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Designing for Emergence: The McCune Charitable Foundation Grows Agency Across New Mexico

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Introduction

“It’s obvious they have the answers, so they don’t need us.”

This was William Keator in his recent Center for Effective Philanthropy blog post, describing the reaction of a grant writer to a logic model presentation by a program director at a large foundation (Keator, 2018, para. 13). Theories of change and related logic models are a core element of strategic philanthropy (So & Capanyola, 2016; Brest, 2012), but, as Keator relates, this well-intentioned effort on the part of foundation program staff to spell out the strategy behind an investment can leave grantees feeling a loss of agency. *Which box can I fit in to get funded?* Ford Foundation President Darren Walker (2014) described how, in his previous experience as a grantee, he “sometimes felt imprisoned by logic frameworks” (para. 4).

As these quotes illustrate, there is an inherent power imbalance in the grantmaker/grantee relationship. The impact of that power imbalance has come into particular focus as equity and justice have become a greater priority for philanthropy.¹ Which grantees get selected and what constraints are placed on them are decisions held by those who provide the funding. What would it take to right this power imbalance? Should funders relinquish the right to define goals and a strategy? Does it mean that funders should just hand over a check and walk away?

Key Points

- The impact of the inherent power imbalance in the grantmaker/grantee relationship has come into particular focus as equity and justice have become a greater priority for philanthropy. This article looks at the example of the McCune Charitable Foundation, which deliberately designed an emergent strategy approach that establishes clear goals and then created a platform to permit a reversal of that power dynamic, so that leadership for priorities comes from those closest to the work.
- The authors launched a two-year project to research what emergence might look like in seven complex social-change initiatives, and how the strategy could grow agency and create more sustainable solutions in dynamic environments. When the leaders of these initiatives focused on creating the conditions for local leaders and nonprofits to decide what strategies to pursue, it tended to spur unanticipated approaches that responded to needs and opportunities in diverse, changing environments. At the same time, funders were able to establish goals while promoting “a marketplace of ideas.”
- The McCune story illustrates how moving from a prescriptive strategy to an emergent one can shift the power imbalance between grantmaker and grantees, expand agency and ownership for complex social change, and potentially create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

¹ For more on this subject, see the *Stanford Social Innovation Review's* “Power in Philanthropy” series, available at https://ssir.org/power_in_philanthropy#

The authors think about the grantmaker/grantee power imbalance from the perspective of complex adaptive systems (CAS) research, which asks, What is the difference between those systems that are able to adapt to change at a scale that is faster than evolution and those that are not?

Kania, Kramer, and Russell (2014) took on the problem of prescriptive strategic philanthropy by proposing an alternative emergent strategy approach. Their article, “Strategic Philanthropy for a Complex World,” set off a debate over whether grantmakers should continue to declare outcomes or let them emerge through a collective effort. In his response, Ford’s Walker (2014) argued that funders must still focus on outcomes, but without being doctrinaire about strategies; and discussed the need for a marketplace of ideas to ensure that the best idea prevails.

In an article two years ago for *The Foundation Review*, authors Darling, Guber, and Smith (2016) advocated for thinking about the grantmaker/grantee relationship in complex social change as akin to a team sport, where success depends on the intelligence and agency of every player on the field, instead of as a chess game, where the chess pieces have no agency. In this article, the authors offer an example of a foundation that has deliberately designed for emergence, establishing clear goals and then creating a platform — its Zone Grants — to allow grantees to think together about the best way to achieve these goals in the richly complex environment of New Mexico.

The Role of Emergence in Complex Social Change

The authors think about the grantmaker/grantee power imbalance from the perspective of complex adaptive systems (CAS) research, which asks, What is the difference between those systems that are able to adapt to change at a scale that is faster than evolution and those that are not? CAS researchers study how individuals — agents — inside of a system behave as they go about pursuing their own goals, and how that produces behavior in the larger system that is richer and more complex than what any individual could produce alone (Holland, 1995).

The authors launched a two-year exploratory research project to better understand what emergence might look like in complex social-change initiatives and how it could grow agency and create more sustainable, environmentally fit solutions in complex and dynamic environments. With funding from the William and Flora Hewlett, David and Lucile Packard, and John S. and James L. Knight foundations, we chose seven very different cases to study — from a small, neighborhood-based community services initiative to a multicontinent health initiative. Each initiative was scanned for results that emerged from the efforts of a diverse set of agents, that were attuned to their different and changing environments, and that continued beyond the life of the initiative or its funding (Darling, Guber, & Smith, 2018).

When the leaders of these initiatives focused not on orchestrating action themselves, but instead on creating the conditions for the larger community of agents (e.g., nonprofits, local leaders) to make their own decisions about what actions to take, it tended to spur a variety of activities that had not been imagined when the initiative was launched and that responded to the needs and opportunities in diverse and changing environments. In the cases studied, leaders of the most emergent initiatives held a clear line of sight to a goal, but did not require every agent to commit to a particular strategy or to developing a predetermined set of skills. In fact, initiative leaders

often encouraged the community to develop their own ideas and funded experiments to test those ideas.

Nearly every initiative leadership team made maintaining relationships across the whole ecosystem a deliberate priority. One funder described how it was through maintaining strong relationships that she and her intermediary partners were able to allow community members to bring their own perspectives, creativity, and energy to identifying the most important local problems and developing creative solutions that made sense in their own environments.

Participants in the most emergent initiatives took steps to support a particular type of learning. To differing degrees, they created a way for individuals to communicate to peers as easily and regularly as possible —“Here’s what I saw, here’s what I did, and here’s what happened as a result,” and a way for the community of peers to compare these stories, begin to see patterns, and make meaning from them so that everyone would be able learn from their collective results in order to strengthen the thinking and actions of the whole system (Darling et al., 2018).

From comparing and contrasting cases, the authors developed an emergence hypothesis: If initiative leaders focus on making sure there is strong line of sight to a clear and shared goal, and a platform or process that helps its partners on the ground develop and test their own strategies around how to achieve it (freedom to experiment) and learn from each other’s results (returning learning to the system), then the whole system will achieve results that are nonlinear (a whole greater than the sum of its parts), environmentally fit, and sustainable.

What might it look like in practice if a funder chose to deliberately design for emergence? Taking the ideas developed through this research, the McCune Charitable Foundation has begun to deliberately change how it designs its grantmaking to promote emergence.

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McCune Grows Agency Across New Mexico

The McCune Charitable Foundation is a small, private, family foundation, located in Santa Fe, New Mexico, whose overall mission is to enrich the health, education, environment, and cultural and spiritual life of New Mexicans. In 2015, several forces turned an anticipated short-term decrease in McCune’s distributable funds into the right moment for a transformation in its grantmaking. Realizing that the foundation plays a critical role in catalyzing much-needed change in New Mexico, the board mandated staff to further focus its priorities to increase systems-level impact, even as grantee funding was being reduced. The McCune staff also had begun to sense that their interactions with grantees were too funder-centric and transactional to evoke the creative solutions their grantees were capable of producing. Staff members were frustrated by missed opportunities as they heard only incidentally about partnerships and places where synergies existed.

These conditions and insights led the McCune staff to invite current and past grantees to two large convenings designed to explore their openness to thinking and working in an ecosystem framework. They defined their “ecosystem” to include community members; staff of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), government and tribal agencies, funders, and businesses; and

Foundation staff understood that if the goal was to move away from transactional grantmaking, they were going to have to rethink their own practices. They would need to stop focusing on individual transactions, including how they convene, and start to see the work as a more intentional, long-term arc; and they would need to learn from and about the process along the way.

community organizers and advocates. Through these convenings, the McCune team sought to create opportunities for all participants, including foundation staff,

to see themselves as part of an interconnected ecosystem, with opportunities for participants to make the connections between their work more visible and to network across organizations and sectors, and to learn from participants the challenges and opportunities presented by working together as part of an interconnected ecosystem. (Hagerman, 2018, p. 2)

These two convenings led McCune to as many insights about itself as a funder as it learned about its grantees. Foundation staff understood that if the goal was to move away from transactional grantmaking, they were going to have to rethink their own practices. They would need to stop focusing on individual transactions, including how they convene, and start to see the work as a more intentional, long-term arc; and they would need to learn from and about the process along the way. They would need to commit to work with their grantees to design the next

phase of grantmaking and implementation, and to invite grantees to be learning partners along with them.

McCune staff realized that if their aim was to better understand the intersections between the work of their grantees, they needed to become aware of their own mental models and blind spots and actively change their own way of working together, seeing themselves as an ecosystem. They made numerous process changes to reflect that shift. For example, because their current application format gathered information solely about each individual grantee and each project, with no place to reveal or support interdependencies and synergistic opportunities, applicants were presenting their work in a one-dimensional way to fit the requirements of the grant application process. In response to grantee feedback, staff began reinventing that process to elicit a more dynamic and comprehensive awareness of what their grantees were proposing.

The resulting shifts were noticed and acknowledged by grantees such as Eileen Everett, executive director of the Environmental Education Association of New Mexico:

I have watched the McCune Charitable Foundation actively listen to communities and respond with such thoughtful, intentional changes to the grant making process.... The opportunity to apply for general operating funds has been invaluable in allowing us to grow our efforts and seek out paths for greater systemic impact.” (Personal communication, August 29, 2018)

A Defining Moment: Shifting the Power Dynamic

In addition to the large convenings, McCune held a smaller, regional convening in Las Cruces, New Mexico, in November 2017. “It was in this event that we flipped the dynamics of our group meeting format to one less about [grantees] presenting to the funder and more about coming together to learn from each other’s work,” reported McCune Associate Program Officer Allison Hagerman (personal communication, September 20, 2018). The two-hour meeting allowed each of 16 participating nonprofits to share defining moments in

their work from the past two years and reflect on patterns and shared themes across the stories.

Staff experienced firsthand the usefulness of creating new conditions with grantees to better see and interact with them in the larger system of which they all are a part — the southeastern region of New Mexico — and how sharing information about what was being funded and about recent successes and failures might promote deeper partnerships. They saw that by creating “zones of agreement,” grantee organizations with different missions could work toward common goals, often with unlikely allies.

In the Las Cruces convening, several grantees asked McCune to convene them with more funders to showcase how they were working together to address big problems. Wendy Lewis, McCune’s executive director, replied that the foundation would not organize the convening, but, if the grantees did so, McCune would participate. Eleven months later, the foundation was invited by these grantees to the Grant County Community Conversation, a showcase for funders to learn about projects happening in the region. There were 102 attendees from 52 nonprofits and 11 funders from the region. One \$20,000 grant, voted on by all attendees, was awarded to the group that presented the best proposal.

By 2018, the inquiry that started McCune’s journey had now evolved into the following hypothesis: If we co-create a more aligned, collaborative, and integrated civic sector, then we will support greater resilience and prosperity in New Mexico communities (Hagerman, 2018).

McCune wanted to reverse the power dynamic between funder and grantee, so that leadership for priorities came from those closest to the work and most affected by it. The foundation identified one of its success indicators as funding collaborative activities that are initiated by grantees and community members who then invite the foundation, among other funders, to the table. Heartened by the changes they were seeing, staff continued their inward-facing learning discipline with regular, semi-annual vision checkpoints and

“We have nine programmatic focus areas that we used to fit grantees into. We stopped doing that,” said Henry Rael, McCune’s program officer. “Instead of wrapping community around those focus areas, we put the community and what they need at the center.”

the monthly “line-of-sight” meetings to continue to connect day-to-day work with their larger goals and mission. Together they created the intention to look at everything they do and ask, “Are we actually doing that or not?”

“We have nine programmatic focus areas that we used to fit grantees into. We stopped doing that,” said Henry Rael, McCune’s program officer. “Instead of wrapping community around those focus areas, we put the community and what they need at the center” (H. Rael, personal communication, September 20, 2018). Now that its perspective had shifted to addressing transformational issues together, McCune could see that no single grantee or single funder, however successful or competent, could create the kind of change on their own that was needed to move New Mexico forward. These realizations led to the creation of the NM Collaborative Zone Grant.

The Zone Grant Emerges

The NM Collaborative Zone Grant establishes a shared, multiyear funding structure in which multiple grantmakers can invest across different missions and funding priorities, with a focus on funding self-organizing collaborations of nonprofits.

Recognizing that funders often lead collaboratives with their own programmatic

This grant structure supports multiple nonprofit organizations to self-organize and apply together for single planning grants around the questions that matter the most to them.

approaches, which can be challenging given varying funding priorities, McCune and its funder partners started with a grant structure and developed agreements in advance on principles that could be applied to whatever the programmatic area might be. In the funder agreement document (McCune Charitable Foundation, 2018), the collaborative members addressed such topics as level of participation, shared reporting, and decision-making by consensus, regardless of the amount contributed. They stipulated that all grants would be for general operating support. The shared reporting process, to be co-developed with the NM Collaborative Zone Grant funders, would now also serve as the application for the subsequent implementation grants.

The agreement allowed funders to participate in a flexible, shared structure with multiple entry points; choose how deeply they wanted to participate; and then self-select and recruit others into smaller funding collaboratives to support a “marketplace of ideas.” The grant structure agreement “freed us to come together around the important focus questions that matter to each of us ..., and the proposals came in addressing those questions” (Rael, personal communication, September 20, 2018). Lewis, McCune’s executive director, added that “the Zone Grant structure now allows us all to test multiple hypotheses, both in the funder and grantee approach” (personal communication, September 20, 2018).

When Santa Fe Community Foundation (SFCF) heard about the Zone Grant, it responded

immediately. The foundation’s president and CEO, Bill Smith, remarked that

[T]his new initiative has involved all of us in coming together to fund collaborative initiatives around the nonprofits that are seeking systemic solutions. ... We are working together as funders in the same way we’re asking the grantees on the other end to work collaboratively with others to address the entire gamut of issues that are part of the solution. (Personal communication, September 27, 2018)

This grant structure supports multiple nonprofit organizations to self-organize and apply together for single planning grants around the questions that matter the most to them. In just one of the five Zone Grant focus areas, affordable housing, funders were so impressed with three of the cross-sector proposals that they tripled their commitment, funding three planning grants instead of one:

1. HomeWise and its six partners came together to define a “spectrum of housing” for Santa Fe, New Mexico, and align their efforts to serve the entire spectrum, providing services that ranged from emergency housing for the homeless to mortgage assistance for low-income families seeking to buy a home.
2. The Santa Fe Housing Action Coalition is working to identify policy change opportunities within the city of Santa Fe and Santa Fe County to create leverage and momentum to address the housing crisis there.
3. The Chainbreaker Collective is investigating the possibility of creating a land trust development in Santa Fe that will include permanent affordability for the housing units developed within it.

Zone Grant funders turned their goals into framing questions to clearly invite everyone’s thinking and innovative ideas. The collaborative proposals were the applicants’ response to these questions. For example,

- What will it take for affordable housing to become a more equitably accessible and available resource in Santa Fe?
- How can vulnerable families be supported to overcome the barriers they face in building assets and wealth?
- How might organizations work together to connect “direct services” provision to broader policy change for the benefit of vulnerable New Mexican families?

Participating funders will fund a minimum of three implementation grants beginning in the fall of 2019.

A Whole Greater Than the Sum of Its Parts

The Zone Grant RFP generated several important unanticipated results which, taken together, were early indicators to McCune that other funders were also interested in strengthening the grantmaker/grantee ecosystem. Across the board, funders increased commitments from their original offers, and the effort attracted additional funders to support more planning grants. McCune originally had commitments from three funders — itself (\$125,000), SFCF, (\$35,000); and the Thornburg Foundation (\$50,000) — for a total of \$210,000. Within several months, they added two funders — the Nusenda Foundation (\$30,000) and the Solidago Foundation (\$50,000) — and saw increased commitments from McCune (\$205,000), SFCF, (\$45,000), and Thornburg (\$55,000), for a total of \$385,000. In early 2019, the Turner Foundation contributed \$20,000 as an adjacent funder for energy transition work.

Robin Brulé, chief community engagement officer for Nusenda Credit Union, observed that “investment-ready systems change efforts are rare. Strategies, capabilities and partnerships have to be built, taking into account the challenges along the way.” Brulé said she believes the Zone Grants will lead to different outcomes through this self-organized collaboration: “Philanthropy shouldn’t call the shots. We need

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to continue to work on creating new cultures and structures. ... You can’t co-create if you’re not willing to explore and listen to other perceptions and realities” (personal communication, October 10, 2018).

The Thornburg Foundation has historically made its own funding decisions, but joined the Zone Grants because, as Bryan Crawford-Garrett, Thornburg’s food and agriculture policy officer, said,

This is a different type of opportunity to further the systemwide change that we’re looking for in our food and agriculture work. ... We are hoping that this will provide a mechanism for other funders to see the value of it and that it fits within their priorities. (Personal communication, September 27, 2018)

Thornburg also tripled the amount of planning grant dollars, due to the high quality of the applications received and reviewed together, Crawford-Garrett said: “We were all very impressed with the level of proposed collaboration and the types

Additional changes they have made include creating new types of strategic grantee convenings. Based on grantee feedback, their introductory roundtables for new grantees are no longer one-way information exchanges. “They are now dialogues that allow grantees to connect with us, but also with each other, to share challenges and opportunities,” said Hagerman.

of organizations that would be working together at a pretty wide scale.”

One of the biggest challenges McCune has discovered is getting people to invest the time it takes to collaborate. But once people actually do come together, McCune found that the payoffs are significant. Cathy Kosak, McCune’s senior executive assistant, observed that “there’s a completely different vibe now with people involved in these collaboration grants. They’re much more at ease, friendlier, with their purpose for being here already known. They know that something is getting accomplished; it’s always moving forward” (personal communication, September 20, 2018).

What McCune and Its Partners Are Learning

Partner funders have realized that “in order to invest in collaboration, we all need to do the work together, co-creating the structures, co-deciding, co-communicating and eventually co-branding,” commented Ernesto Torres, McCune’s grant coordinator (personal communication, September 20, 2018). McCune staff worked with the two other state-based partner

foundations to create a shared RFP with focus areas specific to each funder, as well as shared review processes. They also worked together to select proposals and establish further shared structures around reporting, technical support, sharing learning across the funded cohorts, and creating pathways for other grantmakers funders to join the funder group.

While the Zone Grant is only in its first year, McCune and its partner funders have already seen a noticeable improvement in the quality of grant proposals, including a higher level of shared vision for the work. Key relationships and connections are now visible and can be supported to increase community resilience. Torres observed that

[P]roposals received in response to the Zone Grant RFP collectively revealed a deeper engagement in a thinking process, focused through the framing questions. Yet the diversity of ideas and approaches provided real choice with regard to experimentation within the context of the Zone Grant hypothesis. Additionally, because of the breadth and variety of communities involved, the patterns, relationships, and opportunities that emerge provide learning that could be integrated into activities beyond grantmaking. (Personal communication, September 20, 2018)

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Learning Into the Future

As McCune staff have become more aware of the work and unique perspectives of both their grantees and partner funders, they are broadening their understanding of what it takes to accomplish change intentionally and respectfully while keeping the “why” behind the change at the heart of their work. Wendy Lewis observes:

Learning about and getting better at collaboration and returning that learning to the system is an outcome in itself for the Zone Grant structure across all funding questions. How can we all — funders, grantees, and the communities we serve — learn together and from each other so that we get better at collaboration as we increase our impact and effectiveness over time? That is our “North Star.” ... The Zone Grant is a great opportunity for McCune to learn more about how to deepen our leadership in emergence and defining “outcomes” without being a prescriptive funder, so that we support and fund community-driven resiliency and prosperity. (Personal communication, October 15, 2018)

Designing for Emergence

As noted at the outset of this article, prescriptive strategic philanthropy can feel constraining to grantees who sense a need to fit into neat logic models to get funded — especially when the work to be done is complex and the problems are dynamic. The McCune story illustrates how moving from a prescriptive strategy to an emergent strategy holds the potential to shift the power imbalance between grantmaker and grantees, to expand agency and ownership for complex social change, and, potentially, to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

The authors do not propose that emergence is always the best way to approach social change. Funders should look to other strategic approaches when the problem is straightforward (perhaps complicated, but not complex) and the solution is replicable; when the issue being tackled is urgent and requires immediate and coordinated action; or when a funder requires commitment to specific strategies in advance or is looking to brand a solution. In the research study, initiatives were aiming to address such complex and fluid challenges as reproductive health in Nigeria, Ethiopia, India, Pakistan, and the Philippines; social resilience in a mostly immigrant community in Toronto, Ontario; and gender violence in South Africa’s Vaal Triangle. When taking on challenges like these, if funders aspire to tap into the creative energy and ideas of everyone the ecosystem, where should they start?

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Start With a Clear Goal

The research included examples of initiatives for which the goal had been defined by a funder and yet created results that were emergent because of how the initiative was designed or implemented to promote experimentation and learning. In both the research and practice, the authors have seen the alternative — leaving goals undefined with the expectation that they will emerge in an unstructured way — translate into long, frustrating months of effort, frayed relationships, and accentuated power dynamics. The paradox of emergence, as predicted by CAS theory, is that it requires some structure to measure success; a guidepost or “North Star” to give people some way to learn from their experiments (Spear & Bowen, 1999; Darling, Parry & Moore, 2005). And, as the Ford Foundation’s Walker noted, foundations do have a responsibility to the social issues they have committed to tackle.

McCune’s approach demonstrates the power of involving the whole ecosystem in developing goals in a structured way. It asked: What is most urgently needed? Where are the most pressing gaps between what is needed and the resources available to address them? As this story illustrates, the more personally compelling a goal is, the more people will be drawn to join in and

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invest their own energy, creativity, and time to help to close the gap. McCune says that its next step will be to source Zone Grant questions from the community.

McCune did something else that invited a diverse set of voices into the design process — it asked questions: “What will it take for affordable housing to become a more equitably accessible and available resource in Santa Fe?” Translating a goal into an open-ended, forward-focused, and actionable question is a simple but important way to communicate that an initiative is intended to be emergent. It keeps the goal front and center, but also communicates that the journey is one we are on together and that everyone’s thinking is welcome and needed (Darling et al., 2016).

Investing in emergence also means investing in relationships. The shift McCune has made to inviting collaborating nonprofits to propose solutions together has shifted the relationship between grantees and between the foundation and its grantees. The research suggested that the stronger the relationships among actors in a change initiative, the easier it is to develop and maintain strong line of sight, give everyone the freedom to experiment with different pathways to get there, and to talk honestly about what is working and what is not. Where relationships were at arm’s length or strained, people reported feeling less freedom to speak their mind or take risks.

Create a Platform for Agency and Experimentation

A key piece of McCune’s design was creating Zone Grants, which became a platform for grantees to develop creative solutions in partnership and to bring their best thinking to McCune and its partners to fund. In the research cases, data platforms, hosting and supporting networks, and sometimes just the physical space to gather created a platform — a place or process that invited people to engage with each other and self-organize in ways that created new, out-of-the-box ideas that no one person could have thought of on their own, and that created ownership for solutions and for making sure that what was being created would continue to serve changing needs and conditions.

As illustrated by McCune’s Zone Grant process, members of the ecosystem could think together about experiments to try out and, later, have a place to come back and learn together from results. As CAS theory would predict, the more the activities of the whole can become visible to everyone, the more quickly useful patterns will emerge and the more quickly people will be able to learn from each other, and, ultimately, demonstrate emergent results.

Be Thoughtful About How to Evaluate Emergence

The research did not focus directly on evaluation, but did propose a few directions for funders like McCune and its collaborative partners to pursue. If the funder’s strategy in an emergent initiative is to create a platform for grantees to create their own strategies, then in addition to measuring the impact of the portfolio of grants, the evaluation might also focus on the effectiveness of the platform created. Is it growing agency and ownership? Are a diverse set of voices being included? Is it producing strategies that the funder could not have anticipated? Are those strategies coming from a more diverse set of grantees and partners? Are they environmentally fit and likely to be sustainable? How strong are the grantmaker/grantee relationships? What is contributing to that and what difference is it making?

For McCune, since the NM Collaborative Zone Grant program was launched only in mid-January 2019, funders are not yet expecting to see indicators of social impact in the communities they fund or in which their grantees have targeted interventions. Early results have included increased investment from other funders and some early indications of increased grantee satisfaction. They have also observed that the funders' collaborative is looking for ways to become independent from any one of the funders, and is already establishing its identity as a new approach to community change. In the first convening between grantees and funders, grantees demonstrated increased agency as they actively and explicitly negotiated the funders' role and how funder behaviors can impede or support their impact.

Early indicators that they expect to see relate to how collaboration and partnerships among grantees and between grantees and funders are changing. They will study if and how agency (local responsibility and leadership) increases among the community collaboratives, and how new partnerships form and evolve in response to their learning across the whole Zone Grant community. Ultimately, funders expect to see greater resolution of issues that have persisted in the community and new insights and behaviors around collaboration and partnering for social change. McCune also expects to see new types of funding inspired or initiated by the collaboratives and greater breadth and depth in funder participation, e.g., an increase in the number of funders and in what they are willing to fund. For grantees, the research suggested that a more participatory approach to evaluation would help the ecosystem see and learn from its results, ideally closer to real time. What results are we creating and what is contributing to those results? McCune has asked its collaboratives to articulate explicitly their markers of success and plan to track how they are succeeding against these markers.

Focus on Your Own Leadership Practice

In both the McCune story and the research cases, one of the most powerful actions a leadership team could take was to “be the change you want

In the research, a common characteristic of the most emergent initiatives was humility — a recognition that initiative leaders could not know enough to solve these complex problems alone; that the best ideas might come from the diversity of voices they had invited into the conversation.

to create in the world.” In other words, if an initiative design called for strong relationships between external partners, in the most emergent initiatives, leaders focused on building strong relationships internally as well. If the initiative called for experimentation and returning learning to the system among external partners, leaders also made it a priority internally.

Initiative leaders should look honestly at how the ways they approach their own work now reinforce the status quo. In the research cases, even though the leaders called for emergence, sometimes the way their initiatives were designed produced the opposite result. In the case of McCune, the staff took to heart the changes they were trying to make in their relationships with grantees and asked themselves what they were doing that needed to be changed to make this happen.

In the research, a common characteristic of the most emergent initiatives was humility — a recognition that initiative leaders could not know enough to solve these complex problems alone; that the best ideas might come from the diversity of voices they had invited into the conversation.

Conclusion

Creating sustainable impact in complex social-change efforts is truly a community effort. It requires humility and curiosity and a

commitment to experimentation. In this article, the authors have offered an example of designing from a different perspective — that of emergence, grounded in complex adaptive systems. The article offers an example of how a funder (or collaborative of funders) can establish a goal and still promote “a marketplace of ideas,” as called for by Darren Walker (2014). It suggests that initiatives that focus on bringing a diverse set of perspectives to not just implementing solutions, but also to defining the problem and searching for creative solutions that no one organization could have designed a priori, has the potential to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts — solutions that will continue to evolve to fit their evolving environments in sustainable ways. McCune’s aspiration for this experiment in collaboration and agency is to build a greater understanding among New Mexico’s community of funders about of how its community systems work and how to build more adaptive and resilient communities.

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