify, attract, and retain the people coming out of the many existing pipelines. So there must be an understanding of what pipelines are out there, and that they may be different ones than folks are used to using to access talent and leadership.

So, I think it's not only nurturing the pipelines but also nurturing the institutions into which folks are moving that's important. That is a space that folks increasingly need to pay more attention to: the nature of their organizational cultures—how they're communicating with certain folks and how they're investing much more intentionally in building the networks that one needs in order to reach new talent. Because just sending a job announcement to the Black MBA Association is not going to cut it. We know that, particularly as you move up the ladder, people get jobs and get placed and get access increasingly as a result of networks, even when there are very formal processes in place; so, building those networks has to be invested in on both ends. I think that is where we're seeing not only the similar kinds of patterns across fields as you move up but also similar kinds of solutions to deal with those patterns.

RM: *Right. The whole issue of institutional culture and field culture was very striking—particularly as I remember it in the environmental reports—because it held on so tightly. There was virtually no change over a period of many years. Even when people had declared themselves on board with trying to diversify their institutions, there was no movement in some of the more elite jobs and roles in the institutions. Can you talk a little bit about what practices and behaviors need to change in order to see movement?*

KB: Well, I think there has to be an understanding that if you want different results, you have to do things differently and you have to see things differently. What we hear often is, “Well, we want people at the senior levels but no one applies or is qualified.” But there is a crying need

for stepping back and looking at what folks mean by, quote-unquote, “qualified.” Too often, there's a sense that the competencies that have to do with being able to function with and relate to diverse communities are not included as priorities in the list of what would qualify a leader, even if these are increasingly going to be the kinds of qualifications that everybody needs. And so the status quo persists.

Being able to step back and really understand that when we want a director of policy, when we want a development director, increasingly the candidates will not only need to have the skills that we used to look for but also will need other, different kinds of skills—skills that relate to inclusion, to effectively managing and navigating across difference, and to drawing out the improved results that the research shows come from being able to do that. And that requires a different kind of internal lens and capacity.

I think we went through a time when arenas opened up for folks from different kinds of backgrounds and perspectives, and there was a sense of the need to fit in and assimilate—a sense that people would get access and opportunities if they adapted to the dominant culture. But where we're moving now, I think, that is going to be less and less the case—and this is a major shift. Increasingly, and largely due to pressure from Millennials, nonprofits are going to have to ask themselves, “How are we actually creating different kinds of organizational cultures that allow for people to be fully who they are and to actually bring their identity and perspectives into the space?” Because that's the point and the benefit of diversity—not just the representational space. The point isn't to just have people who ostensibly look different or seem different—it is to make the space itself different.

This is the challenge across the board: how do you create cultures and manage organizations where leaders with new perspectives actually help the organizations think differently, and even have different assumptions in some cases? Because that's really the benefit of having diversity. It's not just a justice and equity issue, although that's very much a part of it—it's a necessary competency.

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RM: *That’s such an important point, and it gets to this issue of how people who are not used to doing so can honestly interrogate themselves on their own culturally based assumptions.*

KB: It’s very difficult; but I’m very optimistic right now, because I see foundations trying to do that. And I think that while it’s challenging, they are poised to move ahead, because they understand our communities are changing. And this requires that they understand whether or not the groups they support are reflecting their communities—and doing so in a way that helps their organizations understand what’s going on in those communities, and why. They often quickly realize that they actually can’t have constructive conversations about this if they haven’t done their own reflecting. And even though folks experience the conversations as hard and sometimes painful, the process, for those really committed, has brought so much richness and depth that they don’t want to go back.

And like any other form of change, sometimes you’re intensely engaged and proactive, and then you have periods when it’s quiet and latent, and you kind of let folks massage the change through the organizational ecosystem.

This has to happen, and I do think most organizations and people find the work very transformative. But, because people are so anxious about diversity issues—particularly issues around race, and particularly because those issues are so highly charged in the larger environment—they want to just get the work done.

But I tell folks that we’re never going to “get done” doing this kind of work—we will just get better. Because ten or fifteen years from now, there will be other manifestations of systemic issues related to identity that it will be important to take into account and address. And the degree to which we invest in strengthening our capacities and competencies now will determine the degree of our improvement in the future.

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I often point to the issue around gender identity, because although sexual orientation was on D5's original agenda, the kinds of conversations that people are having now around gender identity—and how that gets recognized within the organizations—is a very new conversation.

RM: *Oh, it's like rapids—it's like the rapids opened up. But let me back up for a minute. I recently read a study from the corporate sector that found that many of the ways that corporate America (and I'm sure some nonprofits, also) have tried to work on diversity in their organizations have had reverse effects—for instance, workshops that are partially aimed at avoiding lawsuits, which are actually counterproductive. Can you talk a little bit about how ideas about the ways we go about achieving diversity have changed?*

KB: I assume you're talking about the *Harvard Business Review* article that just came out, which was very good and very interesting, and important to understand at the stage we are in now—diversity and inclusion 2.0, or maybe even 3.0. What that article touched on were the challenges of solutions that flowed out of the framework of compliance—which I think in the early days, as we know, was very much needed. In that environment, people were refusing us entry, and the response was, “No, you have to let us in.” That context pushed open realities and engagement, and promoted tools we still have the remnants of and that we may need to rethink—because to do things only because they're required creates environments where folks feel like that's the only reason why they're engaging. And now people have more options.

I mean, just imagine if someone invited you to be on a board, and you got the impression that the only reason they invited you is because they were pressured into it. That doesn't make you feel terribly welcome—which means that the whole interaction, even though you may want that opportunity, is not going to be constructive or viable.

RM: *Or motivational.*

KB: Exactly—on anybody's end. But I think what is happening is that, as we move from this space of compliance and assimilation, we move into an environment where we realize we don't really have the option *not* to think about ways to cocreate new sorts of organizations and opportunities. But these issues relate to who we are—issues of identity and access, and all the structural things around that. It's not just, “Is my widget the right widget?” or “Is my service the right service?” It's about how the perspective I bring as a result of who I am contributes to an optimal strategy. And that requires us to bring our full selves, not just our culturally validated credentials and pedigrees, into the conversation—and that's not easy or trivial.

We certainly can't put compliance and accountability completely to the side, because there's always going to be resistance. To some degree, however, I do think that we have to move more in a direction of saying, “There is something in this for me, and it isn't a zero-sum game; it involves welcoming other folks into an environment and actually taking their perspectives and experiences into account, because what we create when we do that will be so much better.” That is a big switch, and I think the reason we see the limited results from a compliance kind of mechanism—particularly in this day and age—reflects the need to take into account that folks really have to want to do this and they have to want to see the benefit, because it really isn't optional. It won't mean that they will lose as much as the framing often implies—and any losses will be offset by gains. I think that's why a lot of these approaches need to be rethought; and I think what the [*Harvard Business Review*] article refers to is that when you reframe things in that way, strategies become much more effective.

RM: *And so it fits very well with where we are generally in the workforce. I know that there's a right answer—an organizational answer—to what I'm about to ask, and you may want to just stick with that, but I do want to ask you specifically about your feelings about the slowness with which things have moved in philanthropy. When I attended those sessions at the Council*

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“For me, the frustration is not so much around the pace of change as it is around the level of discourse about it. People want to know why we still have to work so hard on this and what difference it makes—that should be obvious, and it still is not.”

on Foundations, there was a palpable feeling of disappointment coming from people who had been working hard on change.

KB: I understand that sentiment, but I will say—and this is in all candor, not because this is my job (and actually I feel like we’re doing a good job)—I think that there are a couple of things you have to really interrogate about people’s original hopes and expectations. On the one hand, philanthropy as a field is a profoundly elite arena and always has been, so what were the expectations, in terms of pace, that we could reasonably have? On the other hand, I suggest that we may not see the depth of the change that has occurred by the limited numbers we have to look at. And though I don’t generally like to talk about tipping points, I would argue that, vis-à-vis issues like marriage equality, there will be different perspectives about the pace of change. Some people probably think marriage equality happened really fast, but folks who have been working on the issue

for many decades would probably think, “Wow, that’s what *you* think, because you haven’t been paying attention to how long this struggle has been going on.” So, to some degree there has to be a clear-eyedness about what are appropriate expectations. Quite frankly, like I say, I’ve been in this field for over twenty years. I had my first job in a foundation in 1994, and even before that, when I was at TransAfrica, I was exposed to the field, because we worked with big foundations and with people who were leading them. And this was when there were, literally, maybe six black people in philanthropy. And that was only twenty years ago. And we’re not *there* anymore.

So, while the numbers may seem disappointing with respect to the snapshot that we’ve cut out—given the challenged nature of the data themselves—in all honesty, I’m not sure it’s as slow as we think or as little as we think. I completely understand the frustration given the broader demographic shifts, though; but for me, the frustration is not so much around the pace



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of change as it is around the level of discourse about it. People want to know why we still have to work so hard on this and what difference it makes—that should be obvious, and it still is not. So, at least with respect to philanthropy, I think: 1) there's more change than we think; 2) it's faster than we think; and 3) it's a hard field to change.

RM: *If you could point to three or four kinds of catalytic things that you see right now that are going to advance change, what would you say they were?*

KB: Catalytic things . . . well, I definitely think the emergence of the technological capacity to capture—in very real and visceral terms—evidence of inequity and exclusion, and to share that and to be able to engage it broadly and quickly, is something very catalytic. I mean, I certainly think we've seen that from the Black Lives Matter movement and all these other conversations around police accountability, simply because people are able to actually see something that looked awful. And I think it mirrors what we saw around the Selma visual all those many decades ago. It was a shocking revelation to many to see dogs attacking people and horses running over people and people getting water hosed during a nonviolent protest. That was extremely significant to having people say, "Wait, whoa! Not good, not us."

RM: *You know, that's never actually left my mind's eye.*

KB: Never.

RM: *From a kid, right?*

KB: Never. Never get it out of your head—you can't. The visual engagement is profoundly catalytic. There were clearly many reasons why the Civil Rights Movement happened when it did, but I'm a big believer that the visuals of it had something to do with it—and I think there is an amplification of that right now, in our current environment, in this new iteration. I think the other catalytic thing is that folks—and again,

especially younger folks—are embracing the spectrum of identity, and the complexities and the dynamic nature of identity, much more robustly. I think they're going to want to see that reflected in the institutions they're moving into. And that's going to be messy, and it's going to be dynamic, and it's going to be challenging. I'm not necessarily one of those who say, "Oh well, the Millennials, they're not racist; they're much more diverse, and everything will be solved." I think that they will bring their own kinds of challenges, but I think this momentum will start to push some of our larger institutions—and, again, not just nonprofits and foundations but all of our social institutions—in ways that will require us to really build our muscle around these issues.

RM: *Absolutely.*

KB: I guess I just want to stress to people that there are tipping points in movements, and we can look back at movements that made meaningful change and try to learn. I often refer to the Free South Africa Movement. People said: "It's going so slow, we're never going to do it. This could go really wrong; this could go badly." But it didn't. And certainly, South Africa is not perfect by any means—but now we all look back on the transition and think, "Of course that was going to happen." So I think one day we'll look back on this and see that we were saying the same thing, and then things changed.

It takes persistence, it takes rigor, it takes compassion, it takes intentionality. It takes a different sort of orientation to really embrace this in a way that helps people see we are making a contribution to creating the world that we actually all want to live in, in spite of the fear and in spite of the fearmongering and in spite of the real anxieties that people feel about these kinds of changes. I think we're going to do it; I know we will. And I think people should embrace the challenge of doing it—because not only is the goal important, the process is important, too.

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