Catalytic Funding, Partnership, Evaluation, and Advocacy: Innovation Strategies for Community Impact

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Introduction

As cities and towns across the United States face growing challenges, community foundations are in a unique position to stimulate development of local solutions. Possessing significant financial resources and operating outside of deliberative public processes, foundations can develop collaborative solutions that impact the quality of life in their communities.

Over the past decade, increasing numbers of community foundations have begun looking for more effective ways to pursue strategic community initiatives – defined by the James Irvine Foundation (2003) as a "strategic effort, working in partnership with local nonprofit organizations, to invest significant money and time to address a specific community issue for a limited period of time" (p. 2). Growing evidence that community foundations may gain increased visibility and financial support through such initiatives is encouraging this shift (Pease & Carlson, 2006).

This article discusses the innovative strategies of community leadership pursued by the Community Foundation for the Fox Valley Region (CFFVR) to expand opportunities for youth in Northeast Wisconsin to participate in the arts. Seizing the opportunity to address a growing community concern over cutbacks in youth arts education, the foundation undertook a community initiative that combined several new strategies it hoped would have a sustainable impact on the commu-

Key Points

· With long-term commitments to concentrated geographic regions, community foundations are in a unique position to highlight problems and stimulate other nonprofit organizations and funders to develop local solutions. Seizing an opportunity to address a growing community concern over cutbacks in youth arts education, the Community Foundation for the Fox Valley Region undertook an initiative that utilized several innovation strategies in a way that would impact the community and its own work.

· This article describes how the foundation combined catalytic funding, partnership with grantees, creative use of evaluation, and design of advocacy tools to promote and strengthen youth arts programming. The partnership approach gave rise to very different working relationships with grantees, moving the foundation away from its traditional role to one that led to shared ownership among all the collaborative partners.

· The initiative included significant use of a variety of evaluation approaches, including needs assessment, evaluation capacity-building, and developmental evaluation. The experience with this innovative project positioned the foundation to pursue future community-impact initiatives even more effectively, and this article concludes with eight insights for others interested in using innovative methods to lead large initiatives designed for broad community impact.

Today, helping a community address the growing array of complex problems may depend on the ability of community foundations to step out of the traditional role and use new tools and different approaches to protect the area's quality of life.

nity: a catalytic funding approach, a partnership with grantees, a focus on evaluation, and a set of advocacy activities.

In using these innovative methods, CFFVR learned a number of important lessons that would enhance its long-term ability to impact the community. Having successfully navigated the uncertainties of this initiative, the foundation became poised to recognize new opportunities where nontraditional approaches might be applied. It gained experience setting up funding agreements that provided the necessary flexibility within a workable structure to accomplish mutual goals. It fine-tuned the qualities to look for in possible partner grantees, including commitment to continue to evaluate programs and advocate, with others, for the arts. The foundation recognized the useful, expanded role played by the evaluator in terms of strengthening data collection on which to base the initiative and incorporating a developmental evaluation role. Finally, the foundation learned from things that it might choose to do differently in future projects: namely, to develop more specific plans to sustain advocacy once funding had concluded. These and other insights are presented at the end of this article.

In combining these strategies, CFFVR attempted a new, nontraditional approach that contrasted with the historical role played by many community foundations. In traditional roles, community foundations facilitate local action as they provide knowledge resources, promote information exchange across sectors, stimulate collaboration, and advise donors to direct their funding to known needs in the community. Based on a national study, Millesen and Martin (2014) described this approach as one of two predominant patterns of community foundation board leadership. Foundations that fit this pattern follow a business-as-usual approach due to uncertainty over methods or fear of alienating donors by getting too involved in local issues. They adhere to the principle of leaving well enough alone and focus on funding and managing grants. Performance is measured in terms of growth of assets, revenues, granted dollars, and program scale.

Today, helping a community address the growing array of complex problems may depend on the ability of community foundations to step out of the traditional role and use new tools and different approaches to protect the area's quality of life. Millesen and Martin (2014) identified a second pattern of foundation strategy as serendipity, or a willingness to act on the basis of being in the right place at the right time. Contexts for serendipitous approaches include situations where a significant charitable gift had been received, a community problem had arisen, or something else had afforded the community foundation a chance to take on a leadership role.

To play this role, Sandfort (2008) argued that community foundations must develop strategic philanthropy tools that go beyond grantmaking to include convening partners, communicating to influence public opinion, conducting research to document community issues, and building networks to mobilize response. Community foundations have the ability to leverage political, social, and financial capital. In order to do so, they must move beyond current functions, such as public relations or resource development, to analyze and frame community problems, support networks of actors working on collaborative goals, and facilitate shared learning among grantees and other stakeholders.

TABLE 1 Youth Education in the Arts Initiative Theory of Change

Inputs	Activities	Short-term outcomes	Medium-term outcomes	Long-term outcomes
<u>Investment</u> $325,000 funding <u>Funder</u> Community Foundation for the Fox Valley Region <u>Arts Organizations</u> • Fox Cities Performing Arts Center • Fox Valley Symphony • Appleton Art Center <u>Evaluator</u> Experienced independent evaluator	<u>Innovative Funding</u> Catalytic unrestricted funding <u>Partnership</u> Funder and grantees met as collaborative partners to plan and implement the initiative. <u>Evaluation</u> • Needs assessment • Capacity building • Developmental evaluation role <u>Advocacy</u> • Several reports to community • Information distributed to arts education agencies	<u>Arts organizations</u> • Increased value placed on evaluation • Increased evaluation skills • Improved advocacy skills and resources • Stronger relationships among arts providers in community • Stronger relationship with key local funder • Significant stable funding for three years <u>Community foundation</u> • Increased skills in innovative community strategies • Development of organization's learning culture • Improved relationships with funding recipients • Increased visibility in community • Increased funding support for arts	<u>Arts organizations</u> • Outcome measurement system implemented for key programs • Enhanced current arts education program activities • Sustainability plans for youth arts programming developed • Generated more sustainable funding for programs • Advocated for youth arts programs in the community <u>Community foundation</u> • Increased capacity for effective grant making • Greater institutionalization of innovation	<u>Community/sector</u> • Improved investment by community stakeholders in in long-term support of arts • Improved sustainability of nonprofit arts organizations • Increased opportunities for youth to participate in strong arts programs • Increased capacity for the community to partner in quality-of-life issues

The initiative undertaken by CFFVR exemplified the second pattern described by Millesen and Martin (2014). In 2006, the foundation began to discuss ways to address its increasing concern about declining funding for the arts, specifically the need to strengthen opportunities for the area's youth to participate in the arts. This was a strong value expressed by a board member, a local philanthropist. Responsive grantmaking seemed insufficient to achieve the desired community change, so the foundation designed an innovative, nontraditional approach that it hoped would create greater impact and lasting change. To justify the foundation's investment, the board wanted to learn more about the Fox Valley arts sector and how artistic experiences affected youth. Were there really significant benefits to arts participation for young people? And, if so, how could the foundation expand the long-term capacity of arts organizations, contributing to the quality of life and economic vitality of the Fox Valley? As a funder, what could CFFVR do to preserve arts opportunities in its community? Staff initiated discussions with local nonprofit art organizations and commissioned a professional evaluator to research these and other questions.

TABLE 2 Youth Education in the Arts: a Multifaceted Initiative

Initiative Components	Strategies
Innovative funding approach	• Three-year, unrestricted, catalytic funding totaling $325,000
Collaborative partnership of funder, grantees, and evaluator	• Funder, program managers, and evaluator held regular team meetings to plan and implement all components of the initiative. • Focus on developing culture and relationship of trust

Evaluation	• Needs assessment:
	  - Secondary data on participation in arts classes and extracurricular arts programs in public schools
	  - Survey of regional arts organizations
	  - Release of published report on findings
	• Capacity building:
	  - Collaborative development of logic models, outcomes, and measures
	  - Training/coaching on use of online survey tool, outcome development and modification, analysis
	  - Development of Guidebook on Outcome Measurement shared with arts organizations
	• Evaluator served as partner in developmental evaluation role.

Advocacy	• *Analysis of Research on Youth Education in the Arts* (report to the community on results of needs assessment) • *Call to Action* (CFFVR annual report with data and position statements) • Website with resources to articulate benefits of youth participation in the arts https://www.cffoxvalley.org/Page.aspx?pid=703 • Public news release of report at annual meeting with media coverage • Convening of area arts providers to discuss further advocacy strategies

From these efforts, the board confirmed its belief in the essential role that the arts play in educating the kind of young person able to contribute to the community. Research made a convincing case that experience with the arts can increase one's motivation to learn and develops skills in reading and language, math, critical thinking, and communication (Catterall, 2002; Ruppert, 2006). Education, business, and government leaders concurred that these qualities are important to the 21st-century economy (Partnership for 21st-Century Skills, 2010; Wisconsin Task Force on Arts and Creativity in Education, 2008).

The CFFVR board became committed to sustaining the strength and vitality of the local arts sector as a way to build the quality of life in its community. The foundation launched its community catalyst effort, the Youth Education in the Arts (YEA) Initiative, allocating $325,000 over three years to improve the lives and prospects of youth in the community and to ensure the economic vitality of the region by providing transformative support to three arts organizations offering educational programming for youth (CFFVR, 2006). (See Table 1.) In essence, the foundation's strategies would build partnerships and strengthen the evaluation and advocacy capacity of these three organizations. Based on these short-term outcomes, the three grantees could increase effectiveness and sustainability of outcome measurement, programs, and funding. Sharing the project with other arts education organizations, the sector would be strengthened. Finally, in the long term, the foundation sought to preserve the community's opportunities for youth to engage in the arts.

TABLE 3 YEA's Use of Elements of Innovative Funding Models

Council on Foundations' Grantmaking Strategies	Grantmakers for Effective Organizations' Actions for Challenging Times	Kramer's Practices for Catalyzing Change
Traditional: Grants to nonprofits in response to proposals	Provide general support for operations.	Take responsibility for results.
Strategic: Grants to address specific community needs with a defined impact in mind		Mobilize a campaign.
Proactive: 3- to 5-year grants that target issues of interest to the foundation	Provide multiyear support.	Use a variety of all available tools.
Initiative: Grants that focus on achieving a vision, providing leadership for a community goal	Work together in a supportive and respectful relationship.	Create actionable knowledge.
Collaborative: Grants given collaboratively with other funders in mutual support of a project		
Shaded boxes: Adapted by the YEA funding approach		

Three specific goals were initially identified:

- Build both evaluation and advocacy capacity among arts organizations to help them become self-sustaining.
- Strengthen collaborative relationships between the foundation and arts organizations.
- Generate community awareness of the importance of arts education for youth so that the community would step up funding for local arts programs.

To accomplish these goals, the CFFVR experimented with a series of nontraditional approaches described next. This article examines the development of this initiative, describes its components, and evaluates the principles that keyed its success.

Components of the Youth Education in the Arts Initiative

The YEA Initiative had four key components: an innovative funding approach, a collaborative part-nership with grantees, evaluation woven throughout, and an advocacy strategy. (See Table 2.)

Catalytic-Funding Approach

As a centerpiece to the initiative, CFFVR provided three years of significant unrestricted funding ($325,000 total) to three local organizations that provided arts experiences for children and youth. These organizations were selected for their commitment to arts education, their ability to reach a wide audience of youth from multiple communities and family-income levels, and their potential to grow when given this type of multiyear support. The organizations agreed to participate as partners in developing a working model for sustainability, evaluation, and advocacy that could be adapted by other art organizations.

Comparing CFFVR's funding strategy with several other granting models helps to illustrate its unique elements. (See Table 3.)

The initiative incorporated several actions that aligned with the Grantmakers for Effective Organizations' (2009) best practices: providing some general support for operations, providing multiyear support, and working together in a supportive and respectful relationship. And it urged grantmakers to engage stakeholders and provide more flexible funding during challenging economic times.

The Council on Foundations (2008) has summarized common funding patterns employed by foundations. The YEA Initiative clearly combined two of these patterns: a proactive strategy, with longer-term funding for projects of interest to the funder, and initiative grantmaking. In some ways the YEA funding exemplified the collaborative pattern, as several other funders were expected to become involved.

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Finally, the YEA funding approach incorporated methods of catalytic funding described by Kramer (2009). Catalytic-philanthropy approaches create shared solutions through funder-grantee partnerships, departing from the usual grantmaking process of directing funds to the most appealing proposal. The foundation used, with varying degrees of success, four practices of catalytic philanthropy outlined by Kramer:

- It took on more responsibility for achieving results, by working directly on the funded initiative with agency partners and publicly reporting results.
- It mobilized a campaign for change, by undertaking activities to engage the community such as including other donors, community leaders, and arts organizations.
- It used all available tools, including working with community networks.
- It focused on creating actionable knowledge, with an end product (report) that was a true call to action.

With proactive funding as one significant component of the plan, the foundation included other strategies that would enhance the YEA Initiative's impact.

Collaborative Partnership With Grantees

Catalytic-funding approaches rely heavily on the partnership relationship between funder and grantee. Wei-Skillern and Silver (2013) point out that while much research has investigated partnerships and networks in the nonprofit sector, the leadership and culture that contribute to partnership success are often overlooked. They urge nonprofit leaders to "let go of conventional wisdom and shift their focus from organization-level goals to network-level impacts" (p. 122). All partners in the YEA Initiative shared a desire to generate lasting community impact to sustain these youth arts programs. This type of leadership and the cultural norm of equality it engendered contributed to the spirit of partnership that embodied the initiative.

A second leadership principle urges partnerships to establish trust (Wei-Skillern & Silver, 2013). The YEA Initiative carefully chose three visible, reputable, and collaborative organizations with which to partner. As the project began, early

actions strengthened the trusting relationship: the partners worked together to design specific activities of the initiative and to problem-solve. Moreover, the fact that CFFVR had backed up its stated position with significant, collaborative funding spoke volumes.

The foundation exemplified a third principle of successful networks: promote others rather than oneself (Wei-Skillern & Silver, 2014). Humility is a hallmark of successful network partnerships. From the outset, CFFVR's goal was to promote and strengthen the local arts agencies by facilitating their growth into strong and viable continuing programs, rather than to generate visibility and financial support for the foundation. It exercised its strength and community leadership as it presented the YEA Initiative to the community; in doing so, the youth arts programs that had participated – and the youth themselves – were front and center. In fact, none of the partners sought to capitalize on the opportunity to gain visibility or grow funding. The foundation recognized that promoting its grantee partners "builds a reservoir of goodwill that motivates all participants to fully invest and lend their ongoing support to the network" (Wei-Skillern & Silver, 2013, p. 125).

A final principle of collaborating urges networks to focus on building an array of partners that can share resources, learn from one another, and contribute to impact greater than any one partner can have (Wei-Skillern & Silver, 2013). While the YEA Initiative involved catalytic funding to major arts agencies in the Fox Valley, another aim was to strengthen the capacity of all arts-providing organizations. All local arts organizations were invited to participate several times during the initiative and at the initiative's conclusion, CFFVR convened 19 leaders from Fox Valley art organizations to learn how they intended to use the advocacy tools and to get their feedback. For several years that followed, these relationships may have helped them withstand continuing economic challenges. In sum, the leadership mindset and cultural norms that characterized the YEA partnership clearly increased its overall impact.

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Evaluation and Capacity Building

A third major component of the initiative involved obtaining the support of a professional evaluator to conduct a needs assessment, develop evaluation capacity by assisting grantee organizations to develop outcome measures, and serve as a member of the planning team throughout the initiative.

- *Needs assessment.* A critical initial element of the YEA Initiative involved assessing trends in the number and type of opportunities for youth to participate in the arts in Fox Valley schools and community settings. The evaluator gathered secondary data from public schools, surveyed nonprofits, and brought together scholarly literature and national reports containing evidence of the value of the arts in the lives of youth. The needs assessment provided an essential picture of the situation and helped identify some important issues related to youth and the arts in the Fox Valley. The evaluator analyzed data from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction on the participation rates of Fox Valley middle and high school students in the arts. In both visual art and music, high school students in 19 school districts trailed the state aver-

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age participation rates, and males participated in the fine arts at lower rates than females. According to Music for All (2008), "a key indicator of quality arts programs is the percentage of students enrolled" (p. 2). In addition, 26 mostly nonprofit organizations (offering more than 500 youth arts programs) participated in a survey of program participation by youth. The majority reported having maintained or increased youth program capacity between 2005 and 2008; the study also found that cost and location limited the participation of rural children in community arts programs. Compiling quantitative local data enabled CFFVR and the art organizations to make a stronger, evidence-based case for support to the community.

- *Evaluation capacity.* Another of the foundation's primary aims was to increase the evaluation capacity of grantees. In growing numbers, funders have recognized the importance of holding grantees accountable: by 2004, 31 percent of small foundations and 88 percent of large foundations required evaluation as a condition of funding (Ostrower, 2004). Three years later, the Association of Small Foundations released its handbook, Evaluating Impact for Small Foundations: Useful Evaluation Terms, Tools, and Resources (2007). Not only was evaluation increasingly required, CFFVR agreed with Davidson, Howe, and Scriven (2004) that evaluation can be a transformative tool: it

can increase chances a proposal gets funded, enhance project success, lead to better understanding of what works, and demonstrate the value of programs. Not only would evaluation skills help the nonprofits report results to the community, it would enable them to enhance their services over the long run as they could attract funding and expand programming. But evaluation is a technical analytical skill: Carman and Fredericks (2010) found that while some nonprofits strongly value evaluation and can integrate measurement into day-to-day operations, many others have difficulties implementing it. Newcomer (2007) pointed out that program managers confront a variety of challenges when measuring outcomes, including conceptualizing which outcomes to measure and developing the actual measurement tools. Often performers and artists themselves, few arts managers receive such training, and it is difficult and labor intensive to measure some of the longer-term, cognitive or emotional benefits of the arts (e.g., increased creativity, critical thinking, verbal skills, teamwork, or sensitivity to others).

For these reasons, the professional evaluator worked closely with agency staff to develop outcome measures for two youth programs chosen for the fact that each one engaged students over a relatively long period. McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, and Brooks (2004) recognized that the most important benefits of arts participation came from sustained involvement, rather than one-shot experiences. Based on this, two deeply engaging pilot-test programs were chosen for the initiative: Partners in Education, for hundreds of third-grade public school students and offered by the Fox Valley Symphony and Appleton Art Center, and Performing Arts Touch the Hearts of Students, presented by the Fox Cities Performing Arts Center in collaboration with an alternative high school. (See Table 4). Working with the evaluator to identify measures of outcomes, staff quickly learned "outcome thinking": a focus on outcomes and how they wanted students to benefit from the programs, leading to greater clarity of purpose for each program. With the evaluator, they tested a way

TABLE 4 Evaluation Capacity Building in Two Youth Arts Programs

Partners in Education

The Partners in Education (PIE) program was offered jointly by the Fox Valley Symphony and Appleton Art Center. This corporative effort involved hundreds of third- and fourth-grade children in public and private schools throughout the Fox Valley. During the 2008-09 school year teachers used PIE lesson plans to build on the theme "Sing Along with the Symphony: Exploring Storytelling in Opera." Students studied the operas The Magic Flute and Hansel and Gretel; listened to concertos, arias, and instrumental music; and learned about how music, art, and drama can work together to tell a story. They made opera-inspired masks, which were strung together to form a backdrop for the final performance of the symphony's season at the Fox Cities Performing Arts Center. (CFFVR, 2009, p. 4).

Intended Outcomes of PIE Program

- Increased knowledge of opera
- Ability to recognize musical instruments
- Understanding of basics of set design and use of color
- Increased enjoyment and interest in music, art, and drama

Performing Arts Touch the Hearts of Students

The Performing Arts Touch the Hearts of Students (PATHS) program was offered by the Fox Cities Performing Arts Center in collaboration with the Kaukauna Area School District's alternative school for at-risk students. Juniors and seniors attended performances, engaged in discussions, and completed projects related to the theme of the performances. During the 2008-09 school year, the theme was "Wicked Politics." Activities linked the musical Wicked to the presidential election to help students increase awareness and civic engagement. PATHS used the arts to help students think critically about the performance and link it to academic subjects. Group discussions helped students practice verbal skills, develop confidence in a group setting, and become more engaged at school. (Community Foundation for the Fox Valley Region, 2009, p. 6).

Intended Outcomes of PATHS Program

- Attendance at dramatic performances (which otherwise wouldn't occur)
- Increased interest in politics (2008-09 theme) and civic engagement
- Increased connection to peers and school
- Improvement in discussion/verbal skills
- Greater consideration of one's future

to measure selected outcomes, learning to collect data efficiently. The evaluator led a one-day training for area arts programs to share one of the YEA's publications, Guidebook for Outcome Measurement (Warner, 2009).

- *Developmental evaluation.* While CFFVR initially hired the evaluator to compile community data and teach managers to develop outcome measures, the evaluator began to take on a new role as the initiative unfolded and charted new territory that called for adaptation and midcourse corrections. The evaluator began to participate as a member of the implementation team in the role of developmental evaluator described by Patton (2011). Patton identified a "preformative" developmental evaluation purpose that addresses the complex task of creating a potentially scalable intervention. He describes this role as working "with emerging ideas and visionary hopes in a period of exploration to shape them into a potential model that is more fully conceptualized" (p. 22). The evaluator helped the team consider how to proceed in ways that enhanced the success of the initiative.

Advocacy
Advocacy was the final ingredient of the YEA Initiative. Millesen, Morariu, and Brennan (2009) suggest that "advocacy work has the potential to

FIGURE 1 Community Foundation for the Fox Valley Region Advocacy Publication

affect many more lives than direct service work alone" (p. 100), urging funders to engage in advocacy to expand their potential for impact. The foundation hoped that increased awareness from the initiative would drive broad-scale support for youth education in the arts, strengthening the arts sector and expanding opportunities for youth to participate.

Initially, the foundation planned to use several formal advocacy tools. CFFVR (2008) produced a polished, full-color report intended for a public audience and provided to statewide and national arts organizations and local school districts: "Youth Education in the Arts: Why You Should Care. What You Can Do" (See Figure 1). The report made a compelling case for supporting arts opportunities for youth, presenting selected community data, engaging case studies of youth

arts programs that had been funded, and national literature on the benefits of arts participation. A second advocacy tool for youth arts was a website that contained a wealth of information on benefits of the arts, links to important national reports and white papers, and downloadable copies of all YEA reports. Third, the launch of the website and the release of the report headlined the foundation's annual meeting, garnering local media coverage. CFFVR envisioned that partner organizations and other stakeholders would continue to advocate and organize using the data and many of the tools after the conclusion of the YEA Initiative.

Ideally, advocacy initiatives can lead to longer-term growth of a constituency or base of support, development of new advocates, stronger partnerships or alliances, and coordination of work on an issue (Beer & Reed, 2009). All were desired

outcomes of CFFVR's effort. This secondary stage of advocacy, however, was not well understood. While the public education advocacy activities by CFFVR were essential, the foundation might have found additional forms of advocacy beneficial: advocacy capacity building, network formation, and leadership development (Millesen, et al., 2009). While CFFVR had held several meetings to discuss the work of the initiative, share information, and present the advocacy tools it had prepared, it did not fully understand the developmental activities needed to sustain the advocacy movement. In addition, a formal evaluation of the impact of its advocacy work had not been built into the initial project. Nonetheless, there are important principles of such initiatives to take away from the innovative project.

Innovation for Community Impact

By undertaking the YEA Initiative, CFFVR recognized and acted on "serendipity" of the opportunity that arose (Millesen & Martin, 2013). During a time when opportunities for youth to grow through arts were threatened, a major donor provided the funds to support the arts and in doing so created a unique opportunity. While the CFFVR board could have used the funds to build its endowment and continue its traditional grantmaking style, instead the foundation seized the moment and developed several innovative strategies from which it learned and grew. The foundation pursued the YEA Initiative for three years despite turnover in staff and board.

Did the YEA Initiative lead to changes in the community and among the participating partners? Was there stronger support in the community for youth arts experiences? Although not part of the initial plan (or budget), CFFVR and the evaluator wanted to learn the impacts of its nontraditional community initiative. The evaluator interviewed grantee and CFFVR stakeholders who played a role in the initiative and observed subsequent outcome measurement efforts by the funded partners. After the three-year funding had ended, follow-up interviews were conducted with the leaders of the partner organizations. CFFVR leaders informally reflected on the longer-term impacts of this project.

While the public education advocacy activities by CFFVR were essential, the foundation might have found additional forms of advocacy beneficial: advocacy capacity building, network formation, and leadership development (Millesen, et al., 2009). While CFFVR had held several meetings to discuss the work of the initiative, share information, and present the advocacy tools it had prepared, it did not fully understand the developmental activities needed to sustain the advocacy movement.

Two of the three art agency partners cited long-term organization-level impact from the new approach to funding. The size and length of the grant, along with few restrictions, created unique opportunities and those organizations used them to conduct strategic assessments of organizational priorities. As they stated,

> This type of granting was challenging. Some grants we get are very restricted, but with this one we could do any number of things. It was a pretty big sum; with small grants we can typically just do one small program. This allowed us to think big. We needed to be analytical, but at the same time we could be creative. (Personal communication, 2010)

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

We saw this as an investment in our organization and we needed to do our research and development … to cost out our ideas and choose the best option. The YEA grant forced the issue; we had to decide about our commitment to youth education and in order to do so, we needed to re-evaluate our strategic plan. With a smaller, more limited grant, none of this would have happened. (Personal communication, 2010)

> *The large grant offered more than programmatic support; it could be strategically transformative if invested well.*

This organization developed a strategic plan to expand its focus on youth programming. For these two partners, the amount and flexibility of the funding was instrumental in compelling them to take stock of their youth programming. The large grant offered more than programmatic support; it could be strategically transformative if invested well. The third grantee did not appear to share this transformation, possibly due to the fact that it was in transition and focused on other strategic goals at the time.

One of the primary goals of the initiative was to build evaluation capacity among arts organizations to help them become self-sustaining. Based on observations of their subsequent outcome-measurement activities, this goal was partially reached. Partner agencies valued the pilot outcome measures they tracked, and learned from the data. Staff at one agency began to understand how evaluation might help them improve their programs, and became motivated to collect data on the benefits they believed their students were achieving. One staff member stated, "We had been using 'smile sheets.' Now our eyes have been opened to many other possible outcomes, even those like kids learning the etiquette of attending a performance" (Personal communication, 2010). This agency established outcome measures

for several of the other educational programs, used lessons learned to develop long-term goals for educational curriculum, and even leveraged YEA results to obtain additional grant funding. Other program outcome measures yielded some interesting insights regarding gender differences in how children experienced the program. As a result, staff discussed how the program might be changed to engage boys to a greater extent. Staff embraced "outcome thinking" and continued their focus on outcome goals as they planned for offering the program in the coming school year. However, lasting growth in evaluation capacity may prove elusive, as grantees experienced staff turnover following the YEA Initiative. In general, partner agency staff increased understanding of how to measure outcomes but inconsistent growth in the ability to implement the measures on their own. Leaders who prioritize evaluation are more likely to create a sustainable evaluation system than those who evaluate programs as a matter of compliance for funders (Alaimo, 2008). While the art organization partners worked hard on evaluation during the YEA Initiative, only one – which had less turnover – appeared able to maintain the capacity once the initiative ended.

The second expressed goal of the initiative was to strengthen collaborative relationships between the foundation and arts organizations. Without exception, all partner agencies realized that the collaborative meetings had been valuable and once the ongoing exchange ended, their individual projects became more difficult to sustain. Early in the initiative, CFFVR staff partnered at the table with grantees as they pursued the shared, community-level goal of expanding artistic opportunities for youth. According to a grantee, "the foundation changed its role; it sat on the same side of the table with us as a trusted partner." Another grantee viewed the effort as "four equal partners working together," while another called this project "unique, extraordinary, and unexpected – the CFFVR came to us with this new model that offered so many opportunities" (Personal communication, 2010).

The third and final goal of the YEA Initiative was to generate community awareness of the

importance of arts education for youth, so that the community would step up funding for local arts programs. This involved conducting advocacy among community stakeholders. For a brief time, the importance of arts experiences for youth gained increased visibility in the Fox Valley. The foundation shared a report on the needs-assessment results with nonprofit arts agencies and met with them to share information during and at the conclusion of the YEA Initiative. However, it was apparent that more structure and support might have helped them translate the materials into advocacy tools and activities.

The YEA Initiative impacted the community foundation itself in obvious and subtle ways. By experimenting with a combination of innovative strategies, the foundation enhanced its visible role as a community leader and elicited additional donations to the community arts fund. The foundation board continued to embrace the lessons it had learned about the value of the arts. The initiative may have played an indirect role in the board's subsequent decision to identify new focus areas for its discretionary funding, including one entitled Arts and Culture, whose goal is to "enhance opportunities for appreciation of and participation in visual, music, performing, and literary arts, history, and other cultural opportunities" (CFFVR, n.d.). Similarly, it became clear that the CFFVR board and staff had learned from the YEA experience through collaboration, experimentation, and key staff involvement. This included insights into what not to do and, according to one staff member, "how we would do some things differently" (Personal communication, 2014).

In the years since the YEA Initiative, the foundation has not utilized major catalytic funding. However, in development of subsequent community initiatives, the foundation created a much more intentional process (described below). In doing so, the CFFVR had institutionalized its learning. The California HealthCare Foundation, based on its experiences with grantmaking, recognized that the deepest lessons had come from collaborative processes, a willingness to experiment, and involvement by both new and experienced staff and partners (Tran and Shah, 2013). They

> *By experimenting with a combination of innovative strategies, the foundation enhanced its visible role as a community leader and elicited additional donations to the community arts fund.*

wrote, "the process of learning holds as much – if not more – value as the products of learning" (p. 28). This seemed to hold true for CFFVR, which was clearly impacted by the experience of innovation in grantmaking.

Recommendations

The YEA Initiative combined four innovations: nontraditional funding methods, collaboration among funder and grantees as learning organizations, a combination of evaluation approaches, and advocacy. There were many benefits and lessons learned through this initiative, many of which are difficult to measure. Breaking new ground, partners learned together and built trusting relationships. Several recommendations are presented here for others to consider as they attempt new and innovative grantmaking strategies.

1. *Recognize opportunities to innovate.* Given the propensity of community foundations to focus on growing the scale of their programs and relying on traditional granting processes (Millesen & Martin, 2013), it is essential that leaders look for situations where new approaches might play a role. These opportunities may come in the form of an emerging, acute community problem; the desires of a major donor; or some other unexpected alignment of the stars. Knowing that fear of controversy or of not knowing how to respond to these opportunities can hold innovation back, leaders must consciously adopt an open mind and a willingness to attempt a new, entrepreneurial approach.

Creative grantmaking, partnering with grantees, integration of evaluation approaches, and advocacy worked well together as a combined approach to address a community issue.

2. *Combine the four strategies.* Creative grantmaking, partnering with grantees, integration of evaluation approaches, and advocacy worked well together as a combined approach to address a community issue. In the present case, each strategy supported the other. Community foundations may be familiar with each one of the strategies individually, but rarely do they invest the time or resources to accomplish all four simultaneously. Doing so may create a synergy that increases community impact.

3. *Develop a clear internal process to identify and construct a community initiative.* The Irvine Foundation's Eyes Wide Open: Deciding When to Launch a Community Initiative describes a process for carefully evaluating whether to undertake this type of project (2003). Although not part of its knowledge base when establishing the YEA Initiative, CFFVR followed many steps of this process, including:

   • identifying the key nonprofit art agencies in the beginning of the effort
   • planning to track the progress of the initiative carefully through collaborative meetings throughout the three-year period
   • asking for periodic progress reports
   • solidifying board support by working carefully through its feedback and questions over several months
   • having an exit strategy by helping the partners position themselves to sustain their advocacy and evaluation efforts
   • developing projects related to the initiative that could prove beneficial beyond the immediate partners

The foundation clearly recognized the benefits of having this formal process as it established internal guidelines for future broad initiatives that it might undertake.

4. *Develop a theory of change, measurable outcomes, and an evaluation plan for the initiative collaboratively with the help of an evaluator.* While CFFVR established broad goals at the outset and developed a theory of change, the YEA partners had not collaboratively established measurable outcomes for the initiative as a whole. The YEA Initiative may have been able to articulate a measurable impact if clearer outcomes and plans had been established earlier. The role of the evaluator could have been expanded to devise and implement measures of community changes. This is especially true for the advocacy component.

5. *Assess and support the commitment of grantee leadership.* Partner selection is critical for successful collaborative efforts. The foundation chose its partners by identifying arts organizations in the strongest position to achieve a significant impact using three criteria: mission-focus on youth education in the arts, the financial stability of the organization, and the breadth of its outreach. The willingness to partner was strong, but use of one more criteria may have been beneficial: the level of commitment of the partners' executive staff and board. Once the key partners are identified, their involvement should begin early in the planning and continue throughout the project.

6. *Incorporate flexible funding agreements.* The foundation learned that flexibility should characterize the grant agreements and guidelines. The catalytic-funding approach is by nature new and different. While it provided incentives for organizations to "think big" and move beyond daily planning to strategic planning,

an element of uncertainty characterized this innovative funding method. While all three organizations participated, some were more actively involved than others and some projects eventually needed more (or less) funding than predicted initially. Flexibility to adjust funding each year, or discontinue funding to an organization not fully committed to participating in the overall effort, would have increased the effectiveness of the funding.

7. *Focus on advocacy throughout the initiative.* Beyond providing support to the key partners, the foundation deliberately involved other arts organizations at key points during the grant period. The organizations provided information and feedback, participated in the community survey, and received information on evaluation that would prove useful to all arts organizations. They discussed the potential for future advocacy for funding and support. Nineteen of the organizations attended open meetings to offer insights and commented on how much they learned from one another. They became more convinced of the importance of evaluation and of collaboration. Expanding community involvement even further might have increased the initiative's long-term impact. This could have encouraged other interested funders, donors, and community members to deepen their interest enough to become funders of a longer-term effort. Community leaders in the private and government sectors might have become more involved advocates when arts funding in school budgets was threatened. Leaders from schools participating in the YEA Initiative might have helped strengthen program. For example, the principal at the high school where one youth program was located became an enthusiastic ally for the funded partner, but only after he was asked to visit the program toward the end of the grant period.

8. *Create a specific plan for sustainability.* As noted by the Atlantic Philanthropies (2008), building a sustainable support system for change is critical to long-term impact: It must be realistic and specific, which requires that the

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infrastructure, staff, and funding is available to sustain the effort. The foundation had calculated that evaluation capacity building and initial support would provide each organization with the tools to sustain the initiative's goals. The plan was for grantees to take the ball and run with it once the initiative ended by making staff and budgetary commitments to evaluation. Similarly, the foundation hoped grantees would take a leadership role for advocacy among arts organizations for youth arts education in the community. These assumptions proved unrealistic given the workload and pressures of charitable organizations. The follow-up interviews showed that further support might have helped grantees establish this sustainability. Planning for sustainability must be part of the initiative itself.

With the long-term goal of sustaining the arts opportunities available to youth in the Fox Valley area, the YEA Initiative used a catalytic-partnership model that encouraged youth-serving art organizations to think strategically, increase evaluation capacity, and advocate. The choice to provide significant, multiyear unrestricted funding prompted a more proactive, strategic kind of thinking among grantees. Such a funding

Evaluation played a central role in this effort: it provided solid evidence for the need for the initiative, moved partner agencies toward the capacity to measure outcomes, provided support for problem-solving and planning in a developmental role, and helped CFFVR reflect on and make sense of what it had experienced and learned.

structure offered flexibility and enough security to encourage partner organizations to think "big" about their community impact. The partnership approach gave rise to very different working relationships with grantees, moving the foundation away from its traditional role to a new role of shared ownership among all the collaborative partners. Perhaps just as importantly, the experience demonstrated to CFFVR how to effectively undertake an effort to create community change. The foundation and its partners evolved as learning organizations.

Evaluation played a central role in this effort: it provided solid evidence for the need for the initiative, moved partner agencies toward the capacity to measure outcomes, provided support for problem-solving and planning in a developmental role, and helped CFFVR reflect on and make sense of what it had experienced and learned. Seeking systematic feedback and reflecting on its own work helped the foundation become even more effective in future innovations. Kramer, Graves, Hirschorn, and Fiske (2007) assert:

The field of philanthropy is undergoing a fundamental transition, from a narrow view of evaluation limited to traditional third-party outcome studies to include more performance-centered approaches encompassing a wide range of activities that provide foundations and their grantees with current information and actionable insights." (p. 10)

This wide range of activities should include developmental evaluation support through all stages of work. With emphasis on collaboration and continuing commitment to learning through evaluation, the goal of creating community change through catalytic funding seems possible. Community foundations are perfectly positioned to strengthen the quality of life in their communities through such innovative leadership.

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