



INSPIRING COMPETITION

Inspiring Competition is the second of five papers commissioned by the Pritzker Traubert Foundation to document the design and development of the *Chicago Prize*. The first, *Getting to Go*, discusses the origins of the *Chicago Prize*. Available [here](#), it examines the Foundation's decision to award \$10 million to a single initiative on the city's South or West Side.

To be awarded later this year, the *Chicago Prize* seeks to stimulate innovation in neighborhood revitalization and improve physical conditions, strengthen civic infrastructure, and produce economic benefits for area residents. *Getting to Go* also discusses the partnership formed by Pritzker Traubert Foundation and the MacArthur Foundation to execute the competition, and the *Chicago Prize* team of ten individuals assembled to complete the necessary conceptual and practical work.

Inspiring Competition examines communications undertaken to advance the *Chicago Prize*, with an emphasis on the team's efforts to reach, recruit, and support applicants to the competition. It describes communications activity leading up to and announcing the *Chicago Prize* in April 2019; efforts to support participants through a four-month application process; and the announcement of finalists in December 2019. *Inspiring Competition* closes with a few observations about challenges encountered along the way and questions that remain unanswered.

AROUSING INTEREST

On April 16, 2019 the Pritzker Traubert Foundation quietly issued a press release to signal the start of the *Chicago Prize* competition. This no-frills, no-fanfare release was followed by frequent updates directed to local nonprofits about whether and how to apply. Nine months later, the Foundation announced the selection of six finalists at an awards ceremony. A few days later, the *Chicago Prize* team convened the finalists to begin the competition's final phase.

All along the way, the form and content of communications were shaped to the purpose and situation. Word-of-mouth and influencer-engagement strategies were the main methods used to reach community development organizations, intermediaries, and other funders with information about and promote participation in the *Chicago Prize*. As the sponsor of the *Prize*, Pritzker Traubert took the lead with external audiences, such as potential applicants and investors. Common Pool and Lever for Change

coordinated communications with visitors to the website: information-seekers and registrants, registrants-turned-applicants, and members of the review panel.

The official **launch** of the *Chicago Prize* in April triggered outreach and communications plans that had been months in the making. Four months earlier Pritzker Traubert staff had started working with Rudd Resources, a full-service public relations firm “located at the neighborhood level [with] first-hand knowledge of the grit and determination” of the people and organizations in Chicago’s communities. One of several firms to respond to the Foundation’s RFP seeking communications, Rudd Resources was selected for its knowledge of neighborhoods, the depth of its relationships locally and citywide, and especially “for its grasp of the Foundation’s values,” says Foundation president Cindy Moelis.

Kimberley Rudd, the firm’s president, was intrigued by the prospect of collaborating with Pritzker Traubert. She “sensed” that the Foundation was “open to something new,” and appreciated that the Foundation “declare[d] that communities on the South and West Sides can and will meet high expectations—a laudable characteristic” [she was] “eager to help promote.” Rudd recommended that the Foundation “keep a forward focus on the finalists” in all its communications. With this in mind, when the Foundation issued the media announcement, organized email blasts, and placed content on Twitter and LinkedIn about the *Chicago Prize*, it called for “bold ideas to activate existing community plans that are led by teams with deep community partnerships and the expertise to leverage the grant, implement the initiative, and create impact in under-resourced communities.”

In later press statements, Foundation president Cindy Moelis affirmed this forward focus on neighborhood initiatives, noting that the competition “was a means to an end. Effective community investment [was] the point, *not* the competition.” The purpose, Moelis says, “was to lift up community investment done a particular way, surface and fund strong locally-driven initiatives, identify and learn from all the innovative work being done in neighborhoods throughout Chicago, and leverage the support of others for that good work.” The message was received as intended: coverage in *Crain’s Chicago Business*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, and broadcasts on WBEZ, WVON, and other outlets focused on the potential of the *Prize* to make a difference in neighborhoods, not on the Foundation.

The *Chicago Prize* team added to the initial outreach. They sent personalized e-mails with a description and a link to the competition website to 400+ individuals and institutions, such as: community development organizations and other prospects; organizations sure to know potential applicants; faith institutions, civic groups, and policy shops; elected and appointed officials; community development financial intermediaries, impact investors, and other funders. They also asked for help in

spreading the word and included a toolkit of graphics and sample messages to help ensure that visually attractive, accurate information was delivered. In the days following the announcement, the Urban Institute pushed out an interview with Cindy Moelis, and MacArthur and Lever for Change sent email blasts to their contacts. In each instance, recipients were asked to share the news with friends and colleagues. This social media, influencer engagement approach leveraged the institutional resources of *Chicago Prize* team members, as well as the those of their compatriots in urban development and philanthropy.

Pritzker Traubert also involved two more groups of people familiar to those working in neighborhood revitalization. One was the “kitchen cabinet” of 14 people who had advised the Foundation on the competition; the other, the 67 local and national urban development professionals recruited by the *Chicago Prize* team to evaluate applications. Both groups were primed to serve as messengers and happy to accommodate; one wrote to say: “This is incredibly exciting. I’ll be sure to visit the site and spread the word. This is sure to be a gamechanger for the organizations selected.” Leaders of various community organizations reported receiving multiple notices from people; one forwarded her response: “Thank you for thinking of us. You’re the fourth person to share this [information about the *Chicago Prize*] with me. I am glad it has gotten so much buzz. We definitely plan to apply.”

Additional anecdotes illustrate the results. A tweet by trustee Penny Pritzker was picked up by follower David Axelrod and shared with his 1.5 million followers. Racial equity activist Liz Dozier of Chicago Beyond volunteered to deliver anti-bias training to the 67 reviewers. She subsequently did, training not only the *Chicago Prize* reviewers, but also the judges for MacArthur’s *100&Change* competition. Elle Ramel, founder of a *pro bono* “planning and design services group,” convened an evening workshop open to anyone interesting in applying to the *Chicago Prize*. The heads of city departments met to discuss how to take full advantage of the *Prize*—and to figure out how to encourage others to participate as well. The CEO of the Chicago Housing Authority posted the announcement to the CHA’s Facebook page, in the process getting the information about the competition to 15,000 households in neighborhoods throughout the city’s West and South Sides.

Following the initial flurry of information-sharing, the *Chicago Prize* team continued to promote and support participation. They regularly released information—such as invitations to webinars, copies of podcasts and radio broadcasts, reminders of deadlines, and other updates and notices—to website visitors and other audiences. Meanwhile, Pritzker Traubert trustees and staff continued to meet with other funders to explore priorities; raise the possibility of their investing in some of best projects; and invite them to events that would showcase top-ranked initiatives. Some of these meetings were one-on-one conversations with individuals, some with small groups, and

some with attendees at affinity-group gatherings. Included in the mix, for example, were discussions with investors at Citibank, Goldman Sachs, and JP Morgan Chase; a luncheon with a dozen funders, co-hosted with Forefront, a grantmakers association; and a reception for attendees at the biannual gathering of the National Center for Family Foundations. Altogether Pritzker Traubert staff and trustees organized more than 30 conversations with individual donors, small groups of investors, family offices, social impact fund managers, community development financial intermediaries, and state and local officials.

ENCOURAGING PARTICIPATION

The crucial measure of the team's communications effectiveness is whether the messages reached and elicited responses from possible contenders. At the start of the competition, the *Chicago Prize* team hoped the [application process](#) would yield at least four strong applications. To accomplish the objective, Common Pool estimated that at least 50 organizations would need to visit the website and complete a self-assessment. Of these, at least 30 would need to qualify as eligible and register for the competition.

The team was determined to deliver the right number and kind of applicants. They drove traffic to the competition platform through continuous outreach; helped nonprofits with registration and answered any questions people had; and offered guidance and encouragement along the way. They worked through several rounds of writing and wordsmithing to ensure that all the relevant information was easy to find, easy to understand, and obvious about deadlines and other requirements. They analyzed and organized blocks of text to “push” readers to the next block of text; they deliberated about placement, about where to put what information on the site.

To help ensure that community groups “saw themselves” in the competition, the Foundation contracted with Free Spirit Media to create a *Chicago Prize* video. Free Spirit is a community organization that provides media education and hands-on production experiences to youth on Chicago's West and South Sides. The nonprofit delivered a two-minute video in eight days. The results were impressive: two minutes of fast-flowing, colorful images that celebrated the diversity of the city's communities; a lively voiceover that set forth the purpose and priorities of the *Chicago Prize*; and an irregular thrum of music that evoked the energy and excitement and possibility of a \$10 million investment in a Chicago neighborhood.

As the team designed the application platform and populated it with content, they aimed for “consistent redundancy.” They shared a mantra of “stay on message, stay strong, stick to deadlines, everything goes back to the website.” And that, says Common Pool, is what made the competition, well, *competitive*—an open, transparent, and fair

process. Common Pool tracked the online activity of registrants and monitored their progress on completing applications, reminded registrants of deadlines, and referred them to the array of resources available on the site. By the close of the competition, 163 eligible organizations had registered, 86 had submitted applications, and 20 stood apart, rated highly by reviewers. Six finalists were chosen from among the 20, and provided access to *pro bono* technical assistance and planning grants of \$100,000. The six remain in the running for the \$10 million *Chicago Prize*.

CELEBRATING PROMISE

The six finalists were announced and feted at an [awards ceremony](#) at The Hatchery on Chicago's West Side in December 2019. The event brought together—across sector and class, across race and ethnicity—120 of the city's most influential civic and community leaders. It was a celebration of both aspiration and achievement, with a simple agenda: a few speakers, a panel discussion, the presentation of awards, and a pledge by Mayor Lori Lightfoot, and her new commissioner of planning and development, Maurice Cox, to leverage the results of the *Prize*.

Trustee Bryan Traubert spoke about the Foundation's mission and the family's love for their hometown. A main reason to sponsor the *Chicago Prize*, he explained, was firsthand knowledge that "talent is universal across [the] city, but access to opportunity is not." Jenn White of WBEZ, Chicago's NPR station, moderated a panel discussion that added history, context, and perspective:

- University of Chicago historian Adam Green spoke about the enduring effects of racism and "the legacies of a culture at risk," and about the need for the "difficult conversations" and a "new language" to deal with the "hard truths about complicity" [and] "bring us to an understanding." Green said that he came to Chicago "for school, stayed because of the humanness of people." He envisioned Chicago as "a city of flows, where people flow freely," able to live wherever they want.
- Maurice Cox, Chicago's commissioner of planning and development, pointed to the "people who didn't leave" their neighborhoods, seeing them as the "foundation for rebuilding." Cox argued that strategies to revitalize Chicago's neighborhoods "have to be of the people in those places...those who stayed." He called on planners to "own their own role in creating or enabling circumstances"; on people with resources "to listen and learn"; and on foundations "to give freedom, and take risk." By doing so, Cox declared "we can design the future we want thirty years out."

- Jose Rico drew attention to the contributions and potential of community organizing and social movement formation to support justice in neighborhood revitalization. The director of Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation, Greater Chicago at the Woods Fund, Rico pressed for “building civic muscle” through racial healing circles. He called for collective efforts to “foster connections across place” and for relational approaches that “roll up the economic side, the political side, the cultural side.”
- Picking up on several themes, Pritzker Traubert president Cindy Moelis noted that the Foundation focuses first on community voice; conceives of the *Chicago Prize* as patient risk capital; and understand and acts on the belief that revitalization requires collaboration, leverage, and the long view. Cindy then segued to the evening’s main event: the announcement of the six finalists; the screening of videos about their initiatives; and, accompanied by songs they’d selected, the presentation of awards to team representatives.

Trustee Penny Pritzker introduced the awards ceremony by first acknowledging the “persistence [and] grit” of the finalists.” Penny pointed to the naming of finalists as an important inflection point, not only in the *Chicago Prize* process, but also in the development of their initiatives. Reflecting on her own real estate experience, she described the next challenge. To realize their visions and the promise of their applications, the finalists would now need to “pivot from aspiration to executable plan.” That, Penny explained, was the rationale for the Foundation’s grants of \$100,000 to each of the finalists. The planning grants, as well as the offer of technical assistance, are intended to help with the “shift to workable blueprints.”

Penny also drew attention to the contents of a 50-page program book for the evening event. Available [here](#), the book details the finalists’ initiatives, complete with photos and other visuals; describes 14 other top-ranked applications and their teams; and lists all applicants to the *Chicago Prize*. In closing, Penny observed that “undoing decades of disinvestment” requires the combined efforts of many. It also requires faith, hope, and dedication—qualities evident in the finalists and other participants, as well as those in attendance. Penny called on all who share a passion for making the Chicago more equitable and vibrant to work together toward that end.

FORTIFYING CAPACITY

Shifting from aspiration to achievement was the charge, a few days later, when the *Chicago Prize* team convened the finalist teams at an orientation workshop at IIT's South Side campus. The focus of the gathering was twofold: to provide guidance for the next phase of the competition, and to offer assistance to the groups as they continue to develop their initiatives and applications. The Bridgespan Group and Foundation staff summarized expectations for final proposals, saying that the best applications will have:

- convincing business plans, informed by relevant data and supported by specific market analyses
- compelling theories of change, with clear indicators and measures of progress and impact
- cogent arguments for why the proposed projects and activities are the right interventions, at the right time, for the location and community

The workshop was also the occasion for introducing the technical assistance providers. Recruited by the *Chicago Prize* team, the firms had specified the kind and level of services they could provide. Because they are bound by nondisclosure and confidentiality agreements, the providers made it clear that any information obtained in the course of working with teams would not be shared with the Foundation.

The providers described their services and expertise, typically referencing their work on similar projects to illustrate their approaches. Teams were offered expertise in eight areas, ranging from real estate finance to market analysis and business planning to impact evaluation, storytelling, and legal advice. Teams were free to choose the mix of technical assistance most suited to their circumstances, or none at all.

CLOSING COMMENT

Communications for the rollout and application process for the *Chicago Prize* consumed time and thought. It required careful planning, strong project management, and skillful coordination of the many contributors and production schedules. But it wasn't especially elaborate or complicated. The thornier challenge was resolving—or at least acknowledging—some of the tensions embedded in the aspirations and priorities of the *Chicago Prize*. The Pritzker Traubert Foundation and other members of the *Chicago Prize* team endeavored to find the right balance and communicate sensibly about seemingly conflicting objectives.

As detailed in *Getting to Go*, the Foundation saw the *Chicago Prize* as one way to operationalize their values for connecting, acting with care, taking thoughtful risks, and learning through practice. Staff and trustees hoped that the competition’s easy-to-access online platform and simple application format would appeal to and be used widely by community-based nonprofits, in the process reaching deep into Chicago neighborhoods to tap local leadership and new ideas. Ever mindful of differences in their circumstances and those of many Chicago residents, Foundation leaders wondered if it were possible to “get closer to community” by “staying out of the way.” They wanted to see whether an open-call competition, in the words of trustee Bryan Traubert, “allows for grantmaking that can be more local and organic [and can help] level the playing field.”

Staff and trustees also hoped that certain features of the competition—the use of external reviewers, well-specified scoring criteria, consistent referral to an application platform and online information rather than individual conversations tailored to particular parties—would result in information being made available to all applicants in a uniform and equitable manner. In these and other ways, the Foundation sought to address the power imbalance and other limitations of organized philanthropy. It wanted to confront the “concentrated, top-down, command-and-control structures of the past” and contribute to what Kresge Foundation CEO Rip Rapson has called a new “machinery of problem-solving” in philanthropy.

Though worthy of pursuit, these aspirations proved complicated to realize in practice. In the lead up to the competition, the *Chicago Prize* team homed in on four attributes to convey the Foundation’s priorities and used to evaluate applications. The strongest initiatives would deliver economic and social benefits and have a lasting *impact*; be led by capable teams with *feasible* plans; be advanced by *community-led collaborations* that build on local assets and plans; and have and would likely *leverage* additional resources.

The attributes, and the concepts associated with them, were shared with applicants. They were featured on the *Chicago Prize* website and in the video; informed the questions asked in the self-assessment and application; identified as the scoring criteria, posted on the platform and available to all; and echoed in the content of webinars, FAQs, and all the rest. But because the competition content did not provide a rank order of priorities or suggest preferred strategies, it was left to applicants to demonstrate whether and to what extent their proposed initiatives exhibited the desired attributes. It was up to them to reconcile tensions embedded in community development practice such as:

- Innovation matters, yet so do connection to a preexisting plan and use of proven strategies.

- Resident voice and authentic community leadership matter the most, yet grant recipients must be financially sophisticated, able to manage complex arrangements and multiple streams of financing.
- Resources sufficient to get the job done must be at hand, yet there is a verifiable need and use for an additional capital investment of \$10 million.

Meanwhile, Foundation trustees and staff focused on philanthropic practice. In the absence of a counterfactual, they sought to better understand the distinctive value of grant competitions relative to other grantmaking approaches. They considered questions like:

- Does the investment of time and resources to design and conduct a competition result in proposals that interest other funders? Does it lead to or strengthen existing philanthropic partnerships?
- Does “ranking” or “winning” in a competition lead to other gains for recipients? Do other applicants pursue the initiatives they proposed or secure other sources of funds?
- Does the visibility of a competition increase interest and investment in community development?

With the *Chicago Prize*, the Pritzker Traubert Foundation wanted “to encourage new collaborations, engage other private and public funders, and provide technical assistance to many of these efforts...[and]...continue to learn more about what’s happening in Chicago’s neighborhoods and what we can do as a city to support these big, bold ideas.” Whether competition inspires greater collaboration and increased investment in Chicago neighborhoods remains to be seen.