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# Understanding Collective Impact in a Rural Funding Collaborative: Collective Grantmaking in Appalachian Ohio

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*Keywords: Funder collaboratives, collective impact, rural philanthropy*

## Key Points

- This article documents the history and work of the Appalachian Ohio Funders Group, a nine-member regional grantmaking collaborative committed to strategically enhancing the region's assets through leadership, networking, financial and in-kind investments, leveraged resources, and collaboration.
- The work of the collaborative is positioned within the broader context of recent publications examining funder collaboratives, networks, and collective impact as ways to address social problems, achieve economies of scale, and inspire innovation. Specific attention is given to what makes the collaborative unique – namely, the organizational diversity of the funding partners, the lack of a shared issue area, and the fluidity of work within the group.
- The findings provide insight into how meaningful collaboration takes place when funders share a love of place and negotiate the costs and benefits associated with collaborative work, and how an explicit commitment to being creative and adaptive can help a group respond to emergent opportunities.

## Introduction

This article documents the history and work of the Appalachian Ohio Funders Group (AOFG) as detailed in a comprehensive set of archives, published documents, and intensive interviews with its members and consultants. The nine-

member regional grantmaking collaborative<sup>1</sup> is committed to strategically enhancing Appalachian Ohio assets through leadership, networking, financial and in-kind investments, leveraged resources, and collaboration. The group has worked together for five years in various configurations on a number of initiatives that reflect individual organizational goals, embrace a commitment to collaborative work, and promote a shared vision for strong communities throughout the region.

A number of recent publications have offered different descriptions of relationships among and between funders working together to address shared interests. These include strategic alignments (Association of Small Foundations, 2010; Parker, 2010), collective impact (Kania & Kramer, 2011), and learning networks (Gibson & Mackinnon, 2009; Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2012; Searce, 2011; Stehling, 2014). All champion the message that collaboration is a good thing, with the potential to achieve better outcomes than if funders worked individually. Whether working together to achieve collective impact, joining forces with other funders to accomplish shared goals, networking to achieve economies of scale, or forming strategic

<sup>1</sup> The AOFG's members are the Athens Foundation, Foundation for Appalachian Ohio, Marietta Community Foundation, Ohio Children's Foundation, Osteopathic Heritage Foundation of Nelsonville, Scioto Foundation, Sisters Health Foundation, Sugar Bush Foundation, and the HealthPath Foundation of Ohio.

alignments around a common vision, these kinds of joint efforts tend to achieve similar benefits and are thwarted by common pitfalls.

The story of AOFG makes an important contribution to this growing body of work in at least two important ways. First, much of the existing work on funder collaboratives focuses on grantmaking in urban areas. For example, Ralph Hamilton's *Moving Ideas and Money* (2002) identifies quite a few funder collaboratives undertaking work in education, energy and the environment, public safety, health, transportation, and philanthropy. Many of the examples, however, are of funders working together in more metropolitan areas. Similarly, the Grantmakers for Effective Organizations' case study of the Strive Partnership (Woodwell, 2012) describes how local grantmakers are working with schools, colleges, universities, businesses, and nonprofits to improve student achievement in the urban core. Although Paul Castelloe and his colleagues studied six networks focused on creating wealth in rural communities and addressed the role of funders in a network, none of the groups studied could be considered a funding collaborative (Castelloe, Watson, & Allen, 2011).

The AOFG, with members representing corporate, community, public charity, family, and private foundations, undertakes projects mostly in rural Appalachia, an area characterized by low population density, geographic isolation, poor roads, and lack of public transportation. According to research by the Office of Policy, Research, and Strategic Planning at the Ohio Development Services Agency,<sup>2</sup> the 32 counties of Ohio's Appalachian region also have a less educated workforce, poorer health status, greater rates of poverty, and higher overall unemployment rates than the rest of the state. Moreover, as Castelloe et al. note, rural communities "have a strong sense of place; a shared culture, identity, way of life, landscape,

*While collective action often can bring about important community and social change, the lessons learned in rural Appalachia suggest that it may not be prudent to simply replicate existing models as absolute blueprints for success. Although this article positions the AOFG collaborative within the broader context of recent publications examining funder collaboratives, networks, and collective impact, none of these models (in their purest form) can completely capture the breadth and depth of the AOFG's work.*

and geography" (2011, p. 2) that is important to understand particularly if funders are going to work alongside residents on important local issues. It is this second aspect of rural communities, specifically the strong sense of place, which emerges as a salient characteristic directly influencing the work of the AOFG and shaping the relationships of those at the table.

A second contribution offered by this case study is related to existing research in the field. While collective action often can bring about important community and social change, the lessons learned in rural Appalachia suggest that it may not be prudent to simply replicate existing models as absolute blueprints for success. Although this

<sup>2</sup> The Ohio Development Services Agency provides data and analysis for the Appalachian region in particular, as well as publishing research reports on economic, demographic, and program trends in the state of Ohio. These data and reports are available online at [http://www.development.ohio.gov/reports/reports\\_research.htm](http://www.development.ohio.gov/reports/reports_research.htm)

*The context of the AOFG collaborative is also somewhat unique in that its work is not issue-based. What brings these partners to the table is not a specific task to be completed, but rather a set of shared values and a common commitment to improving place-based conditions in rural Appalachia.*

article positions the AOFG collaborative within the broader context of recent publications examining funder collaboratives, networks, and collective impact, none of these models (in their purest form) can completely capture the breadth and depth of the AOFG's work. It is a strong network of people with a broad set of shared values and a form of collaboration that is varied, flexible, and evolving. If the work done by the AOFG were to be examined through the lens of only one framework, what makes this network truly unique would be lost.

Particularly noteworthy is the investment the AOFG has made in building strong interpersonal relationships while engaging in co-learning and exploration. As a result, group members are flexible in the ways they collaborate, creative in how they leverage the institutional diversity of the group to accomplish collective goals, confident in their ability to build new identities that are separate from historical relationships, and comfortable embracing elements of a particular framework or model when doing so advances individual foundation goals, accomplishes collective goals, and improves the conditions in rural Appalachia. Rather than wasting time and energy on trying to force the specific aspects of a

prescribed model, the findings here demonstrate how the AOFG partners have evolved, and sometimes configured, in ways that not only reflect multiple models but also allow them to accomplish their work.

The context of the AOFG collaborative is also somewhat unique in that its work is not issue-based. What brings these partners to the table is not a specific task to be completed, but rather a set of shared values and a common commitment to improving place-based conditions in rural Appalachia. When the "purpose" of a collective effort (e.g., to improve student achievement) is not explicit at the onset, as in the case of the AOFG, it is difficult to determine how each partner will simultaneously advance individual organizational goals while adding value to the overall collaborative work. The findings shared here provide insight into how meaningful collaboration takes place when funders share a love of place rather than a common commitment to a specific issue; how the various partners negotiate the costs and benefits associated with collaborative work; and how an explicit commitment to being flexible, creative, and adaptive can help a group to remain nimble so that it can be responsive to emergent opportunities.

This article begins with the methods used to tell the story of the AOFG. Then, the work of the collaborative is positioned within the broader context of recent publications examining funder collaboratives, networks, and collective impact as ways to address social problems, achieve economies of scale, and inspire innovation. Specific attention is given to what makes the AOFG unique – namely, the organizational diversity of the funding partners, the lack of a shared issue, and the fluidity of work within the group, thereby adding depth and perspective to both the benefits and drawbacks associated with collective impact and joint grantmaking. The article concludes with recommendations for nurturing evolving relationships and deciding purposeful, mutually beneficial work that produces both individual and collective returns.

## History of the Appalachian Ohio Funders Group

Data used to explain the history and work of the Appalachian Ohio Funders Group were gathered from a comprehensive set of archives, including historical documents, meeting minutes, retreat summaries, published reports, and websites, as well as through structured interviews with all nine AOFG members and two organizational consultants. The average interview lasted approximately 46 minutes; they ranged from 29 to 86 minutes. Interview questions were designed to learn more about the work of the AOFG and how each of the partners thought about their roles, added value, dealt with challenges, and reaped the benefits of collaboration, as well as to discuss the overall philosophy that guided decision making.

The AOFG defines itself as “an informal group of corporate, community, public charity, family, and private foundations committed to strategically enhancing Appalachian Ohio assets through leadership, networking, financial and in-kind investments, leveraged resources, and collaboration.” Although participation is open to any foundation committed to working together to advance the region’s quality of life, today a core group of nine foundations (see Appendix A) meet as needed to identify mutual areas of interest and share what they have in ways that are focused on building strong communities throughout Appalachian Ohio.

Even though the AOFG officially took shape in March 2009, a commitment to build stronger communities and improve economic opportunities through regional partnerships among funders in Appalachian Ohio dates to 2002. At that time, as part of a grant received from the Regional Association of Grantmakers, the Foundation for Appalachian Ohio pulled together a group of 12 regional grantmakers (community foundations, private foundations, and corporate giving programs), the Ohio State Extension, and the Ohio Grantmakers Forum with the purpose of creating regional partnerships to promote the growth of charitable giving in Appalachian Ohio. This initiative, originally known as Appalachian Ohio New Ventures in

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Philanthropy, was renamed Appalachian Ohio Giving in 2003. As one interviewee observed, “in some ways, I think those early partnerships helped to set up” the AOFG.

Over the three-year period of the grant, Appalachian Ohio Giving hosted a summit to help stakeholders learn more about engaging new and emerging donors; developed a teaching tool, *The Perfect Gift* (Yeske, n.d.), to educate young people about charitable giving; created the Philanthropy Index, a tool that helped measure a community’s preparedness to grow philanthropic capital; and presented at several regional and statewide conferences. It also produced a number of publications, including *The Craft of Charitable Giving: More Than Writing a Check* (Appalachian Ohio Giving, n.d.) which offered suggestions for noncash donations with an emphasis on gifts of real estate.

*Since that initial 2009 meeting, the AOFG has expanded the reach of partnering foundations, improved information flows to and amplified the voice from local rural communities, leveraged resources of all types to address important issues in underserved communities, and cultivated peer relationships in ways that have provided professional development opportunities and enriched friendships.*

Although some collaborative work continued after the close of the grant, the idea of a funder's collaborative did not begin to take shape until 2009, when Philanthropy Ohio (then known as the Ohio Grantmakers Forum) convened a meeting titled "Responding to the Economic Crisis: Leading in Lean Times." Held in Athens County, the meeting was well attended and attracted a broad group of foundation representatives as well as a number of nonprofit and community leaders. Two important findings relative to the funders emerged at this gathering. First, it was clear that funders could and often did play an important role in building local capacity through leverage, convening, and technical assistance. Second, there was an explicit recognition that many local issues were also regional issues, and the funders wanted to explore collaborative approaches to realizing opportunities and addressing common concerns.

In July of that year, about 10 philanthropic foundations met to explore the potential of regional collaborative work. A facilitator was

hired in August and the group collaborated on its first project one year later. Since that initial 2009 meeting, the AOFG has expanded the reach of partnering foundations, improved information flows to and amplified the voice from local rural communities, leveraged resources of all types to address important issues in underserved communities, and cultivated peer relationships in ways that have provided professional development opportunities and enriched friendships. In terms of funding and financial support, the AOFG has leveraged more than \$30,000 for school breakfast programs; created a Community Health Loan Fund; undertaken a comprehensive initiative that has pooled almost \$600,000 to increase the availability, affordability, and consumption of healthy foods; contributed nearly \$10,000 to support an oral health assessment program for school-age children; provided \$110,000 over two years in operating support to Nonprofits LEAD to develop a sustainable model for providing capacity-building services to nonprofits in the Mid-Ohio Valley; and shared learning about new opportunities, partnerships, and challenges in the region. (See Appendix B). Guided by a profound belief that Appalachian Ohio has tremendous assets, people, and opportunities and by a strong conviction that the philanthropic sector is uniquely positioned to help the region achieve its goals through collaborative, strategic, and leveraged investments, AOFG members are inspired by a commitment to achieve together what they could not do separately.

In the next section, the work of the AOFG is positioned within the broader context of research done on networks and funder collaboratives to explain how the group accomplished these milestones. Special attention is given to the how the group has remained nimble, responsive, and creative while focusing its collective effort on a common desire to make a difference in the region and negotiating challenges associated with collective work.

### **The Work of the Appalachian Ohio Funders Group**

The body of literature and case study research detailing the benefits of funding collaboratives and other mutually beneficial joint arrangements



TABLE 1 AOFG's Work as a Funding Collaborative

Type	Benefits	Examples
<b>Learning Network</b>	Making local connections	Regional funders are provided with valuable sources of information, ways to extend reach, and credibility in the community
		Community foundations are able to attract money and other resources, gain access to expertise, and increase visibility of local issues
		Family and private foundations develop a deeper understanding of issues outside their funding priorities
	Bringing visibility to the region	Partnership with Appalachia Funders Network
	Developing better solutions	Shared expertise and advice about dental care
	Cultivation of a peer network	Professional development, networking
<b>Strategic Alignment Network</b>	Attracting visibility, traction, and funding	School breakfast program leverages federal dollars and shifts public policy
<b>Pooled Funding</b>	Increasing financial resources available for a specific purpose	Created Health Loan Fund; matched community grant pools; increased the availability, affordability, and consumption of healthy foods

is growing. Much of this work identifies a similar set of requirements and converges around a common set of assumptions that underlie successful collective work. The importance of planning, open communication, clearly articulated roles, a shared sense of purpose, consensus about what constitutes success, and a recognition that every member has something to give and something to gain are promoted as hallmarks of effective collaboration. Those who write about funder collaboratives in particular also point to the need for dedicated staff time to handle administrative aspects, leveling the playing field in ways that equalize power differentials (e.g., minimum funding levels, one-vote rules, executive-level participation), and the importance of learning and sharing best practices.

Although this recipe for success seems somewhat straightforward, negotiating agreement has its challenges even when all the requisite requirements are in place. Moreover, navigating the collective-work landscape can be perplexing because there are different types of collaborative arrangements, each with a slightly different set of antecedents, expectations, and outcomes. With underwriting from the Ford Foundation, GrantCraft published *Funder Collaboratives: Why and How Funders Work Together* (Gibson

& Mackinnon, 2009); the report draws on data collected from grantmakers representing organizations of all sizes to show why funders engage in joint funding arrangements, how they work, and the benefits and challenges of collective grantmaking.

The report suggests that there are three broad types of funder collaboratives: learning networks, strategic alignment networks, and pooled funds. This typology appears in other publications as well (e.g., Association of Small Foundations, 2010; Pearson, 2010). Although each report notes that there is some overlap in the three types, there is a collective sense that the categorization is useful to the field because the particular purposes or goals of a specific funder's collaborative can be met by distinctive characteristics of each type. It is important to note, however, that each of these frameworks needn't be treated as mutually exclusive models to be adopted or replicated. The work of the AOFG clearly demonstrates the utility of being flexible – picking and choosing elements of a particular model that make the most sense in a given situation. (See Table 1.)

### AOFG as a Learning Network

Cynthia Gibson and Anne Mackinnon (2009) argue that a learning network is best understood

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as a group of funders that come together for the primary purpose of sharing information and increasing knowledge. The network will typically discuss trends in the field, changes in service delivery, or policy developments that affect a specific geographic region or issue. The group might also bring in speakers, host conferences, commission research, or provide training so that collective learning takes place among all network members. Learning networks often provide a mechanism for showcasing exemplary work on important issues to a broader audience, including statewide, national, or international funders, with the hope that more funders will provide support. In addition to any financial backing a learning network might attract, it brings visibility or “voice” to an issue so that it might attract the attention of elected officials who have the capacity to inform and influence public policy.

Although it is unlikely that any member of the AOFG would describe the primary purpose of the group as information sharing, a consistent theme over the course of its five-year history is a commitment to shared learning and the

collective benefits that accrue to the individual, group, community, and region as a result of information exchange. Said one interviewee about the value of the AOFG, “one of our greatest gifts in this process ... beyond anything that has to do with funding are the resources we can share in terms of people and shared expertise.” The ability to leverage knowledge, experience, and other resources across vastly different types of foundations that are united not around a single issue, but instead around a shared love of place, points to the value of examining the AOFG as a learning network.

One particularly illustrative example of how the AOFG functions as a learning network is the Community Connections grant project, an effort by a private foundation to make grants in every county of its service area. The idea was for the private foundation to partner with a local community foundation to increase visibility in the area by hosting a series of informational workshops. The community foundation would decide the location, invite participants, and serve as the local host. The expectation was that local nonprofits would be more likely to attend if they received an invitation from the community foundation – which was indeed the case – and the private foundation would then be able to learn more about local needs. A representative of the private foundation said that when it was looking to increase geographic representation on its board, the community foundation’s executive director was asked to recommend a local person to serve. The person recommended, who had great expertise and depth of knowledge about the region, agreed to serve on the board and became a member of the grants committee. In that role, he was able to recruit other people from the county to serve as grant reviewers for projects of local benefit, thereby assuring that private foundation money continued to address real needs in the community.

In addition to these reciprocal benefits, shared learning plays out in three distinct ways, both consistent with and extending existing research in the field. First, the collaborative partners see real value in the learning and information exchange



that happens through making local connections. Regardless of foundation type, all were able to articulate multiple benefits of building relationships with people working in local communities. Second, a commitment to shared learning brings visibility to an issue. Although information sharing is most often thought of as an opportunity to learn more about how resources might be leveraged to address challenges, the AOFG has been able to focus attention on the region in ways that formally recognize and acknowledge the tremendous work being done in local communities. Finally, a culture of open information exchange creates an environment where members of the group can seek expertise and advice from others in the network. These exchanges happen regularly around a number of topics, even when the potential for funding is not part of the equation.

### *Local Connections*

In some ways, it is not hard to imagine why a regional or statewide funder might appreciate strong, collaborative working relationships with local community foundations, particularly given that two of the most important roles of a community foundation are to provide community leadership and convene residents around issues of importance to the community (Pereira, 2013). Those interviewed described community foundations as “important sources of information,” a “way to extend reach,” and as a way to gain credibility in a rural community. Regional funders also talked about local ownership as being critical to the sustainability of any kind of intervention. One AOFG member explained how the group has helped her foundation’s work:

We have a small staff and a large service area ... so we try to leverage as much as possible. ... Part of our strategy is to build relationships and to leverage what we have to give both in terms of staff time and cash resources. We see additional need in the Appalachian communities where we have worked. ... Even though we have funded in this area for over a decade, there is still outstanding need. ... I was not satisfied with where we were at in serving that population and wanted to do more, recognizing that there were a lot of folks I didn’t know in those communities. ...

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The funder’s group just led to these partnerships, which really just helped our work. ... I really tapped into that group for linkages to resources, linkages to people, and some linkages to funding.

This person also talked about the ways the local community foundations have offered credibility:

I know how rural folk are. I recognize that I don’t live in the region and may be perceived as an outsider; even though my heart is there, it really takes time to build relationships and acceptance in a community. I also recognize there are folks in those communities that have a very good base of understanding [of] what the needs are; they know where the relationships are, they know where the leadership is that can help us connect to people to help us to further our agenda, and I really see that as a key strength; and I have benefitted from that in several ways.

Another interviewee said she regards working through local community foundations as a way to achieve legitimacy and gain access to rural communities. While emphasizing that it was not her personal perspective, she elaborated on how resistance to “outsiders” is entrenched in local communities. Speaking colloquially and with intonations reflective of local residents, she characterized that resistance:

*The second way that AOFG partners benefit from a commitment of shared learning is in the ability to bring visibility to an issue. This played out in an unusual way for the AOFG. Rather than to a specific issue, it was able to bring visibility to the region.*

"You are not coming down here with your fancy Columbus money and telling us how to do things. ... Get your money out of here; every time outsiders come into the region it leaves us worse than we were before."

The community foundation representatives also saw great value in strengthening local connections. Clearly, there is the benefit of attracting money and other resources into local communities: "One of the obvious benefits," said one, "is the money we have been able to funnel into the county both through our own grant program and our collaborative work." But there are benefits beyond the obvious potential for funding. Those interviewed talked about tapping into the expertise of regional and statewide funders. Said one: "It is important for us as funders to know what other resources are out there; AOFG members sometimes know of other funders that would be willing to come to the table and help." Whether sitting across the table sharing information, talking through a grant application, or working alongside local grantees, these types of funding collaboratives expose regional and statewide funders to opportunities and challenges in local communities.

The AOFG member from the family foundation also emphasized the importance of building strong relationships with the local community:

I think it is important for those of us who are funders to know what's going on locally even if it is not in our focus area. I would not know what was going on in a particular group if I was not a part of [the AOFG]. ... I think it helps each individual foundation to set priorities. ... It helps us to see things we may not have seen.

Links to the local community can benefit all members of a funding collaborative. Community foundations get a better sense of what regional and statewide funders are doing. Regional and statewide foundations develop peer networks in local communities capable of implementing and sustaining projects. Family foundations can learn more about how others are addressing community concerns. And, as illustrated by the Community Connections initiative, the learning and the benefits are reciprocal; each of the partners often increases its knowledge and gains something substantial from the collaborative.

#### *Visibility*

The second way that AOFG partners benefit from a commitment of shared learning is in the ability to bring visibility to an issue. This played out in an unusual way for the AOFG. Rather than to a specific issue, it was able to bring visibility to the region by serving as a local partner and co-host of the 2014 annual gathering of the Appalachia Funders Network (AFN), a group of 80 public and private grantmakers working to accelerate the economic transition of Central Appalachia while sustaining the region's environmental and cultural assets.<sup>3</sup> For members of the AOFG, working with the AFN to ensure a successful conference was seen not only as a potential strategy to bring more resources to the region, but also as a way to put a national spotlight on the kind of work being done locally through collaborative public-private-nonprofit and foundation partnerships.

The 2014 network gathering, in Athens, gave 150 individuals representing 97 organizations the opportunity to learn, expand networks, and align resources in a typical conference setting

<sup>3</sup> The AFN defines Central Appalachia as the Appalachian counties in Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, and North Carolina.

and to participate in one of four site visits. Those hands-on experiences introduced participants to the ways in which value chains strengthen local and regional food systems; how university-community partnerships increase access to rural health care services and build the capacity of the region's medical workforce; how arts and tourism are part of small-town economic development strategies; and how Ohio University works with entrepreneurs and investors to build a strong entrepreneurial ecosystem in Southeast Ohio. As one AOFG member said, "It is important to make sure the work we do here is acknowledged ... and maybe we can make some connections that will help us to bring more resources into the communities we serve."

#### *Problem Solving*

Finally, shared learning helps AOFG collaborative partners develop better solutions to existing and emergent problems. One of the community foundation representatives offered a particularly illustrative example: The local dental clinic in her community was closing. Because of her work with the AOFG, she knew that oral health was a specific area of interest for at least three AOFG foundations that had already worked together to improve access to school-linked dental care. Although her community fell outside the service area of the three funders and therefore made financial support from AOFG members unlikely, she knew there was a wealth of knowledge in the group and was looking forward to brainstorming ideas for alternative care with her colleagues.

One additional benefit of shared learning, not explicitly mentioned in the literature yet certainly prevalent at the AOFG, is the cultivation of a peer network. The AOFG's peer network offers at least two distinct benefits for the group's members. First, it serves as a form of professional development, providing an opportunity for foundation staff to share best practices, network with other funders, and even build organizational and staff capacity by sharing talent within the group. As one interviewee said, "If I was a teacher, I would have other teachers to talk with and bounce ideas off of. ... This group is great for that reason." Another said,

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One of my favorite things to do is to sit there and knock off ideas with other foundations and listen to what other people are doing. ... It is unbelievable what is happening, and what I would not know if I did not sit at the table with those other people. ... It has helped me tremendously and educated me on what's here and what's available, and I have also been able to push out their information out to other nonprofits.

Said a third: "We are all part of very small staffs. ... This gives us an opportunity to network and think about our work."

A second benefit not mentioned in the literature is the bonds of friendship that develop among

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members of a group. In addition to whatever professional development and peer learning takes place, there is a circle of friends and colleagues, sharing a variety of resources including what they know, have heard, and experienced. Whether somebody has moved, taken a new job, had a grandchild, sent a daughter off to college, lost a loved one, vacationed someplace exotic (or maybe not so exotic), read a new book, or gone to a conference, the group looks forward to sharing those experiences with each other whenever time allows. "They are just neat people," said one interviewee. "I feel as if I am friends with all of them. ... It is a really nice group and we all like getting together."

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audience to the breadth of sustainable economic development work being done in a place members love; and provided advice and lessons learned to the collaborative. Moreover, perhaps because of its rural location and lack of foundation density, the AOFG network has been an important source of professional development and friendship for its members.

### **AOFG as a Strategic Alignment Network**

Another type of funder collaborative is a strategic alignment network, made up of funders that share an interest in a specific mission and a desire to commit organizational resources in ways that might bring visibility, traction, and funding to a particular issue. Hamilton (2002) explains that these networks can be informal or formal.<sup>4</sup> Informal networks are open to diverse groups of public and private funders that share a common interest in supporting a collective strategy, yet there is no explicit expectation that network participants will co-fund. In fact, members of an informal strategic alignment network often will do all their grantmaking independently; the network's emphasis is on working together to develop common solutions.

In a formal strategic alignment network, membership is more selective and there is an explicit expectation that each funder will make a financial commitment to the work. Whether the network is formal or informal – and even when there is staff to coordinate the work of the network – fundraising, network leadership, and strategic direction are member responsibilities. Funding partners adopt joint or complementary strategies and commit organizational resources (e.g., time, expertise, reputation, money) in pursuit of a common goal.

Most of the work undertaken by the AOFG does not fit neatly into either the formal or the informal category. Even so, the commitment of its members to achieve together what they could not do separately and the fluidity of their work have

<sup>4</sup> Hamilton's work highlights examples of strategic alignment networks that include the Sustainable Forestry Funders, the East Bay Public Safety Corridor Project, and the National Community Development Initiative.

resulted not only in better service outcomes, but also policy change at the state level. In what could be characterized as a formal strategic alignment network, for example, AOFG members decided to contribute time and money to assuring that young people throughout Appalachian Ohio had access to breakfast at school.

The decision took shape in May 2010, when a member approached the group with a collective funding idea that would increase the percentage of children participating in the federal School Breakfast Program in five targeted Appalachian Ohio counties (Athens, Meigs, Morgan, Muskingum, and Scioto). The project would take advantage of federal subsidies and tap into technical assistance available from Ohio's statewide, nonprofit Children's Hunger Alliance.

In September 2010, with \$10,000 in lead funding from one foundation and \$5,000 from each of the other participating AOFG members, the Children's Hunger Alliance began work to identify and eliminate barriers in schools and districts ready to increase their school-breakfast participation rates. A portion of the money was to be used to compensate the Alliance for technical assistance in the five participating counties. The remaining dollars were earmarked as "incentive funds" to help some schools or districts purchase equipment or storage for their programs. All requests for incentive funds were to come directly to the AOFG and decisions about how to allocate that money would be collectively decided.

It was expected that the project would increase the percentage of children participating in the federal School Breakfast Program by an average of at least 10 percent in each of the participating counties. Unfortunately this did not happen in every county, for reasons that ranged from schools and districts declining to participate to children shunning free breakfast for fear of being stigmatized. But as this project was being implemented, two bills were introduced in the state Legislature that essentially required schools to provide breakfast for students, thereby eliminating some of the barriers to participation (e.g., stigmatization). Several AOFG members

*Several AOFG members believe that their efforts to engage stakeholders, like the Children's Hunger Alliance, brought additional attention to the number of low-income children who were eligible but not receiving subsidized school breakfasts. By requiring that breakfast be served in low-income, poorly performing schools, the state was able to leverage additional federal funding and make breakfast available to those who needed it the most.*

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### The AOFG and Pooled Funding

The final type of collaborative funding model is a pooled fund, where multiple funders contribute to a central pool with the purpose of regranting those funds in a specific geographic area or around a particular issue. Expectations regarding minimum contribution amounts (i.e., whether everyone contributes equally) and voting rights (i.e., whether the amount of money contributed to the pool determines the number of votes) are



## *Not all AOFG members contribute to every initiative and those outside of the AOFG collaborative are sometimes invited to participate.*

often negotiated for each pooled fund. Grants made from the fund typically do not distinguish the original donor; all gifts are made from the fund. As noted by Julie Peterson (2002) in her description of the Ms. Foundation's pooled funding collaborative, "each partner contributes its resources and reputation and shares the results and rewards" (p. 1).

There are different kinds of pooled funds, with varying levels of administrative complexity, sophistication, and expectations of engagement from members. These kinds of funding collaboratives range from extremely efficient financing mechanisms, such as virtual organizations with pass-through fiscal agents and funding syndicates, to durable, highly structured arrangements among deeply engaged grantmakers that take responsibility for things such as setting strategy, issuing RFPs, conducting site visits, providing advice and technical assistance, and helping with advocacy and public relations.

While the feasibility study around oral health and the school breakfast program can certainly be considered examples of pooled funding arrangements, the AOFG has participated, in various configurations and sometimes with external funding partners, in at least four additional pooled funds with flexible participation norms unique to this network of funders. (See Table 2.) First, as part of its mission to expand health care services in communities with great need, the HealthPath Foundation of Ohio led an effort with the Finance Fund, PNC Bank, the Greater Cincinnati Foundation, and the Ohio Development Services Agency to establish a

\$6 million Community Health Loan Fund. It provides loans of up to \$250,000 to encourage the purchase, expansion, or renovation of community-based health care facilities in Ohio's low-income communities.

In another pooled funding arrangement, the Osteopathic Heritage Foundation of Nelsonville and the Sisters Health Foundation have partnered with the Athens Foundation on an initiative that has provided \$225,000 over three years to benefit food pantries in southeastern Ohio. A third pooled funding arrangement involves the Sisters Health Foundation and the Marietta Foundation in partnership with three foundations outside the collaborative (the Bernard McDonough, Ross, and Parkersburg Area Community foundations) to provide \$110,000 in operating support to Nonprofits LEAD, an initiative through the Office of Civic Engagement at Marietta College to build a sustainable nonprofit community in the Mid-Ohio Valley.

The final example of how the AOFG has participated in a pooled funding arrangement is the work to increase access to healthy food. AOFG members in various configurations are supporting programs to address the complex challenges associated with increasing the availability, affordability, and consumption of healthy foods, particularly among low-income, vulnerable members of the region. Projects range from small local efforts that provide direct hunger relief and building the capacity of programs that provide assistance, to systemwide efforts to strengthen the local food economy in ways that reduce the conditions of poverty that contribute to the high levels of food insecurity in the region. Participation is voluntary and reflects individual foundation mission and focus, target population, service area, types of grants that can be awarded, and operational constraints.

There are two important takeaways in terms of pooled funding and the work of the AOFG. First, not all AOFG members contribute to every initiative and those outside of the AOFG collaborative are sometimes invited to participate. Second, although pooled funding arrangements



TABLE 2 AOFG's Pooled Funding Arrangements\*

Partners	Project	Activities and Outcomes
AF HPFO OCF OHFN SHF SF	Feasibility study meeting oral health needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Needs assessment for Athens and Scioto counties</li> <li>• Feasibility study for development of oral health services</li> </ul>
HPFO FF PNC GCF ODSA	Community Health Loan Fund	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• \$6 million to provide loans for the purchase, expansion, or renovation of community-based health care facilities in low-income communities</li> </ul>
AF OHN SHF	Bounty in the Pantries fundraiser	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• \$225,000 over three years raised and awarded through a small grant program, Bounty in the Pantries, to enhance the capacity of food pantries in 10 rural Southeast Ohio counties and the regional food bank to obtain, store, and distribute healthy food</li> </ul>
MCF SHF BMF RS PACF	Operating support for Nonprofits LEAD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• \$110,000 over two years</li> <li>• Development of sustainable model for capacity-building services for nonprofits</li> </ul>
OHN SHF AF	Three-year, \$350,000 healthy-food-access initiative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• \$30,600 investment in system planning and assessment</li> <li>• \$17,000 to purchase equipment to increase storage and distribution capacity of local partners</li> <li>• \$335,502 to support sustainable food system implementation strategies</li> </ul>
AF OHFN SHF	Planning process to position the regional food center for growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business-plan development for operations and facilities</li> <li>• Strategic and fundraising plan</li> </ul>
OCF SHF	Meigs County Summer Feeding Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working with Children's Hunger Alliance and Council on Aging to bring summer feeding programs to nine additional locations in Meigs County</li> </ul>
AF OHFN SHF OCC	Trimble Township Youth Initiative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• \$50,000 to hire an activities coordinator to develop a comprehensive activity curriculum to promote structured safe environments for middle and high school students</li> </ul>
AF SBF OHFN SHF	Federal Hocking Local School Healthy Food Initiative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• \$20,000 to launch three-year comprehensive 3Cs Project (Community, Classroom, and Cafeteria) to leverage USDA Farm to School funding</li> </ul>
OHFN OCF HPFO SHF SF	Expansion of school breakfast programs in areas of need	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support capacity building in schools to implement new program</li> <li>• Startup expenses (e.g., carts for "grab and go" breakfast bags)</li> </ul>

\*Does not include the school breakfast program, because all AOFG members participated

Key:

AF – Athens Foundation  
 BM – Bernard McDonough Foundation  
 FF – Finance Fund  
 GCF – Greater Cincinnati Foundation  
 HPF – the HealthPath Foundation  
 MCF – Marietta Community Foundation  
 OCC – Ohio Children's Consortium  
 OCF – Ohio Children's Fund

ODSA – Ohio Development Services Agency  
 OHFN – Osteopathic Heritage Foundation of Nelsonville  
 PACF – Parkersburg Area Community Foundation  
 PNC – PNC Bank  
 RS – Ross Foundation  
 SBF – Sugar Bush Foundation  
 SHF – Sisters Health Foundation

TABLE 3 Collective Impact and AOFG

	Collective Impact	AOFG
Centralized Infrastructure	Backbone organization provides logistical and administrative support; develops sense of urgency; provides direction; identifies opportunities and challenges; mediates conflict	Philanthropy Ohio manages logistics and administration; opportunities and challenges are collectively identified; urgency, direction, and interpersonal dynamics are managed by an emergent leader around specific projects.
Common Agenda	Define and scope problem; assess the existing landscape	No single problem focuses work; love for the region brings people together.
Shared Measurement	Track progress toward shared goal; share data; integrate feedback	Accept metrics prepared by others; information sharing; storytelling.
Continuous Communication	Build trust; develop common vocabulary; share knowledge and expertise; strengthen decision-making process	A commitment to in-person meetings and informal gatherings builds trust and creates the environment for open exchange.
Mutually Reinforcing Activities	Coordinate different activities in support of an overarching plan.	Members selectively participate in those initiatives where they can benefit and add value.

are a cornerstone of the AOFG’s work, the collaborative as an entity is often not credited with the grant; rather, it is the cluster of funders that provided funding in support of a particular purpose that are recognized for their efforts. Funders, both internal and external to the network, participate only when doing so is aligned with individual foundation goals and objectives, and each funder is recognized for the contribution to whatever collective effort is pursued.

Collective Impact and the Work of the AOFG

John Kania and Mark Kramer’s (2011) widely cited work on collective impact provides examples of large-scale social change resulting from cross-sector coordination around a common agenda. The authors note that although partnerships, networks, and other kinds of joint efforts are somewhat commonplace, what differentiates collective impact from these other types of mutually beneficial arrangements lies in its centralized infrastructure with dedicated staff, a common agenda, shared measurement, continuous communication, and mutually

reinforcing activities among the participants. Since the article’s publication, there have been numerous follow-up articles, webinars, podcasts, videos, presentations, and conferences on the benefits of creating intentional processes that build strong partnerships that allow for effective solutions to seemingly intractable social problems.

Not surprisingly, the AOFG partnership embodies elements of the collective-impact model. Yet, for a number of reasons, the framework does not provide the ideal lens through which to view the work of the AOFG. In a study of restoration efforts in Oregon’s Willamette Basin, Pam Wiley and her colleagues come to a similar conclusion, discussing how the basin and its challenges might not be a good fit for the model in its “purest form” (Wiley, Bierly, Reeve, & Smith, 2013, p. 99). Even so, the authors suggest that the five elements of collective impact offer a useful way to think about, categorize, and align disparate efforts to achieve better results. Looking at the work of the AOFG through the lens of collective impact helps to clarify why it might be prudent to pick and choose, or even modify, elements of the model

most relevant to a given situation. (See Table 3.) In many ways, this case study contributes to what Wiley and her colleagues dub a “modified collective-impact framework” pointing to why some elements of the model are relevant to success and others are not (2013, p. 89).

#### *Centralized Infrastructure*

One condition of collective success is a backbone support organization that provides a centralized infrastructure. Kania and Kramer suggest that one of the prime reasons collaborative efforts fail is that no one individual or organization is tasked with the responsibility to manage the logistical and administrative details associated with collective action. They further note that backbone organizations play a key role in coordinating effort and therefore must be adept at adaptive leadership so they can create a sense of urgency, provide oversight and encouragement, identify opportunities and challenges, and mediate conflict. These kinds of centralized infrastructure organizations are an institutionalized aspect of collective-impact efforts from formation through implementation. Although the AOFG does receive some backbone support from Philanthropy Ohio, that support is primarily administrative. What makes the AOFG unique in this regard is that leadership, facilitation, and coordination are mostly malleable (similar to the pooled funding arrangements), coming together around specific initiatives and opportunities.

As part of its mission to “enhance the ability of members to fulfill their charitable goals,” Philanthropy Ohio has administratively supported the work of the AOFG since its inception. Staffers manage and execute logistics such as scheduling meetings, taking notes, distributing agendas, and managing RSVPs. They also attend meetings, provide support materials, and complete other tasks between meetings. Yet, at least from the perspective of a vice president at Philanthropy Ohio, this work is not really “backbone, organization-level” support. In an interview, she said,

Something that I think is really interesting about the Appalachian Ohio Funders Group is that there is no

*There is no central organization serving the backbone function for the collaborative as a whole. Rather, in a way that is analogous to the AOFG’s pooled funding arrangements, the backbone role flexes with and emerges around whatever issue is being addressed.*

backbone organization. ... Nobody is saying, “I am the voice and my organization is the organization from which all [leadership] stems.” They have really balanced the power dynamics. There are some people in the group who have access to a lot of resources, there are some who have to raise every penny they bring; whether that was very explicitly recognized or just organic, it is very interesting how they navigated that.

The Philanthropy Ohio representative added that “voice” emerges and the “backbone” takes shape around specific issues, and she explained how this works:

One or two members might know a little more about securing public finance and managing PRIs or food sustainability issues, so they then pull in additional partners to work on a rural health fund or planning and visioning processes to assure access to healthy foods.

The point is that there is no central organization serving the backbone function for the collaborative as a whole. Rather, in a way that is analogous to the AOFG’s pooled funding arrangements, the backbone role flexes with and emerges around whatever issue is being addressed.

*Not all collaborative partners will come to the table with a strong desire to affect change in a particular area. Sometimes, simply acknowledging the common ground and maintaining a commitment to be flexible, fluid, and responsive to emergent challenges and developing opportunities is enough to jump-start meaningful collaborative effort.*

#### *A Common Agenda*

To avoid the kinds of differences that can splinter effort and undermine change, Kania and Kramer argue, all those involved in collective-impact initiatives must establish a common agenda and develop a shared vision for the future. David Phillips and Jennifer Splansky Juster (2014) argue that establishing a common agenda, which can take months to develop, is essential if leaders are to focus efforts and maximize resources. They emphasize the importance of defining and scoping a problem and assessing the existing landscape as two key inputs to establishing a common agenda.

The AOFG did not come together around a common purpose or because there was an urgent issue that needed to be addressed. Rather, in the words of one AOFG member, “a deeply held care and passion for the region” and a collective desire to make a difference are what unites the funders in this group:

[It is] a common grounding and passion and care for Appalachian Ohio. It is not any one issue focus; it is ... the region and all of the challenges of the region and the recognition that this is something we all care about deeply, so we keep coming back to the table. And whatever it is, we are all going to work together and find a way that we can continue to make it better.

This finding supports Gibson and Mackinnon’s (2009) assertion that funders aligning to advance a common agenda or support a key organization are not the most frequent impetus for collective action. More often, people come together around commitment to learn more about how to define a common agenda. The authors further discuss how funders coming together to define an agenda will often share a grantmaking focus in a particular field (a new or growing issue), a potential solution (capitalizing on policy opportunity), a specific strategy (an approach to maximizing opportunities or tackling problems), a certain identity (improving the circumstances of specific groups), or a specified geographic area (place-based issues and opportunities).

Although a common agenda or shared vision is key to collective impact, the findings here, along with the work of Gibson and Mackinnon, seem to suggest that not all collaborative partners will come to the table with a strong desire to affect change in a particular area. Sometimes, simply acknowledging the common ground and maintaining a commitment to be flexible, fluid, and responsive to emergent challenges and developing opportunities is enough to jump-start meaningful collaborative effort.

#### *Shared Measurement*

According to Kania and Kramer, shared measurement systems that clearly express the ways in which success will be measured and reported are critical to achieving collective impact. In earlier work, Kramer and colleagues Marcie Parkhurst and Lalitha Vaidyanathan (2009) show that by developing a shared measurement

system – which they refer to an adaptive learning system – all members of a collaborative initiative can track progress toward a shared goal, provide scalable platforms to share data and learn from others, and integrate feedback in ways that facilitate continuous improvement and refine practice.

In many ways it does not make sense for the AOFG to develop a shared measurement system; after all, the group does not work on single issues behind which all members of the group are aligned. This does not mean that no efforts are made to learn the value of collective investments. Data are collected in two primary ways. First, given that as individual members or as a collective the AOFG is not always the only funder, it will accept metrics prepared for others. For example, data demonstrating the effectiveness of funding targeted at improving access to school breakfasts were collected and distributed by the Children's Hunger Alliance. Similarly, one of the school-breakfast participants submitted a grant proposal that had been prepared for the U.S. Department of Agriculture as way to demonstrate the effectiveness of money received from the AOFG. The grant application detailed the ways in which the AOFG funds were used to develop a three-year comprehensive plan to launch new food initiatives throughout the district. The AOFG accepted both of these documents as “final reports” authenticating the impact of charitable dollars.

A second way the AOFG learns about the effectiveness of its work is by listening to the stories of “the good we have done.” As one interviewee said,

We are not big on evaluations, we are not big on data; we are big on a compelling story. Tell us what difference you have made. We do not need the metrics and the charts. Ours is much more anecdotal. ... We know you can fudge around with data ..., so tell us a compelling story to get the grant and then tell us what you have learned and what, if anything, would you do differently.

This form of assessing outcomes is consistent with the group's conscious commitment to learning and co-learning. Asking grantees to critically reflect on their accomplishments and examine their approach provides funders with a unique opportunity to offer constructive feedback, collectively decide appropriate supports, and assist in planning next steps. The co-learning that occurs in these kinds of exchanges not only contributes to overall performance, it also strengthens the relationship between the funder and the grantee.

### *Continuous Communication*

Explicit in collective-impact work is the need for members of the group to trust one another and feel confident that individual as well as collective interests are valued and respected. In fact, it is argued that continuous communication in whatever form – in-person meetings, conference calls, emails, web-based platforms – leads to the kind of trust needed to establish a common agenda, agree on outcomes, and develop strategy. Although it may be more convenient and efficient to conduct regular updates using technology, the AOFG has remained steadfast in its commitment to face-to-face meetings.

The AOFG's in-person meetings are recognized by members as an important element in building trust, strengthening relationships, developing a common vocabulary, and identifying overlapping interests. Face-to-face meetings limit the number of distractions and keep people focused. As one interviewee said,

I think the importance of actually being together in person is one part that helps to build the trust, because you are there looking at each other and kibitzing about one little thing. ... Those are very important and not possible over a webinar. ... I think that is one way trust has been built up. ... Sometimes we go out together ... or we share stories about things we are interested in doing. ... Sharing outside interests helps.

*Although it may be somewhat desirable to use existing models to validate collective work, sometimes slight variations to the model offer novel insights, open previously unexplored opportunities, and raise questions from which different kinds of collaborative and impactful work can emerge. Taking time to figure out what needs to be accomplished and then structuring work around shared goals can produce amazing results that are assessed in any number of ways.*

#### *Mutually Reinforcing Activities*

Although somewhat intuitive, the notion of mutually reinforcing activities could actually be implemented in ways that do not achieve the intended effect. Inherent in the logic is that organizations coming together for the purpose of achieving collective impact will bring distinctive assets to the table. The task is to coordinate action in ways that leverage differentiated activities all focused on a common goal. Collective-impact work is interdependent, building on the efforts of others throughout the life cycle of the project. The work is most successful when individuals and institutions offer unique expertise and resources in ways that compliment and reinforce previous work, as opposed to all participants doing the same thing or taking on similar tasks.

The notion of mutually reinforcing activities is the cornerstone of the AOFG's work. Given that what brings people together is a strong affinity for the region and a collective desire to strengthen communities throughout rural Appalachia, it is not surprising that AOFG members participate only in those initiatives that reinforce individual mission-related goals and objectives. As one interviewee explained,

It is usually pretty clear what falls into your little pool of work, and people participate if it falls into their foundation's mission. If it doesn't, then they don't – it is usually pretty black and white like that. I can't think of a case where it fell into somebody's mission and they did not want to participate. ... That is kind of why we are meeting.

Although it may be somewhat desirable to use existing models to validate collective work, sometimes slight variations to the model offer novel insights, open previously unexplored opportunities, and raise questions from which different kinds of collaborative and impactful work can emerge. Taking time to figure out what needs to be accomplished and then structuring work around shared goals can produce amazing results that are assessed in any number of ways. Although he was specifically addressing how foundations might go beyond convening and providing financial support when encouraging collective impact, Doug Easterling notes that “the most effective and productive coalitions are those that emerge naturally when an existing network decides to move to the next stage of working together” (2013, p. 69). The AOFG's flexible participation norms, malleable backbone-support structure, and commitment to co-learning ensure the group remains nimble and responsive while also promoting the individual and collective goals of each of the members.

#### **Moving Forward: Lessons Learned and Recommendations**

Few would argue that over the past five years, the AOFG has not assembled an impressive list of accomplishments. Even though there have been struggles along the way, a strong commitment to do together what they could not do alone



has helped the funders to work through these challenges and share what they have learned. The story of the AOFG extends the literature on funder collaboratives and collective impact in two important ways.

First, by examining the work of the AOFG through existing models of funder collaboratives and collective impact, this case study reinforces the idea that relationships are important. Paying attention to building strong relationships among members of the group so that information flows, trust is built, agendas are decided, work aligns, and outcomes are achieved is an important first step in accomplishing shared goals. But more importantly for the AOFG, paying attention to managing the relationship each funder has to the money they are responsible for granting and to negotiating evolving interpersonal relationships that are inherently part of collaborative work emerged as important aspects of relationship building.

A second lesson learned is around the responsibility to specify purpose and clarify expectations. Beyond the familiar notions of stimulating collective learning, establishing a shared agenda, collectively deciding a common purpose, and pooling funds, the work of the AOFG highlights what Susan Cohen and Diane Bailey (1997) refer to as parallel social structures. Although their research examines work in organizational teams, the authors make clear that when people are pulled together to share their knowledge or abilities to perform a function that serves a collective benefit, it is essential to recognize that participants will have accountabilities to both individual and shared purposes. Thus, any funding collaborative will want to spend time reconciling the multiple interests of each of the partners as well as balancing the opportunity costs and rewards associated with being part of collective action.

#### *Managing New and Emerging Relationships*

In addition to managing and building strong relationships between and among the funders, there are two very different kinds of relationships funders need to recognize: the relationship

each funder has with the money it grants and managing new relationships that come about as a result of the partnership.

Funders responsible for raising money are likely to face a different set of expectations and restrictions than those who are not actively required to do so. And this tension played out in some of the interactions among AOFG members; community foundation partners in particular were quick to point out accountabilities to donors who expected “local money to stay local.” Similarly, funding cycles and the process of grantmaking differed among various funding partners, further complicating a particular project or initiative. One strategy for overcoming these challenges is to capitalize on the unique attributes of each funder. Rather than allowing constraints to dictate participation norms – community foundations are constrained by geographic boundaries, for example; statewide foundations tend to be constrained by mission – each organizational structure could be used to actually strengthen the overall work of the collaborative. As one member of the AOFG said,

We all have different federal designations, but we all do the same things, we support nonprofit organizations ... How could we capitalize on our structure to benefit organizations throughout the region? ... We have used a community foundation as a fiscal agent for lots of stuff; ... are there ways to utilize other infrastructures?

A second way to leverage organizational structure might be to overcome what has been referred to as a dysfunctional funding environment that has historically provided one-time, project-based support in the hopes of discovering a silver bullet to take out an intractable social problem. Funder collaboratives, particularly those with diverse members, are uniquely positioned to not only pool their funding around a specific problem or issue – whether through the mission focus of a statewide foundation or the specific interests of a community foundation donor-advised fund – but also to creatively use the varied funding cycles to stagger grants over a longer period. In this way, funding collaboratives would no

longer pool money to underwrite the costs of one-time independent proposals intended to address interdependent problems; they would be investing significant resources over time in building an infrastructure capable of supporting the facilitation, coordination, and measurement of collective efforts. The key is to figure out how the work of the collective might be strengthened by the uniqueness of its institutional members.

Building and nurturing strong relationships between and among members of a group is often seen as superfluous or only tangentially related to the overall success of collective goals. Yet, as Gwen Walden notes, “funding collaboratives can fail because they do not take the necessary time or allocate enough resources to creating cohesive working relationships” (2012). Kania and Kramer agree that real change can only happen when there is a “systemic approach to social impact that focuses on the relationships between organizations and the progress toward shared objectives” (2011, p. 39). In spite of those who might refer to this work as too “touchy feely” or who may not have fully appreciated the benefits of attention to strengthening interpersonal relationships and process, AOFG members spend significant time building relationships with each other, as one interviewee said, “not by the hat they are wearing, but by the person they are.”

During a recent retreat, a facilitator led the AOFG through a series of exercises to help the partners support each other in their individual and collective work and to identify areas of future work that would strengthen both the collaborative and each of the representative organizations. From the facilitator’s perspective, what stood out was the group’s need to address how relationships among each of the people at the table have evolved given that they were now talking about working together around a shared interest (which had yet to be explicitly defined). She further noted,

They need to understand themselves as a collaborative and they need to be in a relationship with each other as a collaborative, not in their historical relationships. If they are going to be

successful as a collaborative and be able to focus on a collective purpose, then they have to be in a relationship around that purpose.

This kind of relationship-building work is essential if, for example, collaboratives are to avoid challenges associated with previous relationships dictating norms around the table. Some of the AOFG members had long-established grantor-grantee relationships; others had never worked with one another prior to the collaborative. Some had been “competitors” seeking funds from one or more people at the table; others had been long-term partners engaged in collective work around salient community issues. Each of these previous relationships brought with them ascribed roles and recognized patterns of interaction. Yet in order for the group to function well as a collaborative, individual members needed to abandon those past identities and build new relationships around their shared love for the region and a collective goal to work collaboratively on issues of common concern.

#### *Specifying Purpose and Clarifying Expectations*

It seems sensible to expect any effort, individual or collective, be purposeful. From a practical perspective, why engage in activity if there is no clear understanding of why the activity is being undertaken? Even so, groups of all types have difficulty expressing shared goals and agreeing on how success will be measured. In addition, organizational collaboratives operate in what Cohen and Bailey (1997) call parallel social structures, each with established accountabilities and expectations. Therefore, those engaging in collective efforts are challenged by the need to specifically articulate how participation will produce both a return for their respective organizations and the shared goals established by the group (Easterling, 2013).

While attention to benefits is necessary, so, too, is an explicit recognition of the costs associated with collective work. Costs include material things such as resources given to the group, time spent on group work, and lost opportunities as a result of group membership as well as emotional costs such as dissatisfaction, frustration,

displeasure, and anger associated with group activity. Attention to costs was particularly salient among the community foundation partners. One community foundation representative talked about the value of time, noting that to be justified, time spent on AOFG efforts also needed to advance the mission of the foundation: “At the end of the day, you have to show your board or your donors that something came back to the organization as a result of your participation.” Another referenced the difficulty a community foundation faces in playing a “bigger role in a bigger game” when the expectation is that local money stays local. “You gotta remember where your bread is buttered,” she said.

Indeed, the need to strike a balance between costs and benefits is essential for successful collaborative work, and is particularly salient when the group coalesces for affinity reasons rather than to accomplish a specified objective. When a shared purpose (like addressing homelessness or feeding the hungry) is not what brings people to the table, it is difficult to be specific about how the community will change because the group is meeting and working together. This group came together because they are all committed to making the region a better place to live and work. They did not start out with a specific plan to engage in collective work to achieve sustainable impact. Group members must consider whether an investment of time and other resources will yield substantial benefit to their respective institutions. In these instances, funders need to be specific about how their missions dovetail with the greater work of the collaborative.

One way the AOFG has negotiated this need for balance has been to establish flexible participation norms. The group does not require all partners to contribute to every project; individual members can bring ideas or issues to the table and invite others to participate in ways that make sense for their individual organizations. As one interviewee said, “We get together, we share things in common, but then we, on the off hours, work in little projects with smaller groupings.” Another said,

*While attention to benefits is necessary, so, too, is an explicit recognition of the costs associated with collective work. Costs include material things such as resources given to the group, time spent on group work, and lost opportunities as a result of group membership as well as emotional costs such as dissatisfaction, frustration, displeasure, and anger associated with group activity.*

We found that maybe we were being too structured [by expecting full financial buy-in for every project] and it would work better if we could be a little more flexible, to invite people to talk about projects they were doing and learn whether there might be shared interest. ... Things rise up through the group: those who want to participate, do; those who do not, don't.

To produce mutually beneficial returns there is a need for balance. Individuals participating in group activities need to know that that their individuality will not be threatened by the collective and that participation is worth the effort. The task for groups, then, is two-fold. First, the work needs to be practical and relevant at the individual and collective levels. Group activity must satisfy multiple mission-related expectations and promote a range of value propositions while protecting against the uncomfortable anonymity that can be part of membership in a group. Second, there must be explicit attention to the individual costs and benefits of collective work. Openly acknowledging and discussing what each participant can offer and hopes to gain from

TABLE 4 Lessons Learned

Key Takeaways
Replication in its “purest form” is not always the best course of action.
Flexible participation norms and malleable structures encourage more involvement.
Be intentional about negotiating the costs and benefits of collective action.
Discover ways to leverage organizational diversity.
Learn about each partner’s relationship to the money it grants.
Build new identities and relationships that emerge through partnership.

participation can help coordinate activity as well as provide the greatest overall gains for the collaborative and individual members.

While it is often true that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, assembling those parts in a way that maximizes individual and collective assets can be a daunting and “agonizingly slow” process for even the most experienced and well-resourced collaborators (Pereira, 2013, p. 15). Easterling also cautions those undertaking collective-impact work against spending more time “sorting out their interests and determining a common agenda” than they do on the actual work of the collaborative (2013, p. 68). In the end, designing a collaborative means working with others to assemble the various gifts each brings to the table with the goal of doing something together that could not be done through individual effort.

As outlined in Table 4, the AOFG collaborative offers six important lessons to funders as they embark on collective efforts that engage others in community change efforts, all of which can be summarized under the general themes of intentionality and adaptation. Intentionality especially as it relates to learning more about the gifts (broadly defined) that each of the potential partners brings to the table as well as what each hopes to gain from the collaboration is essential in leveraging the collective assets and organizational diversity of the group. Adaptation is also important particularly because new relationships and identities are likely to emerge when collaborative partners come together around a shared purpose that addresses a community

issue or pursues an emergent opportunity. An intentional commitment to co-learning and flexibility provides a funders collaborative with what it needs to determine which parts of existing models are most likely to advance the specific collective purposes defined by the group.

Whereas there is certainly something that can be learned from the experiences of others, neither the process nor the ultimate result of collective work can be prescribed or standardized, thus suggesting the need for those experimenting with new ideas and approaches to share what they have learned with a broader audience. Sharing experiences, whether at a conference, in journals, or in a meeting with peers, might offer others the confidence to try something new or the encouragement to tweak existing models in ways that yield appreciable benefits in communities across the country (Wiley et al., 2013). Although the work of the AOFG may not fit neatly into prescribed collaborative funding or collective-impact models and in spite of any challenges the AOFG may have encountered and that may be ahead, its members remain steadfast in their commitment to work collectively to achieve together what they cannot do alone.

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## APPENDIX A Organization Profiles

**Athens Foundation**

<http://www.athensfoundation.org>

The Athens Foundation is a community foundation founded in 1980 by eight civic-spirited Athens women who each gave \$50 to launch the foundation. The foundation enhances the quality of life for the people of the region through building endowments, awarding grants, and providing leadership on key community issues now and for generations to come. The foundation is committed to a healthy, inclusive community where there are opportunities for all people and everyone is engaged.

The Athens Foundation believes that a healthy, inclusive community is one that preserves and expands on those things that are working well. Its decision-making process values local input, solicits diverse perspectives, inspires cooperation and collaboration, stewards valued resources, encourages self-assessment and continuous learning, and promotes shared values of trust, respect, honesty, and openness.

*Foundation type:* Community foundation

*Asset size:* \$6 million

*Grantmaking area:* Athens County, Ohio

**Foundation for Appalachian Ohio**

<http://www.appalachianohio.org/>

The Foundation for Appalachian Ohio works to create opportunities for Appalachian Ohio's citizens and communities by inspiring and supporting philanthropy so that citizens live in a region abundant with possibilities. The foundation values multigenerational responsibility, accountability, focus, optimism, learning, and love.

*Foundation type:* Community foundation

*Asset size:* \$21.24 million

*Grantmaking area:* 32 counties of Appalachian Ohio: Adams, Ashtabula, Athens, Belmont, Brown, Carroll, Clermont, Columbiana, Coshocton, Gallia, Guernsey, Harrison, Highland, Hocking, Holmes, Jackson, Jefferson, Lawrence, Mahoning, Meigs, Monroe, Morgan, Muskingum, Noble, Perry, Pike, Ross, Scioto, Trumbull, Tuscarawas, Vinton, and Washington

**Marietta Community Foundation**

<http://www.mcfohio.org>

The Marietta Community Foundation, by serving as manager and distributor of donated funds, supports philanthropy and the efforts of citizens to improve natural, human, and civic resources. An advocate for a strong and active sense of community, the foundation is attentive to today's needs, yet attuned to tomorrow's opportunities.

The foundation's vision for Washington County is to be a community where generosity and civic engagement are valued and practiced by all people to the common good. The Marietta Community Foundation focuses on the core values of service and stewardship, legacy and honor, and the power of philanthropy to transform lives and shape the course of Washington County's destiny.

*Foundation type:* Community foundation

*Asset size:* \$19.76 million

*Grantmaking area:* Washington County, Ohio

**Ohio Children's Foundation**

<http://www.ohiochildrensfoundation.org/>

The mission of the Ohio Children's Foundation is to enhance the lives of children by providing grants to support services for at-risk children and families, by helping prepare children for kindergarten, and by advocating for public policy that will positively affect children's lives. The foundation believes it is important that children be allowed to be children during their early, formative years. Children deserve to be loved and nurtured by their families, in their schools, and by the communities in which they live. Children should be free from poverty, hunger, fear, and violence. Childhood should be a time to learn how to make good choices, to explore many pathways, and to understand and appreciate the diversity in others.

*Foundation type:* Private foundation

*Asset size:* \$6.89 million

*Grantmaking area:* Ohio

**Osteopathic Heritage Foundation of Nelsonville**

<http://osteopathicheritage.org/>

The Osteopathic Heritage Foundation and the Osteopathic Heritage Foundation of Nelsonville (the Foundations) are private, non-profit foundations that share a common mission, vision and staff, while maintaining separate governing boards and funding concentration. The mission of the Osteopathic Heritage Foundations is to improve the health and quality of life in the community through education, research and service consistent with its osteopathic heritage. To achieve its mission, the Foundation proactively pursues partnerships to advance innovative solutions that demonstrate long-term, positive impact for vulnerable populations, measureable outcomes and sustainability.

*Foundation type:* Private foundation

*Asset size:* \$277 million

*Grantmaking area:* Southeastern Ohio counties of Athens, Fairfield, Hocking, Jackson, Meigs, Morgan, Perry, Ross, Vinton, and Washington



**Scioto Foundation**

<http://www.sciotofoundation.org/>

The Scioto Foundation works to improve, enhance, and enrich the quality of life for the residents of the Scioto County area. The foundation achieves its mission by practicing wise and careful investment of assets, providing a continuous stream of income to benefit community needs and the intent of donors, promoting philanthropy to all people in the region, demonstrating and promoting leadership through collaborative partnerships with community organizations, and monitoring the outcomes of its grantmaking.

*Foundation type:* Community foundation

*Asset size:* \$31.86 million

*Grantmaking area:* Scioto County

**Sisters Health Foundation**

<http://www.sistershealthfdn.org>

The mission of the Sisters Health Foundation (SHF) is to promote healthy and sustainable communities by providing resources, strengthening collaborative relationships, and supporting initiatives that impact people in the Mid-Ohio Valley. There are three priority grantmaking areas: Oral Health, Healthy Lifestyles and Health Equity.

SHF is a sponsored ministry of the Congregation of St. Joseph. The foundation continues and expands the health and wellness ministry of the Sisters of St. Joseph, after the transfer of ownership of their hospital in Parkersburg, WV in the mid-90's. The current service area of SHF reflects the service area of the hospital from which the assets of the foundation originated.

*Foundation type:* Grantmaking charity

*Asset size:* \$25 million

*Grantmaking area:* Ohio counties of Athens, Meigs, and Washington; West Virginia counties of Calhoun, Jackson, Pleasants, Ritchie, Tyler, Wirt, and Wood

**Sugar Bush Foundation**

<http://www.ohio.edu/advancement/sugarbush/index.cfm>

The Sugar Bush Foundation is a supporting organization of the Ohio University Foundation.

The foundation works with Ohio University and local communities to improve the quality of life in Appalachian Ohio by encouraging civic engagement and by fostering sustainable environmental and socioeconomic development. It envisions a new model for university-community collaboration based on equal partnership and mutual respect.

The impact of the Sugar Bush Foundation will be realized in healthy people, a growing economy, and a vibrant environment. The foundation believes in ensuring the well-being of future generations of Appalachians, collaboration, sharing Ohio University expertise with the region, sustainable development, respect for the expertise residing in local communities, resource conservation, and socially responsible investing.

*Foundation type:* Family foundation; supporting organization of the Ohio University Foundation

*Giving:* To date, the family has made gifts of \$1.6 million through the foundation

*Grantmaking area:* 32 counties of Appalachian Ohio: Adams, Ashtabula, Athens, Belmont, Brown, Carroll, Clermont, Columbiana, Coshocton, Gallia, Guernsey, Harrison, Highland, Hocking, Holmes, Jackson, Jefferson, Lawrence, Mahoning, Meigs, Monroe, Morgan, Muskingum, Noble, Perry, Pike, Ross, Scioto, Trumbull, Tuscarawas, Vinton, and Washington

**The HealthPath Foundation of Ohio**

<http://www.healthpathohio.org>

The HealthPath Foundation of Ohio was established in 1999 as a supporting organization of the Greater Cincinnati Foundation with a vision that all Ohioans, regardless of status, wealth, or circumstances, will have the ongoing opportunity to achieve their fullest health potential.

The HealthPath Foundation of Ohio addresses some of the most pressing, yet neglected, health issues faced by Ohio's indigent population – preventive oral health care and family-violence prevention. Its approach takes advantage of community strengths and empowers individuals and organizations to work together toward a common goal. The HealthPath Foundation of Ohio supports programs and strategies that are family focused and responsive to the needs of diverse populations, and that ensure integrated and comprehensive services and support.

*Foundation type:* Public charity

*Asset Size:* \$26.76 million

*Grantmaking area:* 36 counties in Ohio: Adams, Allen, Auglaize, Belmont, Brown, Butler, Carroll, Clark, Clermont, Columbiana, Clinton, Darke, Green, Hamilton, Hancock, Hardin, Harrison, Highland, Holmes, Jefferson, Mahoning, Mercer, Miami, Monroe, Montgomery, Noble, Preble, Putnam, Scioto, Shelby, Stark, Trumbull, Tuscarawas, Van Wert, Warren, and Washington

## APPENDIX B AOFG Timeline

2009	<p><b>March:</b> Ohio Grantmakers Forum (OGF) hosts "Responding to the Economic Crisis" in Athens.</p> <p><b>July:</b> OFG convenes regional funders.</p> <p><b>August:</b> Appalachian Funders Work Group is formed; external facilitator is hired.</p> <p><b>November:</b> Group establishes themes: children, health, and education.</p>
2010	<p><b>August:</b> Name is changed to Appalachian Ohio Funders Group.</p> <p><b>September:</b> AOFG funds school breakfast programs and dental-services feasibility study.</p>
2011	<p><b>July:</b> AOFG quarterly meeting locations will rotate; each member will host and be "in the spotlight."</p>
2012	<p><b>September:</b> Community Health Loan Fund established in partnership with the Finance Fund.</p>
2013	<p><b>April:</b> Farm to School Project – Federal Hocking Schools.</p> <p><b>May:</b> AOFG planning retreat.</p> <p><b>June:</b> Meigs County summer feeding program launched.</p> <p><b>July:</b> Healthy Food Access Initiative launched.</p> <p><b>November:</b> Bounty in the Pantries – \$75,000 in grants awarded.</p>
2014	<p><b>April:</b> AOFG hosts AFN biannual conference.</p> <p><b>May:</b> Operating support to Nonprofits LEAD.</p> <p><b>November:</b> Bounty in the Pantries – \$75,000 in grants awarded.</p>
2015	<p><b>November:</b> Bounty in the Pantries – \$75,000 in grants awarded.</p>