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The Foundation Review is the first peer-reviewed journal of philanthropy, written by and for foundation staff and boards and those who work with them implementing programs. Each quarterly issue of *The Foundation Review* provides peer-reviewed reports about the field of philanthropy, including reports by foundations on their own work.

Our mission: To share evaluation results, tools, and knowledge about the philanthropic sector in order to improve the practice of grantmaking, yielding greater impact and innovation.

The Foundation Review is a proud product of the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University.

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Statement of the Editorial Advisory Board

We believe that the forthright sharing of information among foundations and nonprofits builds a knowledge base that strengthens their ability to effectively address critical social issues. We encourage foundation donors, boards, and staff to honor this transparency in their own practices and to support others who do so.

Editorial

Dear readers,

Teresa R. Behrens, Ph.D.

One of the critical components of foundation effectiveness and long-term impact is the ability to learn as organizations, beyond individual staff learning. This type of learning is already difficult, and when you add the complexity of working within systems and networks while trying to change them at the same time, learning is both more difficult and more critical to success. Following up on our issue on Foundation Learning, this issue focuses on how foundations engage in this more complex learning in collaboration with others, including community members, grantees, and other funders.

Two of the articles in this issue report on the results of shared learning efforts. **Darling, Guber, Smith, and Lewis** write about the McCune Charitable Foundation's emergent strategy approach that was designed to establish clear goals and then create a platform to ensure that leadership 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.

In 2014, the Kansas Health Foundation brought together a group of knowledgeable stakeholders from a multitude of specialties to focus on reducing tobacco use specifically among Kansans with mental illness. **Long, Richter, Avers, and Cagan** describe how a stakeholder engagement model led to the group's success in achieving a number of policy, system, and environmental changes — including expanding cessation benefits available under Medicaid in Kansas — and could be replicated by any foundation.

New tools are needed as foundations seek to implement collaborative learning approaches. Funders like the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation are exploring ways to fully engage grantees, co-funders, technical consultants, and evaluators in collective learning and reflection. **Taddy-Sandino, Gray, and Scaturro** share how the foundation's cohort-based capacity-building program, Propel*Next,* was designed to enhance the performance of promising nonprofits that serve America's disadvantaged youth. They highlight strategies and tools to accelerate change, strengthen funder-grantee interactions, and advance the field.

Chen, Johnson, Alvarez, Harlow, and Price-Letscher describe the Nonprofit Sustainability Initiative, a multiyear collaboration of 17 funders in Los Angeles County, California, that supports nonprofit organizations to collaborate and restructure in a variety of forms. As the initiative evolved, its evaluation and learning system had to have the ability to evolve with it. This article presents key design aspects of the system, describes how it evolved over time, and shares insights and learnings.

In late 2016, four health legacy foundations partnered to launch the Health Legacy Collaborative Learning Circle. **Martinie, Love, Kelly, Dueck, and Strunk** describe the yearlong process of creating the collaborative, and present a framework that can be used to create learning environments. This learning framework was used to test and expand assumptions about promising approaches to common population health challenges, explore organizational best practices related to programming and operations, and understand the roles and impacts peer health legacy foundations have in their communities.

The final three articles share reflections about learning based on the authors' experiences. **Kelly, Brown, Yu, and Colombo,** four highly experienced foundation evaluation leaders, focus on the need to elevate the role foundations can play in building field-level learning about community initiatives. Many of the documented evaluations of such investments lack translatable lessons specific and influential enough to drive related decisions and actions of others in the field. This article developed from ongoing, multiyear peer learning across several foundations that collectively compiled recommendations for community systems-change funders and evaluators to implement more powerful evaluations.

Nolan, Howard, Gulley and Gonzalez explore how foundations can harness the power of feedback to improve philanthropic practice, using the experiences of the James Irvine Foundation as a case example. They present two cases from the foundation's own experience gathering feedback from community stakeholders and grantee partners, and then lay out a series of culminating lessons and insights based on this work.

NeighborWorks America and the Wells Fargo Regional Foundation regularly engage in collaborative learning processes with their grantees and partners to

Editorial (continued)

support local revitalization practices and inform program and grantmaking strategies. **Dahab, Finn, Greco, and Kopf** reflect on the key ingredients and processes needed to develop and sustain collaborative learning over time among grantee organizations, community residents, other stakeholders and funding partners, as well as the critical role that providers of technical assistance play.

Finally, this issue concludes with a review of *Giving Done Right: Effective Philanthropy and Making Every Dollar Count* by Phil Buchanan. **Putman** describes it as a helpful but not oversimplified look at what it takes to be effective philanthropists. Understanding and valuing the role of the sector are necessary first steps — and not surprisingly, learning with grantees and community members is another key ingredient.

There is still a lot to learn about learning, especially about collaborative learning. For example, we need better understanding of effective practices in managing the learning process, how to use technology to support it, and when and how to communicate to various stakeholders. The articles in this issue share successes, tools, and reflections that demonstrate such learning is both possible and necessary.

Teresa R. Behrens, Ph.D.
Editor in Chief, *The Foundation Review*
Executive Director, Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy
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The Institute for Foundation and Donor Learning

Philanthropy is evolving quickly, presenting new opportunities and challenges for effective grantmaking. The Institute for Foundation and Donor Learning at the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy helps grantmakers adopt best practices and interact with other practitioners to strengthen their daily work.

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

Marilyn J. Darling, M.A., Heidi Sparkes Guber, M.P.S., and Jillaine S. Smith, B.A., Fourth Quadrant Partners; and Wendy Lewis, B.A., McCune Charitable Foundation

Keywords: *Emergence, emergent learning, foundation strategy, McCune Charitable Foundation, grantee engagement, grantmaking, power dynamics*

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.

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.

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 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."

"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

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.

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)

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 (personal communication, September 20, 2018).

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 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?

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

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.

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 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.

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.

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

Results

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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Better Together: Engaging Stakeholders in Learning and Leadership to Guide Foundation Resources Toward Adaptive Systems Change

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Introduction

Cigarette smoking is the leading preventable cause of morbidity and mortality in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Smoking prevalence has reduced substantially in the general population, but this decline has been significantly slower among people with mental illness (Drope et al., 2018). Although people with mental illness can be effectively and safely treated for tobacco-use disorders (Peckham, Brabyn, Cook, Tew, & Gilbody, 2017), few people receiving treatment for mental illness also receive treatment for tobacco dependence (Royal College of Physicians & Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2013). Consequently, people with mental illnesses, especially those with serious mental illnesses, have high rates of tobacco-related illness and die, on average, 14.9 years earlier than people without serious mental illnesses (Tam, Warner, & Meza, 2016).

Due to these health and treatment disparities, smokers with mental illness, including substance use disorders, should become a priority population for tobacco control (Williams, Steinberg, Griffiths, & Cooperman, 2013). Tobacco control, mental health services, and advocacy organizations should work together to implement cross-cutting policies and practices to bring down smoking prevalence and tobacco-related mortality (Williams, Willett, & Miller, 2013). To that end, in 2014 the Kansas Health Foundation (KHF) launched an initiative to bring together state leaders from these and other stakeholder

Key Points

- In 2014, the Kansas Health Foundation brought together a group of knowledgeable stakeholders from a multitude of specialties to focus on reducing tobacco use specifically among Kansans with mental illness. Over 15 months, the group and the foundation worked to learn deeply about the issue and inform action that could be taken on individual, organizational, and systemic levels.
- The wealth of knowledge and experience brought by each participant to the discussion and learning about this complex issue, together from a range of perspectives, resulted in a more productive dialogue. The model proved very effective, as evidenced by the group's success in achieving a number of policy, system, and environmental changes — including expanding cessation benefits available under Medicaid in Kansas — and could be replicated by any foundation.
- The foundation continues to work collaboratively on this issue and discover more about what is effective in reducing tobacco use. What it learned alongside its community partners has powerfully informed the foundation's approach to this work and has resulted in meaningful change, at multiple levels, in the behavioral health system.

The KHF has long recognized the benefits of convening knowledgeable stakeholders and supporting them to act as catalysts for change. This was formalized in 1999 with the creation of the Kansas Health Foundation Fellows program.

groups to understand and address the high prevalence of tobacco use among people with mental illness in Kansas. The KHF, a conversion foundation created in 1985 with a mission to improve the health of all Kansans, focuses on increasing health equity within four impact areas; one of these is "healthy behaviors" and includes reducing tobacco use.

Since its inception, KHF has recognized the power of bringing stakeholders together to build capacity, strengthen networks, and leverage expertise. The combination of this focus on reducing tobacco-use disparities and engaging expert leaders from different factions resulted in a powerful process that has led to sustained and meaningful change for the behavioral health system in Kansas.

The Kansas Health Foundation Fellows Program

The KHF has long recognized the benefits of convening knowledgeable stakeholders and supporting them to act as catalysts for change. This was formalized in 1999 with the creation of the Kansas Health Foundation Fellows program. This intensive leadership-development experience took many forms over the years, but always focused on building the capacity of the KHF Fellows to exercise adaptive leadership in their organizations and communities to create a healthier Kansas.

In 2007, KHF created the Kansas Leadership Center (KLC), which began managing the Fellows program. The KLC integrates its principles of purposeful, provocative, and engaging civic leadership into the content and structure of leadership training (Chrislip & O'Malley, 2013). KLC trainings encourage participants to think of leadership as an activity and not a position, and challenges trainees to seek adaptive changes that require systemwide innovation and learning (Heifetz, 1994).

Between 1999 and 2013 there were seven cohorts of Fellows, which included 128 Kansans. The program evolved over time, and there was a shift after the fifth Fellows cohort away from discussions around more general health topics to narrowing in on a more defined health issue. The sixth class of KHF Fellows examined issues related to healthy community design, and the seventh class focused on access to healthy foods. Targeting specific health issues enabled the program to select Fellows with diverse perspectives on the selected issues, and gave them an opportunity to have more productive conversations about potential changes to improve outcomes in these defined areas.

Fellows VIII: Focus, Resources and Participants

In 2013, when planning for the eighth cohort began, there was a growing recognition at the KHF and in the field of the poor health outcomes being experienced by individuals with mental illness related to their extremely high levels of tobacco use. A planning team that included KHF staff, KLC team members, and several Fellows alumni developed a plan for the eighth class of Fellows to focus on reducing tobacco use among Kansans with serious mental illness. In terms of structure, there was a desire to take the model developed with previous Fellows cohorts a step further. For the first time, specific objectives were outlined for Fellows members around building trust and comfort with the KHF and previous cohorts of Fellows, developing and utilizing leadership skills, and contributing to the creation of intervention recommendations

for the KHF to consider to reduce tobacco use among people with mental illness.

In addition to the full-time, master's-level staff person hired to launch and manage the Fellows VIII program, other partners and resources necessary for successful implementation were identified in the planning phase. Those included the KLC, which provided expert facilitation and leadership coaching based on its model of civic leadership and its experience in building collaborative networks across Kansas communities. Funding was also set aside for evaluation, lodging, meals, and materials for in-person convenings, and for consulting with content-area experts in tobacco control and behavioral health for training and tools to address tobacco use among people with mental illness.

With the purpose, goals, and resources for the cohort established, recruitment of participants began. Planning team members reached out to a variety of state government actors who had a role in creating or implementing tobacco control or prevention initiatives, nonprofits and advocacy groups in the space, Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs), substance-abuse treatment facilities, and other stakeholders who could engage in productive dialogue around this issue. Because no policy should be adopted without participation of members of the group(s) affected by that policy, the cohort adopted the "nothing about us without us" ethic. Fellows included patient advocates and mental health service consumers who contributed to the process their lived experiences and ideas for solutions. The group of participants also included primary care physicians, journalists, researchers, and the statewide association for CMHCs. Together, this group of 23 passionate Kansans with a variety of backgrounds and experiences with tobacco control and behavioral health was united by a common belief: It was possible for progress to made in reducing the use of tobacco products by individuals with mental illness.

Structured Learning, Discovery, and Initiative Development

Fellows VIII was designed to be a 15-month engagement where members met approximately every other month between May 2014 and August 2015, for a total of eight sessions. (See Table 1.) The work proceeded in three phases.

Phase I: Leadership Development

Issues affecting health are complex and adaptive by nature. To effectively tackle these complicated challenges, the KHF believes we should build the capacity of stakeholders to exercise leadership in a way that inspires a different kind of change: one that engages diverse voices, thinks in the long term, and utilizes a trustworthy process to build consensus. Building this leadership muscle has been at the crux of the KHF Fellows program since the beginning, and for the Fellows VIII cohort, this represented the first phase of the initiative.

For one week in July 2014, the Fellows attended a workshop at the Kansas Leadership Center led by four expert facilitators (one of whom was the ongoing facilitator at the subsequent Fellows meetings). During this time, they learned about the KLC's theory of leadership and competencies to create adaptive change: diagnose the situation, manage self, energize others, and intervene skillfully. Fellows practiced applying these competencies to their own individual leadership challenges and to the group's broader purpose of reducing tobacco use among those with mental illness.

In addition to building leadership skills, this phase was important for creating connections among the Fellows and giving them space and time to get to know one another. These bonding experiences solidified network connections in what proved to be a critical way for the group to make progress, allowing them to feel safe to have tough conversations and collaboratively brainstorm solutions. Moreover, the introspection that occurred as a part of this phase helped build trust within the cohort as well as a respectful understanding of the group dynamic and how this dynamic affected issue-area exploration and learning.

TABLE 1 Fellows VIII Group Sessions

	Date	Activities	Presenters
	Session 1: May 1, 2014	***Orientation*** Introductions to KHF, each other, Fellows program	• KHF Staff
Leadership Development	Session 2: July 21–25, 2014	Weeklong training session with KLC faculty; one-on-one coaching sessions with leadership coaches	• Kansas Leadership Center Faculty and Coaches
Leadership Development	Session 3: Sept. 11–12, 2014	Session with Seth Bate, certified Myers Briggs trainer, to dig deep on individual strengths	• KHF Staff • Seth Bate, Wichita State University Community Engagement Institute
Discovery	Session 4: Nov. 13–14, 2014	***Data Gathering*** Dr. Sarah Jolley reviewed data gathered from consumers at a local recovery conference; Christine Cheng and Shelina Foderingham shared what was happening at the national level and in other states with tobacco cessation efforts and behavioral health.	• Kansas Leadership Center Faculty and Coaches • Dr. Sarah Jolley, Wichita State University Community Engagement Institute • Christine Cheng, Smoking Cessation Leadership Center • Shelina Foderingham, National Council on Behavioral Health
Discovery	Session 5: Jan. 12–13, 2015	***Data Gathering*** Dr. Jill Williams presented data on tobacco use among individuals with behavioral health issues, and on efforts/recommendations for progress.	• Dr. Jill Williams, Robert Wood Johnson School of Medicine, Rutgers University
Initiative Delveopment	Session 6: March 10–11, 2015	***Strategic Action Planning*** Christine Cheng set up a gallery walk with relevant data and helped the group start working through first strategies for an action plan.	• Christine Cheng, Smoking Cessation Leadership Center
Initiative Delveopment	Session 7: April 27–28, 2015	***Strategic Action Planning*** Fellows had a focus group with Jennifer Avers and finalized the action plan for the group, including prioritizing strategies for KHF's consideration.	• Jennifer Avers, Evaluation Consultant
	Session 8: Aug. 5–6, 2015	***Graduation*** Celebrated the commitment from Fellows members and progress made as a group	• KHF and KLC Staff

Phase II: Discovery

At the fourth session, the pivot was made from the first phase, leadership development, to the second phase, discovery. Here, the goal was to spend time as a group gathering and analyzing data to build a collective understanding about the issue. This involved reviewing data, listening to experts, and tapping the collective expertise of the Fellows.

Two reports were commissioned to get accurate and updated data on tobacco use among individuals with mental illness in Kansas. The first report, *Tobacco Use Among Kansans With Mental Illness,* synthesized data from the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System.[1] The primary findings in this report helped the group develop a sense of the scope of the disparity in tobacco use among this population: 37.8 percent, compared to 17.3 percent among adults without mental illness; those with serious mental illness in the past 30 days had a 45.7 percent smoking rate. The report also looked at the smoking rates among youth with a mental illness: 26.8 percent, compared to 10.9 percent among youth without mental illness. A second report was based on interviews with adults living with mental illness and examined their tobacco-use habits as well as interest in and attempts to quit tobacco. These findings were consistent with nationally available data, including that largely, these smokers started before age 18 and were interested in quitting.

Several national speakers were invited to share their knowledge with the Fellows. Christine Cheng, from the Smoking Cessation Leadership Center; Shelina Foderingham, from the National Council for Behavioral Health; and Dr. Jill Williams, of the Robert Wood Johnson Medical School at Rutgers University, presented at different sessions, sharing data and recommendations for the group to consider in formulating their own interventions.

In addition to outside experts, the knowledge of the individual Fellows was leveraged. Each brought a unique background and experience to the discussion, so time was spent having each Fellow describe their work and/or personal experience in terms of the collective purpose and what they had learned up to that point that might be beneficial to share.

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Phase III: Initiative Development and Recommendations

In March 2015 the shift was made to the third phase, initiative development. During this phase, Fellows applied their increased leadership capacity and content knowledge to formulate recommendations for initial steps to reduce tobacco use among Kansans with mental illness. Individually and collectively, the cohort created a comprehensive work plan whose collective goal was to sustain and amplify the cohort's efforts, support individual Fellows and subsequent work groups in change efforts, and hold one another accountable for progress. From the work plan and ongoing conversations between KHF program officers and cohort members, the KHF drafted a Request for Proposals (RFP): Tobacco Treatment and Recovery in Behavioral Health.

[1] See https://www.cdc.gov/brfss/index.html

TABLE 2 Kansas Health Foundation Fellows VIII Outcome Objectives

Objective 1	Fellows will develop a relationship with the KHF and among current and former Fellows, resulting in a network of influential individuals able to help drive health policy and environmental change in the state of Kansas to reduce tobacco use within the mental health community.
Objective 2	Fellows will develop the skills to exercise civic leadership that will contribute to their role as catalysts for change in reducing tobacco use within the mental health community.
Objective 3	Fellows will understand the competencies necessary to enhance their capacity for civic leadership and will engage more frequently and effectively in acts of leadership around the KHF's healthy behaviors focus areas.
Objective 4	Fellows will help plan future KHF initiatives to contribute to the reduction of tobacco use in the mental health community.

Evaluation of the Fellows VIII Program

To understand the extent to which the KHF was successful in designing a Fellows program that would lead to achieving the four objectives identified at the outset by KLC faculty and KHF program officers, an external evaluator, Jennifer Avers, was engaged. The evaluation was framed around these outcomes among the Fellows:

- comfort engaging with the KHF and other Fellow cohorts,
- leadership skills development,
- leadership engagement, and
- contributing to KHF plans to reduce tobacco use among people with mental illness.

The evaluator designed a methodology to address the four objectives and align with the three programmatic phases. Prior to the cohort's orientation session in May 2014, the evaluator interviewed the 23 participants accepted into the Fellows VIII program. In November 2014, midway through the program, the Fellows were asked to complete an online survey about their experiences in the program. The survey was organized into three sections: program effects on participants, comfort and interactions with the KHF, and issue-area and cohort formation. A Likert scale was used, with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

In April 2015, the evaluator observed the sessions taking place at the KLC and facilitated a discussion with the Fellows about their efforts to develop a work plan that would live beyond the scope of the Fellows program. At the close of the program (December 2015), the evaluator conducted structured interviews to capture the Fellows' final reflections about their participation, the program, and their sense of next steps as individuals, as a cohort, and in relationship with the KHF. At the end of the program, the evaluator analyzed the qualitative and quantitative data collected throughout the duration of Fellows VIII; results are presented in order of the four outcome objectives. (See Table 2.)

Objective No. 1

> *Fellows will develop a relationship with the foundation — and among current and former Fellows — resulting in a network of influential individuals able to help drive health policy and environmental change in the state of Kansas to reduce tobacco use within the mental health community.*

When the Fellows were surveyed midway through the program, average ratings were high overall. Responses related to relationship-centric items ranged from 4.11 to 4.63 (agree to strongly

agree) on the 5-point agreement scale. The items included the following:

- I know how to contact KHF staff.
- The KHF wants me to share my ideas and insights with them.
- I feel comfortable approaching KHF staff with small talk.
- I understand how the KHF's program areas support its mission.
- I feel comfortable letting KHF staff know about others in my community who might help the foundation with its work (e.g., as partners, grant recipients, advisors).
- To date, the KHF has provided sufficient opportunities for me to learn about its work.

Somewhat fewer Fellows (3.79) agreed with the statement, "I have told other people in my communities about grant opportunities from KHF." Qualitative data suggest there was some lack of clarity for some Fellows regarding the KHF's expectations of them over the longer term, specifically in terms of how they would function as ambassadors of civic leadership competencies and of the foundation's vision.

By the close of the program, participants expressed increased understanding of the KHF's expectations and interests, and many were actively sharing information about the foundation's resources with others in their communities. Among the factors cited by Fellows as increasing their comfort and motivation to share resources on behalf of the KHF were the following:

1. opportunities to talk with KHF staff through casual exchanges during program sessions,
2. experiences working alongside KHF program officers during action planning and work plan development,

By the close of the program, participants expressed increased understanding of the KHF's expectations and interests, and many were actively sharing information about the foundation's resources with others in their communities.

3. KHF program officer receptiveness to Fellows sharing their project ideas and funding interests,
4. KHF program officer transparency about what strategies (related to the issue area) aligned with the foundation's mission and program areas and what did not,
5. increased clarity about the KHF's interests and priorities as program officers shared the draft of the RFP, and
6. the KHF's willingness to adapt and revise the RFP based on Fellows' feedback.

As the initiative ended, cohort members had a deeper understanding of the KHF as a funder and as a community partner. As one Fellow remarked, "I appreciate the attention to personal relationships and developing personal relationships among the Fellows and between the Fellows and the foundation." Another noted, "We were encouraged to work collaboratively as a group of Fellows with the foundation to decide how things need to change to create opportunities and resources to make that change happen." Those who were initially reticent about approaching program officers with questions, concerns, ideas, or requests indicated they were comfortable doing so by the close of the program. For those with pre-existing comfort or history working with the KHF, they too

As the program ended, Fellows were optimistic about the ongoing evolution of the work plan. All were hopeful that cohort members would utilize their skills, and newfound relationships with one another and the KHF, to hold individuals and relevant groups accountable for progress

expressed increased ease and confidence in terms of approaching foundation staff. All cohort members said they were interested in working with the KHF on this issue in the future.

Last, Fellows found great personal and professional value in their relationships with other cohort members. Fellows unanimously reported high degrees of comfort with one another, even when there were disagreements or points of contention between individuals or groups of people. They emphasized the importance of hearing from and working with diverse perspectives and actors in the behavioral health space. In several cases of tensions between individuals prior to participation in Fellows VIII, those tensions eased, and some disagreements were resolved through participation in the program. All Fellows described a high degree of respect and camaraderie.

At the close of the program, the majority of those in the cohort had already initiated shared efforts with some of their peers to address the issue of tobacco use, not only as specific to the Fellows VIII work plan, but also around other shared areas of interest and concern. Fellows were less clear about how they would engage with Fellows outside their cohort, or the role the KHF might play in convening Fellows across the various cohorts, but did understand and appreciate that they were part of a larger network of civic leaders. They valued being connected to one another and the foundation through a shared understanding of and commitment to using the civic leadership competencies to inform systems change.

Objective No. 2

> *Fellows will develop the skills to exercise civic leadership that will contribute to their role as catalysts for change in reducing tobacco use within the mental health community.*

Fellows VIII was a successful strategy for equipping diverse professionals with civic leadership competencies. Fellows easily referenced how the program positively impacted their understanding of themselves and equipped them with tools and resources to effectively exhibit leadership behaviors in a number of settings (e.g., professional, civic, political, personal). Fellows also said they appreciated developing a shared civic leadership language and framework for understanding technical and adaptive challenges.

The program components cited most frequently as most supportive in reaching the program objectives were individual coaching, presentations by experts (including review of national and state data), and well-facilitated discussions within the diverse cohort.

Objective No. 3

> *Fellows will understand the competencies necessary to enhance their capacity for civic leadership and will engage more frequently and effectively in acts of leadership around the foundation's "healthy behaviors" focus areas.*

Fellows expressed increased understanding of the issue area, a much better grasp on state and national data related to tobacco use and the mental health community, a richer understanding of the challenges and opportunities in terms of making progress on the issue, and an overall confidence that progress can and will be made by them and their cohort members, as well as with the KHF's continued leadership and funding in this area.

TABLE 3 Strategies and Selected Tactics to Reduce Tobacco Use Among Kansans With Mental Illness

Strategy	Tactic
Policy/Systems Change	State policy to expand Medicaid benefits and increase reimbursement rates for smoking-cessation services
	Establish tobacco-free grounds and/or integrate treatment for tobacco dependence.
Education/Awareness	Help more CMHCs offer tobacco cessation treatment.
Communications/Messaging	Consumer-driven social marketing/messaging
	Social marketing/messaging to providers

Fellows indicated numerous ways they were acting as catalysts for change. They referenced their ongoing additions and revisions to the cohort work plan and were excited to see the KHF draft the RFP for ongoing funding in this area. Fellows described a variety of efforts, including leading tobacco-free campus campaigns, opening cessation support centers, integrating and adding mental health strategies and resources to existing cessation programs, navigating Medicaid and educating community members about access and program types, and intentionally and strategically developing relationships with a range of power brokers and mental health providers across the state. As the program ended, Fellows were optimistic about the ongoing evolution of the work plan. All were hopeful that cohort members would utilize their skills, and new-found relationships with one another and the KHF, to hold individuals and relevant groups accountable for progress. As the formal evaluation of the Fellows program closed, the KHF and cohort members continued to develop and refine the work plan, as well as build the required capacity to implement it.

Objective No. 4

Fellows will help plan future KHF initiatives to contribute to the reduction of tobacco use in the mental health community.

Strategic Planning and Work Plan Development

The Fellows conducted strategic action planning over the course of two meetings, initially guided by staff from the Smoking Cessation Leadership Center who encouraged the group to develop a useful plan that would clearly lay out goals, actions, and who was responsible for moving it forward. To build the final work plan, Fellows developed baseline measures and goals, agreed on key strategy areas, broke into working groups, and developed tactics for each strategy.

The final work plan focused on three main strategies: policy/systems change; education/training; and communication/messaging. While many ideas were brainstormed about possible approaches to advance the group's purpose within those strategies, ultimately five tactics were prioritized as the most important for first steps. (See Table 3.)

RFPs in Two "Tracks"

To advance these priorities articulated by the group, the KHF issued an RFP, Tobacco Treatment and Recovery in Behavioral Health. The RFP was approved by the KHF board and included just over $1.5 million in grants to organizations, with another $167,000 allocated for evaluation, technical assistance, and other supports for the project, including convenings.

The NAMI–Kansas Behavioral Health and Tobacco Initiative included the development of a working group to oversee and support grant activities and involved representatives of state health and behavioral health departments, behavioral health advocacy organizations, Federally Qualified Health Centers, CMHCs, substance use treatment facilities, consumer-run organizations, physician organizations, and local universities.

The RFP was designed to provide support to nonprofit organizations in Kansas through two tracks. Track One was designed to support behavioral health organizations in changing their culture and the culture of the behavioral health system around tobacco, as well as to strengthen approaches to reducing tobacco use among individuals with a mental health diagnosis. Among the eligible Track One activities were establishing tobacco-free grounds, integrating peer-to-peer programs, implementing best practices for tobacco dependence treatment, and piloting other policy/environmental changes that would contribute to a tobacco-free culture for consumers and staff.

Track Two was intended to support advocacy work with behavioral health insurance plans, providers, state government agencies, legislators, and others who could influence the strength of treatment coverage in Kansas. It was hoped that in addition to increasing insurance coverage for tobacco cessation services, the Track Two grantee would be able to increase utilization of existing benefits, which in Kansas at the time were very underutilized. Within this track, one agency was to be funded to implement and coordinate advocacy efforts for changes to tobacco dependence treatment coverage and usage.

Funded Proposals

Seven organizations were funded by the Tobacco Treatment and Recovery in Behavioral Health RFP. National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)–Kansas was funded for the statewide Track Two initiative. The NAMI–Kansas Behavioral Health and Tobacco Initiative included the development of a working group to oversee and support grant activities and involved representatives of state health and behavioral health departments, behavioral health advocacy organizations, Federally Qualified Health Centers, CMHCs, substance use treatment facilities, consumer-run organizations, physician organizations, and local universities.

Five behavioral health service provider organizations, including a mix of mental health and substance use treatment facilities, were funded under Track One, along with the University of Kansas Medical School, which provided Tobacco Treatment Specialist (TTS) training for organizations across the state. Collectively, over the course of three years (2016–2019) Track One and Track Two initiatives achieved a number of successes.

Organizational Achievements

The initiative led by NAMI-Kansas in many ways took up the systems-change baton from Fellows VIII. It convened a multidisciplinary group of providers funded under Track One and other key stakeholders, and fostered high levels of engagement and collaboration in all its activities. NAMI-Kansas led successful efforts to develop the Kansas Tobacco Guideline for Behavioral Health Care[2]

[2] See https://2n07782zqf7l2608b679dk7e-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2018/04/Tobacco-Guideline-for-Behavioral-Health-Care-Current-Revision-1.pdf , or, for links to all NAMI resources listed here, see https://namikansas.org/resources/smoking-cessation-information.

in conjunction with many health associations, providers, and consumers. This guideline is an evidence-based, comprehensive set of actions that organizations can pursue to reduce tobacco use among their constituents in an effective and sustainable way. Accompanying the one-page guideline is a self-assessment questionnaire[3] to help programs measure progress toward full implementation and an Implementation Toolkit[4] that provides in-depth resources. To date, 30 organizations have endorsed the guideline and many others are in some stage of considering endorsement and adoption.

The guideline is considered an "aspirational" document — adoption implies that organizations are interested in change, not that they have achieved all of the steps in the guide. As such, it is a vehicle for encouraging culture change across organizations in the state. In line with theories of diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 1995), the growth in the number of adopters could create its own momentum toward adoption of the idea that treating tobacco dependence is an integral part of behavioral health care. In 2018, the Kansas Department for Aging and Disability Services (KDADS), which oversees behavioral health care in the state, indicated a willingness to house and promote the guideline. This ensures sustainability of the guideline and associated documents, and increases the likelihood of utilization by providers as KDADS encourages and supports implementation in future years.

To quantify the benefit of supporting Kansans with mental illness to quit tobacco, NAMI-Kansas partnered with the University of Kansas School of Medicine to estimate the economic impact of providing smoking cessation treatment. The report, *The Economics of Proactive Smoking Cessation Treatment for Individuals With Serious Mental Illness and/or Substance Use Disorder in the Medicaid Population,* has been used to support legislation to expand cessation benefits.[5]

NAMI-Kansas also successfully brought forward a bill in the state Senate to create a comprehensive and barrier-free tobacco cessation program within Medicaid; eventually achieved via a budget proviso, it expanded available benefits. Since July 1, 2018, individuals covered by Kansas Medicaid (KanCare) are eligible to receive up to four rounds of nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) each year and are also eligible to receive ongoing cessation counseling services with no lifetime cap, which was previously a covered service only for pregnant women.

In addition, the University of Kansas School of Medicine has trained 123 providers to serve as TTS. The Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) has made TTS training eligible under the KDHE Chronic Disease Risk Reduction grant mechanisms, which provide another sustainable source of funding.

The five other projects funded under Track One have strengthened their ability to assess and document tobacco use among consumers and have modified their infrastructure to incorporate cessation services that include counseling and dispensing NRT as appropriate. They have collectively screened more than 10,000 Kansans for tobacco use in just the first year and a half. Data reveal that consumers and staff at these organizations are making quit attempts, and all have made progress on adopting tobacco-free policies at their facilities.

Among these organizations, Episcopal Social Services, a local provider of mental health services that includes a Clubhouse International[6] structure that it refers to as the Breakthrough Club, now has a staff-led cessation group that follows the national "Breathe Easy, Live Well" model (Baker, Ranney, & Goldstein, 2016). In addition, Breakthrough Club members began their own peer-led cessation group, exhibiting an impulse that seems to bear out evidence seen in

[3] See https://2n07782zqf7l2608b679dk7e-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2019/06/Self-Assessment.pdf

[4] See https://publichealthlawcenter.org/sites/default/files/resources/Kansas-Tobacco-Guideline-Behavioral-Health-Care-Toolkit-Dec2018.pdf

[5] See https://namikansas.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2018/01/The-Economic-Impact-of-Reducing-Smoking.pdf

[6] See https://clubhouse-intl.org

Results

This collaborative learning environment was ideal for creating interventions that would align with KHF philanthropic strategy and would translate into meaningful action in the field, as they were informed by knowledgeable Kansas practitioners and stakeholders.

research that many consumers, despite outdated perceptions, want to quit and are ready to act to do so.

Prairie View, a community mental health center in Newton, Kansas, recently launched a partnership with the YMCA and Mirror Inc., a local substance abuse treatment facility, to expand available cessation groups for individuals in their service area. DCCCA, a behavioral health service provider, expanded its focus from an initial two planned substance abuse treatment facility locations in Wichita to infusing the tobacco cessation message throughout its mental health and substance abuse treatment programming at locations across the state. Both the Mental Health Association of South-Central Kansas and the Central Kansas Foundation have made strides in integrating seamless cessation services throughout their residential and outpatient infrastructures.

Although not an organization funded by the RFP, the KDHE participated in the Fellows VIII cohort, and as a key partner in several Track One and Track Two change initiatives turned out to be vital to the grantees' progress. The Kansas Tobacco Quitline, sponsored by KDHE, launched its Behavioral Health Program Support in 2017; as part of this free expanded service, callers who self-identify as having a behavioral health disorder receive calls from counselors who have enhanced training as well as extended counseling sessions and a free, two-week NRT starter kit.

These highlights represent only some of the successes that have been experienced by the Tobacco Treatment and Recovery in Behavioral Health grantees and their partners. Expectations have been far exceeded in terms of initial hopes for policy, system, and environmental changes for individual organizations as well as for the behavioral health system. These changes also have an exceptional outlook for long-term sustainability, resulting in impact that will only continue to grow.

Discussion

These significant successes in policy, program, and systems change are indicative of the strength of the foundation that was created by the Fellows VIII initiative. Investing in the capacity of the Fellows and giving them the time and space to bond as a cohort has created a sustained and powerful network of change agents. Fellows feel strongly that they can rely on each other for support in their efforts to create change related to tobacco use in behavioral health. This has contributed to the overall success of the Tobacco Treatment and Recovery in Behavioral Health RFP that resulted from the Fellows program.

Additionally, the structure of the KHF Fellows program provided an opportunity for foundation staff to learn alongside cohort members. Learning shoulder to shoulder ensured that there was a shared understanding of the issue, a common vocabulary, and, most importantly, shared values. This collaborative learning environment was ideal for creating interventions that would align with KHF philanthropic strategy and would translate into meaningful action in the field, as they were informed by knowledgeable Kansas practitioners and stakeholders. The Fellows program served as a level playing field for everyone involved to be forthright with their concerns and suggestions, creating a true dialogue about what might best serve the goal of reducing tobacco use among individuals with mental illness.

In considering how the KHF Fellows program could best be replicated, it is important to note that the diversity of the cohort members was exceptional in some respects, but glaringly absent in others. In one regard, the diversity of the Fellows VIII cohort members was a critical asset: The Fellows planning committee was very successful in recruiting a strong mix of tobacco-control representatives and behavioral health providers and peers. A wide variety of professional stakeholders from both sides of the tobacco/behavioral health issue were engaged. Having consumers engaged alongside providers was also a powerful dynamic that served the process well. But in terms of demographics, as the Fellows articulated themselves during program, diversity was lacking. No young adults were included, and communities of color were underrepresented. While the current grantees funded through the resulting RFP are more representative of the state's population, diversity in a number of different respects should be considered in terms of engaging participants.

The Fellows program as a whole, and the eighth class in particular, provided the KHF with an effective vehicle to learn deeply about an issue while also vetting approaches to intervene effectively alongside key stakeholders. It is difficult to separate and highlight the outcomes of the Fellows VIII program from those achieved by grantees funded through the resulting RFP. The resulting collaborations between Fellows and KHF, and among the Fellows, have yielded impressive results that continue to contribute to the goal of reducing tobacco use among individuals with mental illness. Indeed, new achievements are being added to this growing list as the journey of the foundation and these Fellows continues to play out. For example, a Fellow was recently appointed Secretary for the Kansas Department of Children and Families as well as the KDADS. She has indicated a willingness to support the efforts of the grantees to reduce tobacco use among Kansans receiving the services of the departments she leads. This example, which is coming to fruition three years after the close of Fellows VIII, reinforces the importance of the networking and joint learning that occurred during the Fellows experience.

The Fellows initiative, and resulting RFP and funded programs, were proof positive for collaborative grantmaking.

KHF's Adaptive Changes

The Fellows initiative, and resulting RFP and funded programs, were proof positive for collaborative grantmaking. The KHF had previously sought out expertise and insights to inform initiative planning. With Fellows VIII, it collaborated with Fellows to co-create funding priorities and guidelines in a way that had been unprecedented for the foundation. This put the Fellows, and thereafter the initiative grantees, in the driver's seat in terms of where the work should be focused to have the biggest impact.

The tremendous success of this shared approach to designing interventions has been a powerful learning experience for the KHF and has impacted work in other KHF focus areas, like increasing educational attainment. With a deeper understanding of how meaningful engagement and investment in diverse stakeholders can have long-term payoff, the KHF recently brought together a group of thought leaders in education to further inform its efforts in this new area of focus. This group of stakeholders will work together and with the KHF to think critically about how to best support schools, families, and communities around the purpose of improving early literacy, with the hope that the resulting policy, systems, and environmental changes will be as successful.

The Fellows VIII evaluation underscored the importance of trust, relationships, and the authentic engagement of participants. It is critical to invest in their capacity to be change agents. The initiative also highlighted that by connecting people, building trust, and empowering them to take the lead, more meaningful, sustainable progress can be made. As an organization, the foundation continues to work on meeting communities where they are at and building capacity.

The Fellows experience has provided a model that works and will inform the KHF's philanthropic strategy into the future.

Key Takeaways

- Investing in the capacity and knowledge of the Fellows participants was essential to the group's success. Supporting the Fellows in developing their capacity for adaptive leadership, along with increasing the group's knowledge about this issue from both the behavioral health and tobacco-control perspectives, made dialogue more productive.

- Engaging an external evaluator to help the KHF understand the extent to which it was successful in meeting its own objectives was important to learn so that future engagements could be improved.

- Learning about the issue together (funder and grantee) was a key component of the success of this work. It created a foundation of shared understanding that was important when the group arrived at the third phase, initiative development, which is the phase that is often jumped to immediately.

- By partnering with the Kansas Leadership Center, the Fellows were exposed to civic leadership principles and competencies that helped them think differently about both the issue and potential interventions.

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Learning Together: Cohort-Based Capacity Building and the Ripple Effects of Collaboration

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Keywords: *Capacity building, collaboration, cohort, performance management, nonprofit*

Tools

Introduction

For decades, grantmakers have recognized the importance of investing in nonprofit capacity to help organizations strengthen their effectiveness and fulfill their missions (Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2016). These capacity-building efforts come in all shapes and sizes, and typically focus on a range of core capacities, including leadership and program development, financial management, technology, human resources, communications, and evaluation and learning.

The field of organizational capacity building has evolved considerably over the years, yet assessing the impact of capacity-building supports on organizational effectiveness continues to be challenging. We have a solid sense of which strategies are immediately effective, but the longer-term impact is less clear. Some funders have described impact assessment as the "holy grail" or the "million-dollar question," noting the confluence of factors that can influence capacity building and the inherent challenges of attribution (Pond, 2015). Furthermore, rigorous evaluations that examine both the evolution and impact of capacity-building efforts over a longer span of time are costly and complicated, given the dynamic environment in which nonprofits operate. As a result, most evaluations have tended to focus on shorter-term outcomes (e.g., knowledge acquisition and skill building) rather than meaningful but hard-to-measure impacts, such as improved program quality, enhanced organizational performance, and better outcomes for beneficiaries.

Key Points

- Foundations frequently commission evaluations and are the primary audiences for findings. Grantee organizations, however, often don't see the results, or they find in them limited value and relevance to their own work. Funders like the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation are quietly disrupting this status quo by exploring ways to fully engage grantees, co-funders, technical consultants, and evaluators in collective learning and reflection.
- The foundation's comprehensive, cohort-based capacity-building program, Propel*Next*, was designed to enhance the performance of promising nonprofits that serve America's disadvantaged youth. With a combination of financial support, individualized coaching, and peer-learning sessions, grantees engage in a test-and-learn cycle to promote a culture of learning and continuous improvement.
- This article explores what collaborative learning looks like in the Propel*Next* context and how foundations can "practice what they preach" by modeling a reflective practice, sharing what they're learning, and supporting evaluations that surface information that is useful to everyone. It also discusses findings related to collaborative learning for both a regionally based and a nationally based cohort. Finally, it highlights specific strategies and tools to promote collaborative learning and to leverage peer networks in ways that can accelerate change, strengthen funder-grantee interactions, and advance the field.

"We always talked about having the head and the heart, but the heart led and then the head came along. [Now] we lead more with the head from a heart-centered place. That was a big shift."
– Alumni CEO

Since 2000, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation (EMCF) has made large, long-term investments to help high-performing nonprofits scale evidence-based programs that improve the lives of disadvantaged children and youth. In 2012, EMCF launched Propel*Next*, a signature capacity-building model designed to strengthen promising organizations whose programs had not yet been fully codified. Propel*Next* was designed to be an intensive, cohort-based program that emphasizes deep capacity building and intentional learning on multiple levels. With a combination of financial support, individualized coaching, and peer-learning sessions, grantees engage in a test-and-learn cycle that promotes a culture of learning and continuous improvement. A hallmark of Propel*Next* is the emphasis on creating a strong peer-based learning community.

To better understand both the potential of its strategy and the impact of its capacity-building investments, the EMCF commissioned a post-program study of its inaugural national cohort as well as a developmental evaluation of its second cohort, based in California. Both studies have revealed promising findings that build upon an evolving field and delve deeper into what it takes to optimize nonprofit performance. In addition to positive results for grantees, these studies have surfaced additional evidence that highlights the power and potential of cohort-based models to deepen learning not only within individual organizations, but also across cohorts and the broader field. As Peter Senge (2006) posits in his seminal book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of a Learning Organization,* organizations are dynamic entities and a change in one area often creates conditions for learning with ripples of change and reactions elsewhere in the organization. The same appears to hold true when grantees and funders come together and engage in deep and intentional collaborative learning.

The EMCF and its co-investing partners[1] have also been deeply engaged in the test-and-learn cycle along with grantees. This has required a willingness to "walk the walk" by modeling a reflective practice, sharing what they are learning, and supporting evaluations that surface information that is useful across multiple stakeholders. In this article, we highlight key findings from these two recent evaluation studies (Engage R+D and Harder+Company Community Research, 2018a, 2019), as well as specific strategies to leverage collaborative learning in ways that accelerate change, strengthen funder-grantee interactions, and elevate data-driven learning across the field.

The Propel*Next* Model

Propel*Next* is an intensive program that builds capacity through a strong, peer-based learning experience that typically includes 12 to 16 organizations. The 28 grantees in the first two cohorts were selected through an invitation-only process and underwent a rigorous review of their readiness to benefit from participation in the program. The due diligence process included structured site visits with several EMCF team members and the technical assistance provider who collectively assessed and compared notes. Organizations were selected based on their strong leadership, management capacity, and potential to boost effectiveness and increase impact on the lives of youth. The first and second cohorts of Propel*Next* grantees represent a geographically diverse cross-section of organizations working in a range of areas, including juvenile

[1] In the California Cohort, which completed in 2018, the co-investors were the William and Flora Hewlett, David and Lucile Packard, Sobrato Family, and Weingart foundations.

TABLE 1 Propel*Next* Grantee Organizations (2015 and 2018 Cohorts)

Propel*Next* Grantees	
National 2015 Cohort	**California 2018 Cohort**
1. Blue Engine	1. Alternatives in Action
2. Carolina Youth Development Center	2. Asian Youth Center
3. Colorado Youth for a Change	3. Beyond Emancipation
4. Domus Kids, Inc.	4. Bresee Foundation
5. DREAM	5. Coalition for Responsible Community Development
6. Fresh Lifelines for Youth	6. Community Youth Center of San Francisco
7. National Indian Youth Leadership Project	7. East Oakland Youth Development Center
8. New Door Ventures	8. Huckleberry Youth Programs
9. New Pathways	9. Lavender Youth Recreation and Information Center
10. Taller San Jose Hope Builders	10. Los Angeles Brotherhood Crusade
11. UTEC, Inc.	11. My Friend's Place
12. Youth Opportunities Unlimited	12. Pivotal
13. Youth Services of Tulsa	13. Reach Out
	14. Social Advocates for Youth
	15. Teen Success, Inc.

justice, foster youth, homelessness, and student re-engagement, and serving youth with significant risk factors, trauma, and other barriers to reaching their full potential. (See Table 1.)

As part of a cohort, grantees receive common curriculum and capacity-building support over a three-year period from a dedicated team of seasoned coaches and consultants. They also receive grants to support individualized capacity building and to implement performance-management systems. Expert coaching, structured group-learning sessions, performance-management tools, and access to an online learning platform all round out a robust program. (See Figure 1.) Throughout the program, organizations design and pilot research-informed program models, develop theories of change (TOCs), and engage in a test-and-learn cycle to promote a culture of learning and continuous improvement.

FIGURE 1 Propel*Next* Supports

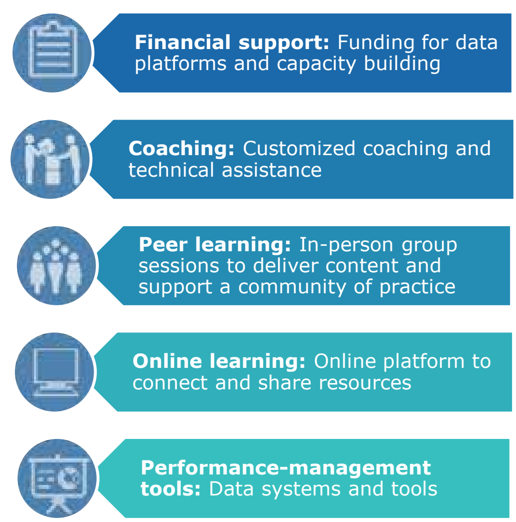
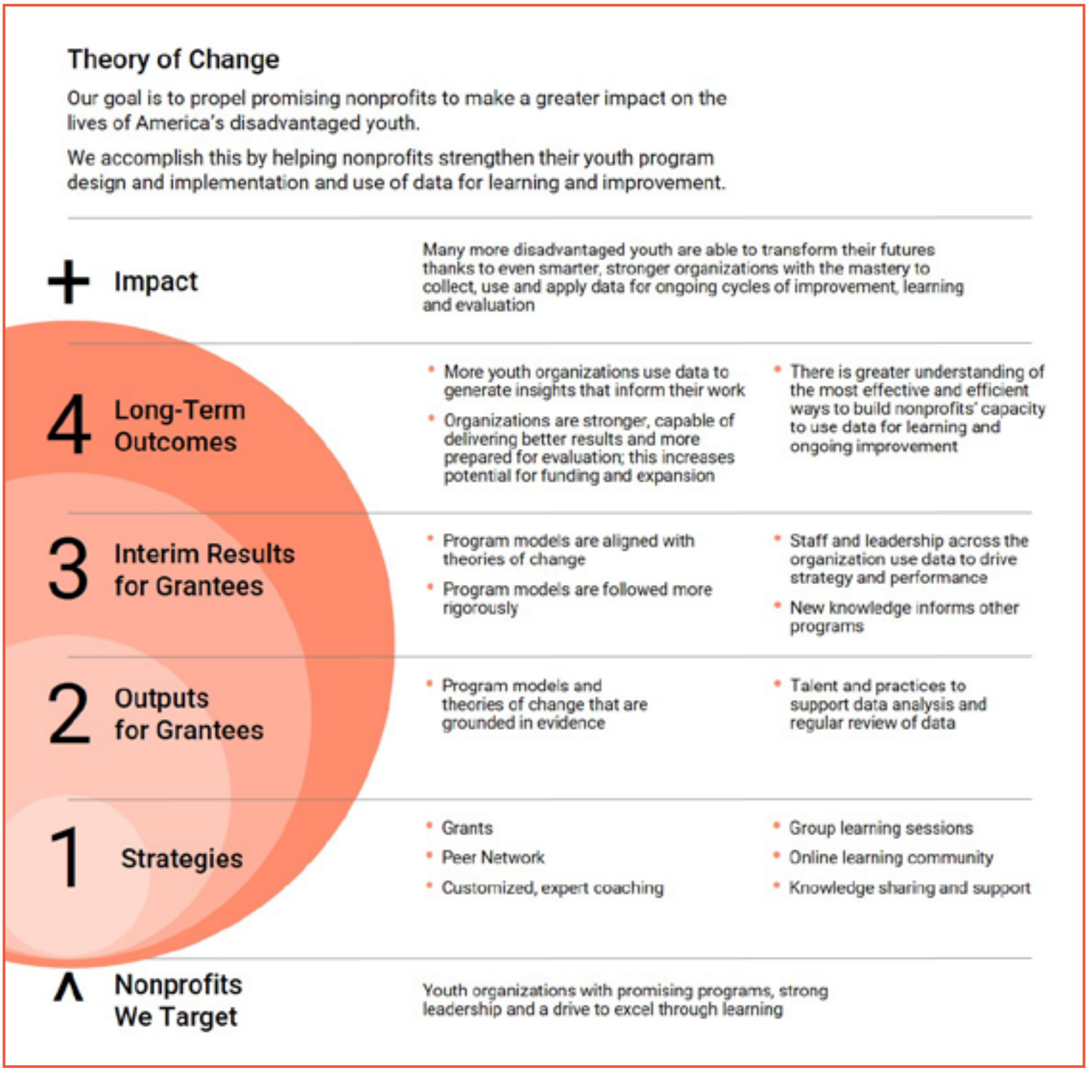


FIGURE 2 Propel*Next* Theory of Change



Program content is guided by the Propel*Next* TOC and a framework designed to assess grantee progress and track key milestones through various stages of the program. (See Figure 2.) Core program content includes designing and codifying data-informed program models, developing TOCs, identifying meaningful progress and outcome indicators, and implementing data-management systems and practices. Core content also includes an array of change-management issues as grantees embed a culture of learning and continuous improvement across their organizations. With this comprehensive collection of supports, Propel*Next* seeks to strengthen the capacity of youth-serving nonprofits to deliver high-quality programs and services that ultimately produce better results for disadvantaged young people.

Evaluating Change

To better understand how Propel*Next* contributes to improved organizational performance, the EMCF partnered with Engage R+D and Harder+Company Community Research to assess post-program progress of the National 2015 Cohort, which participated from 2012 to 2015, and to concurrently conduct a

TABLE 2 Key Learning Questions

Post-Program Study of National 2015 Cohort	Developmental Evaluation of California 2018 Cohort
1. To what extent have alumni organizations sustained the capacities they developed during Propel*Next*? What conditions facilitated or hindered their efforts? 2. What role did Propel*Next* play in helping organizations build and sustain those capacities? What elements of the program were most influential in supporting gains and/or additional progress post-Propel*Next*? 3. What have organizations achieved that can be attributed, in part or whole, to their experience in Propel*Next*? What unexpected achievements or challenges have occurred?	1. How are grantees progressing through Propel*Next*? 2. What facilitates or supports grantees' progress in the Propel*Next* program? What hinders grantees' progress? 3. How and to what extent are grantees infusing Propel*Next* learnings and practices into their organizations?

developmental evaluation of the California 2018 Cohort, which participated from 2015 to 2018. Conducting the evaluations of the first and second cohorts in parallel provided a unique opportunity to cross-pollinate methodology and lift up real-time learning to inform the content and delivery of the program for the California cohort. (See Table 2.)

Using a collaborative approach to the evaluation design, the team worked with the EMCF, advisors, the implementation team, and grantee leaders to identify indicators of progress and success throughout and in the years following Propel*Next*. The evaluators also looked to the literature and sought to identify observable evidence and proof points where measurable change and shifts in practices could be documented. Contextual factors that may have propelled or hindered efforts to improve performance and fulfill an organization's mission were also examined.

Both evaluation studies were aligned with the Dimensions for Building a Learning Organization (DBLO) framework, developed by the EMCF in partnership with LeadWell Partners. While the DBLO rubric included progress indicators for the primary intervention (i.e., development of evidence-based program models, performance-management systems, and data-use practices), the indicators related to adaptive leadership, talent management, and shifts in organizational culture were less nuanced. To address this, the evaluation team leveraged select measures and proof points from Performance Practice,[2] developed by the Leap of Reason Ambassadors Community (2017). The combination of progress indicators and proof points from each framework allowed the team to drill deeper and better capture nuanced shifts in behaviors, practices, and mindsets in core capacity areas. (See Table 3.)

Quantitative and qualitative data were gathered from various sources at multiple points in time. Data collection included in-depth site visits with 27 organizations[3] (12 from the National 2015 Cohort and 15 from the California 2018 Cohort); document review; meeting observations; and

[2] Formerly known as the Performance Imperative Organizational Self-Assessment, Performance Practice is a tool and framework to focus on key organizational principles and proof points that undergird and support high performance.

[3] One of the organizations from the National 2015 Cohort did not participate in the post-program study.

Tools

TABLE 3 Key Levers and Dimensions for Building a Learning Organization

Key Levers and Dimensions for Building a Learning Organization	
Program Models and Implementation	• Institutionalizing codified program models based on research, evidence, and data • Strengthening implementation fidelity and accountability • Listening and learning from program participants and beneficiaries
Technical Infrastructure	• Using robust data systems • Strengthening capacity of front-line staff to use data effectively • Building an internal data and evaluation function • Reflecting and thinking critically about relevance and utility of data
Adaptive Leadership	• Modeling and inspiring a learning and data-driven culture • Using data and research to inform organizational decisions • Exercising discipline and learning from failures • Engaging the board in learning and data-driven decision-making
Talent Management	• Supporting and aligning talent with organizational needs • "Getting the right people in the right seats" • Engaging and empowering staff • Raising the bar and clarifying performance expectations • Institutionalizing new recruitment and hiring practices
Organizational Alignment and Integration	• Using data to align programs and major initiatives with organizational strategy • Fostering cross-departmental learning and quality improvement • Systematically collecting and using data across departments and functions

surveys, interviews, and focus groups with organizational leaders, managers, front-line staff, board members, partners, and funders. Data from these multiple sources and perspectives were triangulated by the evaluation team and highlighted in a series of reports[4] that summarized key findings and captured the journey of grantees as they cultivated a learning culture and embedded performance-management practices into their organizational DNA.

Building a Learning Organization: Key Findings

Organizational learning is a process that unfolds over time and is typically exemplified by institutional cultures that encourage and support continuous improvement and experimentation. The Propel*Next* studies provide evidence that the road to high performance is an inherently disruptive process that challenges grantees to think in new ways and scrutinize the status quo. The practices that organizations learn in Propel*Next* are not "one and done" events, but rather long-term, multiyear undertakings to build cultures of learning and embed data-driven practices across organizations. While the initial focus of Propel*Next* is on designing and testing robust program models, the work extends far beyond programming and has profound implications for nearly every aspect of an organization, from

[4] The reports are available on the Propel*Next* website: http://www.propelnext.org/what-were-learning/propelnext-evaluations

strategy, leadership, and culture to talent management, operations, and fund development.

More than two years after completing Propel*Next*, alumni organizations identified a significant shift in how they approach their work. Leaders described their Propel*Next* experience as transformational and recognized that they are still "on a journey of discovery" as they strive to sustain, deepen, and spread practices across their organization (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2018a, p. 5). When asked about reverting to old ways of thinking, leaders openly acknowledged the inherent pull, but, as one CEO acknowledged, "[You] can't go back to what you were before" (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2018a, p. 5). Some changes were seeded during the Propel*Next* program and began to bear fruit a year or two after the program ended. Specifically, alumni organizations have continued to invest in people, capacities, systems, and processes to more fully infuse learning and continuous improvement into their organizations.

Alumni organizations noted in particular the iterative nature of this work and provided tangible examples of post-program gains and capacities they have continued to strengthen in the years after the program ended. These findings suggest that this type of deep and comprehensive capacity building can have a lasting and transformative effect on organizational effectiveness. The post-program study of the National 2015 Cohort surfaced clear evidence of sustained impact and the ripple effect of Propel*Next* beyond program design and implementation to all aspects of the organization several years after program completion (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2018a).[5]

Well-Designed, Well-Implemented Programs and Strategies

A central thrust of Propel*Next* is to guide grantees through a rigorous process of designing, testing, and refining program models that are data-driven, informed by research, and guided by a solid theory of change. Both evaluation studies revealed that organizations have made critical strides in codifying program models based on research with clear target populations, intended outcomes, dosage, and duration. Post-Propel*Next*, 91 percent of leaders indicated that their organizations use the best available data to develop and refine their programs. The majority (87 percent) said their organizations had since created individual or team positions that were responsible for monitoring implementation fidelity, compared to 11 percent before Propel*Next*. Organizations have also improved and sustained implementation fidelity by strengthening guidelines, engaging staff in data use, and providing more intensive supervision (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2018a).

"It's an iterative process. I was hoping that at the end of the yellow brick road I'd get to the Emerald City, but it doesn't actually happen like that."
– Alumni CEO

While fidelity has generally improved, some organizations continue to face challenges (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2018a, 2019). For some multisite organizations that work across geographies, implementation fidelity is a heavier lift. Organizations that rely heavily on clinical interventions like case management also appear to face more challenges with fidelity. In these cases, assessing fidelity goes beyond tracking dosage or duration to focus on the quality of interactions with youth. These organizations required more intensive strategies for assessing fidelity, including relying on qualitative data, observations, or increased supervision.

[5] The full report is available on the Propel*Next* website: http://www.propelnext.org/fileadmin/media/Propel_Next/PDFs/PropelNext_Alumni_Study_Full_Report.pdf

Tools

"We're more intentional about making sure whatever we're thinking [in terms of program implementation] is grounded in some type of best practices or evidence-based work."

– Alumni Senior Leader

Other organizations have grappled with the reality that meaningful program outcomes for youth with complex needs take longer to achieve. One organization discussed the challenge of "telling their story" to funders who were eager to see "high success rates" immediately, noting that "if you choose to focus on more challenging populations, you're going to be faced with data that isn't always going to be as rosy" (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2018a, p. 10).

Systems, Infrastructure, and Capacity to Support Data Use

Organizations from both cohorts are now using more robust data systems and training front-line staff to use data to strengthen program delivery for at-risk youth. Staff members have increased their capacity and confidence to use, discuss, and think critically about the relevance and utility of data. To facilitate systematic data use and learning, nearly all organizations have developed and sustained at least one full-time position dedicated to this function (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2018a, 2019). The total number of learning and evaluation staff also increased, from an average of 0.5 full-time equivalent (FTE) positions in 2012 to 2.3 FTE positions in 2017 (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2018a).

Some organizations have struggled to find the right candidates to fill these positions and to find the balance between technical skills and the ability to facilitate more strategic data use across the organization. They also acknowledged challenges to staff engagement and managing the natural anxiety about data use and organizational change. "There is always pushback from the line staff around changes," one alumni leader observed, "and there are those who will say, 'I liked how it was before.'" (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2018a, p. 32). Other leaders talked about seasoned staff who at times struggled to adapt to new responsibilities and requirements. One recalled having to tell tenured managers that "you're new at this, and you have to go through the learning curve ... so you can teach and model to your staff" (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2018a, p. 32).

Adaptive Leadership That Inspires and Models a Learning Culture

Organizational leaders have a clear and unfettered understanding of the critical role they play in modeling and inspiring a culture of learning by encouraging people throughout their organization to be curious and data-driven. As one executive director noted, "We are the culture keepers, the people who can spread the culture of learning and curiosity" (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2018a, p. 22). Another commented that "we model that kind of behavior all the time in what we do" (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2018a, p. 22).

Interviews and survey results indicate that leaders have increased the frequency and regularity in which they share data and results with staff and board members (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2018a, 2019). This includes creating space and conditions to both celebrate successes and learn from experiences that didn't go as planned. Before Propel*Next*, these practices were not consistently applied and leaders acknowledged relying on intuition rather than data to make operational and strategic decisions. The majority (61 percent) of leaders from the National 2015 Cohort and 70 percent of the California 2018 Cohort expressed this was not a regular practice prior to Propel*Next*. After Propel*Next*, 89 percent of the National 2015 Cohort and 94 percent of the

California 2018 Cohort indicated that they were substantially or fully implementing this practice. Staff corroborated the data collected from leaders in nearly all measures, providing additional evidence of notable shifts in behavior, greater openness to learning from mistakes, and making decisions based on data (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2018a, 2019).

According to leaders, Propel*Next* is fundamentally about change and transformation, calling for sharper skills and agility to effectively navigate both the challenges and opportunities change often brings. One executive director acknowledged, "change management is very complex and we're all completely under trained on it. It's happening all the time, so it seems like an area where we could have done a lot more work [in Propel*Next*]" (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2019, p. 24). Nearly all organizational leaders expressed the need for more focus and training on change management.

Talent and Expectations Aligned With Organizational Growth and High Performance

In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins (2001) underscores the critical importance of human capital and coined the now famous phrase, "getting the right people in the right seats." Throughout Propel*Next*, grantees reflected on opportunities to develop staff and identify areas that required new talent to propel them to the next level of performance. At the beginning of the program, the concept of talent alignment was not really on the radar for most organizational leaders. Two years after Propel*Next*, organizations from the first cohort have made notable strides in this area, with 86 percent of leaders indicating that they made substantial progress "getting the right people in the right seats," and 81 percent reporting that the practice of communicating standards of excellence and accountability was substantially or fully implemented (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2018a).

Interviews with organizational leaders also revealed some of the inherent challenges in

> *"Data is in almost everything we do . . . I am able to then use all that data to plan much more targeted interventions than if I didn't [have that data]."*
> *– Alumni Staff*

raising the bar and efforts to recruit qualified staff. Several leaders mentioned elevating salaries to attract and retain talent, as well as establishing higher standards in the recruitment process. Other leaders discussed the challenges of managing staff expectations and clarifying pathways for growth when performance standards are high. Said one program director,

> For better or for worse, we've gotten a lot more strict about what it means to manage a person, and that a manager title doesn't just get thrown at you because you've been here a long time or because you want it. You have to meet all of these criteria to show us that you're ready for that before you get the title. (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2018a, p. 33).

Efforts to get "the right people in the right seats" have not been easy. In fact, many organizations from both cohorts experienced considerable staff turnover during and after the Propel*Next* program. While turnover in the nonprofit sector is nothing new, a number of grantees reported that at least some of the departures were a result of their efforts to transform their organizational practices and culture. While painful at times, organizational leaders have tried to use transitions as an opportunity to make structural changes, refine job responsibilities, change recruitment practices, and strengthen their approach to staff development.

Intentional Efforts to Integrate Learning and Data Use Across the Organization

Organizations highlighted a variety of mechanisms and processes to promote alignment, collaboration, and integration across programs,

"Anyone who manages anyone here has to be able to show concrete evidence of ability and a history of using data to learn and improve performance in some way or another."

– Alumni CEO

departments, and job functions, including organizational theories of change and strategic plans driven by research, analysis, and stakeholder engagement. They have broken down silos by creating cross-agency teams focused on quality improvement and by using data, discipline, and structured processes for making operational and strategic decisions. Staff shared how their data-system reports help not only in gauging program effectiveness, but also in driving improvement in all facets of their organizations. Before Propel*Next*, 59 percent of organizational leaders said that this practice was not started or partially met, with 30 percent unable to assess. Since Propel*Next* there has been a shift, with 84 percent of leaders reporting that their organization has substantially or fully implemented this practice (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2018a).

To help infuse and spread data-driven learning throughout an organization, leaders have stressed transparency and communicating the value of learning and continuous improvement across often fragmented programs and departments. Organizations from the California 2018 Cohort said Propel*Next* has fueled cross-agency collaboration, which was noted as one of their most significant achievements. According to one executive director, "Propel*Next* revealed gaps and weakness that have been under the surface for a long time — not just about data, but about how we work together and coordinate" (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2019, p. 32) Specifically, Propel*Next* surfaced places in their continuum of services where youth fall through the cracks, and helped them become more "youth-centered" rather than "program-driven" (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2019, p. 35).

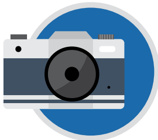
Sustaining, Strengthening, and Communicating Impact

Funders, board members, and partners cited expansion and serving more youth as the most noteworthy achievements of the National 2015 Cohort since participating in Propel*Next*. (See Figure 3.) Ten out of 12 alumni organizations are now serving more youth, with a median growth of 53 percent. Organizations have also increased their program options and have begun to grow their programs through partnerships and expansion into additional geographic sites. One organization doubled the number of school partnerships, while another expanded programming to 13 new cities. Over three-quarters of alumni organizations have secured new sources of funding and/or retained funding from existing funders. Ten out of 12 organizations have increased their budgets, with a median growth of 36 percent between 2012 and 2016.

Funders and grantees alike noted improvements in the quality of funder-grantee relationships and in the quality of interactions with institutional and community partners. Nearly all grantees from the National 2015 Cohort said Propel*Next* has helped them bring much more clarity to their work and, as a result, equipped them with better information and an enhanced ability to tell their stories. Some mentioned creating improved, results-focused annual reports and learning to talk to boards and funders in more compelling ways. Nonetheless, most organizations — particularly those from the California 2018 Cohort — see external communications and data-driven storytelling as areas for growth (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2018a, 2019).

Despite an overall uptick in funding, some organizations expressed concern about their ability to financially sustain their growth as they have struggled to attract larger sources of regional or national funding, due to their geographic focus and/or lack of rigorous external evaluations. As

FIGURE 3 Key Findings From National 2015 Cohort



A Snapshot of Propel*Next* Alumni

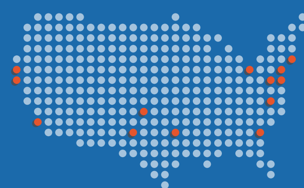
The first national cohort of grantees completed Propel*Next* in 2015. Since then, alumni organizations have seen substantial growth and progress. Let's take a look at some of the defining characteristics of Propel*Next*'s 12 alumni grantees.

DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS

Committed to serving disadvantaged youth through innovative practices and programming, alumni organizations work in a variety of fields:

- Juvenile Justice
- Workforce Development
- Student Reengagement
- Academic Achievement
- Experiential Leadership
- Community Building
- Foster Youth
- Social Enterprise
- Homelessness

Propel*Next* alumni are a regionally diverse group of organizations hailing from all corners of the U.S.



EXPANDED PROGRAMMING

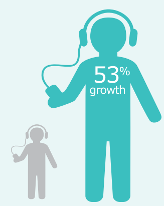
10 of 12 alumni organizations have more program options or have expanded to new program sites since Propel*Next*.

For example, one organization increased their school partnerships by 100%. Another organization expanded programming to an additional county and 13 new cities.

MORE YOUTH SERVED

10 of 12 alumni organizations reported having more program participants since Propel*Next*.

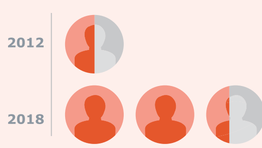
In 2012, organizations served between **59 & 3,189 youth annually**. With a median growth of 53% since Propel*Next*, organizations **now serve between 100 & 4,679 youth annually**.



DEDICATED LEARNING AND EVALUATION TEAMS

Before Propel*Next* only five organizations had data and evaluation staff, compared to 11 organizations in 2017.

In 2017, alumni organizations had **an average of 2.3 FTE data and evaluation staff,** compared to **an average of 0.5** in 2012.



FINANCIAL GROWTH

Since Propel*Next*, the majority of alumni organizations **(10 of 12) saw their budgets[1] grow, with a few experiencing phenomenal financial growth.**

36% The median percentage of budget growth alumni experienced between 2012 and 2016

1 Budget is defined as an organization's annual expenses.

Tools

"It gave us an opportunity to both communicate and evolve a cross-section of the staff in some key decision points moving forward … it was comprised of folks from advancement, training, instructors, case managers, employment folks [and] finance."
– Alumni CEO

an organizational partner put it, they are "too big or too mature for local funders, but not big enough for national funders" (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2018a, p. 44). Organizations that depend on public-sector funding have also struggled, and, given the current policy environment, things seem likely to get worse before they get better. One commented, "The budget for the state over the last five years has almost been flat funding. Maybe 1 percent or 2 percent, but, essentially, the costs of the program are going up but the funding isn't keeping pace with it" (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2018a, p. 44).

Reflections on the Propel*Next* Model

To better understand the "secret sauce" of Propel*Next*, the evaluation team continuously surveyed both cohorts about the components and attributes that have been most impactful in propelling them forward. Across the board, grantees appreciated the structured approach and accountability of Propel*Next*, pushing them to accomplish things they otherwise would not. The combination of intensive supports is part of what makes Propel*Next* a powerful program, but according to leaders from both cohorts, the most critical components have been (1) the customized coaching, (2) a trusting and supportive relationship with their funders, and (3) relevant content bolstered by peer learning. The evaluation revealed the important role funders play in modeling best practices and "walking the walk."

Customized, high-caliber coaching helps to accelerate and embed the application of generalized knowledge into organizational practice. Propel*Next* grantees receive guidance from experienced coaches who bring a unique mix of experience in organizational development and leadership, deep understanding of the nonprofit sector, and strong management and specialized technical expertise. The coaches are well-positioned to provide targeted support to grantees because they are seasoned professionals with extensive experience in developing and implementing performance management systems and processes, including dashboards, score cards, and other data-driven learning tools to support continuous improvement.

The coaching component was consistently ranked as the most valuable aspect of Propel*Next* — specifically, the thought partnership, fresh perspective, candor, and ability of coaches to anticipate blind spots and challenges organizations would encounter down the road. Grantees appreciated hearing the "hard truth" and how coaches "pushed you in uncomfortable but productive ways" (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2019, p. 40). A leader from the California 2018 Cohort said, "There's no substitute for having somebody regularly checking in … There's been a few other [capacity-building] programs that I've been part of where there's been some component of that, but it hasn't been nearly as comprehensive or as in depth as what is provided with Propel*Next*" (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2019, p. 40). Many organizations have maintained contact with their coaches and have sought advice, refresher workshops, and support during organizational transitions.

Foundations that strike the right balance between high standards and responsiveness create a solid set of incentives for authentic partnerships and high performance. Alumni found

the EMCF team to be transparent and highly responsive. Said one:

> I truly have such tremendous respect for the foundation …, the role modeling of having high standards, being demanding, hard work … being stretched beyond what we thought we were capable of in the beginning. The hard part was there, but there was also great humility. (Harder+Company Community Research, 2017, p. 11).

Grantees said they felt heard and that the foundation struck the right balance between accountability and flexibility. "I felt very inspired to meet a funder that had both the sophistication and the humility that really made it safe to be vulnerable, to pull apart who we were, what we were doing, and putting it back together" (Harder+Company Community Research, 2017, p. 11). Grantees appreciated the EMCF's ability to create an environment that fostered vulnerability and openness to sometimes sensitive conversations. "I never felt judgment," one CEO noted. "They really created a safe space for that to happen, and, in fact, I felt like the more honest and vulnerable I was, the more enriched the relationship with EMCF. That's a unique experience" (Harder+Company Community Research, 2017, p. 11).

Well managed cohort peer-learning opportunities can incentivize collaboration and help elevate the field. The cohort-based model created a strong peer-learning experience and sense of community, both within and across cohorts. Over time, alumni developed trusting, transparent, and supportive relationships as well as a shared language and experience. One leader reflected, "[F]or us as an organization, everything happens in the context of a relationship," and the opportunity to come together on a regular basis — to "go out to dinner and have drinks on occasion … really developed a trust where agencies were willing to take risks in doing business differently" (Harder+Company Community Research, 2017, p. 10). Another CEO commented that the level of trust created important space for peer learning, support, and growth: "As a CEO, there's not a lot of places where you can be super transparent and vulnerable, and so it's nice to have that space" (Harder+Company Community Research, 2017, p. 10). And one California grantee responded, "Overall, what we found to be the most beneficial was the peer learning, both from our current peer group as well as the National cohort" (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2019, p. 40).

"I felt like I was part of a movement to elevate the sector. Something bigger than me and my organization. Our kids deserve a sector that elevates the work [and is] really centered around better outcomes for kids."

– Grantee CEO

Peer learning as well as a pervasive culture of reflection and responsiveness have been a common thread throughout Propel*Next*. Using real-time and rapid feedback loops, the Propel*Next* team continuously responded to grantee feedback, adapting the content and format of large group-learning sessions. This included peer-to-peer breakout sessions during large group convenings that allowed executive directors to meet and discuss role-specific issues, while program leaders connected with their peers on topics most relevant to their role and function within the organization. Executive directors discussed strategies for engaging their boards, building leadership teams, and managing organizational change, while program and operational directors had deeper discussions about program implementation and data use. There were also opportunities for organizations with similar program models to engage in discussions, group problem solving, and deeper connections with peers. Grantees said they found it reassuring to talk to other members of

the cohort who were facing similar organizational or programmatic challenges, and that they often left learning sessions feeling energized and equipped with new tools, strategies, and solutions. Each organization sent two to three people to each learning session, thus allowing them to more readily "bring the learning home" and strategize ways to infuse that learning within their organizations.

Propel*Next* has also leveraged experiences and insights across cohorts by creating opportunities for alumni to share both their trials and actionable insights with current cohorts. In fact, most of the California cohort grantees said the best and most meaningful presentations at the learning sessions came from the alumni, as opposed to expert speakers. Half of those grantees have proactively connected with alumni outside of learning sessions to share materials and resources, meet in person, or conduct site visits. One California grantee commented, "Having access to the past cohort is probably the most valuable thing in this whole relationship ..., because having their insight into the journey calms our fears and our anxiety of trying to take a whole organization through this process" (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2018b, p. 15).

The Ripple Effects of Collaborative Learning

As part of the second cohort, the EMCF pursued a collaborative co-investor model to incubate and launch a regional approach in California, providing unique opportunities for learning and experimentation among funders. The four California-based foundations — the William and Flora Hewlett, David and Lucile Packard, Sobrato Family, and Weingart foundations — have all been notable champions of organizational effectiveness and were eager to participate in testing and learning at both the grantee and funder levels. They brought their own questions about the model and unique insights on how the Propel*Next* initiative compares to other capacity-building programs. Throughout the three-year period, funders attended the grantee learning sessions and participated in regular funder meetings to discuss their reflections and observations. Like the grantee cohort, the funder group was equally engaged in a test-and-learn cycle.

Interviews with the co-investors revealed aligned values and a shared commitment to strengthening the organizational effectiveness of the nonprofit sector. They were excited to be part of a funder learning community, explore other capacity-building approaches, and enhance their own internal grantmaking practices. Each brought thought-provoking insights and questions to the table and helped to incorporate new content, such as beneficiary feedback and more attention to equity and inclusion. One funder expressed interest in cohort-based learning: "There's power in the cohort model if it's managed well, if there's sufficient room for the organizations to really learn from each other, and if the incentives are set up the right way" (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2018b, p. 12). At least two of the funders have since launched cohort models similar to Propel*Next*, but on a smaller scale. One reported piloting an 18-month cohort for increasing evaluation capacity, while another took lessons learned from Propel*Next* and implemented a "financial resilience cohort" aimed at helping grantees move toward systemic change.

In addition to the co-investor model, the California 2018 Cohort also provided an opportunity to test a regional approach with grantees clustered in the Los Angeles and San Francisco Bay areas. Grantees, funders, and coaches all cited multiple benefits of regional clusters, including bringing more resources to the area and strengthening the capacity and networks of youth-serving organizations. Despite the potential for competitive funding tensions, grantees were highly collaborative — partnering on funding opportunities and openly sharing programmatic, operational, and training materials. There are promising signs the cohort model and the new regional focus are fostering collaboration and enthusiasm about field-building. One director said, "We're hoping that the things that we are learning will help us become leaders in the field among our peers," (Engage R+D &

Harder+Company Community Research, 2018b, p. 13). This shared commitment and sense of responsibility for building a sector that delivers better outcomes for youth was echoed by other California grantees.

Conclusion and Implications for the Field

In the fall of 2018, the EMCF and five co-investors[6] launched the third Propel*Next* cohort with 12 grantees clustered in Northern California. They are continuing to test, learn, and build evidence for deep and intentional learning that propels organizations to higher levels of performance and, ultimately, better outcomes for beneficiaries. More than five years after launching the first cohort, alumni organizations have continued to build muscle and core competencies for performance management, resulting in notable shifts in organizational practices, behaviors, processes, and culture. While the combination of intensive and comprehensive supports is part of what makes Propel*Next* a powerful program, both the high-caliber coaching and the cohort-based peer-learning model were acknowledged as "game changers."

There is also strong evidence to support the ripple effect of deep and intentional learning — not only within individual organizations, but across organizations and funders on multiple levels. Propel*Next* has provided fertile ground to test and document the often-overlapping ripples of learning and collaboration within organizations, across organizational peer groups (i.e., CEOs, program leaders, learning and evaluation staff), and among funders working in the same or adjacent areas of interest. These ripple effects have the potential to elevate the broader field as new standards of performance are replicated and spread to other organizations. With encouragement from the EMCF, alumni organizations have developed a strong sense of community as well as a willingness to lend their support to the Propel*Next* cohorts that follow in their footsteps. As one leader put it, "We would jump at any opportunity to collaborate. We're like the [Harvard Business School] graduates that stay in touch for 50 years" (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2018a, p. 48). Others recognized their role and responsibility to advance the field and improve outcomes for at-risk youth. "[We're] part of elevating the nonprofit sector," said one executive director, working "to create a new standard of doing things for our most vulnerable kids" (Engage R+D & Harder+Company Community Research, 2018b, p. 1).

Tools

[6] The co-investors for the cohort in Northern California are the William and Flora Hewlett, David and Lucile Packard, Sobrato Family, and Heising-Simons foundations.

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Tools

From Idea to Initiative: Real-Time Learning for a Funder Collaborative on Nonprofit Strategic Restructuring

Way-Ting Chen, I.M.B.A., and Shannon Johnson, M.B.A., Blue Garnet; Lynn Alvarez, J.D., California Community Foundation; Carrie Harlow, M.P.A., The Ahmanson Foundation; and Jennifer Price-Letscher, M.P.O.D., The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation

Keywords: *Real-time learning and evaluation, adaptive learning, strategic restructuring, funder collaborative, nonprofit partnerships, nonprofit mergers and acquisitions, funder collaboration, developmental evaluation, Los Angeles*

Tools

Introduction and Context

Evaluation and learning can sometimes be seen as at odds with one another. While the purpose and results of traditional evaluation systems help determine whether a particular goal was achieved (or not), a well-designed learning system typically focuses on initiative design and formation — leading to changes that make the job of a traditional evaluation system nearly impossible. This is where developmental evaluation can be most useful.

> Developmental evaluation applies to an ongoing process of innovation in which both the path and the destination are evolving. It differs from making improvements along the way to a clearly defined goal. Where more traditional approaches to evaluation try to predict the outcomes of the innovation and focus measurement on those goals, developmental evaluation is intended to support innovation within a context of uncertainty. (Patton, 2010)

The Nonprofit Sustainability Initiative (NSI) is a funding collaborative seeking to transform perceptions and behaviors around nonprofit strategic restructuring in Los Angeles. The NSI adopted a developmental evaluation (DE) approach to spark innovation in how to best support nonprofit strategic restructuring. As defined by Kohm, La Piana, and Gowdy (2000), strategic restructuring occurs when

> two or more independent organizations establish an ongoing relationship to increase the

Key Points

- Evaluation and learning is often seen as a high-stakes, formalized process of comparing an effort at its conclusion against some standard or benchmark. More recently, formative and developmental approaches to evaluation have been created to accommodate the need for more adaptability and ambiguity in an effort.
- The Nonprofit Sustainability Initiative, a multiyear collaboration of 17 funders in Los Angeles County, California, supports nonprofit organizations to collaborate and restructure in a variety of forms. As the initiative evolved, its evaluation and learning system had to have the ability to evolve with it. Real-time learning informed initiative design and refinement, aligned funders on the definition of success, spurred exploration of a grantee peer-learning network, and developed a vetted consultant list and key strategic partners.
- This article presents key design aspects of the initiative's evaluation and learning system, describes how it evolved over time, and shares key evaluation insights and learnings. It also explores the nuances of learning and evaluation in a large collaborative, including what the initiative has done to balance learning and accountability, and quickly move from learning to insight to action.

Today, the NSI aims to support nonprofits wanting to explore strategic restructuring to enhance their long-term sustainability. At the same time, it serves as an opportunity for foundations to understand the need for these partnerships and how to best support them.

Tools

> administrative efficiency and/or further the programmatic mission of one or more of the participating organizations through shared, transferred, or combined services, resources, or programs. Strategic restructuring ranges from jointly managed programs and consolidated administrative functions to full-scale mergers. (p. 1)

When NSI began in 2012, its three founding funders shared a strong desire to set up a system of evaluation and learning that helped them understand the possibilities of funding in strategic restructuring, and determine the most effective and efficient means of doing so. The result was a real-time learning system that itself changed as it helped NSI evolve over a six-year period.

This article will illustrate the continually evolving learning experience of a funder collaborative, and share insights about the learning system that reflect realities of this dynamic collaboration — one that started out informally, requires funders to recommit annually, and continues to evolve. The authors hope this narrative and its resulting insights help inform the design of future systems like this, and further open possibilities of setting up an adaptive DE, or real-time learning system, for themselves and others.

The Nonprofit Sustainability Initiative

The NSI is a funder collaborative enabling nonprofits to pursue long-term, formal strategic partnerships. It was designed in response to several trends in Los Angeles: the significant downturn in the economy and corresponding increase in demand for services; the loss of revenue from private and public funders for these services;[1] and the significant growth of nonprofits in the area — all competing for limited resources. By 2008, the number of nonprofits in Los Angeles had doubled from 1994 levels to 34,674 (Howard & Kil, 2009). Today, the NSI aims to support nonprofits wanting to explore strategic restructuring to enhance their long-term sustainability. At the same time, it serves as an opportunity for foundations to understand the need for these partnerships and how to best support them.

The NSI's theory of change focuses on removing the stigma around nonprofit strategic partnerships and supporting exploration of collaboration opportunities. Its goal is to normalize the dialogue and activity around long-term partnerships among nonprofits by establishing an environment where providers, funders, and technical assistance (TA) professionals understand and regularly engage in the activity as a strategy for enhancing impact and sustainability. The NSI does this by fostering strategic restructuring conversations among nonprofits. It provides grants for Los Angeles County-based agencies to explore formal partnerships that enhance organizational effectiveness and efficiency. Drawing from a common private-sector practice, strategic restructuring conversations typically culminate in agreements to combine some or all aspects of participating organizations, ranging from jointly managed programs and back-office consolidations to shared ventures or full-scale mergers (Kohm et al., 2000).

[1] A UCLA study, The Generosity Gap: Donating Less in Post-Recession Los Angeles County (Parent, Landres, & Byerly, 2016), finds that local giving in Los Angeles declined dramatically since before the Great Recession and high-dollar donations dropped in particular, resulting in $1 billion less in annual charitable giving in 2013 than in 2006.

FIGURE 1 NSI Support for Grantee Success

FIGURE 2 The NSI Funders

The Nonprofit Sustainability Initiative Contributing Funders (as of 9/15/18)

- The Ahmanson Foundation
- The Annenberg Foundation
- Ballmer Group
- California Community Foundation
- The California Endowment
- Carl & Roberta Deutsch Foundation
- Carol and James Collins Foundation
- Conrad N. Hilton Foundation
- The Durfee Foundation
- First 5 LA
- James Irvine Foundation
- JPMorgan Chase Foundation
- LA84 Foundation
- The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation
- The Rose Hills Foundation
- UniHealth Foundation
- Weingart Foundation

Two types of grants are provided by the NSI:

- Negotiation grants pay for outside consulting services to assist two or more organizations in exploring, negotiating, and reaching a restructuring agreement. Negotiation grants typically range from $15,000 to $40,000.

- Integration grants are available to organizations that complete the negotiation process and reach a formal restructuring agreement. Grants, typically ranging from $10,000 to $30,000, support one-time costs associated with implementing the partnership, such as merging information technology or accounting systems, rebranding, etc.

To support a healthy pipeline of quality grant proposals, the NSI also conducts additional activities to create awareness and help build readiness among interested nonprofits. (See Figure 1.)

Initially an informal collaboration of three leading Southern California foundations, the initiative is now comprised of 17 foundations. (See Figure 2). It is managed by a consultant with direction and oversight from three current managing funders (The Ahmanson, California Community, and The Ralph M. Parsons foundations).[2] The California Community Foundation (CCF) acts as fiscal agent for the initiative and supports it by hosting its website, where nonprofits and others can seek information, review resources, and apply online.[3] To date, 190

[2] One of the three original managing funders was Weingart Foundation, which rotated off and was replaced by Ahmanson in 2016.

[3] See https://www.calfund.org/nsi.

Tools

FIGURE 3 Three Phases of NSI Development

The NSI in...	2012 "StartUp"	2013-16 "Growth & Expansion"	2017-18+ "Maturity"
Description	• Informally formed by 3 funders • Focused on funding "negotiation" and supporting "ready" nonprofits	• Rapidly expanded to 12 funders • Created managing funders structure; hired program manager • Expanded support to "integration" funding	• Paced growth to 17 funders • Expanding support to strengthen "ecosystem" (consultants list, nonprofit peer-learning network) • Formally engaging with national movement
Activity	• Nonprofit convening • Formation and operational structure	• \$1.9 million in grantmaking • 48 negotiation grants + 12 integration grants • 128 nonprofit organizations	• \$1.1 million in new grantmaking • 18 new negotiation grants + 11 new integration grants • 190 total nonprofits

nonprofits have received $2.8 million across 66 negotiations, plus 23 integration grants. Among these nonprofits, which serve every region of Los Angeles County, over 85 percent of negotiations have resulted in signed agreements. Half are mergers or acquisitions; the remainder are formal partnerships involving networks, co-location, joint programming, and consolidated administrative functions.

Since 2012, the NSI has made significant changes to its design based on feedback received from its evaluation and learning system. Its first six years can best be understood via three phases: startup, growth and expansion, and maturity. (See Figure 3.)

The NSI in Startup

The spark for the NSI came through a learning conversation. In an informal partnership in April 1992, CCF, The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation, and the Weingart Foundation set out to share and discuss strategic restructuring as well as research reports by TCC Group (2010) and the UCLA Center for Civil Society (Hasenfeld, Kil, Chen, & Parent, 2012). The focus was on the post-recession "new normal" in Los Angeles, and how strategic restructuring could be used to build greater impact and sustainability. All three foundations invited grantees to send their executive directors and board chairs to a convening. Over 700 leaders attended, representing over 300 organizations.

With clear interest expressed through this convening, the founding funders began a "readiness assessment" phase, funding La Piana Consulting to administer and review results of its Strategic Restructuring Assessment Tool (SRAT) for 42 nonprofits to determine their readiness for strategic restructuring negotiations. Each saw clear demand for financial support to help nonprofits engage in strategic restructuring, committed to a pooled fund, and became the "managing funders." By December 2012, the NSI began supporting strategic restructuring negotiations, awarding its first grant in January 2013.

The NSI in Growth and Expansion

The next phase of the NSI is characterized by increased grantmaking, and solidifying internal capacity to support the initiative and its learning. The NSI went through substantive changes over three years, refining its design, expanding the nonprofit grantee pool, and increasing the number of funders in the collaborative.

In February 2013, Lynn Alvarez joined the initiative as project manager. Her role has included facilitating funder collaboration, reviewing all

proposals, and providing program officer services for grantmaking, organizing convenings, coordinating with evaluation, managing TA providers, fundraising for the initiative, and overseeing communication and outreach. She also served to "create a more open learning channel between grantees and foundations" (Raynor, Blanchard, & Spence, 2015, p. 107).

In August 2013, Blue Garnet joined the initiative as the evaluation and learning partner. A social impact consultancy based in Southern California, Blue Garnet brought extensive experience working at the intersection of evaluation and strategy formation. It supported the NSI in formalizing and conducting its real-time learning system and drawing insights to inform the NSI process. Blue Garnet also worked with the managing funders to formalize a definition of success for the initiative, including impact on key players in the Los Angeles nonprofit ecosystem.

Based on feedback received from the real-time learning system, the NSI made significant changes to its design to address readiness, grantee experience, support and communications, results, and direct outcomes. Notably, real-time learning led to streamlining the application process and expansion of funding into integration/implementation support. A term of art borrowed from the field of computing, a real-time learning system is described as one that "controls an environment by receiving data, processing them, and returning the results sufficiently quickly to affect the environment at that time" (Martin, 1965, p. 4).

Beyond grantmaking, the NSI reached out to raise awareness and build acceptance of strategic restructuring as an important tool. In September 2014, it held a second convening to provide information on strategic restructuring, lessons from nonprofit leaders and consultants who had participated thus far, and key evaluation findings. Given feedback from real-time learning, the convening focused less on mergers and acquisitions and more on other types of potential partnerships. In May 2016, the NSI also convened 14 consultants who had provided negotiation support to initiative grantees. The NSI funders also began holding semiannual gatherings with interested funder colleagues to discuss learnings and outcomes and consider future opportunities. The October 2015 funder convening was a significant milestone, forming consensus over the NSI's definition of success: the "L.A. County nonprofit sector, including funders, nonprofit organizations, technical assistance providers, and educational institutions, supports, understands, and regularly engages in strategic restructuring to enhance its impact and sustainability."

Based on feedback received from the real-time learning system, the NSI made significant changes to its design to address readiness, grantee experience, support and communications, results, and direct outcomes. Notably, real-time learning led streamlining the application process and expansion of funding into integration/implementation support.

Finally, trust in the three managing funders for day-to-day management and decision-making allowed the initiative to grow seamlessly. This governance structure became key to the initiative's long-term success, providing continuity and stability during rapid growth. By the end of 2016, the NSI had stabilized its program design and distributed over $1.9 million to 128 nonprofits across 48 negotiation and 12 integration grants, and nine new funders joined the initiative, bringing the total to 12.

The NSI in Maturity

In 2017, the initiative began focusing more explicitly on other areas of the strategic

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Since inception, the NSI has engaged in an adaptive developmental evaluation (DE), integrating evaluation and learning to enhance the initiative's design and implementation and to evolve the learning system itself. As with the DE employed by Landers, Price, and Minyard, the managing funders' commitment to evaluation as a learning tool was rooted in an interest in real-time improvement. The NSI calls this its real-time learning system.

restructuring ecosystem, turning its attention to the growing national movement of similar partnership initiatives. Again based on real-time learning feedback, the NSI made an intentional effort to strengthen the supporting ecosystem for nonprofits exploring strategic restructuring. To this end, it launched an RFQ and published a list of consultants with experience in strategic restructuring negotiations. The NSI also asked Blue Garnet to engage initiative grantees and alumni to explore interest in peer support. The team designed a peer-support network, featuring a facilitated "lunch and learn" series and a volunteer mentorship program.

Today, the NSI continues outreach to support learning among nonprofits and fellow funders. The initiative seeks out opportunities to present about strategic restructuring, doing so at nonprofit-sector and subsector conferences in Southern California. Semiannual funder convenings continue to provide important education opportunities for potential funders. The number of NSI funders now totals 17.

Since its founding, the NSI has been in contact with similar efforts across the country. Having solidified and reached maturity, it now shares its experience and learned expertise with them. Collectively, they are seeding a national movement to promote long-term nonprofit strategic restructuring, collaborations, and partnerships.

NSI's Real-Time Learning System

Since inception, the NSI has engaged in an adaptive developmental evaluation (DE), integrating evaluation and learning to enhance the initiative's design and implementation and to evolve the learning system itself. As with the DE employed by Landers, Price, and Minyard (2018), the managing funders' commitment to evaluation as a learning tool was rooted in an interest in real-time improvement. The NSI calls this its real-time learning system.

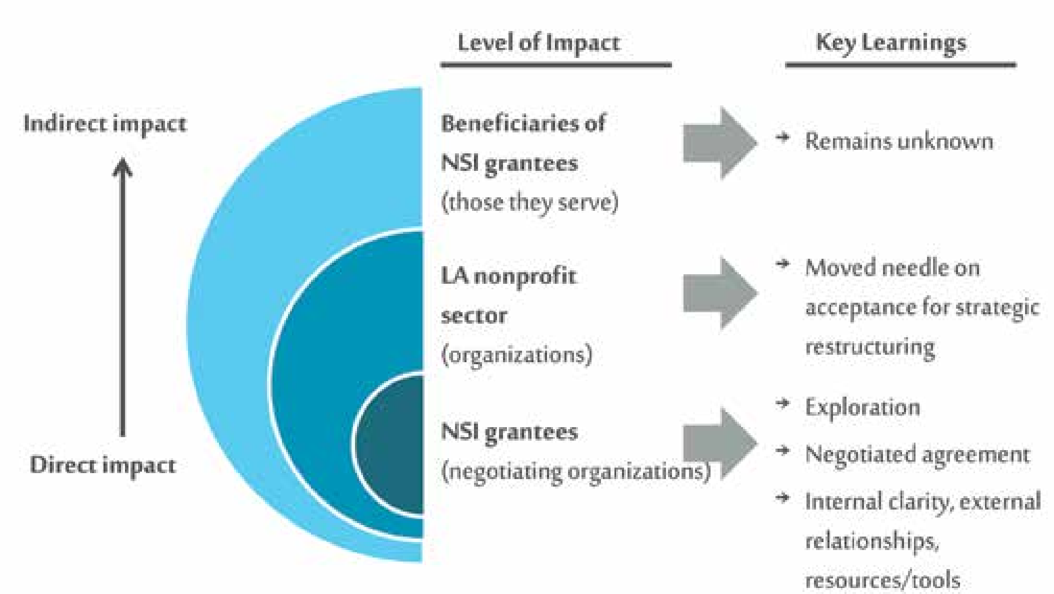
The general theory of change reflects a set of working hypotheses held by NSI funders from the start:

- Just as mergers and acquisitions are important strategic tools for corporations and businesses in general (Nohria, Joyce, & Roberson, 2003), strategic restructuring can similarly be an important tool for nonprofits. While not a silver bullet, strategic restructuring can be a valuable strategy to enhance nonprofit impact and sustainability (Cortez, Foster, & Milway, 2009).

- Yet, stigma around strategic restructuring exists in our ecosystem. Simply put, the stigma suggests nonprofits use strategic restructuring only during times of financial hardship and organizational difficulty (Fischer, Vadapalli, & Coulton, 2017).

- Thus, while Los Angeles nonprofits may need support for strategic restructuring, funding for it is sparse. This is an unfamiliar area of grantmaking for many foundations,

FIGURE 4 NSI Framework for Levels of Impact



Icon created by Blue Garnet

and nonprofits fear requesting support for strategic restructuring would cannibalize opportunities for other types of support.

- The greater the exposure to strategic restructuring in the nonprofit sector, the more it will be normalized and embraced as an important tool for nonprofits, and the stigma will be removed.
- Ultimately, the demand for this type of support will tell funders whether or not strategic restructuring funding is valuable. We will continue to provide strategic restructuring grants as long as nonprofits continue to communicate that they are valuable.

While these core assumptions persist, the relative emphasis the initiative places on learning has shifted. Throughout the NSI learning experience, its real-time learning system has asked a range of learning questions, from formative inquiries about the grantee experience to those that clarify and offer "proof points" of NSI's varying degrees of impact. (See Figure 4.) Driven by growing understanding, the relative importance of these questions shifted and, with it, the real-time learning system needed to adapt. The evolution of the NSI's real-time learning system mirrors the three phases of the initiative's development. (See Figure 5.)

NSI Real-Time Learning System in Formation

While the NSI was still being formed, its accompanying learning system was informal and highly developmental. From the beginning, the founding funders wanted a way to support the initiative's learning. They contributed deep grantmaking expertise, past experience with other capacity-building initiatives, and strong working relationships with nonprofit grantees and philanthropic colleagues in Los Angeles. At the same time, the use of strategic restructuring continued to lag in our sector (Milway, Orozco, & Botero, 2014), and this was a relatively new area of investment to the founding funders.

Initially, the three founding funders posed three formative learning questions, and took different approaches to answering them:

Tools

FIGURE 5 Summary of the NSI Real-Time Learning System Over Time

NSI Real-Time Learning in...	"Formation"	"Development"	"Broadening"
Why? (Description)	• Develop and establish NSI learning system. • "Process" evaluation, with emphasis on grantee experience.	• Formalize and refine system. • Refine/redesign grantee experience. • Expand focus to include "success" for nonprofits. • Define "success" for NSI.	• Broaden focus to include "success" in ecosystem. • Internalize learning. • Contribute to national movement.
What? (Learning questions)	1) What does "real-time learning" mean? 2) Is there need and demand for strategic restructuring support? 3) How do we tell if applicants are "ready" (or not)?	1) How do we optimize the grantee experience? 2) How do we define grantee "success"? 3) How do we know if NSI is successful?	1) What does it mean to "normalize" strategic restructuring? 2) How do we bring funders closer to the learning? 3) How do we best share what we have learned?
How? (Methods & tools)	• At start, La Piana Consulting support; use of SRAT tool to screen for readiness • Transition to third-party evaluator (Blue Garnet) to help devise learning system	• Continued with third-party evaluator (Blue Garnet) • Use of surveys and interviews at start, immediate post- and 6-month-post negotiation • Integration questions added to interviews	• Third-party evaluator support to evolve learning system • Transitioned to "in house" data-gathering via surveys at start and immediate post-negotiation and integration grant periods
How? (Communication & decision-making)	• Monthly (managing) funder calls • Reports focused on grantee progress on readiness assessments	• "Batch" reporting to managing funders (2-3 times/year) • Reports focused on grantee experience; expanded to start capturing negotiation goals • Learning conversations with stakeholders: funders (twice yearly), grantees, TA providers • Outreach focused on building nonprofit pipeline	• Monthly managing funder calls • Twice yearly learning conversations with funders • Peer learning network • Outreach to larger nonprofit sector via conferences • Engagement with funders on strategic restructuring and how to replicate NSI • Collaborate nationally on common evaluation framework

1. *What is the need and demand for strategic restructuring in Los Angeles?* Oversubscription of the 2012 nonprofit conference, and resulting number of applications to the "readiness assessment" phase (80 applications for 42 grants), demonstrated the need and demand for funding strategic-restructuring explorations. This expression of demand has continued, and is the basis of annual recommitment to this collaboration by all NSI funders.

2. *How do we tell if applicants are "ready" (or not)?* At the start, NSI funders relied on La Piana Consulting to determine readiness of individual nonprofits. La Piana provided readiness assessments: collecting data via the SRAT, conducting pre- and post-negotiation interviews with grantees, and asking them to complete an impact instrument at conclusion of negotiations. In 2012, aggregated findings from the readiness assessment phase were shared with the NSI regularly. As the NSI formalized its learning system, it transitioned from the SRAT to a customized survey, better aligned with its evolving learning questions, to determine readiness. The resulting findings helped NSI funders better understand nonprofit readiness for strategic restructuring, utilizing DE's notion of real-time feedback to nurture learning (Patton, 2006; Landers et al., 2018). Consequently, the NSI project manager became better equipped to communicate with prospective nonprofits and eventually took on the role of conducting "readiness" due diligence during the application process — for example, by interviewing nonprofit CEOs and, sometimes, board chairs to understand the nonprofits' experience with working together, their level of commitment entering negotiation, availability of time and additional resources during negotiation, etc.

3. *What does "real-time learning" mean? What type of system supports it?* As the NSI developed, funders also formed their perspective on what their real-time learning system would look like. In addition to flexibility with the NSI activities and outcomes, an important element of real-time learning was timely feedback. This input informed decisions on how to improve the grantee experience and, over time, success. This meant the system had to create a space in which grantees could share honest feedback during, and soon after, the grant period, without concern over ramifications. With the NSI itself becoming more structured, formalized, and resourced, the funders decided to hire outside evaluators to minimize any appearance of bias toward a system they created. In late 2012, the managing funders decided to transition support for its real-time learning to a neutral third-party evaluator (i.e., Blue Garnet).

FIGURE 6 NSI Real-Time Learning Components

Icons retrieved from https://thenounproject.com

NSI Real-Time Learning in Development

With the NSI launched and Blue Garnet in place, the funders started formalizing a real-time learning system. Starting in 2013, Blue Garnet worked with the managing funders and project manager to design a methodology for evaluation and intentional learning, develop the supporting tools, collect and analyze data from nonprofit grantees and consultants, and report on insights and implications to the NSI.

In general, the NSI learning fell under one of six categories: participant characteristics, NSI experience, grantee readiness, grantee support, NSI impact, and communications. (See Figure 6.) Blue Garnet, confidentially and anonymously, gathered primary and secondary data to support learning in these categories. In addition to the grantee application and funding contract, Blue Garnet used pre-, post-, and six-month post-negotiation surveys by nonprofit grantees, accompanied by one-on-one interviews with grantees and their consultant post-negotiation to collect data. Grantee participation in evaluation and learning activities became mandatory.

Between 2013 and 2016, Blue Garnet issued five real-time learning reports, sharing findings and recommendations along the six categories. Effort was made to report on "batches" of negotiations concluding around the same time, balancing timely insights with aggregated results to protect anonymity. Real-time learning reports synthesized findings from four to six strategic restructuring groups at a time, were shared with managing funders, and were processed in accompanying learning conversations. Key findings and resulting decisions were then disseminated to the larger funder collaborative during semiannual funder convenings.

With sufficient answers to the initial questions, the NSI funders considered what was next on the learning agenda. While data collection continued for the first set of questions, funders began focusing on other priorities:

- *How do we optimize the grantee experience?* The NSI funders wanted to create a safe space for strategic restructuring conversations, considering it a powerful

Tools

condition for their success. Drawing on their grantmaking philosophies and capacity-building experiences, the funders understood the importance of maintaining a hands-off, nondirective stance toward strategic restructuring outcomes. In essence, the NSI was funding a process, not any specific result; its learning system needed to obtain objective feedback on the process. A safe space was also deemed a necessary condition for understanding grantees' views on the NSI experience and how to improve it. As the first set of NSI grantees concluded their negotiations in 2013, the newly formalized real-time learning system expanded the set of questions posed by the NSI funders, soliciting confidential feedback on the grantee experience. Over time, evaluation findings drove substantive changes to the NSI experience for grantees. Notable changes included a more streamlined and informative application process and clarification about the NSI message. For example, applications could be made via online portal; funding decisions were guaranteed within six weeks of applying; and earlier requirements were removed, changing language to address a perceived bias toward mergers and reiterating the NSI's openness to grantees hiring any qualified consultant.

- *How do we define grantee "success"?* As the first group of nonprofits concluded their negotiations, the NSI funders wanted to understand the results. The real-time learning surfaced four key findings:

  1. What grantees wanted: The NSI was initially unable to systematically determine whether or not grantees achieved their strategic restructuring goals, because grantees were not asked about their goals at the outset. Recognizing this, a question was added to the baseline survey to collect this information.

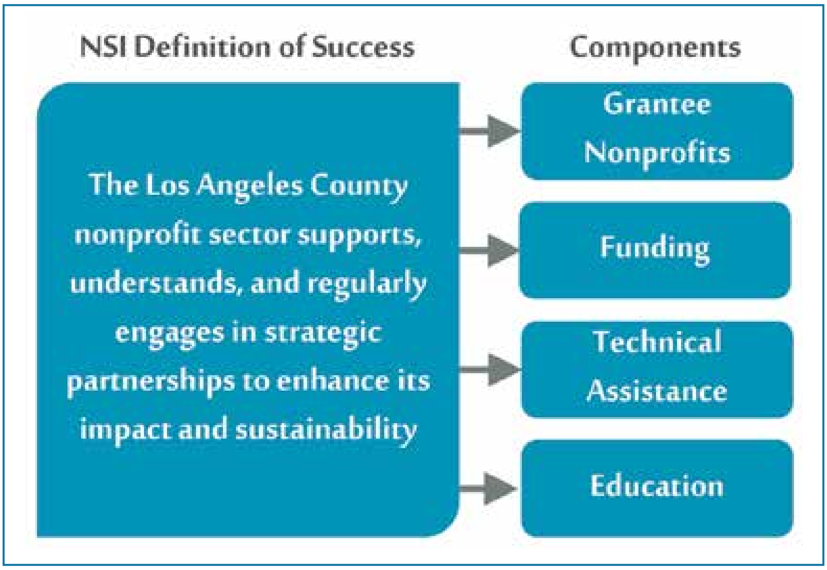
  2. Benefits: Evaluation findings indicated that, regardless of outcomes, nonprofits saw the experience of strategic restructuring negotiation as educational and valuable, bringing unexpected benefits such as relationship development, knowledge sharing, and organizational clarity.

  3. NSI's emerging role: Initially, nonprofits repeatedly saw availability of strategic restructuring funding as a catalyst for entering into negotiations, as the large numbers of applications received in the NSI's first year may have reflected pent-up demand. Today, nonprofits generally credit the NSI as an accelerator to entering strategic restructuring negotiations. Access to a facilitator, which would have been unaffordable but for NSI funding, led nonprofits to more effectively and efficiently agree to exploration with each other.

  4. Short-term impact: With the extensive time frame between negotiation and implementation and even longer time frame to organizational performance, the NSI evaluation sought directional insight on its impact over the short term. For nonprofits that completed a negotiated strategic restructuring agreement, 100 percent believed it would improve organization impact and improve or maintain sustainability.

- *How do we know if the NSI is successful?* Through 2015, real-time learning was largely focused on insights into and recommendations for process rather than impact. At the same time, funders and grantees were more frequently expressing interest in learning more about the NSI's success. Blue Garnet encouraged and supported the funders to advance thinking on their definition of success for NSI. In October 2015, all 17 funders convened to discuss outcomes of the NSI, and consensus was built around the Initiative's definition of success. (See Figure 7.) With this, Blue Garnet started translating the definition of success into action for the real-time learning system.

FIGURE 7 NSI Definition of Success



Tools

Broadening NSI's Real-Time Learning

After 2017, the NSI funders were ready to once again shift their focus. Blue Garnet worked with the project manager and fiscal agent CCF to devise an integrated system that embedded real-time learning in the NSI's direct activities. While Blue Garnet played a formal role facilitating funder learning conversations, the NSI recently moved data gathering in house. Via CCF, it now administers a revised application form and new pre- and post-negotiation surveys to be completed by each grantee organization, not the consultant. Quantitative survey results are summarized and shared with funders at semiannual convenings, along with qualitative information on restructuring activities.

As confidence around understanding direct impact grows, NSI funders have begun to prioritize new learning questions about indirect impact:

- *What does it mean to "normalize" strategic restructuring?* The NSI defines success as "normalization" of strategic restructuring. It also recognizes that normalization cannot happen among nonprofits alone; it requires the support of an ecosystem that also involves funders, TA professionals, and educational institutions. The next step, then, involves determining how to measure normalization in the rest of the ecosystem. It was considered cost-prohibitive for the NSI funders to measure this directly; instead, the NSI learning system uses proxies to gauge indicators (e.g., asking grantees, funders, and consultants how they see normalization taking place in the sector) and has embedded questions into data-gathering tools. The NSI is also exploring with others nationally a shared system that addresses "proof points" for normalization. To further promote grantee learning, share knowledge and resources, and build grantee relationships, the NSI has expanded support from a funder-focused learning system to one that facilitates grantee learnings. The grantee/alumni peer-learning network is in direct response to grantee feedback. A strong ecosystem also requires experienced TA providers who can support nonprofits in this exploration. The pool of local consultants able to do so has not increased significantly since early days of the initiative, and is an area where growth is particularly important to providing services to a large

What drives the evolution of the NSI's real-time learning system ultimately boils down to who is at the table and an open and continuous spirit of learning. Landers et al. state that DE can foster co-learning between the evaluators and those implementing the change.

and diverse nonprofit community such as Los Angeles. From the NSI's perspective, work continues to normalize strategic restructuring among funders. While those directly involved in NSI are far more confident in their understanding of strategic restructuring as a nonprofit tool, informal discussions with fellow foundations suggest negative assumptions and stigma still exist. Whereas funders often expect strategic planning of their grantees, anecdotal data show strategic restructuring is not regularly raised in funder-funder or funder-grantee conversations.

- *How do we bring funders closer to the learning?* As the Initiative progressed, the NSI funders and project manager desired a closer and more direct relationship with grantees. Funders sought stories and details about specific negotiation experiences to help make the case for strategic restructuring, and to share as examples for the field in general. The belief was that these should, in turn, help increase awareness, understanding — and, hopefully, normalization — among funders and nonprofits. The NSI funders also brought in a marketing firm to highlight nonprofit experiences, to help potential nonprofit grantees and funders understand the diversity of strategic restructuring experiences and further normalize strategic restructuring in the broader sector.
- *How do we best share what we have learned?* The primary purpose of the real-time learning system had been to answer NSI funders' learning questions internally, with targeted platforms for sharing publicly. As the initiative amassed a robust body of knowledge and data (on process, outcomes, impact, and operations), it found ways to share stories of the NSI and its grantees. Now, it is positioned to build the field of strategic restructuring, providing insights to help shape others' efforts at replication and scale. As the NSI enters into this latest phase of its learning, it has reinvigorated the issue of "proof points" for strategic restructuring as a valuable tool for our field. And while the NSI has a strong understanding of its direct impact on grantee nonprofits, its long-term indirect impact on the sector remains unclear. From a time and financial standpoint, the NSI considers this question cost-prohibitive to answer alone, and has seized the opportunity to combine efforts with similar initiatives across the country. With this, it can leverage what others have experienced and learned to help answer shared questions about longer-term impact, and how to best support strategic partnerships among nonprofits moving forward. Because of this, the NSI has taken an active role engaging with funders who are pursuing similar efforts outside of Los Angeles.

Adaptation Across Phases: What Made the System Adapt?

What drives the evolution of the NSI's real-time learning system ultimately boils down to who is at the table and an open and continuous spirit of learning. Landers et al. (2018) state that DE can foster co-learning between the evaluators and those implementing the change. For the NSI, this is reflected in several specific factors:

- *The collaborative nature of NSI:* One of the largest pooled funder collaboratives ever in Los Angeles, NSI funders represent varying bases of strategic restructuring knowledge, experience, and agendas. Each year funders are each asked to recommit. To inform this

decision, the system needed to meet the information needs of each funder even as it pursued answers for shared learning (e.g., shifting learning priorities, balance of short-term results vs. long-term outcomes.).

- *Trust in NSI's management and governing structure:* Creating a "managing funder" structure allowed the NSI to foster learning at funder convenings while streamlining initiative oversight, decision-making, and management — and with it, evaluation and learning. The CCF, The Ralph M. Parsons and Weingart foundations, and the Ahmanson Foundation (replacing Weingart in 2016) are well-established, leading institutions with extensive track records and distinct approaches to grantmaking. Other grantmakers likely could identify with at least one of the managing funders, and this inherited credibility engendered trust. Ultimately, this trust meant that the managing funders remain accountable for making and implementing key decisions or changes resulting from the learning effort.

- *Flexibility spurred on by a continuous spirit of learning:* A broad range of potential strategic restructuring activities means it can look differently for different sets of nonprofits. Because the NSI funds process and not a defined outcome, uncertain results and amorphous time frames have required more flexibility from funders. Because strategic restructuring is a less common "tool" in the nonprofit sector, funders generally join the NSI with limited experience in this area. Consequently, NSI funders come to the table with a desire to better understand, and maintain an open attitude toward learning and its implications for NSI's work.

- *The relationship among NSI's managing funders, project manager, and learning partner:* The NSI's three managing funders, its project manager, and Blue Garnet, its developmental evaluation partner, have been in discussions or engaged in learning together for over five years. During this time, our strong working relationship has helped advance thinking on the NSI's design and outcomes, and worked through common challenges via a DE process, such as perceptions of credibility, ambiguity, and uncertainty, and the volume and digestibility of data (Gamble, 2008). Sharing an evolving learning agenda while navigating a complex and changing environment as a triad has been crucial to a healthy real-time learning system, where the NSI can reap benefits of learning while enhancing its primary purpose of grantmaking.

> In innovation, both means and ends can be emergent. The tracking provided through developmental evaluation helps provide accountability; by documenting the "forks in the road," the implications of each decision are considered and a more robust memory of the initiative's creation results. (Gamble, 2008)

This point has been particularly important, as the "who" in the collaborative evolved. The NSI recognizes that it continues to model strategic partnership among funders to the nonprofit sector. With this in mind, the NSI real-time learning system will continue to evolve with the initiative.

Reflections: Insights for Funders and Funder Collaboratives

In reflecting on our work to date, we identified insights we believe other grantmakers and funder collaboratives might take away from the NSI learning system and broader experience. We hope these insights speak to diverse perspectives, and have relevance to readers, in and beyond the world of strategic restructuring.

First, an adaptive model of evaluation is doable! Raynor et al. (2015) highlight two common mistakes funders make in developing their learning model: adopting a particular framework too quickly, and rationalizing that organizational learning is too complex and sticking to existing strategy because of prior investment. Taking a developmental approach toward evaluation and learning makes it possible to ask formative

Tools

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learning questions, whose answers necessarily affect designs for an early-stage initiative. Intentional efforts to reflect on learnings open the possibility of shifting learning priorities. This, in turn, will require the system that supports this learning to adapt, either strategically (e.g., learning questions, emergent strategies, methodology, evaluator role, exit) or more operationally (e.g., application, data-gathering tools, reporting frequency). It is important to not let the need for perfection prevent initiatives from taking smaller but invaluable steps toward more advanced thinking.

Also, an adaptive learning system is particularly important in the context of an evolving collaborative. In a collaborative setting when "who" is at the table can change, adaptability in the evaluation system helps ensure while learning can satisfy needs of individual funders, the collaborative has a means for accountability and a way to develop initiative "memory" (Gamble, 2008). Milway (2013) examines ways to make organizational learning "stick," including fostering a culture of learning and collaborating. In this sense, not only is shared learning a benefit to funder collaboratives (Gibson, 2009), we believe the opportunity for shared learning is a condition for success.

The value of real-time learning is ultimately derived from a greater understanding of your efforts over time. Our experience tells us that the more effective capacity-building efforts are not prescriptive — that they meet the needs of grantees first, not those of the funders. The NSI's real-time learning system built in the mechanism for soliciting input from our grantees, and helped us understand more deeply and with greater confidence the benefits and challenges of strategic restructuring. As a result, we were able to clearly convey to prospective and eventual grantees what they could expect during and as a result of a strategic restructuring negotiation. What we learned about "readiness" informed the due diligence activities taken on by the NSI project manager. As a collaborative of funders, we were able to make a clearer internal case for (continued) investment in the NSI.

Finally, having an intentional effort to learn and evaluate the work allows you to make objective and substantial contributions to the field and the larger sector. Over time, the NSI real-time learning system allowed us to build on more solid understanding to ask new sets of questions — we were able to "dream a little bigger" for what we wanted to learn. Now completing its sixth year (its fifth since launch of grantmaking), the NSI is working with regional strategic restructuring initiatives to create a common evaluation framework nationwide.

Conclusion

Since inception, the founding funders of the Nonprofit Sustainability Initiative have sought a mechanism for evaluation and learning. The funders wanted to learn about a range of aspects, including readiness, process, results, and direct and indirect outcomes.

With a developmental approach in mind, the NSI created a real-time learning system — an adaptive model of developmental evaluation. Starting with a core set of working assumptions, this system regularly prioritized and revisited its learning agenda, and adapted its design and

methodology to follow. Ultimately, the growing and diverse funder collaborative, the spirit of learning its members brought to the table, and the strong working relationship among managing funders, the project manager, and learning partner helped push the real-time learning system to evolve when needed.

In its startup phase, the informal learning system focused on leveraging existing resources to build understanding of nonprofit readiness for strategic restructuring. As the real-time learning system became formalized, learning needs shifted to formative questions around the NSI process, negotiation results, and direct impact of these experiences on grantees. The need for objective data and input drove the NSI to engage Blue Garnet as a neutral, third-party evaluation and learning partner that also helped the initiative articulate its own definition of success. Finally, in its current learning phase, the NSI has shifted priorities to moving the needle on the broader strategic restructuring ecosystem in Los Angeles, as well as advancing the thinking, design, and execution of other strategic restructuring initiatives, individually and collectively, in the field.

The NSI collaborative continues to recognize that it serves as a model of strategic partnership among funders and for the Los Angeles nonprofit sector. The complexity of creating and implementing a successful initiative in a multifunder collaborative can be great, and a real-time learning system can help ensure an initiative's efficiency and effectiveness. And from our experience, the opportunities and benefits of well-designed and implemented capacity-building initiatives are enormous — for nonprofits, for funders, and for the broader sector.

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Tools

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Below the Waterline: Developing a Transformational Learning Collaborative for Foundation Program Officers

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Keywords: *Foundation, philanthropy, foundation learning, learning network, organizational learning, collaborative learning*

Key Points

- Learning from fellow grantmakers is imperative in today's ever-changing world. In late 2016, four health legacy foundations partnered to launch the Health Legacy Collaborative Learning Circle, creating an opportunity to understand not just the participating foundations' visible investments and programs, but also the underlying behaviors, structures, and mindsets that ultimately explain why certain results were or were not achieved.
- This article describes the yearlong process of creating the collaborative, and presents a new learning framework — based on the iceberg metaphor — that can be used to create learning environments that test and expand assumptions about promising approaches to common population health challenges, explore organizational best practices related to programming and operations, and understand the roles and impacts peer health legacy foundations have in their communities.
- For the learning circle participants, the process provided a new and valuable problem-solving tool that allows their organizations to have a more profound impact on the communities they serve. This article concludes with recommendations for how other foundations can create similar transformational learning journeys with their fellow grantmakers.

Introduction

Continuous learning and development are essential for success in today's ever-changing world. This may be particularly true for grantmakers. Foundation staff are often required to be thought leaders in the communities they serve, possessing the knowledge and expertise to help grantees achieve greater impact. Foundation staff may also have the time and resources to investigate emerging practices, test innovative solutions, gather data and information, and reflect on what they are learning. In many communities, foundation staff serve as conveners, bringing people together to network, share challenges and successes, and explore promising approaches. And, finally, foundations are uniquely positioned to generate new knowledge and disseminate it to peers and grantees. Given the complex and dynamic environments in which our communities are situated, creating a culture of continuous learning is imperative.

In this spirit, four health legacy foundations partnered to create the Health Legacy Collaborative Learning Circle. With partial funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and additional investment from each participating foundation, the collaborative created an opportunity to learn across similar organizations around the country.

The learning circle was comprised of the PATH Foundation, in Warrenton, Virginia; the Danville Regional Foundation, in Danville, Virginia; Interact for Health, in Cincinnati,

The learning circle process was built upon lessons learned from organizational learning, learning-network research, and the participants' own experiences and observations.

Ohio; and the Paso del Norte Health Foundation, in El Paso, Texas. These foundations were recruited based on their similar constitutions and sizes, desires to learn from each other, and orientations toward community action and multisector collaboration. Spending a year together in this learning process, which was facilitated by Healthy Places by Design, the learning circle designed a collaborative experience to test and expand assumptions about promising approaches to common population health challenges, explore organizational best practices related to programming and operations, and understand the roles and impacts peer health legacy foundations have in their communities.

Upon reflection, the partners realized that that this intentional process generated a deeper level of learning — one that surpassed the original goals and assumptions. In this article, the authors, who participated in the learning circle, will briefly explore practices in collaborative learning, describe the process of developing the learning circle, introduce their learning framework, and provide recommendations for foundations that are interested in creating productive and insightful learning opportunities.

Review of the Literature

The learning circle process was built upon lessons learned from organizational learning, learning-network research, and the participants' own experiences and observations. Scholars in the past several decades have developed a variety of models for effective organizational learning, all aimed at the development and management of new knowledge in order to improve performance. According to Basten and Haamann (2018), organizational learning includes the strategic creation, capture, internalization, and management of knowledge with the goal of improving performance.

In 1990, Peter Senge published *The Fifth Discipline*. Radical at the time, the book described how a business could boost productivity and success by becoming a learning organization (1990). He outlined five disciplines: personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking. According to Senge, systems thinking integrates the disciplines into a coherent body of theory and practice. Systems thinking is the "framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than a static snapshot" (p. 68). Since then, many theories of organizational learning have been developed, including single-loop and double-loop learning, organizational knowledge creation theory, and the five building blocks (Basten and Haamann, 2018).

While Senge's primary focus was on business success, the field of philanthropy indirectly benefited from his arguments. In 2005, researchers at the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago looked specifically at how foundations use knowledge, in addition to money, to create community change. They identified seven core components of foundations that learn, including an internal structure aligned to learn and leadership committed to learning (Hamilton et al., 2005).

Milway & Saxton (2011) then identified three major challenges of organizational learning: a lack of clear and measurable goals about using knowledge to improve performance, insufficient incentives for individuals or teams to participate, and uncertainty about the most effective processes for capturing and sharing learning. A few years later, in a *Nonprofit Quarterly* article, Milway (2013) described four strategies that a nonprofit can use to overcome these barriers: build a culture of ideas and learning, share good practices, collaborate and learn alongside others, and advance the field through shared knowledge.

The California Health Care Foundation had similar findings after an intensive effort to institutionalize organizational learning (Tran & Shah, 2013). The foundation developed a grantmaking toolbox that documented innovative approaches to grantmaking with the potential to increase impact. It also implemented new reporting and closeout procedures, hosted learning sessions, and developed a Grantmaking 101 series. Through this process, the foundation found that (1) effective learning is a collaborative, not individual process; (2) a willingness to experiment is an important aspect of creating a learning culture; and (3) both experienced and new staff members have significant roles in organizational learning efforts.

Recent work has started to more deeply explore learning with external partners. Ehrlichman and Sawyer (2018) define learning networks as "a form of collaboration that enables groups of stakeholders to cultivate connections across communities and organizations, and to strengthen a whole system simply by focusing on the potential for participants to share information and learn from one another" (para. 1). They explain that effective learning networks share four important factors: they have dedicated network coordination, actively gather information from the field, help disseminate information out to the field, and enable information to flow across the field.

A recent release from Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (2019), *Learning in Philanthropy: A Guidebook,* compiled much of this research into a toolkit for foundations that want to create an internal culture of learning as well as create collaborative learning opportunities with nonprofits, other grantmakers, and communities. Learning networks learn in action, learn together, and learn on an ongoing basis and over time.

Method and Process

Through the RWJF, the learning circle partners had the challenge of designing a learning process that utilized best practices, mostly from research focused on single-organization learning, and apply it to a learning cohort comprised of four foundations in distinct parts of the country. Each foundation assigned a lead staff member to work as part of the cohort, designing the learning circle process together with support from Healthy Places by Design. The authors of this article served as the lead staff members for the foundations.

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An early turning point was the decision to seek and retain a consulting partner to act as a recorder, thought partner, facilitator, and co-author of site-visit case studies and other dissemination products. The learning partners knew early on that the process would be time-consuming and that outside assistance was necessary to ease the burden on each organization. After reviewing multiple proposals, the partners chose Healthy Places by Design (previously known as Active Living by Design), a nonprofit organization highly experienced in population health, philanthropy, and community engagement.

The core element of the collaborative learning process was a series of site visits to each of the partner's communities and monthly conference calls in between. The site visits featured past and current grantee and foundation work that was relevant to the challenges that communities faced. In meeting with community partners learning circle members discussed a range of interventions, from policy advocacy to services for individuals. In a more private setting with

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learning circle members only, conversations about internal approaches and effective practices were held.

Programmatic interests targeted for in-depth learning included healthy eating and active living, school-based health, access to care, the use of community health workers, economic development, community safety, and mental health. In addition, site visits and conference calls gave participants an opportunity to explore each partner foundation's practices related to equity, evaluation, and use of backbone organizations.

The learning circle was intentionally designed to be structured enough to proactively identify and address specific topics of interest, yet flexible enough to absorb new ideas that emerged during the collaboration. As core representatives reported that relationships and trust grew, other complex and sensitive topics were added to the list of learning interests, such as community engagement and capacity building, program and portfolio exit strategies, grantee and board relations, program staff roles, succession planning, and change management.

Each visit spanned two days and followed a common format, beginning with an overview of the host foundation's history, structure, mission, programs, and personnel; an introduction to the community to orient visiting partners to its demographics, culture, challenges, history, and assets; and community visits to meet with partners, programs, grantees, and signature initiatives supported by the host foundation and related to partners' shared interests. In between, participants had scheduled and unscheduled time for reflection, conversation, and deepening relationships as a cohort. Scheduled reflection occurred near the end of each site visit and was led by the host core representative for about two hours. Unscheduled reflection, as the term indicates, occurred in an emergent manner, usually in the evening or while transiting among scheduled events. Each visit concluded with a debrief session among the partners in order to identify and explore emergent lessons and themes and to discuss agenda ideas for the next site visit. Each of the participants left with ideas that had already been tested by another foundation and further explored through inquiry, analysis, and discussion among the partners.

Each partner organization designated one or two core representatives to participate in all of the site visits and conference calls, providing continued support throughout the process. These representatives were selected by their respective foundation based upon criteria that included program officer interest, availably, role in health programs, and ability to effect change. Up to three additional representatives from each foundation participated in the site visits, ensuring that each core member was joined by colleagues to share in the learning. The additional representatives included a cross-section of foundation staff, including communication directors and evaluation, operations, and program officers. This helped maintain momentum for reflection and action when representatives returned home and shared their experiences with colleagues, foundation leadership, board members, and community partners.

Before any site visits, core representatives attempted to prioritize and identify discrete and potentially quantifiable learning outcomes. However, the emergent and unexpected learning from the first site resulted in a more goal-free approach to experiencing a foundation's work, thus being open to unanticipated learnings and construction of knowledge. As visitors, they had the unusual experience of "seeing inside" the

work of a peer institution and gaining insights into challenges and successes. At the same time, the process of hosting was equally valuable and allowed each foundation's staff to reflect on their own initiatives and see them through the eyes of their peers.

By the end of the year, the partners had experienced a much deeper level of learning compared to traditional professional development experiences. The unique combination of activities created an environment that allowed learning circle core members to swim below the surface and uncover the deeper reasoning behind the programs, practices, and procedures of each foundation.

The Collaborative Learning Iceberg

Throughout history, the iceberg metaphor has been used to describe the complexities that lie under the surface of any given group, challenge, or pursuit. Part of an iceberg can be viewed above water, whereas much is below the surface. Early in the 20th century, Sigmund Freud used the metaphor to describe what he defined as the three levels of the mind: the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious (Freud, Stratchey, Freud, Stratchey, & Tyson, 1961). Ernest Hemingway (1932) developed an iceberg theory for a style of writing where the written words are only a small percentage of the underlying themes. Edward Hall (1976) formulated an iceberg analogy of culture, proposing that while behaviors exist above the surface, there are hidden beliefs, values, and thought patterns underneath those behaviors.

The iceberg metaphor can also be applied to learning — specifically, collaborative learning. Simply put, a learning circle can develop questions about and see grantee programs and initiatives in action, but the real transformative learning comes from going much deeper. Our framework describes four distinct levels of learning: visible programs, behavior patterns, structures, and mindsets; and then explains how the Health Legacy Collaborative Learning Circle process allowed participants to move below the waterline.

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Visible Programs

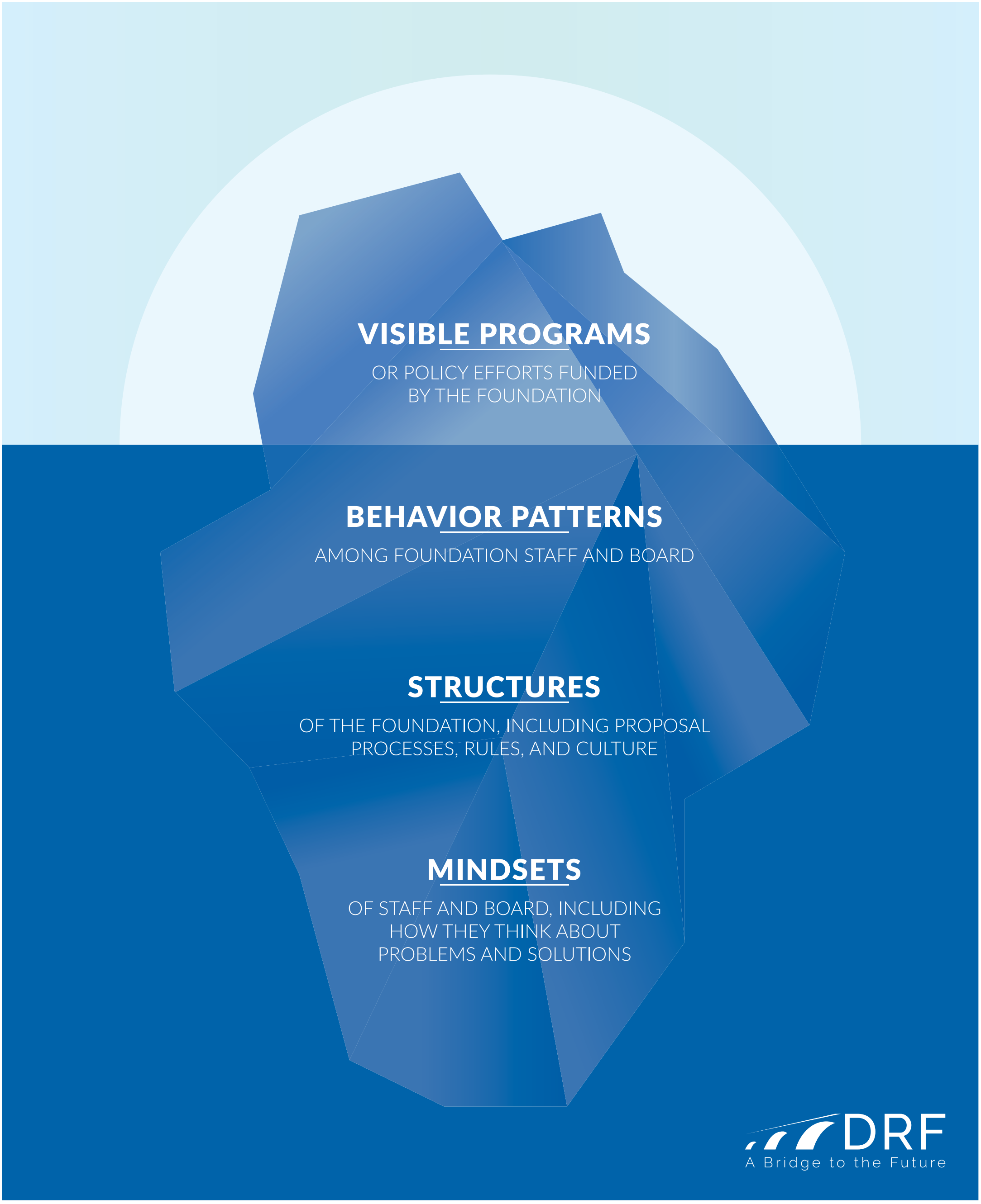
At the top of the iceberg, above water, lie the components of the work that we can see. (See Figure 1.) This includes programs and strategies, requests for proposals, contracts, and external marketing and communications. It is common to set learning questions in this space. Often, when we return from a training, we are asked, "What did you see that we could bring here?" Traditional learning opportunities, like conferences, summarize programs and other visible components of grantmaking. Though this level of learning has many benefits, it does not explain the less visible behaviors, structures, and mindsets that lie beneath the surface.

The participants launched the learning circle by focusing above the surface, largely discussing population health strategies. They then planned site visits that focused on the history of their organizations, community demographics, and introductions to the programs, initiatives, and grantees supported by their foundations. They did not anticipate how the learning circle process would allow them to go beyond the questions of who and what, to understand the how and why.

Behavior Patterns

Just below the surface, the partners began to discuss the behavioral patterns, or the recurrent way of acting within each foundation, that led

FIGURE 1 The Collaborative Learning Iceberg



to the development of specific grants or programs. They found that as trust built, they felt more comfortable exploring topics and asking questions that might have felt inappropriate in another learning environment.

It was established early on that the Health Legacy Collaborative Learning Circle would be a safe space for each participant to share both successes and challenges within their foundations and philanthropy as a whole. Trust increased

throughout the process as partners continued to share more private information about the inner workings of their organizations, seeking guidance and innovative ideas from the other participants. Extremely comprehensive notes were captured during each discussion to help with reflection and analysis of the process.

The partners discussed the potential consequences of limiting funding to small organizations, not requiring community input, avoiding risky grantmaking, funding only large transformational projects, or refusing to fund overhead expenses. They asked and explored what behavior patterns fuel these decisions. They were able to observe how staff speak to each other, with respect to both tone and approach. They asked questions about how and when feedback is provided to grantees. The partners discussed how much time program officers spend in the community initiating change versus sitting behind their desk. They asked, where do these behaviors come from?

Structures

The participants began to see that behaviors among staff are influenced by the underlying structures within each foundation, which may include hierarchy, roles and responsibilities, rules, dress codes, titles, policies, and how information flows between levels of the organization and to the community. These structures affect organizational culture, including office environments and even board dynamics. Structures affect the way staff interacts with grantees or how board members interact with staff. Structures may come in the form of formal policies, informal practices and processes, and even paperwork, such as forms.

As the learning circle progressed, the partners began to dig deeper into their own foundation's internal structures. They shared internal documents, policies and practices, grant requirements, evaluation forms and results, and anecdotal information about how their offices function and how they structure relationships with partners, staff, board members, and other grantmakers.

The partners began asking questions about how structures affect grantmaking and improve or disrupt community impact. Does a foundation have strict submission schedules or require an online application? Are there specific formats or templates required in a proposal, such as a logic model? Is there flexibility in evaluation methods, or rigid reporting requirements? Are there mechanisms available to support capacity building and community engagement? To answer these questions, they had to go deeper still. Structures are put in place due to mindsets.

Mindsets

At the deepest level of the iceberg is mindset, or the set of assumptions, thoughts, and beliefs that affect how we view the world. In this case, mindset is how we fundamentally think about philanthropy and, therefore, how we define solutions. Do we trust and rely on empirical science and evidence, value the wisdom of community members and listen closely to them, see return on investment and metrics as critical, or aim to simply make stakeholders happy?

The learning circle partners began to see the philanthropic mindset as a set of continuums, with each of organization at different points on each. A mindset of equity and inclusion is one example. Does a foundation truly believe in the value of providing equitable opportunities for all community members? Another example is an evidence-based or science mindset. Does a foundation believe in making investments only in projects that apply the best science, and therefore avoid more risky or innovative grantmaking?

The partners found that when they could answer questions about mindset, they began to truly understand how decisions were made, behaviors developed, and, ultimately, how and why a program, grant, or initiative achieved certain results. A well-established mindset creates a powerful incentive within a group to continue the status quo. In contrast, deliberate efforts to shift the mindset within an organization could be the key to changing the structures in place and the behaviors of staff, ultimately leading to more successful investments.

In order to successfully function at all levels of the iceberg, the learning circle partners developed recommendations, aligned with research and best practices, as well as lessons learned from the yearlong process, to help other foundations create engaging, productive, and transformational learning opportunities.

Diving Below the Waterline: Recommendations

In order to successfully function at all levels of the iceberg, the learning circle partners developed recommendations, aligned with research and best practices, as well as lessons learned from the yearlong process, to help other foundations create engaging, productive, and transformational learning opportunities.

1. *Recruit partner organizations that possess a range of expertise and have enough similarities so that lessons learned are relevant and translatable.* Learning circle partners were recruited based on comparable asset size, desire to learn from and with each other, and orientation toward community action and multisector collaboration. In addition to these similarities, the foundations also had important and beneficial differences. Partner organizations represented various ages and stages of institutional evolution, ranging from three to more than 20 years. In addition, each partner knew at least one of the other members, but no one knew everyone. Finally, the participants had similar roles within their organizations, but varying levels of experience. The combination of known and unknown was a key to success in building trust and generating new perspectives.

2. *Recruit partner organizations that are dedicated, have leadership support, and commit specific individuals to the entire process.* At the beginning, leadership from each foundation committed to participation in the entire process. Though a verbal commitment was accepted, the partners recommend developing a memorandum of agreement, signed by foundation CEOs and learning circle participants, that clearly outlines expectations, including the commitment of time and resources, engagement of other staff, and how information and learning will be disseminated within and outside of the participating organizations. Early on, each partner organization also designated core representatives to participate in all site visits and conference calls. Having the same individuals involved throughout the process was key to developing meaningful relationships. Additional representatives helped expand the impact, but the core representatives were instrumental in and benefited from the deeper level of learning.

3. *Design a planning period that purposefully builds relationships and trust, creates a shared vision and outcome, and identifies a set of flexible learning questions that can be revisited and adjusted as the process evolves.* The learning circle team began working together nearly six months before the first site visit. This planning period gave them time and space to develop a proposal, choose focus areas, interview and select a consultant, develop learning questions, and plan the format of the site visits. They had time to develop relationships, establish a democratic decision-making process, and assure that the learning circle would meet individual and organizational goals.

4. *Consider hiring an external consultant and designating one of the foundations as the backbone organization.* Our consultant partner,

Healthy Places by Design, was able to stand inside the learning circle while maintaining an objective perspective, keeping the conversation and process moving forward. She helped us develop learning questions, scheduled and facilitated calls, assisted with site-visit logistics, synthesized lessons, facilitated reflection sessions, and served as co-author. In addition to hiring Healthy Places by Design, the PATH Foundation served as backbone organization for the learning circle. It was the fiscal agent for the funding from RWJF, helped guide the vision and focus, served as the main contact for our consultant, and assisted with dissemination products. Designating a lead organization in advance helped the partners better understand roles and expectations, and provided critical focus, direction, and administrative support throughout the process. Having both a consultant and backbone organization allowed the partners to be fully immersed in the learning environment without logistical distractions.

5. *Carefully design site visits.* Each site visit built upon the one before. The partners learned from experience and made changes as they moved forward. After completing all four site visits, they found that a deliberate mix of activities and experiences facilitated the deepest levels of learning. Include the following in site-visit agendas:

    a. time with foundation leadership and staff to discuss history, community context, and practices;

    b. meetings with grantees and community partners to see the foundation's investments in action and learn about successes and challenges;

    c. informal networking and social opportunities to continue building relationships;

    d. documentation of what you saw, heard, and felt, as well as sharing of insights and follow-up questions; and

    e. time for reflection and debriefing at the end of the visit.

6. *Allocate ample time for reflection and discussion throughout the process.* In the early stages of the learning circle, the partners focused on the originally developed list of learning questions. As they built trust, they began to veer away from those questions. The partners realized that it was important to pause, reflect, and provide the time and space for lessons learned to emerge. The process was iterative, and they had to adapt and be flexible in order to move below the waterline, reaching a depth of conversation that we all found most meaningful and beneficial.

7. *Consider how you will disseminate lessons learned with your organization, across the community, and with other interested stakeholders.* From the beginning, learning circle partners agreed that a final report should be written and disseminated to colleagues, community partners, and key stakeholders. However, they did not plan how to effectively share learnings with other staff members. Upon completion of the process, they realized that there were two groups who benefitted from the learning circle. The first was the tightly networked group of individuals who participated in the calls and site visits — those who were, together, getting to the bottom of the iceberg. The second consisted of staff members who may have attended one or two site visits, and those who heard about the learning circle only peripherally. To better support organizational learning, we recommend deliberately sharing lessons learned throughout the process with all members of your organization. For example, have scheduled times at each program staff meeting, grants committee meeting, or another committee to explore learnings.

Conclusion

The Health Legacy Collaborative Learning Circle allowed partners to explore at all levels of the iceberg, whereas other forms of learning

Tools

The sustainable impact of the learning circle is the individual relationships formed among the participants, and the support and partnership that brings to the future work of each organization. Since the cycle has ended, the group has continued to convene around topics of interest and need, and the support has strengthened each person's network.

may only be helpful above the water line. The process allowed members to more deeply understand the context behind decisions. The learning circle also reciprocally influenced culture, helping partners develop deeper social networks and form a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the need to dive below the waterline. The process also gave partners a model for how to successfully create learning circles within their own communities. Partners are exploring how to replicate the experience with local nonprofit partners and community members to encourage learning, build trust, and develop mutual understanding of one another's mindsets.

The sustainable impact of the learning circle is the individual relationships formed among the participants, and the support and partnership that brings to the future work of each organization. Since the cycle has ended, the group has continued to convene around topics of interest and need, and the support has strengthened each person's network. There are now thought partners across the country that can provide insights and possible solutions for the initiatives each is working on.

These relationships have resulted in internal changes and new initiatives for the participating foundations. For example, during the site visit to Interact for Health, the learning circle members visited a school-based health clinic, one of 32 in the region. Interact for Health has been investing in school-based health clinics for nearly 20 years. Inspired by this work, Danville Regional Foundation staff took a group of community partners to Cincinnati, Ohio, to visit both urban and rural school-based health clinics supported by Interact for Health, as well as explore the Community Learning Center model through Cincinnati Public Schools. There are now school-based health clinics under development in each school district within the Danville Regional Foundation's service area. The learning circle process allowed members to not only learn about the school-based health clinic model and the outcomes achieved, but understand specifically how program staff worked with partners to create an environment that allowed and incentivized school administration staff, health providers, parents, the community, and other funders to come together, align resources, and bring a more holistic version of the project to fruition.

During the learning circle process, Interact for Health was in the midst of a strategic planning process. After learning about the Paso del Norte Health Foundation's evaluation methods and design, the Interact for Health was able to incorporate new evaluation measures within its updated focus areas. It also reframed how it captures information about equity from grantees, including what it wanted to learn and measure, based on the Health Equity report shared by the Danville Regional Foundation, a map-based report exploring health, social, and economic indicators by census tract or zip code.

These are just a few of the many examples that illustrate how learning circles can reflect upon the iceberg and use the metaphor as a way to explore philanthropy. Participants can observe the behaviors of other members of the circle and ask about their mindset. Since going deeply into mindset requires trust and time, a learning circle can support an exploration of the reasons why certain results were or were not achieved. For

the partners, the Health Legacy Collaborative Learning Circle provided a new and valuable problem-solving tool that continues to allow for deeper examination of our own mindsets, structures, and behaviors in order to have a more profound impact on the communities we serve.

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Evaluating for the Bigger Picture: Breaking Through the Learning and Evaluation Barriers to Advancing Community Systems-Change Field Knowledge

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Keywords: *Community change, community systems change, collective impact, systems change, evaluation, field building, knowledge building*

Introduction

Philanthropy is currently surfing a fieldwide wave of learning — strategic learning, peer and collaborative learning, learning from mistakes, emergent learning, learning from innovation, and learning while doing. We see these themes in the conferences attended by funders and evaluators, the publications they produce and share (including many in this journal), and in the changing titles of foundation staff responsible for knowledge building, evaluation, and internal staff learning (Center for Effective Philanthropy [CEP] & Center for Evaluation Innovation [CEI], 2016).

This desire for more learning is in part motivated by an increased mission-driven desire for foundations to be more transparent about the community benefit they are intending to create. It has also been driven by foundations' common frustration and accumulated dissatisfaction with deriving useful lessons from past work and failing to leverage evaluation and documentation effectively to provide translation of findings that are usable in new work. In a 2015 survey of more than 120 foundations, 83 percent reported that their evaluations are not providing useful information for the field — the most often cited challenge (CEP & CEI, 2016).

Often these frustrations and redoubled efforts to increase the effort and value of learning are internally focused in foundations on their own work. Encouragingly, these individual

Key Points

- Foundations investing in community systems change often fail to prioritize field-level and cross-initiative evaluation questions in building initiatives. As a result, many of the documented evaluations of such investments lack translatable lessons specific and influential enough to drive related decisions and actions of others in the field.
- This article developed from ongoing, multiyear peer learning across several foundations that collectively compiled recommendations for community systems-change funders and evaluators to implement more powerful evaluations. They are intended to help funders and evaluators engaged in these efforts build sectorwide knowledge capable of informing improved work across initiatives and communities. This article also prioritizes the inclusion of community in the entire process of field-knowledge creation and use.
- As the managers and advisers responsible for evaluating funder-led community systems change, we have struggled to ensure that our evaluations are capable of providing useful knowledge to future efforts. For that reason, this article focuses on strategies to address the gaps we see and with the intention that important lessons are captured, analyzed, shared, and used by others.

foundations are taking responsibility for their organization's accountability and effectiveness through intentional and ongoing cycles of assessment and learning. There is also the hypothesis that if more foundations are intentional with both their own learning and the transparency and sharing of that learning, the broader community will benefit from greater accumulated knowledge of effective grantmaking and practice. However, unless there is more disciplined and intentional investment of time and resources in our collective knowledge building, we believe there will continue to be a lack of available and useful lessons from both scholarship and practice to create sectorwide knowledge that contributes instrumentally to improved practice.

By definition and goal, the community systems-change field has always been directly engaged in places and communities in ways that have forced funders and evaluators to confront issues of systemic racism, racial and economic equity and opportunity, and the historic and structural imbalances of wealth and power omnipresent in all communities — especially the ones selected for investments and initiatives. As the fields of philanthropy and evaluation continue to advance their understanding and engagement around these issues, there is much to be learned from past community systems-change research and practice. As we consider field-building in this area, we must also address issues of "knowledge equity" (https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Strategy/Wikimedia_movement/2018-20, n.d., para. 5) — who has, holds, and has access and the opportunity to use and contribute to shared knowledge — and the ongoing challenge of foundations and evaluators to acknowledge and adapt their evaluation and learning practices to be more equitable in intent and execution (CEI, Institute for Foundation and Donor Learning, Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy, & Luminare Group, 2017). We acknowledge that foundation knowledge and field-building practices have often failed to adequately include community perspective and knowledge, and in our remaining discussion we prioritize the inclusion of community in the entire process of field-knowledge creation and use.

As we consider field-building in this area, we must also address issues of "knowledge equity" — who has, holds, and has access and the opportunity to use and contribute to shared knowledge

The Bridgespan Group (2009) published *The Strong Field Framework* to examine philanthropy's approach to assessing what is needed for collaborative field building. The framework describes how collaborative practice will be built by assessing and addressing our shared identity and knowledge, standards of practice, field and leadership support, and supportive policies that guide the building of knowledge and improving practice in a specific field. The documentation and sharing of this knowledge are what help test assumptions and build consensus around shared conclusions, which make our collective knowledge stronger and more useful. This social building of knowledge allows for ongoing examination of multiple experiences and data, debate, collaborative reflection, and joint documentation of field consensus (Stahl, 2000). This requires active and ongoing collaboration among funders to build shared knowledge and not simply the accumulation of many individual foundation learning products.

The Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago examined the specific challenges and needs in philanthropy-driven community change investments for more strategic and intentional learning efforts (Hamilton, et al., 2005), and addressed the necessary intentions and actions required for foundations to be learning organizations. Even then, the authors asserted,

> Many foundation leaders believe they cannot successfully change communities by acting or learning alone. Their learning depends on learning throughout the fields of philanthropy and community change, and the fields' learning depends on

Many of the documented and published lessons and evaluations of foundation investments in community initiatives lack translatable lessons specific and influential enough to drive related decisions and actions of others in the field.

> individual foundations' learning. … It is a daunting intellectual and practical task to link the learning agendas of many institutions in a sector that prides itself on independence and exceptionalism — but it is the only way to achieve something larger and more coherent." (p.10)

Before we can learn together we must first address the question, "Why can't we collaborate?" In a recent survey, the CEP (2016) found one-third of foundation CEOs pointing to either the absence of collaboration or challenges in cross-foundation collaboration, and citing many internal and external reasons: One noted the challenges most succinctly as "ego, lack of collaboration, competition — people stuff" (p. 11). Foundation demands and expectations for grantee and community collaborations are not complemented with the same urgency for foundation collaboration. Individual strategic focus often results in shared goals, but in different approaches and priorities as well as disagreements over assumptions and theories of change.

Many of the documented and published lessons and evaluations of foundation investments in community initiatives lack translatable lessons specific and influential enough to drive related decisions and actions of others in the field. Brown (2010) assessed the challenges and trends of community systems-change evaluations, including the increased attention to learning in and from these initiatives as they are developing and being implemented, and found real-time learning and shared learning frameworks increasingly being used and integrated into the community change work. But as Coulton (2010) pointed out in her response to Brown's summary, many of these initiatives and their evaluations are not prioritizing the field-level and cross-initiative evaluation questions. Coulton called this "evaluating for the bigger picture" in order to contribute knowledge effectively to the field across communities and not only to the stakeholders of a single initiative (p. 115).

This article developed from ongoing and multiyear peer learning across several foundations that collectively compiled recommendations for community systems-change funders and evaluators to implement more powerful evaluations that can build sectorwide knowledge capable of informing improved work across initiatives and communities. We will not address the broader challenges of evaluating complex change initiatives, which are presented more fully elsewhere (Brown, 2010). We also will not directly address initiative self-evaluation and ongoing, reflective learning that are now more commonly supported in foundation-funded work, including the engagement of grantee organizations and communities in foundation planning, investment, and evaluation; these related learning activities do contribute to and support knowledge translation and use, but are usually targeted internally at their own implementers. The outputs of this internal learning are a key source of knowledge for the field and we will reference their use and application; however, we specifically focus on what is challenging within community systems-change evaluation and implementation that prevents findings and lessons from being taken up and applied by other funders and implementers in their own initiatives and that precludes the building of useful sectorwide knowledge.

Learning Across Community Systems-Change Efforts

Community change efforts have been funded and implemented in the U.S. for more than 40 years (Hopkins, 2014; Turner, Edelman, Poethig, Aron, & Rogers, 2014). These foundation- and

government-driven efforts have been called comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs), place-based and neighborhood initiatives, and collaborative and collective impact approaches. What they all aim to do is invest in a variety of coordinated strategies in a specific place to achieve broad and long-lasting positive change in the community system[1] for groups of people and whole populations — to change the trajectory of concentrated negative outcomes (e.g., poverty, poor health, violence and lack of safety) in communities. We will refer to all these approaches as community systems change. Gardner, Lalani, & Plamadeala (2010) described the common elements of community systems change focused on poverty alleviation, which have general applications across goal areas as "broad-based collaborations of service providers, residents, advocates, businesses, governments and other stakeholders;

- "that come together to develop comprehensive and integrated multilevel service and policy responses;
- "they are community-based, meaning both located in specific places and contexts and being driven by community needs, perspectives, and mobilization;
- "they have long time horizons and broad ambitions — working to mobilize local communities to transform conditions and constraints." (p. 1)

More recently these community systems-change strategies have advanced to include goals for change at multiple levels of people, place, and policy within the contexts of broader community systems, economies, and histories — especially the multigenerational effects of systemic racism and urban neighborhoods of concentrated poverty (Hopkins & Ferris, 2014). Community systems change also invests in the communities themselves and their people and capacities as the mechanisms and levers of change in order to change the social outcomes affecting that same place. Much has been written about these experiences and many lessons have been shared in various forms; however, our conclusion is that there have also been frustrating challenges to the ability of community systems-change designers, funders, and implementers to gain important and translatable lessons from the past. Specifically, as the managers and advisers responsible for evaluating funder-led community systems change, we have struggled to ensure that the design and outputs of our evaluations are capable of providing useful and usable knowledge to future community change efforts. For this reason, we are focusing on strategies to address the gaps we see in community systems evaluations to increase the likelihood that the important lessons and knowledge of initiatives are captured, analyzed, shared — and used by others.

Specifically, as the managers and advisers responsible for evaluating funder-led community systems change, we have struggled to ensure that the design and outputs of our evaluations are capable of providing useful and usable knowledge to future community change efforts.

Even before the collective-impact framework was put forward by Kania and Kramer (2011), place-based community change efforts were using multiple strategies and investments over three to 10 years and longer to engage local communities and neighborhoods in addressing specific issues of poverty, community safety, health outcomes,

[1] We use the terms "community system" and "systems change" here intentionally to underscore the importance of viewing the community as a complex, interactive social system; this includes, but does not exclusively consist of, government agencies and public systems.

Reflective Practice

This article developed out of ongoing peer conversations and consultations that occurred over a decade among the authors, who were responsible for managing and advising evaluations of community systems-change efforts of 10 years or longer funded by foundations.

and overall disparities (Kubisch, 2010). Most of these initiatives were designed and implemented primarily by single funders, both private foundations and government agencies, sometimes with other partner investors. Despite their many similarities in intention for change at a community level, there has also been wide diversity in the approaches and goals guiding these initiatives. And over time there have been multiple forums and opportunities for community change funders to share their experiences and lessons learned. Chief among these was the series of convenings and publications by the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change,[2] including the *Voices from the Field* series, which shared lessons from multiple initiatives in three volumes (Kubisch, 1997; Kubisch, Auspos, Brown, Chaskin, Fulbright-Anderson, & Hamilton, 2002; Kubisch, Auspos, Brown, & Dewar, 2010). The *Voices* series compiled knowledge and experience of the design, implementation, management, and outcomes of multiple initiatives across many years. Other resources and networks continue to provide opportunities for funders and implementers to learn both from past work and current peers, including the Collective Impact Forum,[3] CCI Tools for Feds,[4] the University of Kansas Community Toolbox,[5] the Tamarack Institute,[6] and the Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO) Evaluating Community Change framework.[7]

The challenge of sharing learning and informing the field also comes from the diversity of approaches and even evaluation methods. A related review of community systems change evaluations concluded,

> As many CCIs are unaffiliated, vary in how they do their work, and [in] what they are working towards, apples-to-apples comparisons across communities are difficult to make. As a result, much of the generated knowledge on CCIs comes from internally generated reports and evaluations that are typically thin on methodological rigor. (Flanagan, Varga, Zaff, Margolius, & Lin, 2018, pp. 5–6)

This article developed out of ongoing peer conversations and consultations that occurred over a decade among the authors, who were responsible for managing and advising evaluations of community systems-change efforts of 10 years or longer funded by foundations. In addition, we have participated in and contributed to studies of place-based community systems-change initiatives funded by place-based, embedded foundations (Sojourner, Brown, Chaskin, Hamilton, Fiester, & Richman, 2004) and the Aspen Institute's Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Change's *Voices from the Field II* (Kubisch et al., 2002) and *Voices from the Field III* (Kubisch et al., 2010). Our professional collaboration developed first out of necessity — each of us needed to know and learn more from similar community systems-change efforts and evaluations — and grew into a genuine collegial and trusting relationship that helped each of us improve our own work in real time. Together

[2] See https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/roundtable-on-community-change.
[3] See https://collectiveimpactforum.org.
[4] See http://www.ccitoolsforfeds.org.
[5] See https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents.
[6] See http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca.
[7] See http://www.pointk.org/resources/files/geo2014_indicators_framework.pdf.

we and our foundation colleagues participated in regular peer exchanges and consultations with each other during the decade of the overlap of the three foundation initiatives, starting in the mid-2000s. These exchanges enabled us to share our frustrations and brainstorm new efforts around the constantly changing demands of our own community systems-change evaluations. This informal yet intentional collaborative learning enabled each of us to compare and contrast our three community systems-change initiatives operating in different contexts and scales — the three multisite initiatives covered city, state, and national efforts and addressed varied issues of child poverty and well-being, community health, employment, and education, which also enabled us collectively to define some field-relevant hypotheses and lessons that we could not have achieved individually in our own evaluations.

This informal peer learning in real time prompted reflection and problem-solving of both design and operational challenges throughout the initiatives. Honest and vulnerable requests for help and advice are difficult to have and address in public venues such as conferences. And when real-time solutions need to be identified amid complex contexts, published documents often lack detail and specificity around the decisions and compromises made throughout a complex initiative. We leaned on the trust and openness each of us brought to our peer sharing in ways that were helpful to our roles and work, to our evaluators and evaluations, and to our foundations and grantee partners. Now, by documenting some of these shared lessons, we believe our other funders, evaluators, and implementers.

Based on our collective experience, we began to compile over several conference calls and emails a set of challenges to designing and implementing community systems-change evaluations that contribute to broader field learning. We also identified specific tactics to address these challenges, some of which we were able to implement in our own evaluations. This summary of challenges and solutions (Kelly, Brown, Cao Yu, Colombo, & Chavis, 2017) was presented to a group of evaluators at the November 2017 American Evaluation Association national conference in Washington, DC, in a think tank inaugurating a topical interest group of evaluators active in community development evaluation.[8] We engaged 25 evaluators around three key questions to elicit their edits and additions:

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- What prevents you as evaluators from helping your clients and others effectively use and translate community systems-change evaluation findings into decisions and actions (especially in new initiatives)?
- Can you give an example from your work where a community systems-change evaluation and its data were shared, leveraged, and translated into new decisions and actions? What behaviors or practices made this possible?
- What do evaluators and evaluations of community systems change need to do to

[8] See http://comm.eval.org/communitydevelopment/home.

Community systems-change evaluations struggle in both design and effort with changing theories of community systems change, and there may not be sufficient time and attention paid to understanding and documenting these key changes, especially for audiences outside of the initiative.

increase the use and translation of evaluation findings into other places and efforts?

We divide these challenges into categories representing stages in the timeline of designing and implementing the evaluation, starting with learning from past initiatives and intentionally designing looking forward with field-building as a goal. (See Table 1.) Addressing these challenges requires foundation initiatives and evaluations to include field-building as an explicit goal and to implement evaluation and learning strategies that can advance field knowledge, including:

- committing to field-building through the sharing and transparency of planning, implementation, and evaluation documents and data;
- using shared frameworks, vocabulary, and data across foundation initiatives and evaluations to better integrate existing and new knowledge;
- including intentional strategies for field-building and influence in community systems-change initiatives' theories of change and implementation;
- prioritizing the inclusion of community knowledge and perspectives in the building of field knowledge; and
- planning and investing the time and resources needed to promote and advance cross-foundation reflection and field-level knowledge building after foundation initiatives end.

Learning From Past Community Systems Change

Challenges

As Flanagan et al. (2018) noted, there is a wide variety of implementation theories and approaches deployed in community systems-change work, making it difficult to more easily draw lessons across initiatives. In addition, many initiatives use very idiosyncratic language and framing to describe their approach. For example, a common element of community systems change is the building of "community capacities," but there are diverse perspectives on what these are, how to define and assess them, and how much they contribute to overall community change. Initiative-specific language is often used to gain common and negotiated understanding among the stakeholders of that single initiative and also to stand out as a new and advanced effort over past work. Although this uniqueness may achieve an important communications goal, it greatly complicates building on field knowledge unless careful translation and links to field knowledge are made.

Another common experience of community systems change is that the language and theory proposed in design are changed and adapted during implementation, often without clear explanation or documentation. Community systems-change evaluations struggle in both design and effort with changing theories of community systems change, and there may not be sufficient time and attention paid to understanding and documenting these key changes, especially for audiences outside of the initiative. Yet these changes often not only reflect real lessons learned by the initiative itself, but also are valuable knowledge and lessons for the field —

TABLE 1 Challenges in Learning Across Community Systems Change

Challenges in Learning From Past Community Systems Change	Challenges in Designing Evaluation With Future Translation of Findings in Mind	Challenges in Translating and Using Evaluation Findings
There is a lack of a shared, common vocabulary and framework for defining and measuring core elements of theory and implementation.	Funders and community systems-change implementers do not plan for intentional use and translation early enough in the evaluation.	The internal culture of the funder/implementer creates barriers to maintaining attention for 10-plus years; admitting failure; and focus on management and implementation.
Published evaluations lack detail on implementation design, management, and decisions, and/or do not always document evolving theories of change, including the analysis informing these changes.	There is a disproportionate focus of evaluation time and resources devoted to outcomes, compared to implementation or learning.	There is a lack of thorough and genuine inclusion of community reflections and analysis on the implementation and impacts of initiatives, including opinions or conclusions that disagree with funder and evaluator perspectives.
Published evaluations and documentation do not include adequate perspectives, analyses, and conclusions of the community members who are the focus of the community systems-change agenda.	There is a lack of time and resources for ongoing knowledge capture during an initiative, including the prioritization of authentic community engagement in evaluation and learning activities.	There is a lack of time and resources for intentional reflection and analysis to define and translate lessons for use.
In multisite community systems change, there is usually wide variation in approaches and timelines in implementation, and a lack of shared understanding and experience of system and community changes.	There is a lack of attention to and analysis and documentation of changing assumptions and theories of change.	There is a lack of coordination and integration among disparate evaluators in design, data collection, analysis, and reporting, both within single initiatives and across multiple initiatives.
Many published evaluations cannot measure population-level outcome changes due to the long-term nature of community change and difficulty of linking to implementation.	Maintaining common knowledge across time and transitions through turnover of leaders, staff, and grantees is inconsistent.	There is inadequate sharing of data and findings with the community and the field because funders or evaluators consider data proprietary.
Documentation of local place context, and how it affects implementation and outcomes, is incomplete.	Evaluation does not adapt to and accommodate emergent innovations and lessons.	Evaluation does not resource post-initiative data collection to document impact and influence occurring after investments end.

if they are documented and communicated intentionally and clearly.

What these challenges share in common is that most of these key elements are rarely documented fully in published evaluations and documents about the demonstrations of community systems change. In their systemic review of more than 2,000 published articles on community change investments, Flanagan et al. (2018) could find only 25 with sufficient documentation of implementation and impact.

TABLE 2 Solutions and Strategies for Learning Across Community Systems Change Field

Solutions for Learning From Past Community Systems Change	Solutions for Designing Evaluation With Future Translation of Findings in Mind	Solutions for Translating and Using Evaluation Findings
Share data and comprehensive evaluation documentation through open sources and public archives (e.g., IssueLab.org).	Resource capacity building intentionally and adequately for the community to participate actively in initiative evaluation and knowledge creation and use.	Engage in post-initiative intentional reflection, analysis, documentation, and dissemination.
Seek ongoing intentional learning communities (e.g., Aspen Roundtable, Community Development topical interest group of the American Evaluation Association).	Devote intentional time and resources throughout the initiative to document, analyze, and share.	Pursue post-initiative intentional communications efforts with an integrated communications and evaluation strategy.
Look to shared community systems-change frameworks that help build on knowledge (e.g., Aspen Institute, GEO Embrace Complexity, Collective Impact).	Increase staffing for and resourcing of more rigorous evaluation (especially of implementation) throughout the initiative, including evaluation capacity building and participation of the community in analysis and dissemination.	Evaluation and evaluators need to be funded post-initiative to share evaluation findings, along with complementary post-initiative investments in communities and the field that support translation and use of findings.
Use peer-sharing networks to structure learning across roles, funders, and initiatives.	Perform timely and regular implementation assessment (e.g., rapid feedback memo) from evaluation throughout implementation.	Produce shorter, user-friendly products with succinct analysis, conclusions, and recommendations, but without oversimplifying the complexity of challenges, initiatives, and lessons.
Develop and share implementation and planning documents across funders and initiatives.	Embed post-initiative leave-behind evaluation capacity in the overall initiative logic model.	Be transparent about mistakes, failures, and unintended consequences.
Address evaluation analysis and use in multiple stages of implementation.	Choose emergent learning processes that translate analysis and conclusions into changed behaviors.	Improve attention to and dissemination of process evaluation design, analysis, and findings, with explicit conclusions on what can be done differently.
	Evaluate the evaluation on its success in dissemination and influence of lessons and findings.	

Much of the documentation of implementation, theory changes, and collective sense-making is held in internal documents by the funders and implementers. We do not believe that funders and change agents are intentionally hiding their work. As Pennie Foster-Fishman of Michigan State pointed out in a meeting of community systems-change evaluators, the complexity of these initiatives leaves behind "swimming pools full of data" and documents that are challenging to manage, analyze, and communicate, especially once an initiative is over (Fiester, 2007, p. 5).

Solutions

The primary challenge that exists across all these barriers to knowledge building for the field is the lack of funding and time to plan intentionally for field building during the design and implementation of the initiative. We welcome the needed increased attention on real-time reflection and learning within initiatives during implementation. What we suggest is a complementary increase in attention to and support for linking these lessons with the existing knowledge in order to build and advance lessons across community systems-change experiences. (See Table 2.)

This first requires having intent and commitment to field and knowledge building and including adequate resources to build and integrate gained knowledge into the field and communicate in ways and venues that ensure the field has access to and can fully understand the community change lessons in the collective of other community systems-change experiences. Funders and implementers need to include field building as an intentional goal of their initiative and resource this goal appropriately — including time and investments in an intentional plan for analysis and dissemination. In addition, it is then appropriate for the systems-change evaluation to consider and assess the progress and success the initiative has in terms of influencing and informing the field of related community initiatives.

Commitment of intention and resources by funders and implementers to shared knowledge building is key, but so is rigor in the review and analysis of knowledge to put it in the context of what is known and the questions we collectively need to answer across the community systems-change field. This means there needs to be more willingness on the part of community systems-change funders and implementers to expose their theories to more rigorous definition and testing (Coulton, 2010), including intentionally linking developing community systems-change theories to existing knowledge in other fields, such as economics, community psychology, and political science (Kelly, 2010).

We welcome the needed increased attention on real-time reflection and learning within initiatives during implementation. What we suggest is a complementary increase in attention to and support for linking these lessons with the existing knowledge in order to build and advance lessons across community systems-change experiences.

Starting with the important field-building and field-networking efforts of the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change (and now the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions), there continue to be opportunities for funders and implementers to connect and share data and lessons — in conferences, peer-learning groups, and professional association conferences (Ahuja, 2014). These network learning opportunities are important, but still disconnected from building if not a single, then a connected and disciplined archive of documents and examples that include unpacked theories of change that explain how they were derived and adapted; implementation models and data that contribute an understanding of community capacity building leading to measurable community change; and, especially, publicly archived outcome data and analyses that can be systematically compiled, reviewed, and even meta-evaluated. The Collective Impact Forum is an excellent example of collective knowledge building and sharing organized around a commonly understood and implemented framework across multiple places and initiatives.

Another good example is the Skillman Foundation's final evaluation report of its 10-year community systems-change program,

Defining and participating in shared frameworks and archives of similarly defined data and lessons are the best way for the community systems-change field to both contribute to and learn from the rich diversity of community change experiences and evaluations. And we need intentional support and participation for this networked scholarship to be viable, useful, and sustained.

Good Neighborhoods, in six Detroit neighborhoods, which included appendices of its theory and implementation as they changed over time (Burns, Brown, Colombo, & O'Laoire, 2017). These details of implementation and theory are usually missing from publicly available final community systems-change reports, yet they are important to understanding how the process and outcomes of the initiative are not only related to each other, but also to what is known in the community systems-change field. The Annie E. Casey Foundation's 10-year Making Connections initiative archived its community outcome survey data in a public data set.[9] An example of both field-knowledge building and sharing is the GEO peer-learning network, Embrace Complexity; in which more than a dozen community systems-change funders (both private foundations and federal agencies) compiled a shared framework of implementation and outcome elements that helped them and helps the field review and analyze experiences and data in a more disciplined manner (Community Science & Bearman, 2014).

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Designing and Implementing Evaluation to Promote Translation and Use

Challenges

Designing and implementing community systems-change evaluations are complicated for all the reasons we have discussed — multiple levels of intervention, adapting theories, changing strategies, and usually a wide scope for what is included in the community intervention and expected in terms of interim community-capacity outcomes. Population-level outcomes may be few and specific, but the pathways to achieving these outcomes are varied and interrelated. Because of this, most community systems-change evaluations are stretched by available resources, especially time, to maintain a focus on what is needed to document the levers of change, program and population-level outcomes, and system changes. There is often a disproportionate amount of evaluation time and funds spent on chasing after and measuring intended (and unintended) outcomes at various levels of program, systems, and community. This leaves fewer evaluation resources to address the most overlooked evaluation questions in the field around design, implementation, and adaptation of the theory and interventions.

There are two other key challenges to community systems-change evaluations being effective in facilitating translation and use of knowledge. The first, similar to many evaluations, is the failure of evaluators and implementers to plan early enough for post-initiative communications and

[9] http://mcstudy.norc.org/

dissemination. It is understandable that many funders and evaluators are cautious about getting too far ahead of the work, data, and analysis, but without some early planning and integration of field-building resources and activities into the evaluation and documentation of the initiative, there will likely be neither the right evaluation questions answered nor the appropriate methods and documentation of those answers contributing to field-building.

Second, we have rarely seen examples of goals and strategies for field-building dissemination, communications, and influence built into the theory of community systems change. Many funders and implementers talk about "influencing the field" through their investments and work, but without an intentional strategy of communications and influence during or after the initiative or period of investment. This includes not fully investing time and funds into documentation that is intentional about field audiences and learning.

Solutions

One of the biggest challenges most community systems-change implementers and their evaluators face in time frames of five to 10 years or longer is the inevitable turnover of people — funders, designers, investors, community leaders, and even evaluators. Planning for constant turnover and onboarding of new actors is a must in yearslong change initiatives. Ongoing documentation and learning strategies are needed to maintain knowledge and momentum of a constantly changing team of implementers and community. A related challenge once the initiative is near its end is that individuals move on — to new work and new opportunities — and if the experiences and lessons of people earlier in the initiative are not adequately captured, including their analysis based on data collected after they left, our ability to make field-relevant conclusions is weakened. Community systems-change evaluations need to address this challenge throughout the initiative by repeatedly advocating for adequate time for review of data and documentation of participants' analysis, reflection, and lessons learned.

One of the biggest challenges most community systems-change implementers and their evaluators face in time frames of five to 10 years or longer is the inevitable turnover of people — funders, designers, investors, community leaders, and even evaluators.

Much attention has been given to improving the ability of stakeholders, particularly foundation funders, to be proactive in their learning, including the sharing of failures (Hamilton, et al., 2005; Leahy, Wegmann, & Nolen, 2016). Funders and implementers hold optimistic and ambitious goals for community change — optimism and ambition that often do not make room for planning for failure and unintended consequences. It is also difficult in long-term initiatives to garner the energy and attention to re-question original assumptions in light of new data and experiences. These cognitive traps in philanthropy require an effort, especially by evaluators, to intervene with reflection and learning tools and practices that challenge thinking and assumptions in helpful ways (Beer & Coffman, 2014).

Most community systems-change evaluations fail to include adequate time and resources for the evaluation to continue to collect data beyond the period of implementation and investment. These efforts are about changing the systems and capacities of communities to take on complex strategies that impact populations — changes in outcomes that may require years to observe. The field suffers from a lack of evidence establishing clear causal linkages between complex interventions and population outcomes (Kubisch, et al., 2010). Without continuing to collect data and test community systems-change theories fully, implementers and evaluators will continue to make attempts to obtain and

A more important gap in most foundation reflection and analyses of community systems change is, in fact, the perspectives of the community itself. Even as community residents are sources of knowledge and data, oftentimes they are not engaged and involved intentionally enough (and lack adequate resources and support) to participate in post-initiative analyses and sense-making prioritized and legitimized by formal and even independent documentation.

measure impact and make field-contributing conclusions inadequately.

This also points to the need for most community systems-change initiatives to consider funding evaluators beyond the implementation period of both the initiative and evaluation to contribute to field-knowledge sharing. Evaluators are often tasked with being the documenters and translators of the theory of systems change as well as being the "sense makers" of a complex intervention and experience, particularly when there are multiple sources of data and, likely, a mixed set of complete and incomplete findings. There are some examples of foundations and implementers commissioning re-visits and look-backs after an initiative has ended that are often focused on sustainability of change momentum and looking for aftereffects or longer-term impacts and influences (Brown, Butler, & Hamilton, 2001; Hebert, 2014). However, these reviews often are missing reexamination and re-questioning of original hypotheses about implementation and causality — reflection and analysis which would contribute more to field building.

A more important gap in most foundation reflection and analyses of community systems change is, in fact, the perspectives of the community itself. Even as community residents are sources of knowledge and data, oftentimes they are not engaged and involved intentionally enough (and lack adequate resources and support) to participate in post-initiative analyses and sense-making prioritized and legitimized by formal and even independent documentation. This crucial community knowledge source may be included as one perspective on community systems change while often not given the same value and attention as the foundation's or evaluator's, yet represents the living knowledge that community possesses to continue change efforts beyond foundation initiatives and investments. Hebert (2014) revisited communities affected by community systems change after the foundation investments ended to gain their perspectives on not only the sustainability of impacts, but also the lessons they learned independent of the foundation.

We also argue that at the heart of all community systems change theories is not only the goal to change the specific place and community, but also to learn more about systems and community change in order to scale positive impact more broadly — to address entrenched, systemic inequities in many more communities. The real goal for most of these efforts is to bring effective community systems change to scale in more communities (Hopkins & Ferris, 2014). This implicit goal for scale is why cross-initiative evidence and learning are important and should be prioritized more. And how the single program or place of focus must be connected to and instrumental in sharing and advancing knowledge in other communities must be a part of the overall theory and implementation of the initiative.

Evaluating for the Bigger Picture: Building Knowledge for the Field

There remains much intention in most community systems-change efforts to contribute to and influence the field, but without explicit theories, funding, and effort of knowledge sharing and dissemination that lead to translation and use of information that actually affects decisions and actions. Current and future evaluators should include in their implementation both theory and planning for this dissemination of knowledge.

Community systems-change knowledge building requires the integration of intentional strategies to influence and disseminate knowledge to the field into evaluations early enough so that appropriate documentation and data are prioritized around the field questions needing to be answered. We recognize that this is not a priority for individual initiative funders and implementers, but our mutual dependence on each other's knowledge and experience is what has built this field over time and we need more attention to ensuring that field-building questions are defined and answered. These questions include needing to know about the complex interactions of capacity building, policy and systems changes, and the achievement of population-level outcomes within a broader context of history and systemic forces acting against specific communities. Without data from multiple community systems-change demonstrations, it will continue to be difficult to obtain the evidence needed to justify the types and levels of investments needed to understand how to achieve long-term community change. The field now has more opportunities to learn from a wide set of initiative examples, and we should continue to commit to the goal of openness and shared learning:

> A commitment to share with the broader field: Foundations that learn often are foundations that share. These foundations see themselves as contributing members of a broader field of inquiry, with reciprocal obligations of openness. Their leaders view their organizations' knowledge and experience — good and bad — as an asset for the field. These funders are not naïve or unsophisticated about sharing information, however. They know they need to be strategic — to have a clear purpose for sharing, to define the audience with whom they are sharing, to choose the right time, and to tailor products to their audience's needs. (Hamilton et al., 2005, p. 46)

It is not simply the commitment and will to share, however, but also intentional effort, leadership, and supportive resources that are necessary to ensure that collaborative knowledge and field building routinely occur. Beyond the challenges to foundation collaboration and learning previously discussed (CEP, 2016), what is most needed is for foundations to take a systems view of their shared goals and need for learning, and then consider themselves as part of a social system necessary to create and codify greater knowledge — which is possible only in collaborative relationship (Hirschhorn & Gilmore, 2004). We must think beyond the needs and demands of an individual foundation and, instead, prioritize the shared goals philanthropy has within a field and invest time and resources to support intentional, well-designed peer-learning collaborations. We need to step up and become field catalysts to promote innovation and learning in philanthropy and creating a "road map for change" and field building, to ensure that we continue to learn and advance shared knowledge and practice in community systems change (Hussein, Plummer, & Breen, 2018, p. 51).

The collaborative knowledge and field building we need in community systems change requires foundations and evaluators to proactively and intentionally define goals and plans to address the field-level questions we still have. This certainly requires the motivation, time, and financial resources to support and engage foundation staff, evaluators, and community to work together with other community systems-change efforts to compare and contrast hypotheses, data, experiences, contexts, and analyses so that we can advance and construct consensus-built common knowledge capable of influencing and being applied in practice beyond single foundation efforts.

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More Than Listening: Harnessing the Power of Feedback to Drive Collaborative Learning

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Keywords: *Feedback, learning; strategy, constituent voice, community*

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Key Points

- Foundations can and should do a better job of gathering feedback from and learning with both grantees and the communities they seek to serve. This type of collaborative learning has the potential to inform and strengthen foundation strategy, grantmaking practices, evaluation, and communications. Gathering meaningful input is difficult, however, given power dynamics between foundations and those they support. Even when authentic input has been gathered, it can be difficult to apply insights to ongoing work.
- What does it look like for a foundation to get feedback from its grantee and community stakeholders? Much of the feedback discussions taking place in the sector center on the role of nonprofit organizations. This article explores how foundations can harness the power of feedback to improve philanthropic practice, using the experiences of the James Irvine Foundation as a case example. It provides information about the foundation and its commitment to constituent feedback, presents two cases from its own experience gathering feedback from community stakeholders and grantee partners, and then lays out a series of culminating lessons and insights based on this work.
- Overall, Irvine believes that collaborative learning requires more than just listening. To truly harness the power of feedback, foundations must act on what they are hearing, share how they are responding with those who provided feedback, and open up this learning to others who can benefit. To do this effectively, foundations must evolve their internal organizational practices to better incorporate external perspectives.

Introduction: Why Focus on Feedback?

Feedback is all around us. We give and receive feedback at work and in educational settings. We seek and provide it in the process of developing new skills, be it learning to play the ukulele or run a faster mile. Businesses regularly ask us to provide feedback through surveys and focus groups as well as via rating systems embedded in our mobile phones. We also exchange feedback over everyday things in our personal lives — how last night's dinner tasted, how to get homework done more effectively, or how to be a better partner to our loved ones.

Despite the ubiquitous nature of feedback, there is a growing sense that social-sector organizations can do a better job listening and responding to those they aim to help. Unlike in business, the people nonprofits and funders seek to help are not paying for their services. This creates potential for market distortion, in that the party paying for services wields more influence than the people those services are meant to benefit (Stid, 2011). For nonprofits, this may mean listening more closely to organizational funders than to one's clients. For foundations, this may mean soliciting approval from board members and executives instead of from nonprofit partners and the communities they serve.

Over the past 10 years, there has been a growing number of articles, presentations, convenings, and tools focused on promoting greater attention to feedback in the social sector.[1] In this context,

[1] See, for example, the collection of articles hosted by the Fund for Shared Insight at https://www.fundforsharedinsight.org/knowledge.

feedback is defined as "perspectives, feelings, and opinions individuals have about their experiences with an organization, product, or service that are used to inform and improve the practice and decision-making of that organization" (Threlfall Consulting, 2017, p. 5). Promoters of feedback point to a number of benefits, including increased program effectiveness (ORS Impact, 2018), increased innovation (Daidone & Samuels, 2019), greater agency on the part of community members (Twersky & Reichheld, 2019), and minimization of unintended harmful impacts (Buteau, Gopal, & Buchanan, 2014). Feedback can also be usefully applied at multiple points in the life of a program or investment — when designing a program to ensure it responds to constituent needs, preferences, and constraints; when implementing a program to identify potential improvements; and after a program is complete to determine what worked and what did not (Twersky, Buchanan, & Threlfall, 2013).

Despite the power of feedback to drive positive change, acquiring good feedback can be challenging. The process of getting it can be expensive, and obtaining representative and authentic responses may be difficult. Feedback also can cause discomfort for those in the position of delivering or funding services (Twersky et al., 2013). To address some of these challenges, several organizations have emerged to support organizations interested in listening more closely to their constituents. These include the Fund for Shared Insight, a funder collaborative working to improve philanthropy by elevating the voices of the people foundations seek to help; and Feedback Labs,[2] a nonprofit that promotes feedback loops through convening and sharing of tools and resources. The Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP), which has long played a role in helping funders gather feedback from their stakeholders, has also published blog posts and briefing papers on the value and practice of obtaining grantee and constituent feedback. "Feedback is not a fad," argues Larry Kramer (2018), CEO of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, but instead should be an integral part of philanthropic strategy. Other foundation

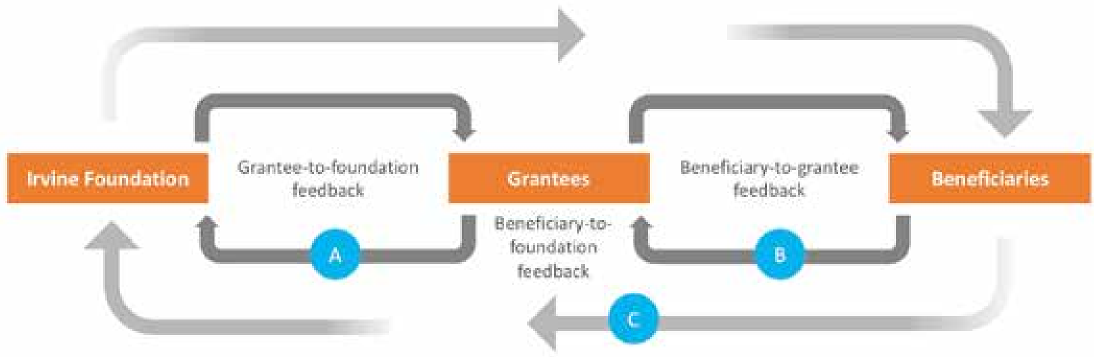
To truly harness the power of feedback, foundations must act on what they are hearing, share how they are responding with those who provided feedback, and open up this learning to others who can benefit. To do this effectively, foundations must evolve their internal organizational practices to better incorporate external perspectives.

CEOs agree: A 2016 CEP study identified learning from the experiences of constituents and of grantees as the top two promising practices CEOs identify for increasing foundations' impact in the coming decades (Buteau, Orensten, & Loh, 2016).

But what does it look like for a foundation to get feedback from its grantee and community stakeholders? Much of the feedback discussions taking place in the sector center on the role of nonprofit organizations. This article explores how foundations can harness the power of feedback to improve philanthropic practice, using the experiences of the James Irvine Foundation as a case example. It provides information about the foundation and its commitment to constituent feedback, presents two cases from its own experience gathering feedback from community stakeholders and grantee partners, and then lays out a series of culminating lessons and insights based on this work. Overall, Irvine believes that collaborative learning requires more than just listening. To truly harness the power of feedback, foundations must act on what they are hearing, share how they are responding with

[2] See https://feedbacklabs.org.

FIGURE 1 Feedback at Multiple Levels



those who provided feedback, and open up this learning to others who can benefit. To do this effectively, foundations must evolve their internal organizational practices to better incorporate external perspectives.

The James Irvine Foundation's Feedback Journey

The James Irvine Foundation was founded in 1937 with a broad mandate to "benefit the people of California."[3] Since its inception, the foundation has awarded more than $1.78 billion in grants to more than 3,300 nonprofit organizations. In January 2016, Irvine announced a new strategic focus (Howard, 2016), and its singular goal now is a California where all low-income workers have the power to advance economically. This shift is designed to respond to large and growing disparities in economic well-being and civic participation within the state.

Along with this shift in strategy, Irvine refreshed its approach to learning and assessing impact and elevated its commitment to feedback. This commitment is documented in the foundation's Impact Assessment and Learning Framework:

> We are accountable to our ultimate beneficiaries: Californians who are working but struggling with poverty. As a result, we are committed to broadening and strengthening our feedback practices — asking and listening, using what we hear to inform our work, and letting those we listen to know how we used what we learned. (Irvine Foundation, 2017, p. 5)

Staff have been inspired by the words of Bryan Stephenson, who urges,

> Find ways to get proximate to people who are suffering. When you get proximate to the excluded and the disfavored, you learn things that you need to understand if we're going to change the world. Our understanding of how we change things comes in proximity to inequality, to injustice. (Hubley, 2018, paras. 19–20)

In practice, the foundation has operationalized its commitment to feedback at three levels:

1. *Grantees:* Irvine gathers feedback from grantees through grantee perception surveys, engagement in strategy development, and grantee gatherings.

2. *Clients served by grantees:* Irvine actively participates in the Fund for Shared Insight and supports the fund's Listen4Good initiative, which provides nonprofits with funding and technical assistance to help them gather and respond to feedback from those they serve (Fund for Shared Insight, 2018).

3. *Those the foundation's grantees serve:* Irvine also gathers feedback directly from the people and communities it seeks to help through efforts such as community listening sessions.

[3] See the James Irvine Foundation's website at https://www.irvine.org/about/history.

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The foundation views listening as integral to its philanthropic approach (Howard, 2018) and is testing new ways to incorporate this concept into its work. In essence, the foundation is on a journey to discover how it can best learn collaboratively with grantee partners and the community. While listening is critical, the foundation also values closing the feedback loop by sharing back what it has learned from these different stakeholders and how it is acting on this information. (See Figure 1.) In practice, however, listening and sharing is not always so linear.

This piece highlights how the Irvine Foundation has approached its feedback practices. The foundation is focusing on all three loops; however, since much has been written about beneficiary-to-grantee feedback as a result of the Listen4Good initiative, this article focuses on recent efforts at the beneficiary-to-foundation and grantee-to-foundation levels. Irvine hopes that by sharing its own knowledge and experience about feedback, it can add value to the field more broadly (Ammann Howard, 2018).

Beneficiary-to-Foundation Feedback: Community Listening Sessions

After Irvine announced its new strategic direction in January 2016, it committed itself to listening to and hearing from working Californians who are struggling economically. The CEO of the foundation was expressly interested in and supportive of listening to those Irvine seeks to help, and staff shared this enthusiasm. According to a blog post published in February of the following year, the foundation asserted, "We know that our ability to have an impact is directly connected to how well we listen to the organizations working to expand opportunity for Californians – and to those Californians themselves" (Ammann Howard & Gulley, 2017, para. 5).

It is worth noting that this was a different practice for Irvine. Historically, the foundation had relied on external research and talking with nonprofit and foundation colleagues as part of assessing needs and developing funding strategies. Sometimes the foundation spoke with community leaders and local elected officials; if it heard from community residents, this typically occurred through grantee site visits or community events hosted by grantees to which Irvine staff were invited. Going to the ground in this way — to directly listen to and learn from those the foundation seeks to serve — was unique.

To better understand the day-to-day experiences of the foundation's intended beneficiaries — their hopes, challenges, and aspirations — Irvine engaged a human-centered design firm to launch an ambitious listening project in incorporating a mix of research methodologies. The director of impact assessment and learning helped to design this process and drove it in collaboration with program and operational staff. The centerpiece of the effort involved partnering with community organizations to hold 14 listening sessions in six regions across California. (See Figure 2.) The sessions were anchored in broad questions focusing on the foundation's two key areas of interest — (1) economic security and mobility, and (2) voice in the decisions that affect participants, their family, and community — but intentionally had a very open format for discussion. This allowed for participants to talk about their experiences in a more holistic way that enabled Irvine to learn about its specific areas of interest as well as related issues and the broader context in which participants worked and lived.

The consultants initially recruited participants through online advertising, with the goal of hearing from people who may or may not be connected to current grantees. This proved challenging with regard to getting a sufficient number of participants to show up even with the offer of financial incentives, child care, and food. As a result, the main recruitment took place through engaging community partners who had strong relationships with low-income communities. While the emphasis was to broaden invitations beyond those individuals their organizations serve, this approach did not result in a sample as representative as that from the first method tried. Partnering with community organizations nonetheless offered an important benefit: They were able to provide participants with information about local supports relevant to challenges

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FIGURE 2 14 Community Listening Sessions in Six California Regions

they identified during the sessions. This was particularly important for participants who were experiencing a financial or family crisis.

Sessions were highly interactive, blending Q&A, group discussion, identifying patterns, brainstorming, and reflection. Participants were encouraged to share what they love to do, write down their challenges, and draw their ideas for change. More than 400 Californians attended these sessions, which were held in 10 languages. The foundation also conducted follow-up interviews with listening-session participants who were open to telling their personal stories in more depth. Finally, Irvine experimented with a mobile research app, called dscout, to reach 18- through 36-year-olds throughout the state in areas where listening sessions didn't take place. The app allows users to upload photos and videos in response to question prompts. Five themes that speak to fundamental human aspirations emerged through this process. (See Table 1.)

The process of gathering this feedback was by no means a perfect one. For example, partnering with local organizations to host sessions worked well in most cases, but in some instances, sessions were less well-organized: participant turnout and the quality of translators varied, for example. In addition, Irvine was interested in having staff in both grantmaking and operations attend and participate in sessions. While the foundation provided an orientation for staff attendees about the session itself and their specific role, staff would have benefitted from a better understanding of the purpose, design, and

TABLE 1 Community Listening Session Themes

Community Listening Session Themes
1. ***"I want to live without making extreme tradeoffs."*** Despite working hard, participants reported having to make difficult decisions about what they can afford in order to survive.
2. ***"I want to live without fear and anxiety."*** Busy schedules, unfriendly work environments, and unsafe situations make day-to-day life feel unstable.
3. ***"I want to be treated with dignity."*** Participants reported wanting respect for their contributions at work and in their communities.
4. ***"I want to be connected to a strong community network."*** Participants who are physically or socially isolated from strong personal or professional networks miss out on information and support.
5. ***"I want the opportunity to make my situation better."*** Some participants feel trapped in their current situation and that they can't make progress toward their goals.

context of the listening efforts more broadly, especially since this was a new approach for the foundation. Finally, the team that organized the community listening sessions was pulled together from across functions (program, communications, impact assessment and learning) and regions (San Francisco and Los Angeles). While having a cross-functional team was highly beneficial to this process, it took time for this group to build relationships and effective ways of working with one another.

So, what did Irvine do with what it heard? In some ways, it was testing what it meant to be a listener and how to use this listening to inform the foundation's work and be accountable to those it seeks to help. Hearing directly from those who are working but struggling with poverty about the impact of broader economic and political conditions on their lived experiences was a powerful and moving experience for staff. By documenting what was heard, the foundation was able to take and amplify participant voices on an ongoing basis in different staff and board conversations to help confirm or inform strategy, grantmaking, and research and development efforts. It also provided important contextual information about other issues (e.g., transportation, health care, child care) that the foundation does not fund but that impacts the same individuals it seeks to serve.

While it has been hard to draw clear linear connections between what staff heard and specific strategy and investment decisions, it has been a critical input that influences staff thinking and reminds them of the urgency and importance of Irvine's mission. As documented on the foundation's blog,

> The Community Listening Sessions changed us. They increased our empathy for the day-to-day experiences of Californians who are working but struggling to make ends meet, and gave us a chance to hear directly the voices that most often aren't heard." (Ammann Howard & Gulley, 2017, para. 11)

Indeed, staff found the sessions so powerful that they made sure photos of participants were posted in the foundation's largest conference room as a reminder of the people Irvine needs to listen to.

Grantee-to-Foundation Feedback Case: "Better Careers" and "Fair Work" Strategy Development

When Irvine embarked on the process of developing funding initiatives aligned with its new strategic direction, it also decided to engage more deeply with grantees in the process of developing new funding strategies. Irvine had a history of soliciting grantee feedback, including

Reflective Practice

FIGURE 3 Sample Learning Questions

Better Careers	Fair Work
Career pathways • What are promising approaches to create career and entrepreneurship pathways that lead to family-sustaining work? • What are the characteristics of effective pathway partnerships? • To what degree are supports integrated with career pathway education/training? • Where are there opportunities for this work to be sustained by other payers? **Jobs** • What are promising approaches to stimulate creation of "quality jobs"? • What are promising approaches to improve the quality of existing jobs? • What are promising approaches to improve hiring, retention, and advancement toward a quality job? • To what degree are supports integrated with employer retention efforts? • Where are there opportunities for this work to be sustained by other payers?	**Wage theft** • How can we incentivize employer compliance with wage laws? • How can workers best advocate in the current sociopolitical context? • How can government, nonprofits, and employers partner to make progress on this issue? **Worker organizing** • How does organizing need to change in today's landscape? • What capacities are essential to the effectiveness of individual organizations? • What capacities can support the overall field's sustainability? **Employer partnerships** • What motivates employers to take high-road approaches? • How does this play out in different industries? • What are the policy opportunities and challenges?

surveys such as those administered by CEP as well as directly in relationship with grantee partners. However, it sought to engage grantees more deeply in order to better understand regional context and the implementation environment for its strategies. It also viewed grantee engagement as a way to be more accountable to its partners and the public.

The foundation began the process of new strategy development by identifying two potential areas for investment in multiyear initiatives: (1) Better Careers, connecting low-income Californians to good jobs with family-sustaining wages and advancement opportunities, and (2) Fair Work, engaging low-wage workers to secure their wages, rights, and protections.

The identification of these areas was informed by Irvine's history of past investment; ongoing discussions among staff, grantees, and field experts; and consideration of opportunities aligned with the foundation's new strategic direction.

Irvine pursued some initial landscaping in each of these areas to identify needs and gaps, promising solutions, and potential areas of investment. This landscaping included reviewing demographic data and prior research and reports on poverty in California, and interviewing nonprofit leaders, funders, and subject-matter experts working on these issues. Building from this initial landscaping and its own experience, the foundation launched a pilot grantmaking program focused on high-functioning organizations whose work could inform foundation strategy. Starting in the summer of 2016, Irvine made flexible, two- to three-year grants to leading organizations in a learning phase as it developed potential initiatives. It also identified a set of learning questions to inform efforts to develop new initiatives in each area. (See Figure 3.)

Following these initial grant investments, Irvine spent more than a year listening to pilot investment grantees while also engaging with employers, thought leaders, and other stakeholders throughout California to obtain their perspectives on the needs, issues, and opportunities within these areas. The approach to grantee engagement was customized to each area.

Better Careers

For Better Careers, pilot grantees were involved in a series of convenings collaboratively designed with foundation staff to maximize shared learning in areas related to the workforce and employment landscape. Conversations allowed for deeper exploration of identified topics, including understanding potential solutions and important regional considerations in middle-wage training and job opportunities, effective employer engagement, and recruitment and hiring practices.

This listening and learning work helped to inform hypotheses underlying initiative design as well as additional investment ideas. For example, one hypothesis pertinent to Better Careers was that while middle-skill jobs exist, training necessary to obtain those jobs is lacking. This was affirmed and helped to hone Irvine's focus to include a learn-and-earn approach (e.g., apprenticeships) as a part of the initiative design. In addition, the process surfaced access challenges, as many low-wage workers aspire to become apprentices but do not have the requisite skills (i.e., soft skills, math). This led the foundation to include some investment in pre-apprenticeship programs that position individuals for success in apprenticeship programs that lead to the middle-skill, middle-wage careers that they need to thrive.

Fair Work

The Fair Work process included an initial gathering of pilot grantees, interviews and site visits to dive deeply into the experience of each organization, and a larger convening that included grantee partners and field experts to explore perspectives on a range of issues: wage theft and worker protections, immigration, worker organizing, capacity building, and emerging narratives related to low-wage work. The process culminated in a follow-up survey, which asked grantees to prioritize topics that were identified as central to the proposed initiative's emerging strategy.

"Our central approach to learning in our pilot phase — guided by investments in strong leaders, organizations, and networks — allowed Irvine to engage stakeholders deeply as full partners in exploring needs and opportunities to expand impact."

– Connie Malloy, portfolio director

This process helped to explore hypotheses about the needs of community-based organizations and what role Irvine might play. For example, the foundation believed that organizations had unique capacity needs but that some needs were shared across organizations. Indeed, leadership development emerged as a need across organizations with potential to be addressed through a statewide program. In contrast, organizations often had unique management-capacity needs, better addressed through tailored supports.

Over the course of this learning phase, foundation staff held team retreats to analyze and integrate information gathered from grantees and field convenings as well as discussions at the board and executive levels. The process of engaging deeply with grantees in the strategy development phase was new for foundation leaders and staff, and at times raised questions about the best way to approach this work. Some of the issues Irvine grappled with included the following:

FIGURE 4 The Feedback Continuum

Identify your constituents, what you can learn from them, and how you will engage them.

Reflect on what you are hearing, adjust your approach, and prepare your foundation to respond.

Share back with constituents what you heard and learned, and how you are acting on the information.

Share what you heard and learned with others so more people can benefit.

- *Making staff time.* Strategy development processes often require a significant amount of time and effort on the part of foundation staff. Engaging grantees in strategy development added a new layer to this work that proved to be relatively time-intensive. Moving forward, Irvine has a better understanding of the time and support needed to effectively resource these efforts.

- *Respecting grantee time.* While Irvine's investments in pilot grantee organizations was fairly substantial and the foundation set an expectation of wanting to learn from their work, the process raised questions about how to use grantees' time most effectively. Collaborative learning requires making the time to build relationships, establish trust, and create spaces for open and honest dialogue. At the same time, the learning phase took place at a time when grantees, especially those on the Fair Work side, faced new pressures in terms of helping the people they serve with changes in federal policy.

- *Striving for alignment.* In the past, strategy development was primarily held internally at Irvine. Incorporating grantees into strategy development and aligning this with the decision processes of the foundation proved to be difficult. At times, tensions emerged around how to manage perspectives across grantees, program staff, and the board. For example, grantees identified many needs, and it was up to foundation staff to make hard choices about how to prioritize those needs, to determine where Irvine was well-positioned to play a role, and to articulate strategies that board members would likely support. Navigating this required care and attention in order to honor grantee perspectives and staff expertise along with norms of institutional governance.

Despite challenges encountered along the way, Irvine has found the feedback and exchange of ideas that took place during the pilot learning phase and the community learning sessions to be tremendously valuable. The foundation gained new insights into both the needs of low-income Californians and promising innovations in the field. It also gained significant knowledge about the individual and collective capacity needs of organizations working in these arenas. The resulting strategies are responsive to the perspectives of organizations working most closely with the people that Irvine seeks to benefit.

Beyond Listening: Moving Along the Feedback Continuum

Through the process of implementing feedback mechanisms, Irvine has gained new insights and lessons about how to harness the power of feedback for collaborative learning. Irvine now conceptualizes its feedback practices along a continuum that begins with listening to constituents, followed by acting on what is heard, closing the feedback loop, and sharing knowledge learned with others. (See Figure 4.) While many listening efforts stop at the listening stage, moving through the other stages of the continuum is critical for deepening collaboration and learning with external stakeholders.

Reflecting on this continuum, the following are some overarching insights regarding what it takes to effectively harness the power of feedback within the philanthropic context.

Listening Well Takes Time, Resources, and Support

Gathering feedback from grantee partners and the communities they serve is not something for foundations to take lightly. Designing processes that enable meaningful engagement requires planning, dedicated time, investment of staff hours, and outside support from consultants who bring expertise in constituent engagement.

For example, the community listening sessions required the allocation of significant staff time in spite of a robust consulting team and community partners. In addition to allocating time for feedback-gathering, it is also important to make time for staff to reflect, process, and adapt to what they are hearing. Iterative analysis allowed for adaptations during the listening process; immersive staff and community-partner workshops provided a process to make meaning of the findings; and synthesizing the data in different ways (e.g., by initiative or regional focus) allowed staff to see more direct applications to their work.

Value Grantee and Community Time and Experience

Participating in the process of providing feedback also takes time and resources. Foundations should be mindful of the burden being placed on participants in terms of time and the costs of participation. There are different levels of burden associated with participating in virtual surveys versus in-person sessions. For example, in-person sessions are longer; require time away from family, work, and friends; and may cost participants money. It is important to offer adequate reimbursement for time along with supports for travel and child care.

Foundations can also show respect for participants by ensuring they feel heard and understand how the information they provide will be used and that mechanisms are culturally, linguistically, and physically accessible.

> ***"Feedback takes time. You have to be patient. When you're not, you think you heard something, you run with what you heard, and then you can find out you didn't listen closely enough."***
>
> ***– Kim Ammann Howard, director of impact assessment and learning***

Be Prepared to Be Changed by What You Hear

The notion of listening to the perspectives and experiences of those foundations seek to help is a compelling one. However, listening comes with a responsibility to act on what you hear. What Irvine has found is that incorporating constituent feedback requires substantial internal preparation and ongoing efforts to engage staff and the board during and after the listening process. For the board, this involved inviting members to attend listening sessions as well as a board session to engage them with what the foundation was hearing during the process and surface areas in which they would like to learn more.

Constituent feedback is often just one of many inputs into strategy development, along with landscape scans, advice from field experts, and internal expertise. This can lead to tensions about how to honor feedback, particularly when other inputs suggest different needs and directions. It is important for foundations to consider how to adapt and/or sequence their decision-making and strategy-development processes to incorporate constituent feedback. Because board members typically hold the ultimate authority around strategic direction, it is important to have their support and backing for this work. It also requires an openness on the part of staff and board, who may hear things that take their work in new directions and/or challenge long-held assumptions.

"It's not just getting feedback, but being able share back what you learned. We say, 'here is what we heard, here is what we learned, and here is what we came up with.' That is the most challenging part of this movement. People think, 'As long as I listen, I'm good.' That's not what we mean by feedback."

– Kelley Gulley, senior program officer

Close the Feedback Loop

Beyond listening and acting on feedback, there is a third step in this process — closing the feedback loop. This involves sharing back with constituents what you heard from them and what you are doing in response. While on the surface this may sound simple, in practice it is often the least attended-to step. It takes time to process feedback, determine how to respond to what you heard, and obtain institutional approval for that response.

On the grantee side, there will inevitably be times when a foundation decides not to pursue an idea or recommendation that was provided. For example, grantees and community members generated many more ideas than the Irvine could reasonably tackle. Staff and board were cognizant that the foundation needed to narrow its focus and attend to those areas where it was best positioned to make a difference. It is important to be transparent with external stakeholders about how you responded to feedback, even in cases where a different direction was pursued. Being clear about what goes into foundation decisions beyond constituent feedback can be helpful.

On the community side, Irvine found it easier to close the feedback loop with grantees than with the low-income Californians who participated in listening sessions. While Irvine did share the results of the listening sessions via an interactive website,[4] a webinar, and emails and texts to participants (in a few languages), these materials did not indicate in detail how Irvine was responding to what it heard. While this was in part due to wanting to share results in a timely manner, subsequent follow up about application was still challenging.

If the foundation pursues a similar effort in the future, it will place more intentionality into this on the front end — for example, by anticipating what information might be available when, brainstorming options for sharing information back, and then testing these options directly with stakeholders.

Share for the Benefit of Others

Beyond closing the feedback loop, Irvine has also made a commitment to share feedback with potential to add value to the broader field. For example, the perspectives and experiences of low-income working Californians hold relevance to other funders, nonprofits, and policymakers in California. This was important because the listening sessions raised issues that Irvine was not well-positioned to address (e.g., child care and health needs). By intentionally sharing that information with other funders, including those who may not have been able to afford to conduct such sessions themselves (e.g., smaller regional funders), and making it available via a publicly website, Irvine sought to elevate the voices of these communities, influence the broader narrative about what workers experience, and inform other funders.

Communities also were able to use the information to support their efforts. For example, two community partners used the information to develop local opinion pieces drawing attention

[4] irvine.org/cavoices.net

to the needs of workers. Finally, Irvine regularly used its blog[5] to report back on what it is learning from engaging its constituents and how it is applying that information with the broader goal of supporting the field overall (Gonzalez & Folmer, 2018).

Ultimately, foundations who choose to embark on their own feedback journey should approach the process with an open mindset, humility, and a willingness to experiment. It takes time to determine the best approaches to gathering feedback, to incorporate feedback into a foundation's way of working, and to find effective ways of sharing back with participants and the field. Not everything will go smoothly all the time, and adjustments will need to be made along the way. In addition, there may be aspects of the feedback process that remain a puzzle, even when good progress has been made.

Cultivating institutional readiness for the full continuum of feedback practices is also critical to success. While community wisdom is often valued and desired by foundations, there is a tendency to hold this wisdom at arm's length and reserve room to exercise authority without clear accountability to one's stakeholders. But engaging in meaningful feedback practices demands a change in business as usual. Foundations must be ready to take responsibility for acting in response to what they hear and being transparent about their decisions with grantees and community stakeholders. This can be challenging for foundations used to relying on staff knowledge or consultant expertise in the design of strategies, or that have not laid the necessary groundwork with their boards about the importance of community responsiveness and transparency. Even at Irvine, with a staff and board fully committed to the inclusion of community and grantee voice in its work, there were still challenging moments requiring thoughtfulness and negotiation across stakeholders to determine the best path forward.

Conclusion

Overall, Irvine has found tremendous value in listening and sharing insights with its grantee partners, community stakeholders, and the field. The foundation remains committed to deepening its feedback practices and is exploring new approaches and ways of elevating the voice and perspectives of its grantee partners and low-income working Californians. For example, the foundation recently surveyed a cross-sectional, representative sample of working Californians that builds on the themes of the community listening sessions. This study revealed that nearly half of working Californians are struggling with poverty, a finding that generated significant press coverage helping to call attention to the prevalence and impact of poverty within the state (Vandermaas et al., 2018).

> *"If you want to move from listening to collaboratively shaping strategy, you have to adjust strategy-development processes within the foundation, including how you engage the board and executive leadership. You have to integrate constituent feedback into board and executive team discussions, and get internal stakeholders ready for that. The integration of feedback with general foundation practices should not be underestimated."*
>
> *– Elizabeth Gonzalez, former portfolio director*

Reflective Practice

[5] See https://www.irvine.org/blog/getting-to-better-careers-what-we-learned.

Designing Feedback Processes for Success

To design a rich and successful feedback process, it is important to clarify desired outcomes and design processes that will lead to those outcomes. For the James Irvine Foundation, this means answering four critical questions on the front end of every feedback process:

- **What do we want to learn?** Identifying learning questions to guide the gathering of feedback is an important but frequently overlooked aspect of this work. Rather than starting with a blank slate, Irvine staff have found it helpful to articulate assumptions about what is known as well as gaps in knowledge, in order to shape an initial set of learning questions. Once these are articulated, the next step is to pose questions in ways that draw on constituents' personal and professional experience. When engaging Fair Work grantees, the initiative team has found it helpful to lay out what it has heard, what it thinks this means for its own work, and learning questions for grantees in written form, and then to share these in advance of grantee convenings. Grantees have appreciated this transparency and felt that it makes for richer learning and discussion.

- **What will we do with what we learn?** Clarifying what the foundation will do in response to what it learns is critical to discuss in advance. There is no use in gathering information that has a low likelihood of influencing the foundation's programming. Therefore, it is important to think through institutional processes that govern decision-making and how to cultivate internal readiness for external feedback. In addition, it is worth recognizing that providing feedback can be burdensome on participants. With Irvine's community listening sessions, community members sometimes shared personal and heartbreaking stories about the tradeoffs they make in their daily lives with the goal of supporting the well-being of themselves and their families. Foundations need to be sensitive not only to the time it takes for constituents to participate in sessions, but also to the issues these sessions can raise and how to respond. Early in the process, the foundation worked with community partners to ensure the availability of referrals to community agencies for listening-session participants with very timely needs.

- **What are our expectations of participants?** It is important for foundations to clarify expectations of participants. How much time will they need to devote to this process? What information and insights can they provide that would not be available from other sources? To what extent is there an emotional burden associated with the process of sharing information, and how might this be managed or mitigated? What will the participants want to know about how the foundation is using information once the engagement period is over, and what is the best way to provide that information? How can we demonstrate the value of their time and willingness to share (e.g., financial incentives, food and child care at the event, reimbursement for transportation)?

- **How will we share what we hear with participants and others?** It is important to set expectations with internal stakeholders about how information gathered will be synthesized and shared back with participants and others, along with the foundation's response to such information. Doing so on the front end can clarify what the foundation hopes to learn, how it will act on the information it gathers, and the best way to report back to participants. Being intentional about this step increases the chance of adhering to the full feedback continuum of listening, responding, closing the loop and sharing.

Additional resources regarding how foundations can open up their practices to better incorporate constituents can be found in the Foundation Openness Section of the Fund for Shared Insight's Knowledge page, at https://www.fundforsharedinsight.org/knowledge/?t=foundation-openness#knowledge-tabs%7C2||knowledge-tabs|2.

With respect to its grantee partners, Irvine is exploring the creation of an advisory network that would provide input and counsel on additional grantmaking investments with potential to accelerate the impact of core initiative grantees. The foundation has also committed to convening its Fair Work and Better Careers grantees at least once a year to share and exchange learning about the work that is taking place to advance opportunity for low-income Californians. The James Irvine Foundation looks forward to continuing to share its journey and to learn from others about how to design and implement strategies that are truly responsive to the needs and wisdom of communities.

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Learning About Neighborhood Change Through Funder-Grantee Collaboration

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Keywords: *Collaborative learning, evaluating community change, community-impact measurement, neighborhood planning and revitalization, strategic grantmaking, funder-grantee partnerships, survey feedback, shared outcomes, organizational learning*

Reflective Practice

Introduction: Nature of Collaborative Learning

As practiced by NeighborWorks America (NeighborWorks) and the Wells Fargo Regional Foundation (Regional Foundation), collaborative learning is an approach where the acquisition, sharing, and use of knowledge to inform programs and strategies are core components of grant support. Both funders support change in communities through a rigorous and structured collaborative learning framework that places the resident voice and experience at the center of learning. (See Figure 1.)

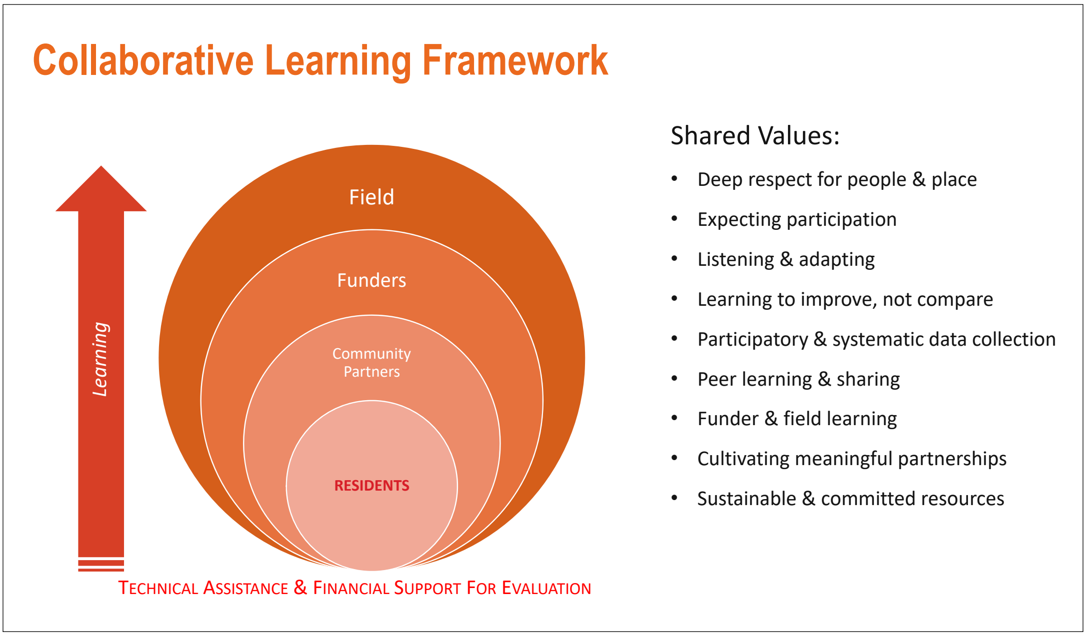
Collaborative learning is distinguished from other learning that occurs during the course of a grant relationship by several factors: its intentionality as a strategy to improve outcomes; the premise that information shared among grantees, funders, and partners will inform more robust learning; the level of commitment required by all parties; the degree to which learning is incorporated into grant processes and structure; and the importance of building trust and interpersonal relationships.

Learning occurs through funder-created activities and opportunities, including technical assistance, evaluation, peer-to-peer learning, cohort-based learning opportunities, resident and stakeholder engagement, and elements of the grant, such as reports and site visits. Grant requirements and support packages have been honed to reflect the needs of grantees as gleaned from formal and informal listening and learning processes. NeighborWorks and the Regional Foundation have also developed pathways for learning with technical assistance partners and internal business units, and among and across grantee cohorts.

Key Points

- NeighborWorks America and the Wells Fargo Regional Foundation support change in communities through a rigorous and structured collaborative learning framework that places the resident voice and experience at the center of learning. Both funders regularly engage in collaborative learning processes with their grantees and partners to support local revitalization practices and inform program and grantmaking strategies.
- This article examines the key ingredients and processes needed to develop and sustain collaborative learning among grantee organizations, community residents, and other stakeholders and funding partners, as well as the critical role played by technical assistance providers.
- The authors reflect on their experience with a range of collaborative learning processes and examine the nexus between grantee and funder interests, where the iterative and shared process can result in long-term change. Examples of organizations of varying size and capacity illustrate grantee and funder perspectives in the collaborative learning process, and how the results are being used to advance solutions to local issues and shift program and funding strategies.

FIGURE 1 Collaborative Learning Framework



The approach offers funders a different paradigm and a pathway for increasing inclusion and equity by shifting the emphasis from confirming a funder-driven hypothesis to the joint learning that occurs when there is a robust and deliberate path for resident and grantee participation and input that drives learning. Some funders may be reluctant to adopt this approach, because it shifts some of the power from funders to local organizations and the communities they represent. A major benefit is the potential for greater impact, as grantees build capacity, experiment, and learn which strategies are most effective.

In the remainder of this article, the authors provide examples of collaborative learning, reflect on their experience, and offer a model for building collaborative learning into community development grantmaking that can be applied by most funders, regardless of scale. The article highlights the critical role of technical assistance providers, using Success Measures, an evaluation resource group at NeighborWorks America, as an example of how learning partners create efficiencies and additional value for all collaborators. (See boxed text on the following page for organizational profiles.)

Wells Fargo Regional Foundation's Neighborhood Grants Program

The Regional Foundation's pathway to a collaborative learning model began when the foundation was first forming its approach and strategies. In those early stages, staff had expertise in commercial lending, but no formal training or experience in community development. Reaching out to leaders in the community development field and grantees became an important strategy for staff to understand how to be impactful. The writings of management consultant and educator Peter Drucker, sometimes described as the "founder of modern management" (Denning, 2014, para. 1), stressed the importance of creating a learning organization and also resonated with the founding board of directors and foundation leadership, as did the importance of longer-term strategic investments and demonstrating impact.

The result has been a culture that is humble, reflective, and responsive to what is heard or

learned. The Regional Foundation's strategic plan solidified around a grantmaking model that emphasized the resident voice in neighborhood planning and development; resident engagement and leadership development; participatory evaluation; and a strong package of technical assistance for capacity building in evaluation and using data to inform strategies and enhance impact.

Collaborative learning is a good fit for what became the Neighborhood Grants Program because of a common emphasis on the resident voice and a communication flow that originates with residents and grantees and then moves upward, rather than the more traditional top down, funder-driven model. Throughout its experience with the program, the Regional Foundation has found that collaborative learning can increase neighborhood social cohesion through heightened engagement and relationship building (Greco, Grieve, & Goldstein, 2015). And it reinforces one of the key elements of its overall approach to revitalization.

The work of one Regional Foundation grantee illustrates how social connections are stronger when they begin with resident-to-resident relationships. Ironbound Community Corporation

Wells Fargo Regional Foundation's Neighborhood Grants Program has awarded grants to more than 80 community development organizations in eastern Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware, totaling more than $66.5 million between 2003 and 2018. Across a series of large, multiyear grants, all grantees develop and implement multifaceted resident-driven neighborhood plans and revitalization strategies rooted in collaborative learning. Grantees can receive up to $2.3 million over an 11-year period. In addition, the foundation's Strategic Initiative Grants, totaling $6.2 million since 2003, support partners and coaches that provide a range of technical assistance to grantees, including data-informed learning, evaluation, financial sustainability, and collective action.

NeighborWorks America works with more than 240 member organizations in every state, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, offering grant funding (totaling more than $158.67 million in fiscal year 2018), technical assistance, peer exchange, evaluation tools, and access to its nationally recognized training of housing and community development professionals. The NeighborWorks network organizations provide residents in their communities with owned and rented affordable homes, financial counseling and coaching, community building through resident engagement, and collaboration in the areas of health, employment, and education. NeighborWorks' ongoing Community Impact Measurement Project was launched in 2013, involving over 120 local NeighborWorks organizations using a common learning framework to collect rigorous baseline and tracking data on resident experience and social, economic, and physical conditions in communities across the country. Participating organizations use the results to inform programs and strategies to strengthen their place-based revitalization efforts and for resource development, community engagement, and partnership development.

Success Measures, a social enterprise at NeighborWorks America, provides evaluation consulting, technical assistance, data-collection tools, and technology to community development and health-related foundations, intermediaries, and nonprofit organizations to help them measure and document the impact of their programs and investments across the country. It partners with NeighborWorks and the Wells Fargo Regional Foundation to assist their member or grantee organizations in developing evaluation capacity through an approach that reflects collaborative learning and participatory evaluation.[1]

[1] Participatory evaluation, as practiced in community development, engages residents and other community stakeholders in developing evaluation questions, creating tools, and interpreting the results from the evaluation. The practice stems from the premise that community participation in the process enhances understanding of the community and resident perspective.

FIGURE 2 The Neighborhood Planning Process

of Newark, New Jersey, organized diverse resident teams to collect surveys in a neighborhood that includes public housing, whose residents are largely African American, and single-family homes, whose residents are mostly Hispanic. While knocking on doors in public housing, a single-family resident learned of the significant unemployment facing public housing residents and shared information about an upcoming recruiting event by a large area employer. Many of the public housing residents subsequently attended the event and were hired.

The Neighborhood Grants Program offers a continuum of grants supporting the development and implementation of a comprehensive neighborhood plan. The planning process focuses on community engagement, incorporating the resident voice through door-to-door surveys, community meetings, one-on-one meetings, and focus groups. (See Figure 2.) Regional Foundation partner Success Measures assists grantees in planning and implementing the resident survey. Another partner, the Reinvestment Fund's Policy Solutions Group,[2] completes a pre-planning analysis of neighborhood demographics, housing and real estate characteristics, employment and jobs, and a survey of property conditions throughout the neighborhood.

Learning is supported throughout the grant relationship though technical assistance, cohort-based learning, and opportunities for feedback. (See Table 1.) For example, grantees repeat the resident survey at specific intervals and review other secondary data to assess change in key indicators. Another resource provided by Policy Solutions Group is access to PolicyMap,[3] an online data and mapping tool with which users can select from demographic, economic, housing, health, and other data sets and patterns within a selected neighborhood. A third partner, Community Wealth Partners,[4] a social enterprise of Share Our Strength, helps grantees craft a professional prospectus and strategies to secure continued funding as part of the Sustainability Initiative. Community Wealth Partners also trains and coaches grantees working as a collaborative to improve the quality of the collaboration.

[2] https://www.reinvestment.com/policy-solutions
[3] www.policymap.com
[4] https://communitywealth.com

TABLE 1 Funder-Supported Components of Collaborative Learning

	Wells Fargo Regional Foundation	NeighborWorks America
Technical Assistance	Success Measures: • Data collection system and tools • Evaluation design and implementation • Theory-of-change development • Resident survey guide • Resident survey data analysis and reports Coaching: Evaluation, sustainability, collaboration Reinvestment Fund: • Access and analysis of data via PolicyMap • Community reports and change reports Community Wealth Partners: • Collaboration Building Initiative • Sustainability Initiative Opportunity grant for leadership/ professional development	Success Measures: • Data collection system and tools • Evaluation design and implementation • Theory-of-change development • Resident survey guide • Resident survey data analysis and reports • Custom data-analysis tool • Evaluation coaching Coaching: Strategy development Community Profile (secondary data) Strategy and Impact Demonstration (leveraging data for programmatic strategies)
Cohort Learning Activities	• Peer sharing: Site visits, cohort presentations • Grantee spotlight • Grantee convening • Hot topics	• Peer sharing • NeighborWorks Training Institute sharing session • Webinars and supplemental materials • Consultant learning forums
Feedback	• Listening exercises • Strategic planning review • Site visits • Interim reports	• Phone interviews with project lead staff • Process documentation • Comments from network organization executives

NeighborWorks' Community Impact Measurement Project

The second example of a program designed for learning is NeighborWorks America's Community Impact Measurement Project. Part of the impetus for this collaborative learning project came from a desire by NeighborWorks to tell a more robust, documented story of its impact in communities around the country.

Many of the now 244 organizations in the NeighborWorks network engage in place-based work in neighborhoods, including affordable housing development and management, homeownership, financial capability, community health, comprehensive community development, and resident engagement. In 2012, most member organizations were measuring community-level outcomes of these various programs, but the tools and methodologies were not uniform across the network and, therefore, not suitable for aggregating to tell a common story.

NeighborWorks recognized that implementing an evaluation with a common set of outcome measures and tools could be accomplished only

An example of this is the foundation's "listening exercises," which play a prominent role in its learning toolbox and have been instrumental in identifying the needs of grantees and residents and making the necessary adjustments to the grant program.

with the full and active participation of most organizations engaged in neighborhood-level work. An internal cross-divisional team developed program goals and parameters, a common methodology, tools, communications strategies, technical assistance guidelines, and recommendations regarding financial support and incentives, all of which were presented to corporate leadership. The resulting Community Impact Measurement Project leverages the strength of the diverse NeighborWorks network to implement the largest comprehensive, national evaluation of its kind. The program debuted in 2013 with the first round of data collection, with network organizations completing a second round of data collection in either 2016 or 2017. The first cohort of the third round of data collection commenced in 2019.

Collaborative learning elements built into the project include an explicit commitment to use results for learning and not as criteria for rating organizations' overall performance; an embedded element of peer-learning among participating organizations; emphasis on actively seeking feedback from network organizations throughout the process; and high levels of technical assistance and support. NeighborWorks engages internal partners, including Success Measures, in providing technical assistance and learning opportunities for cohort organizations. For example, Success Measures has developed a series of webinar trainings that not only review the basics of evaluation planning and data collection, but also focus on such timely topics as advances in using technology for data collection in the field and sessions where participants share current data-collection challenges and best practices.

The Value of Collaborative Learning for Funders and Grantees

Connecting Funders to Grantees and Communities

Collaborative learning can help funders ground their work in the realities of their grantees and resident beneficiaries by elevating the importance of the local and resident voice in community revitalization activities and grantmaking.

For the Regional Foundation, connecting with local organizations and residents is the primary benefit for the funder that justifies the investment. This came as a surprise to the foundation, as the expectation was that the primary benefit would be the ability to assess the impact of its work. Both benefits have been realized, but as the program has evolved and grantees have discovered how to be more effective in creating change in their communities, the connection to the resident voice and the community has provided the greater value.

An example of this is the foundation's "listening exercises," which play a prominent role in its learning toolbox and have been instrumental in identifying the needs of grantees and residents and making the necessary adjustments to the grant program. Since 2010, the foundation has completed two formal listening exercises to amplify the grantee voice and identify opportunities to strengthen support for communities. The results of the exercises led to significant changes in the Neighborhood Grants Program:

- a Sustainability Initiative, to support an understanding of the actual cost of a place-based initiative, and the corresponding development of a targeted fundraising

strategy that included a prospectus and identification of potential funders;

- lengthening the renewal grant from three to five years to extend operating support during capacity building;
- increased monetary support for collaborative projects to ensure the lead entity had the financial capacity to fulfill its oversight requirements, and that subgrantees had resources to fulfill the evaluation and partnership expectations; and
- technical assistance to help collaborative grantees build the shared vision, structure, capacity, trust, and other elements necessary for successful collaboration.

Assessing Impact

Collaborative learning also helps funders answer the following questions with more confidence: Is our approach to community development changing communities? How can we understand and improve our individual and aggregate impact?

Confirming the impact of its network organizations in communities, NeighborWorks incorporated into its strategic plan the goal that 75 percent of network organizations participating in the Community Impact Measurement Project would demonstrate positive impact in at least one of three identified characteristics of community change. In 2017, after completing the project's second round of data collection, NeighborWorks was able to document this result.

In 2014, the Regional Foundation conducted a strategic review of its Neighborhood Grants Program. In one element of the review, secondary analysis demonstrated that a greater percentage of grantees initially designated as "higher risk" continued to demonstrate positive results compared to grantees designated as "lower risk." This outcome was attributed to the strategic use of high levels of technical assistance provided to grantees throughout the relationship.

A primary benefit for grantees is the knowledge acquired as part of the learning process. The door-to-door resident survey used by foundation grantees and NeighborWorks organizations is the most effective tool for connecting to residents.

Collaborative learning can also do the following:

- Enhance a funder's reputation or brand position as a thought-leader in the field;
- Help funder coalitions demonstrate the benefits from measuring impact and develop greater influence with larger funders, including government agencies, regarding its importance; and
- Increase efficiency for funders and technical assistance providers through sharing of materials, approaches, and experiences.

Gaining Knowledge

A primary benefit for grantees is the knowledge acquired as part of the learning process. The door-to-door resident survey used by foundation grantees and NeighborWorks organizations is the most effective tool for connecting to residents. The survey provides valuable, in-depth insights that are more broadly reflective of a diverse community than, for example, a resident council or forum, or a resident member on a nonprofit board. In part, this is due to the survey methodology that requires random sampling of households.

When residents participate as surveyors, the value of the survey increases and it becomes much more than a tablet and a checklist. It is an

[T]he Dwelling Place, a NeighborWorks organization in Grand Rapids, Michigan, used the Community Impact Measurement survey to launch another, more intensive, process among residents, the city, and other partners that ultimately gave residents a much greater voice in determining change in the city's downtown Heartside neighborhood.

Reflective Practice

opportunity for residents to engage and connect with neighbors, ensuring that residents' experience is central to how local efforts are focused and how success is measured. In many cases, new leaders emerge who might not have otherwise been included, thereby strengthening the community's social capital. A staff person from one grantee organization observed,

> I think one part that stuck out to me was hearing members of the survey team talk about how the survey work affected their perspective on their work as a block leader. It helped them build even deeper relationships with their neighbors and inspired new ideas or new approaches to community organizing efforts they already had underway.

A corresponding benefit to residents from conducting the survey in this way is that by sharing their opinions and having those opinions recognized, residents feel empowered. In practice, the survey process activates community residents through listening and reflecting the results back to residents at the neighborhood level. For example, the Dwelling Place, a NeighborWorks organization in Grand Rapids, Michigan, used the Community Impact Measurement survey to launch another, more intensive, process among residents, the city, and other partners that ultimately gave residents a much greater voice in determining change in the city's downtown Heartside neighborhood. Heartside, with exclusively multifamily rental housing, had been widely perceived as having a mobile, transient population, so city officials and staff were surprised to learn from the survey that 21 percent of residents have lived in Heartside for 10 years or more. As a follow-up to the survey, Dwelling Place and the city supported a series of community listening sessions to expand and reflect on residents' needs. Now, the neighborhood has a written plan for improvements and there has been progress on several fronts. The experience has also rekindled neighborhood pride, and residents have greater trust in the city as a partner that cares about the future of Heartside and its residents.

Grantees and network organizations have used survey findings to inform strategies, design programs, develop partnerships, engage in collective action, and secure funding from other sources. One NeighborWorks organization discovered a connection between the location of abandoned homes in the neighborhood and pockets of lower resident satisfaction and perceptions of safety. The organization worked with the city to vacate and shutter these vacant structures and strengthen enforcement of city policies relating to abandoned properties.

Sharing Best Practices

Another benefit from collaborative learning is that best practices surface and are shared more quickly. Training webinars, peer-learning cohorts (sustainability and collaborative building initiatives); and special sessions at the NeighborWorks Training Institute[5] are all venues where attendees share best practices, results, and strategies.

[5] NeighborWorks Training Institute is a five-day "mobile university" offering more than 100 courses related to housing and community development. The institute is held three times a year in major U.S. cities and draws attendees from nearly 2,500 organizations.

Cohort gatherings — like the Regional Foundation's annual grantee conference, which includes "hot topic" presentations — are another venue that can create an atmosphere for generating big ideas and finding common interests. At one of those conferences, a new land bank for abandoned property in the Wilmington, Delaware, area gained momentum as the result of an animated side conversation between two grantees during a convening. One of the individuals involved in the conversation became the executive director of the land bank and has subsequently focused on forming a state housing advocacy alliance drawing upon relationships she built through foundation grantee conferences and peer cohorts. The foundation also encourages peer learning through site visits for grantees to learn from groups that have successfully addressed similar challenges.

Cross-fertilization of ideas occurs when groups from different neighborhoods share their work or when an organization working locally in a collaborative shares ideas and processes. For example, inadequate street lighting is often associated with lower resident perceptions of safety. One NeighborWorks organization used results from block observations and the resident survey to document this phenomenon and shared this experience with peer groups at a forum. Hearing how the organization worked with the city, the electric utility, and the resident association sparked interest from other attendees in doing something similar in their neighborhoods.

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Collaborative learning, when coupled with sustained funding of grantees and their longer-term strategies, can increase impact as both grantees and funders become more effective in identifying strategies that work and more efficient in allocating resources. The approach encourages experimentation — which may be an innovative response to a challenge — and allows for adjustment and recalibration based on the learning that occurs.

The Importance of Partners

Partners can enhance collaborative learning by bringing additional skills, perspectives, and resources to the table. Technical assistance providers, expert advisors, and various internal funder units can play critical roles as sources of advice and ideas on program elements and goals.

Technical Assistance Providers

Technical assistance is an important component of grant support and a facilitator of collaborative learning. Regional Foundation grantees and NeighborWorks organizations vary in the level of expertise and experience that they bring to the table, and technical assistance must be designed to meet the organization at its current level of capacity. For both funders, the important message they want grantee organizations to hear is that even if they do not yet have the capacity to meet all the challenges of a project, the funders are committed to providing the support to help get them there.

Success Measures provides technical assistance to both foundation and NeighborWorks grantees in all phases of evaluation. Grantees work one-on-one with a Success Measures consultant to plan and implement the resident survey. With

Reflective Practice

The Regional Foundation views Success Measures, the Reinvestment Fund, and Community Wealth Partners not as silos of expertise in their respective areas, but as a "think tank" of experts committed to the importance of collaborative learning and community change.

guidance from the consultant, NeighborWorks organizations also design and execute block and parcel observations, and may elect to complete key informant interviews to incorporate an additional perspective on the neighborhood. Grantees all have access to Success Measures resources, including its data-collection tools and the Success Measures Data System, a comprehensive online platform for planning, data collection, and analysis.[6]

At another level, synergies and efficiencies have occurred that benefit each of the funders' grantees because they have their technical assistance provider — Success Measures — in common. Improvements to tools, materials, and methods are shared within and across the foundation and NeighborWorks cohorts. Coaches, who might work with both sets of grantees, are the connectors for sharing materials, information, and ideas, such as best practices and resources Success Measures posts to an online library.

For example, materials created by a NeighborWorks organization for promoting the resident survey was shared through the library and became the basis for many other organizations' versions, each customized for a different local community. In other examples, the Regional Foundation adopted changes to its resident survey based on improvements to the NeighborWorks resident survey, while a survey guide — initially created for foundation grantees — became a valuable reference for a subsequent guide for NeighborWorks organizations.

A 'Think Tank' of Experts

The Regional Foundation views Success Measures, the Reinvestment Fund, and Community Wealth Partners not as silos of expertise in their respective areas, but as a "think tank" of experts committed to the importance of collaborative learning and community change. Partners ask difficult questions and engage in high-level dialogue that lead to learning and improvement.

Conversations among foundation partners go beyond the more familiar discussion of grantee progress. Partners view each other as a sounding board and have developed the high level of interpersonal trust that is essential for open and candid conversations.

Internal Partners

NeighborWorks' Community Impact Measurement Project has benefited from engagement of internal program and service units in addition to Success Measures. Key input from across the corporation has included framing and adjusting the overall approach, interpreting the aggregated results, and expanding opportunities for network organizations to use data from the project to inform their work.

As network organizations began sharing project results, there has been a much clearer understanding and appreciation within both the local organizations and NeighborWorks about the mutual benefits from evaluation and learning. Increasingly, as the organizations identify the value of the project results and they are used in grant applications, reports, peer forums, and communications, other units within NeighborWorks are responding with greater interest in supporting impact measurement and

[6] https://successmeasures.org/data-system

collaborative learning and in seeking ways to expand their value. The most recent initiative is a one-year demonstration project with a cohort of NeighborWorks organizations to build capacity in using their Community Impact Measurement data to inform program and service deployment decisions. The project focuses specifically on developing strategies that are targeted to move the needle in particular areas. NeighborWorks has also observed an increase at the corporate level in using data, which had been routinely collected from network organizations, to stimulate organizational learning and expand peer-learning opportunities within the network.

While many elements of impact measurement are supported internally, Success Measures engages external consultants as coaches for local organizations; the structure and quality of these coaching relationships reflects collaborative learning. Project coaches have regular monthly calls to share successes and challenges and suggest improvements or changes in processes and materials. Coaches also tap local organization staff to share best practices during topical webinars. Success Measures draws on individuals in the coaching pool for expertise in specific areas, including statistical analysis, recruiting and managing volunteers, data-collection methodologies, mapping, and graphics. At the end of the project, coaches are asked to provide feedback for future cohorts.

Building a Collaborative Learning Approach

Organizations will have different objectives and contexts for collaborative learning. NeighborWorks America launched its impact evaluation with the Success Measures team as part of a corporate commitment to strengthening its comprehensive community-revitalization strategies, while ensuring that the learning was shared among local organizations and across key stakeholders within NeighborWorks itself. The Regional Foundation designed its initial grantmaking program with collaborative learning as its core, drawing on external partners to help grantees build capacity and to enhance overall learning. Large and small organizations

It is important that the commitment is sustained. NeighborWorks America incorporated outcome goals based on the aggregate community impact results into its public strategic plan, which is one approach to cementing long-term commitment and improving sustainability.

alike can incorporate the basic elements of collaborative learning into their grantmaking approach, with minor adjustments for scale. The following section describes those elements and provides examples.

Commit to a Vision

Funders must have a vision and a commitment to collaborative learning, recognizing that while returns from the investment will be small in the beginning, they will increase over time. For maximum benefit, staying the course means continuing to invest in capacity building and ongoing learning for a minimum of three to five years.

It is important that the commitment is sustained. NeighborWorks America incorporated outcome goals based on the aggregate community impact results into its public strategic plan, which is one approach to cementing long-term commitment and improving sustainability. The Regional Foundation's board expressed its continuing commitment to a collaborative learning approach when it accepted the results and recommendations from the 2014 Strategic Review.

Design for Learning

Aligning structural elements of the grant with overall learning objectives can facilitate and reinforce the emphasis on learning. Organizations

NeighborWorks, the Regional Foundation, Success Measures, the Reinvestment Fund, and Community Wealth Partners share a commitment to long-term investment in community change, participatory evaluation, a resident-driven approach to community development, and collaborative learning.

can accomplish this by incorporating the following into the grant structure:

- Create systems and processes that support and reinforce the importance of learning, and
- Be deliberate about asking for and using feedback.

The Regional Foundation structures its grantee reports and site visits as opportunities to encourage and reinforce the importance of learning. Lessons learned are captured in each report rather than at the end of the grant, so that they are recorded and remembered as they occur. Grantees describe the reports as very detailed and time consuming, but believe the effort is worthwhile because the depth of reporting encourages thinking and reflection. During site visits, grantees expect in-depth conversations about their work, including examples where the organization has excelled and where it has not been as successful. The foundation calls this "looking for outliers" — those exceptions that beg more conversation about why something worked exceptionally well and why something else did not. The ensuing discussion always ends with this question: "What can the foundation do to help support you?"

NeighborWorks and Success Measures have incorporated regular feedback into the Community Impact Measurement Project. Regular check-ins with project participants are an integral component, with feedback reviewed in real time to adjust pacing, training, technical questions, and other challenges. After the first round of data collection, NeighborWorks interviewed executive directors to identify pain points and how the project could provide additional value to network organizations. Feedback systems are also an opportunity to reinforce trust by connecting changes in a program or process directly back to input from grantees or participants. NeighborWorks was able to strengthen trust by demonstrating its responsiveness to participant feedback from the first round of the Community Impact Measurement Project to changes made in the second round.

Choose the Right Partners and Build Trust Together

When choosing technical assistance partners, shared values and similar theories of change are important criteria. NeighborWorks, the Regional Foundation, Success Measures, the Reinvestment Fund, and Community Wealth Partners share a commitment to long-term investment in community change, participatory evaluation, a resident-driven approach to community development, and collaborative learning.

As with other kinds of collaboration, trust is essential for collaborative learning. All aspects of the grant and the grant relationship must be designed to build and reinforce trust, which leads to the kind of transparency and openness that allows grantees to feel comfortable sharing challenges along with successes. This is where learning occurs, as funder and grantee work together to develop a solution that may include an innovative approach, bringing more resources to the table, or adjusting priorities.

The Regional Foundation's internal culture reflects the importance of trust building. By consistently and actively listening to and engaging

with grantees, foundation staff demonstrate that they are learners in real time from and with the grantees. Grant officers view themselves as resources to meet the needs of grantees and residents, rather than as compliance officers whose role is to monitor the terms of the grant. NeighborWorks' connection with its network of organizations is one of affiliation, cementing a relationship of trust that provides multiple avenues of support and interaction. This is grounded in a local relationship manager, who serves as a trusted advisor and liaison between the affiliate organizations and program initiatives within the national organization.

The structure of both the NeighborWorks and the Regional Foundation funding models, where there is significant investment in grantee organizations over the long term, is conducive to building trust. But this does not mean that funders making smaller investments over a shorter time frame cannot implement elements of collaborative learning. Funders with portfolios with a significant number of repeat grantees may already have the types of relationships with these grantees that are needed for collaboration. Other elements and activities designed to build trust can be incorporated into an existing program.

Expect Participation

Collaborative learning must include both an incentive and a commitment for all parties to participate in active learning. As the power entity in the relationship, the funder creates the environment within which the learning occurs and must set the expectation that the purpose of the evaluation, grantee convening, site visit, or other activity is learning and improvement.

The Regional Foundation does not deviate from the expectation that its staff and grantees must participate and actively contribute to learning opportunities. Completion of the door-to-door resident survey during the planning grant and at end of the implementation and renewal grants is also nonnegotiable. The survey process is time-consuming, resource intensive, and challenging. Because many of the benefits become most evident during the process or after completion, first-time grantees would probably not

Organizations with a program focus in community building and engagement, community stabilization, and community initiatives are encouraged to participate; other network organizations may elect to participate and will receive the same level of support.

elect to participate if given a choice. After the fact, however, almost all grantees agree that the survey experience was invaluable to building relationships with residents, identifying potential leaders, and understanding resident needs.

NeighborWorks uses a slightly different approach to participation in the Community Impact Measurement Project. Organizations with a program focus in community building and engagement, community stabilization, and community initiatives are encouraged to participate; other network organizations may elect to participate and will receive the same level of support. Participation in technical assistance, training, and peer sharing is voluntary and is seen as an indicator that these activities add value for grantees.

Provide Resources

Monetary support designated for learning is essential. NeighborWorks makes sustained, long-term, flexible organization-level operating and capital investment in network organizations, supplemented by support for targeted projects like Community Impact Measurement. Each network organization receives the same amount for the project; although the use is discretionary, most use the funds for project expenses.

After the first round of the community evaluation, NeighborWorks learned that the structure

More important than achieving a "successful" outcome is that organizations learn from the experience and use the knowledge to continue to progress. NeighborWorks similarly precludes the use of Community Impact Measurement results in organizational performance assessment.

for providing support also matters. Providing a larger portion of resources at the start of the project and being clear on the timing and amount of additional funding was important to ensure organizations felt they could fully engage.

The foundation's support also includes a designated amount for implementing the resident survey; the costs of all other learning activities, including technical assistance, coaching, and peer learning, are paid directly by the foundation. The foundation anticipates that 10 percent to 15 percent of its total annual grant support will be for learning, which includes technical assistance, grantee convenings, peer-to-peer visits, and access to data systems. While the level of overall grant support diminishes over time, support for learning continues at the same level throughout the continuum of grants.

Embrace Flexibility

Flexibility helps to keep the ownership and focus of the learning at the local level. Circumstances and conditions differ across communities, and program structure should provide room for all stakeholders to answer questions that are important to their individual objectives while simultaneously providing for shared learning. For example, NeighborWorks requires network organizations to use common measurement tools so that the results can be aggregated. But individual organizations are also encouraged to add their own survey questions, with the assistance of a Success Measures consultant who can ensure that the new content brings the same rigor and focus as the common set. Similarly, Regional Foundation grantees are supported in building out evaluations and learning processes for other aspects of the neighborhood plans.

While both NeighborWorks and the foundation allow some flexibility in the resident survey protocol, being flexible does not mean that rigorous standards and expectations are relaxed. Methods do matter, but there are also circumstances where reflective dialogue and adjustment are appropriate. For example, as long as random sampling is preserved, an organization may combine door-to-door with online methods, or mail data-collection tools to multifamily properties with limited internet access.

Flexibility is particularly critical in a long-term investment scenario, because local environments are dynamic. An example is adjusting milestones and outcomes when housing-market conditions change, an investor in a project pulls out, or a new opportunity consistent with the overall plan objective presents itself.

Focus on Progress

Both the foundation and NeighborWorks work with organizations to identify challenges or shortcomings to improve performance, rather than punitively withdrawing support and resources that might be needed to address those challenges. Continued financial support of Regional Foundation grantees is tied to performance against specific milestones and activities, but it is not tied to reaching specific outcomes from those activities. More important than achieving a "successful" outcome is that organizations learn from the experience and use the knowledge to continue to progress. NeighborWorks similarly precludes the use of Community Impact Measurement results in organizational performance assessment.

Moreover, neither organization will compare grantees to each other or to an aggregate in any reporting. Both NeighborWorks and the foundation are committed to confidentiality and will not share any results without grantee consent. To violate any of these protocols would be a serious breach of trust with grantees.

Conclusion

The long-term approach to collaborative learning explored in this article is a result of and a benefit from the structure of the relationships that the Wells Fargo Regional Foundation and NeighborWorks America have with the organizations in their respective portfolio or network. The choice is strategic and a prominent part of each organization's structure. While some elements of the model presented here might be specific to the longer-term funding or partner relationships discussed, the overall tenets of collaborative learning are generally applicable. It is possible for organizations to incorporate learning values into grant structures and interpersonal interactions, and to develop a cohort of grantees to begin learning together.

It is also a misconception that collaborative learning requires an internal infrastructure, such as an evaluation or learning department or a learning officer. The approach can be implemented at any scale, with the same principles applied to an individual program officer or to a large foundation. In fact, a smaller foundation or single program officer may have more flexibility to respond quickly to opportunities or make changes in its approach than a larger organization with a more public strategy. What is necessary for collaborative learning to be successful, in addition to the elements discussed in this article, is an underlying commitment to acting in ways that demonstrate respect for the expertise and experience of grantee organizations and the people they serve.

Organizations interested in integrating collaborative learning into grantmaking should keep the following in mind:

- Start small, experiment, evaluate, and adjust. Don't let fear of the unknown stand in the way of considering collaborative learning for your organization.
- Provide resources and open doors. Learning is a journey that funder and grantee make together, and the funder's role is to facilitate reaching the destination.
- Create an environment for learning that encourages and celebrates curiosity and camaraderie. Learning should be fun and, ultimately, very satisfying.

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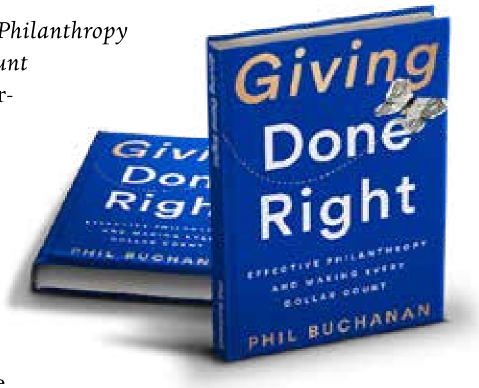
Giving Done Right: Effective Philanthropy and Making Every Dollar Count

Reviewed by Paul G. Putman, Ph.D.



Giving Done Right: Effective Philanthropy and Making Every Dollar Count by Phil Buchanan, PublicAffairs, 2019. ISBN: 1541742257, 978-1541742253

Giving Done Right: Effective Philanthropy and Making Every Dollar Count (2019) is grounded in the perspectives of author Phil Buchanan and his talented team at the Center for Effective Philanthropy, led by Buchanan since its founding in 2001. "This book," he writes in the introduction, "is for givers at all levels who struggle with how to make the most difference." While readers with a baseline of knowledge in the field may find the going a bit slow at the outset, they should persist. Think of the first few chapters as appetizers, providing a shared understanding of the table upon which organized philanthropy in the United States has been set and currently operates. The main course is an exploration of the art of giving.

Buchanan repeatedly reminds readers that philanthropy isn't simple, and the guidance in *Giving Done Right* cannot be boiled down to a five-point checklist. While he does offer a typology of givers that would have provided an easy tease for the book jacket — "What type of giver are you? Turn to Chapter Four to find out!" — Buchanan eschews the click-bait approach in favor of an appeal to thoughtful givers, and the result is a highly accessible and useful read for those who want to "do it right."

Early on, readers encounter Buchanan's strong and insistent argument that approaching philanthropy from a business perspective is a prime example of "giving done wrong." Revisited throughout the book is his indictment of "a simplistic and erroneous narrative in which those in business have all the acumen and passion for results, and those working in the nonprofit sector are the problem." Board members often come from corporate backgrounds and, logically, tend to tackle problems with solutions derived from familiar principles. But Buchanan repeatedly rails against this pervasive line of thinking, and his text is sprinkled with pointed complaints. One favorite: "Those prophesying the happy merging of business and nonprofits into one sector-agnostic orgy of good-doing are often, as we've seen, faculty at business schools." He proclaims that "thoughtful givers and nonprofit leaders need to stand up and make clear that their work is uniquely challenging and requires its own approach and discipline."

Even as he presents this and other critiques of the field, Buchanan is, naturally, encouraging and upbeat about the practice and promise of philanthropy. One real strength of *Giving Done Right* is its mix of voices from philanthropic and nonprofit leadership. Key takeaways from the first chapter's brief introduction to nonprofits: organizations are different, they do not need to act like businesses, the sector does more than you think, and your support matters. Those may seem obvious to those who have worked in the field, and here the book's intended audience appears to be givers who are unfamiliar

with nonprofits or whose views might be skewed by their misguided college business professors. Buchanan challenges some pervasive myths: that bigger is better, or that low overhead always equals a better-run organization. He urges readers to learn more about what they want to support and to be aware that giving to grassroots groups may be the best way to make a difference.

The author is at his best when describing nonprofit partners and sharing their stories. The heroes are those doing the work, and Buchanan — clearly a passionate champion of the sector — praises their efforts and exhorts individual and institutional funders to maximize their partnerships with these organizations. In the full chapter he devotes to selecting and working with nonprofits, he advises givers to find groups "that fit with their goals and strategies, are well-run and making a difference," and that "might not be well-known." Overall, he emphasizes the critically important need for givers to listen and discover what they don't know.

The importance of clarity is underscored to great effect. "Too many givers aren't clear on their goals. They can tell you the category of their giving ..., but they can't tell you what they hope to achieve," Buchanan warns. Appreciated was his reassurance that givers do not need a unique approach to have an impact: "Don't be afraid to simply do what others do and align your goals with those of others you respect and admire." And while Buchanan encourages a focused approach, he observes that "the challenge is to strike the right balance between the natural drift that tends to pull givers into too many areas with too many goals and a telescopic focus that misses the larger context in which a problem resides." Here Buchanan provides readers with a nuanced overview of a philanthropic conundrum and encourages a balanced approach. Readers will either appreciate the balanced centrist guidance or long for him to have a more exacting opinion and advice.

Buchanan also explores the many ways to give; from giving circles to community foundations (which, he quips, are "the original giving circles"). Missing is any exploration of online-giving platforms competing for the attention of givers; the medium is not the message here. He encourages givers to establish a budget, and to practice "conscious giving" as opposed to simply responding to a request. He also presents some additional avenues for givers, including advocacy work, communications, and alternative investing strategies. "Try to do the most good you can do," he advises. Buchanan briefly missteps when he asserts that whatever inspires a giver to give makes the giving more effective. This reader was not convinced: The giver may be more passionate if strongly motivated by religious beliefs or personal pain, but effectiveness and passion are different constructs. Givers who are proximate to an issue can certainly more fully understand it, but depth of understanding does not necessarily lead to effective giving.

In an examination of goals, Buchanan offers an overview of the Effective Altruism movement and notes where his thinking diverges – in encouraging locally directed philanthropy and support for arts and culture. He discusses the benefits of giving that target root causes — solves versus salves — as well as the importance of "trimming branches." Givers are cautioned to question any assumptions that they know best and are in a position to impose solutions: "The philanthropic road is littered with the carcasses of wildly successful business people who thought they'd be able to *single-handedly* address some stubborn social problem in the same time frame and with the same approach with which they made their millions or billions."

In his discussion of strategic philanthropy, the issue for Buchanan is not strategy per se, but rather how it can be poorly conceived or implemented. Both, he clearly shows, often result when funders become enamored of an idea and impose it on those actually doing the work without involving them in the planning. Grantees need to be treated as partners, he emphasizes, and not mere executors of a plan delivered from on high. In this exploration of strategy and impact, Buchanan again dismisses deceptively easy certainties: "Here, again, it's the business school professors and philanthropy consultants invoking business metaphors who led philanthropy astray."

"Regardless of your focus, effective philanthropy requires both an understanding of the unique challenge of running a nonprofit and an awareness of the interdependent nature of problems. ... Most fundamentally, it requires a deep humility and a rejection of the prevailing conventional wisdom that analogizes nonprofits to businesses or giving to investing."
– Phil Buchanan

In a section titled "Go Big or Go Home," Buchanan assesses the call for more "big bets" in philanthropy with a bit of equivocation: "Sometimes big bets make sense. But, other times, what's needed are little bets to test approaches – with bigger bets coming only when something has been shown to work." He dismisses as pointless the debate over whether foundations should exist in perpetuity or spend down their endowments to address today's urgent social challenges, arguing that the question should be considered in the context of funders' specific goals and strategies.

Buchanan encourages support for strong impact assessment efforts among nonprofits; helping them "collect and learn from the data they believe will help them become more effective is arguably one of the best investments a giver can make." He suggests givers ask three simple questions – whether stated priorities match actual giving is one – in an annual review of their support for nonprofit groups. If individual givers (heck – institutional funders, as well) seriously reflected upon these questions, the field would make tremendous progress. But here again, Buchanan warns against simplistic approaches, examining a case in which a nonprofit serving the homeless employed a "cost-per-life-touched ratio" that didn't factor into account the intensive nature of some program interactions and as a result actually favored those with more limited impact. He makes his point clearly: "There is no universal measure to allow for impact comparisons of nonprofit organizations working in different fields or with different populations, and there never will be."

In this text, which is presented as a general guide for donors, Buchanan warns that "it's important to be skeptical of the conventional wisdom found in most general guides for donors." Readers are cautioned to resist the allure of the high-profile corporate figure providing a clear path to philanthropic success, and urged to follow advice from someone deeply rooted in the field. Depending on your perspective, this advice could be met with nods of agreement or dismissive headshakes.

Giving Done Right ends with an infographic presenting ten differences between ineffective and effective givers. While a fine list of items, this infographic belies the complexity of the ideas presented in this text. By its conclusion, *Giving Done Right* reads at times like an instructor's guide to a master course on philanthropy. The inclusion of guiding questions makes the book immediately helpful to readers, but the practice of giving is not oversimplified just to make the concept easy for readers to digest. Buchanan has written a helpful yet not oversimplified guide to coach individual givers along their philanthropic journey. If readers do nothing more than create time and space to reflect upon the questions he poses, his efforts will be worthwhile. And, in Buchanan's own words: "If this sounds like a lot of work, that's because it is."

Paul G. Putman, Ph.D., *is donor relations & technology officer at the Cleveland Foundation and Adjunct Instructor at Baldwin Wallace University.*

Results

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

Marilyn J. Darling, M.A., Heidi Sparkes Guber, M.P.S., and Jillaine S. Smith, B.A., Fourth Quadrant Partners; and Wendy Lewis, B.A., McCune Charitable Foundation

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. The McCune Charitable Foundation deliberately designed an emergent strategy approach that established 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.

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19 Better Together: Engaging Stakeholders in Learning and Leadership to Guide Foundation Resources Toward Adaptive Systems Change

Nadine Long, M.P.A., Kansas Health Foundation; Kimber P. Richter, Ph.D., University of Kansas School of Medicine; Jennifer Elise Avers, M.S., Jennifer Elise Avers LLC; and Rick Cagan, A.B, National Alliance on Mental Illness–Kansas

In 2014, the Kansas Health Foundation brought together a group of knowledgeable stakeholders from a multitude of specialties to focus on reducing tobacco use specifically among Kansans with mental illness. The wealth of knowledge, experiences, and perspectives brought to the discussion resulted in a more productive dialogue about this complex issue. The stakeholder engagement model proved very effective, as evidenced by the group's success in achieving a number of policy, system, and environmental changes — including expanding cessation benefits available under Medicaid in Kansas — and could be replicated by any foundation.

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Tools

33 Learning Together: Cohort-Based Capacity Building and the Ripple Effects of Collaboration

Sonia Taddy-Sandino, M.P.I.A., and Mary Gray, Ph.D., Engage R+D; and Danielle Scaturro, M.B.A., The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation

Funders like the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation are exploring ways to fully engage grantees, co-funders, technical consultants, and evaluators in collective learning and reflection. The foundation's comprehensive, cohort-based capacity-building program, Propel*Next*, was designed to enhance the performance of promising nonprofits that serve America's disadvantaged youth. With a combination of financial support, individualized coaching, and peer-learning sessions, grantees engage in a test-and-learn cycle to promote a culture of learning and continuous improvement. This article highlights strategies and tools to accelerate change, strengthen funder-grantee interactions, and advance the field.

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49 From Idea to Initiative: Real-Time Learning for a Funder Collaborative on Nonprofit Strategic Restructuring

Way-Ting Chen, I.M.B.A., and Shannon Johnson, M.B.A., Blue Garnet; Lynn Alvarez, J.D., California Community Foundation; Carrie Harlow, M.P.A., The Ahmanson Foundation; and Jennifer Price-Letscher, M.P.O.D., The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation

Evaluation and learning are often seen as high-stakes, formalized processes of comparing an effort at its conclusion against some standard or benchmark. More recently, developmental approaches to evaluation have been created to accommodate the need for more adaptability and ambiguity in an effort. The Nonprofit Sustainability Initiative, a multiyear collaboration of 17 funders in Los Angeles County, California, supports nonprofit organizations to collaborate and restructure in a variety of forms. As the initiative evolved, its evaluation and learning system had to have the ability to evolve with it. This article presents key design aspects of the system, describes how it evolved over time, and shares insights and learnings.

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65 Below the Waterline: Developing a Transformational Learning Collaborative for Foundation Program Officers

Annie Martinie, M.P.A., Danville Regional Foundation; Jaime N. Love, M.Ed., Institute for Sustainable Communities; Michael Kelly, Ph.D., Paso del Norte Health Foundation; Kirsten Dueck, M.A., PATH Foundation; and Sarah Strunk, M.H.A., Healthy Places by Design

Learning from fellow grantmakers is imperative in today's ever-changing world. In late 2016, four health legacy foundations partnered to launch the Health Legacy Collaborative Learning Circle. This article describes the yearlong process of creating the collaborative, and presents a new learning framework — based on the iceberg metaphor — that can be used to create learning environments that test and expand assumptions about promising approaches to common population health challenges, explore organizational best practices related to programming and operations, and understand the roles and impacts peer health legacy foundations have in their communities.

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Reflective Practice

76 Evaluating for the Bigger Picture: Breaking Through the Learning and Evaluation Barriers to Advancing Community Systems-Change Field Knowledge

Thomas Kelly, M.P.H., Hawai'i Community Foundation; Prudence Brown, Ph.D., Independent Consultant; Hanh Cao Yu, Ph.D., The California Endowment; and Marie Colombo, M.A., Skillman Foundation

Foundations investing in community systems change often fail to prioritize field-level and cross-initiative evaluation questions in building initiatives. As a result, many of the documented evaluations of such investments lack translatable lessons specific and influential enough to drive related decisions and actions of others in the field. This article developed from ongoing, multiyear peer learning across several foundations that collectively compiled recommendations for community systems-change funders and evaluators to implement more powerful evaluations. They are intended to help funders and evaluators engaged in these efforts build sectorwide knowledge capable of informing improved work across initiatives and communities.

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92 More Than Listening: Harnessing the Power of Feedback to Drive Collaborative Learning

Clare Nolan, M.P.P., Engage R+D; Kim Ammann Howard, Ph.D., and Kelley D. Gulley, M.B.A., The James Irvine Foundation; and Elizabeth Gonzalez, Ph.D., College Futures Foundation

Foundations can and should do a better job of gathering feedback from and learning with both grantees and the communities they seek to serve. Gathering meaningful input is difficult, however, given power dynamics between foundations and those they support. This article explores how foundations can harness the power of feedback to improve philanthropic practice, using the experiences of the James Irvine Foundation as a case example. It provides information about the foundation and its commitment to constituent feedback, presents two cases from its own experience gathering feedback from community stakeholders and grantee partners, and then lays out a series of culminating lessons and insights based on this work.

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107 Learning About Neighborhood Change Through Funder-Grantee Collaboration

Debra Dahab, Ph.D., Enquire Research; Brooke Finn, M.S., NeighborWorks America; Lois Greco, B.A., Wells Fargo Regional Foundation; and Nancy Kopf, M.P.A., NeighborWorks America

NeighborWorks America and the Wells Fargo Regional Foundation regularly engage in collaborative learning processes with their grantees and partners to support local revitalization practices and inform program and grantmaking strategies. This article reflects on the key ingredients and processes needed to develop and sustain collaborative learning over time among grantee organizations, community residents, other stakeholders and funding partners, as well as the critical role that providers of technical assistance play. Examples of organizations of varying size and capacity illustrate grantee and funder perspectives in the collaborative learning process and how the results are being used to advance solutions to local issues and shift program and funding strategies.

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Book Review

122 *Giving Done Right: Effective Philanthropy and Making Every Dollar Count* by Phil Buchanan

Reviewed by Paul G. Putman, Ph.D., Cleveland Foundation

Buchanan has written a helpful yet not oversimplified guide to coach individual givers at all levels. One real strength of Giving Done Right is its mix of voices from philanthropic and nonprofit leadership. The author is at his best when describing nonprofit partners and sharing their stories. Buchanan challenges some pervasive myths, highlights the importance of clear goals, and explores ways to give. Buchanan encourages support for strong impact assessment efforts among nonprofits and warns against simplistic approaches. If readers do nothing more than create time and space to reflect upon the questions posed, the author's efforts will be worthwhile. And, in Buchanan's own words: "If this sounds like a lot of work, that's because it is."

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Call for Papers

For a themed issue on post-secondary education attainment

Abstracts of up to 250 words are being solicited for Vol. 12, Issue 3, of *The Foundation Review.* This issue, sponsored by The Kresge Foundation, Lumina Foundation, and Woodward Hines Education Foundation, is focused on how foundations support access to post-secondary learning and training and attainment of credentials that prepare learners for a rapidly changing society.

While scholarships and programs to prepare students for college have long been supported by foundations, in recent years many funders have increased their focus on retention and completion, ramping up support for strategies embracing the whole learner. Further, the best predictions suggest that a third of new jobs will not require a bachelor's degree, but will require some other post-secondary credential (Center on Education and the Workforce, 2013). As a result, funders have also increased support for other forms of training and education.

There is also increasing attention to the various pathways students take to achieve credentials, with different learners having different opportunities and challenges. Educational systems need to adapt to best serve the needs of diverse learners. Rural and urban students, older adults (including formerly incarcerated individuals and those returning from military service), and first-generation students, for example, may need non-traditional services in order to be successful.

The goal of this issue is to improve philanthropic practice by disseminating what has been learned about how foundations have effectively supported new approaches to these challenges.

Abstracts are due Oct. 31, 2019. If a full paper is invited, it will be due Feb. 28, 2020 for consideration for publication in Sept. 2020. Submit abstracts to submissions@foundationreview.org.

While this is not an exhaustive list, topics might address the following questions:

- What promising new programs are foundations supporting to increase attainment, especially for marginalized populations or those with specific challenges (first generation, older adults, etc.)?
- What role do foundations play beyond awarding grant dollars, such as advocacy, convenings, building collaborations and networks, capacity building, etc.?
- How is equity defined and addressed in philanthropic efforts to increase educational attainment?
- How is student data being used to impact state, regional, or local efforts surrounding postsecondary education outcomes?
- How has philanthropy supported major technology-based solutions to impact post-secondary education outcomes?
- How is philanthropy supporting learning and evaluation around student success work to ensure that grantmaking efforts are fruitful and generative?

Abstracts are solicited in four categories: **Results, Tools, Sector,** and **Reflective Practice**. See category descriptions in the call for papers, available online at http://bit.ly/TFR-12-3-CFP.

Book Reviews: *The Foundation Review* publishes reviews of relevant books. Please contact the editor to discuss submitting a review. Reviewers must be free of conflicts of interest.

Authors can view full manuscript specifications and standards before submitting an abstract at https://johnsoncenter.org/author-guidelines.

Questions? Contact Teri Behrens, editor of *The Foundation Review*, at behrenst@foundationreview.org or (734) 646-2874.

Center on Education and the Workforce. (2013). *Recovery: Job growth and education requirements through 2020.* Washington, DC: Georgetown University. https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/recovery-job-growth-and-education-requirements-through-2020/

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