**U.S. Programs “Civic Core” Portfolio Review**

**PUBLIC SUMMARY**

April 11, 2014 Review (Summary Circulated August 14, 2014)

**U.S. Programs Board Participants (3)**

Eli Pariser; Andy Stern; Chris Stone

Regrets: Deepak Bhargava (comments shared in advance) and Steve Coll

**OSF Staff Participants (27)**

**President’s Office:** Chris Stone; Matthew Craig

**U.S. Programs Executive Office:** Ken Zimmerman; Susanne James

**OSF Strategy Unit:** Daniel Sershen; Daphne Panayotatos

**OSF-DC:** Stephen Rickard (Discussant); Julie Fernandes

**U.S. Special Initiatives & Partnerships:** Bill Vandenberg (Staff Presenter); Patricia Jerido; Mike Fogelberg; Ahely Rios Allende; Maggie Corser

**U.S. Democracy Fund:** Laleh Ispahani

**U.S. Equality Fund:** Leslie Gross-Davis; Archana Sahgal; Eric Halperin

**U.S. Justice Fund:** Lenny Noisette; Adam Culbreath

**Campaign for a New Drug Policy:** Andy Ko; Jamie Wood

**Campaign for Black Male Achievement:** Shawn Dove; Rashid Shabazz

**National Security and Human Rights Campaign:** Lisa Magarrell

**OSI-Baltimore:** Diana Morris; Monique Dixon; Debra Rubino

**Overview of the portfolio & reasons for review**

U.S. Programs’ Civic Core portfolio is managed by the Special Initiatives and Partnership’s (SIP) team and consists of multi-issue constituency building, grassroots advocacy, and political engagement organizations. As noted in the narrative, the Civic Core portfolio emerged out of the 2012 Strategic Planning Process and the closure of the Democracy and Power Fund. Each of the eight Civic Core organizations conducts work to advance open society priorities at the national, state, and local levels.[[1]](#footnote-1) They employ strategies that include: constituency building within African American, faith-based, Latino, and youth communities; elected leader organizing; grassroots organizing and field advocacy; leadership development; and nonpartisan voter engagement.

Evaluating grassroots advocacy efforts such as these can be challenging. The portfolio review process presented a valuable opportunity to reflect on SIP’s work and overall impact within the portfolio. The SIP team and USP leadership sought to gain insights to help staff to refine the portfolio for US Program’s 2015-2018 strategic refinement process. They also sought guidance to help inform emerging conversations and strategies on how to best impact U.S. democracy and seize opportunities for political power building (nonpartisan, albeit) that are connected to ongoing demographic shifts across the nation.

**Key questions**

The Special Initiatives team suggested the following questions for discussion:

* What are the origins of the Civic Core portfolio and how can OSF assess its impact?
* With 2020 in mind, how could the Civic Core portfolio be reconstructed to best contribute to the building of civic capacity – leadership development, political engagement, and constituency building – within the fast growing constituencies that comprise the so-called “New American Majority?”
* What is the portfolio’s connection to the ongoing integration of “power and politics” into U.S. Programs?

**Recap of Discussion**

The degree of candor, quality of writing, and critical self-reflection in the materials was noted and commended by both board and staff participants both before and during the review. The speakers, discussant, and board advisors all indicated that the analysis within the materials was strong and that the contributions of these eight organizations to USP goals were significant. On behalf of the SIP team, Bill Vandenberg presented opening comments that placed the Civic Core portfolio’s establishment within the context of significant changes and restructuring within USP in 2011-12. He also shared that the collective time that the portfolio review took to discuss and prepare – for a five person team that worked collaboratively – was 110 hours.

The discussant, Steve Rickard, director of OSI-DC and OSPC, noted the contributions of the portfolio to advancing OSF democracy, equality, and justice priorities. He then posed a question about the efficacy of multi-issue vs. single issue strategies. Rickard sought greater detail about the rationale for the funding level of each group, noting that there isn’t a linear connection between the resources OSF awards and the grantees’ abilities to influence power. Investing more money in these organizations wouldn’t automatically guarantee those grantees will have more power and influence. Rickard asked:

*How does OSF know these groups are changing policy/influencing power?*

*What about these eight groups, specifically, made us think they were able to exercise power and that our level of resources provided would be sufficient?*

Participants answered with details about the construction of the portfolio, assessment tools (subjective and objective) that exist in relevant fields, and the complexity of evaluating progress on complex social justice priorities at any time, let alone a time of such political polarization. Nonetheless, the SIP team agreed that some harder, more objective measures of efficacy and impact moving forward would be important to seek.

In his opening remarks, Chris Stone reiterated that a portfolio review should focus retrospectively and not be overly concerned with articulating a forward-looking strategy. Stone noted that reflecting back and asking critical questions on our work is rare at OSF and that this process is designed to allow staff to reflect on how they can improve their work, not just focus on next steps. Since this was USP’s first portfolio review of 2014 and its first ever with board members, including Stone, participating, following the review session, SIP staff shared that the materials circulated about reviews, as well as some feedback given prior to the review date, may not have stated as clearly as necessary that there would be little need for future focused questions.

Ken Zimmerman, Rickard, and Vandenberg each shared reflections and posed several questions about how to best evaluate grassroots and field-building work. Board member Eli Pariser noted that to effectively assess the impact of these grantees, the portfolio review process should more extensively tap external expertise in the field – people outside of OSF who can speak to whether these grantees provide effective support. He noted that from a top level, this collection of groups doesn’t read as coherent and lacks a consistent organizing principle or thread. Pariser shared that this was likely due to the unique establishment of the portfolio, coming on the heels of significant USP program shifts and large scale cuts in 2012 to a broader civic engagement and progressive infrastructure portfolio.

Stone then asked participants to complete a ranking exercise of the portfolio. Board and staff ranked the eight organizations in the portfolio (from 1 to 8) based on which organizations, over the last year, exceeded expectations in building power and which organization had disappointing performance. Pariser, Zimmerman, Vandenberg, Patricia Jerido, Diana Morris, and Laleh Ispahani all shared their rankings and a brief rationale. Stone then shared his impressions on the exercise, which he said is designed to force a conversation with the benefit of hindsight. He noted that the staff criteria for ranking were far-reaching and tended to focus on grantee performance: their ability to work at scale, policy impact at a federal level, push against corporate power, or engage African Americans or other key constituencies, among other measures. Stone said that a real strength of any program is naming and understanding our criteria for evaluating organizations. He said the danger of foundation accountability processes is that we often focus on grantee performance instead of asking whether foundation staff performed well:

To that point, Stone then asked *“What did we do, as OSF, that enabled PICO, Color of Change, and others organizations to be effective and highly ranked? What did OSF do (or fail to do) with the League of Young Voters that they were at the bottom of everyone’s list?”*

**Responses to questions**

*To the question on how to evaluate the impact of this portfolio:* Stone advised that because the Civic Core portfolio provides general support grants, evaluation should not focus on policy outcomes or laws passed. Given that this is a general support portfolio, he encouraged SIP to focus on organizational finances, sustainability, governance, and whether they are effective players in their respective fields. Stone said that, according to Guidestar, several of these organizations are (or appear to be) facing precarious organizational situations. OSF’s support needs to strengthen their ability to exercise power in the long term which depends on their ability to be effective organizations. Zimmerman noted the relational aspect of this work which also makes it difficult to measure. He underscored the importance of talking to other groups in the assessment process - in particular groups receiving technical assistance from intermediaries in the portfolio.

*To the question of what SIP could have done better in hindsight:* The SIP team indicated it could have been tougher on metrics and post-election accountability, and could likely have held grantees to a tighter standard. For instance, with the League of Young Voters, OSF is its largest funder and SIP could have: (1) connected the organization to the Management Center, although funder driven technical assistance recommendations are heavily weighted and must have appropriate firewalls; (2) chopped its funding; (3) done more to connect it to peer organizations to encourage collaboration; (4) developed a percentage of what our support metric/threshold should be; (5) developed more rigorous internal measures; (6) converted our funding to a matching grant to force the grantee to leverage additional support; or (7) reconfigured our general support into targeted project support pegged to the hiring of strong secondary leadership. While these options were cited in relation to the League of Young Voters, many of these could be applied to other Civic Core grantees.

*Board member Andy Stern* noted that George Soros is a strong advocate for building progressive infrastructure. Groups like State Voices and Ballot Initiative Strategy Center provide utilities that can serve all of OSF’s priorities and grantees. Stern cautioned that when constructing a portfolio, we should allow groups to be multi-issue and should not be overly prescriptive in making groups work on each of our issues (e.g. if a group isn’t working on criminal justice reform we shouldn’t necessarily push them to start). Stern shared that the Civic Core grantees should be gateways and connectors.

*Challenges facing the Civic Core portfolio:* Stone said that a central challenge of this portfolio is being clear to other USP funds what purpose the organizations serve. If being a “Civic Core” grantee requires organizations to deliver and fill a specific purpose for US Programs, we need to ensure that the other funds agree the organizations serve that purpose. The SIP staff shared that would be folded into ongoing conversations leading into USP’s 2015-18 plans.

Several staff highlighted the importance of these organizations. Ispahani shared that the Democracy Fund works with and has funded several of the groups for project support. She indicated that it is continually important for SIP and other funds to connect how our general support builds organizational strength and relates to specific OSF project funding or issues of interest. Lenny Noisette from the Justice Fund underscored the need for funds to connect the work of core grantees across funds/issue areas, including justice issues. Morris from the Baltimore office said that many of the skills, resources, networks represented in the civic core portfolio are very useful at local and state level – though she noted that OSF’s interest in certain locations can sometimes be in tension with grantee’s prioritization of places with political opportunity. Julie Fernandes from OSF-DC underscored the importance of the tools and infrastructure these groups provide. In particular, she noted the work of the Ballot Initiative Strategy Center, NALEO, and State Voices (“The work they do is critical on both the constituency and infrastructure side.”). Stone asked Fernandes whether she had critiques of the organizations and she offered that some of the State Voices state “tables,” including Georgia and Texas, are not sufficiently connected to communities of color.

**Looking Forward: Decisions and comments from the “staff portfolio strategy preview”**

As the conversation turned to the forward-looking strategy, Stone asked “what are implications of the conversation we just had with 20/20 (vision) hindsight?” He asked whether any of the reflections on past work would be important to recalibrate moving forward. Pariser said the future direction proposed in the portfolio review narrative, on the number and composition of groups, made sense. He asked: What is our strategic approach here? Can we describe our strategy for this portfolio in one sentence? Pariser conceded that might not be possible but encouraged SIP to place a greater emphasis on the organizing principle.

Zimmerman suggested that when considering how to refine this portfolio in the future it will be important how USP actually defines a “civic core,” including what its underlying common characteristics would be. Do these eight organizations represent a field and what different ways can they be grouped? He thought it could be instructive to divide the defining of the portfolio into two parts: (1) tools, intermediaries, and progressive infrastructure; and (2) constituency-based and multi-issue advocacy work. Zimmerman also noted organizational instability, where it exists in the portfolio, as a complicating factor. Moving forward, how can OSF help strengthen the organizations?

Stone did not think the SIP team should place so much emphasis on developing a rigorous evaluation strategy, stating “we cannot evaluate something we cannot fully state the purpose for.” Noting the origins of this portfolio, he suggested that the SIP team should take several months to figure out what works best for the Civic Core, and then to think about evaluation. Stone felt the discipline of having a small portfolio would be helpful. The narrative suggested the SIP team might seek to expand from 8 up to 12 grantees. Stone advised to not add a group unless one is removed and to stick to that discipline for 2- 3 years (and only then start to think about increasing). While there was not consensus among participants on capping the number of grantees at the present level, all agreed that keeping the portfolio on the small(er) side continues to make sense.

**Next steps and proposed follow-up**

* Schedule a debrief meeting with Dan Sershen and Daphne Panayotatos from the OSF Strategy Unit to discuss: (1) Whether the amount of hours put into the portfolio review was it worth it for the SIP team (or for others in the future) and how OSF can make these processes helpful for staff; and (2) In advance of SIP’s November portfolio review on membership organizations, start to discuss what a cross-fund review could look like.
* Stone recommended that the SIP team give increased focus to the Ballot Initiative Strategy Center, which he saw as potentially volatile. The SIP team shared that it was in better shape than it appeared, due to it having a stronger c4 presence than c3. Stone recommended that we should evaluate its organizational health and perhaps work closely with the grantee.

*Any major strategic shifts that emerge as a result of the portfolio review should also be noted as a brief addendum to this online summary.* Any such strategic shifts will occur via the implementation of USP’s 2015-18 strategic plan.

1. The Civic Core Portfolio includes: Ballot Initiative Strategy Center Foundation, Color of Change, Faith in Public Life Resource Center, League of Young Voters Education Fund, National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO) Educational Fund, PICO National Network, State Voices, and Young Elected Officials Network. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)