

Collaboration, Not Competition

Shifting Philanthropic Approaches
to Movement Building for Equity

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing inequities and brought about monumental new challenges for California's students and educational institutions. In May 2020, College Futures Foundation—a strategic philanthropy committed to increasing equitable postsecondary success and upward mobility so that California's economy and communities can thrive—virtually convened a group of nine grantee organizations seeking space to make sense of the pandemic's early impact on postsecondary students and systems. Over the following months, as the pandemic deepened inequities in students' lives and reinforced the need for responsive policy intervention, the Foundation reconsidered how its state policy-focused grantmaking strategy could serve as a vehicle to support movement-building in higher education in California. At a time when many grantees were forced to operate in crisis mode, College Futures deliberately aimed to foster a sense of care, support, and community, paired with stable and flexible funding. This was the start of a new policy grantmaking strategy that eventually grew to an “ecosystem” of 16 organizations, intentionally designed to advance connections, knowledge, and movement-building across higher education equity.

To understand the usefulness of the Policy Ecosystem strategy for grantees and its impact on their work, College Futures Foundation enlisted Cities & People Advisors, an equity-based consulting firm, to lead a comprehensive learning engagement. We learned from Policy Ecosystem grantees that College Futures' strategy stood out from their usual experiences with funders. The status quo experiences are well-known in our field: many in philanthropy do not fund policy advocacy at all and, when advocacy is funded, it might be for just one or two organizations in a field, perpetuating ongoing competition for resources from organizations with the same objectives.

Other contrasts were more nuanced, generating valuable insights for philanthropy in education, as well as beyond education to other justice and equity movements. Taking lessons from grassroots organizing, College Futures adjusted its policy grantmaking strategy from solely issuing individual grants to also convening and supporting an ecosystem of values-aligned organizations with varying approaches and focus areas. Through agile, responsive, and well-facilitated quarterly convenings, grantees explored changing trends in higher education, leveraged each other's expertise, and discussed organizational priorities. The collective space was augmented by individualized guidance from program officers to bolster grantees' organizational approaches and comparative strengths, as well as periodic consultant support for shared efforts across grantees.

Grantees shared that College Futures' personalized and timely actions around emerging issues were a welcome departure from many typical funder-grantee dynamics. The authentic trust developed among grantees and with College Futures has fostered the open sharing of diverse viewpoints, mutual guidance across disciplines, and a welcoming experience for organizations new to the higher education equity field.

We at College Futures and Cities & People offer the following insights to the philanthropic community to strengthen equity-focused movement-building and grantmaking, especially in support of statewide policy and systems change. Our experience showed that some of the approaches and strategies launched during the pandemic remain powerfully effective in 2024 and beyond.

LESSONS FOR PHILANTHROPY TO ADVANCE MOVEMENT-BUILDING FOR EQUITABLE POLICY CHANGE

1 GENTLY HOLD A COLLECTIVE SPACE.

Funders should allow enough structure to be productive, and the flexibility needed for organizations to set the priorities. If College Futures had been too exacting in its quarterly Policy Ecosystem convenings, new ideas could have been squelched. If the space was too nebulous, the precious time of busy grantee organizations would have been wasted. Much of the success of the convenings came from well-developed agendas that were focused on timely topics, based on grantees' requests, and struck a balance between learning and idea-generating discussions. It was equally important to enlist Foundation staff to keep the connections going between convenings.

Bringing in a third-party facilitator who is consistent, well-informed, and nimble was also critical, creating the type of space that engenders connections and interactions among participants. College Futures purposefully selected a facilitator that was informed on the subject matter but did not come directly from the field; this allowed the facilitator to create a neutral space, free from competition.

Linda Collins, founder and executive director of Career Ladders Project, an organization that promotes equity-minded community college redesign, highlighted the convenings' structure as critical to building trust within the group. College Futures, she emphasized, has "done this in a way that has pulled for collaboration and not competition." Indeed, College Futures intentionally kept its convening space focused on addressing issues in the field collectively, rather than a place for spotlighting only individual organizations' accomplishments.

During the early years of the Policy Ecosystem, one convening focused on providing a neutral space for grantees to share and debate varying approaches to community college remedial education reform efforts. As grantees discussed their strategies of legislative advocacy, legal accountability, research, and student activism, they quickly realized that a shared communications plan would augment all of their work and create more impact in the field; College Futures responded to this request and quickly funded this plan. While the goal of the convening was simply to enable grantees to better understand each other's strategies, the flexibility of the space created the conditions for new solutions.

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2 ENSURE THAT BOTH ADVOCATES AND RESEARCHERS ARE AT THE TABLE.

Grantees shared that deep relationships with funders do not often translate to connections initiated between grantees. The Policy Ecosystem strategy went further by building one-on-one relationships between funder and grantee, connecting grantees to others with similar approaches (e.g., connecting advocates to one another, and researchers to one another), and creating connections across advocates, researchers, and organizations who do both.

Bringing advocates and researchers into the same space is critical for supporting movement-building. The presence of advocates and researchers in policy-focused spaces strengthens the work of both and can better hold institutions and systems accountable for improved policy outcomes. Advocates gain insight on evidence-based approaches to champion, and researchers learn what challenges students face that need to be examined.

For example, College Futures Foundation encouraged Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC), which conducts objective research on public policy in California, and Wheelhouse: The Center for Community College Leadership and Research at UC Davis, an organization that conducts actionable research and leadership development in California's community colleges, to connect around their respective research projects on dual enrollment. The two organizations have deepened their collaboration with each other and with lead advocacy organizations—becoming research advisors to the Dual Enrollment Coalition of California, whose steering committee includes Ecosystem participants Ed Trust-West and Career Ladders Project. PPIC and Wheelhouse reports and expertise have been referenced by dual enrollment advocates, practitioners, and in legislative analyses and hearings aimed at understanding the role of dual enrollment in expanding access and success in college for underserved students.

Dr. Michal Kurlaender, lead researcher at Wheelhouse, shared: “Unless researchers are in regular conversation with advocates, they don’t keep up with critical issues facing the state... you can move a broader policy agenda when you increase the synergy between these two groups.” Olga Rodriguez, director at PPIC, described how the connections made with other organizations propelled their work on dual enrollment forward through increased coordination and mutual support.

Jessica Thompson, senior vice president of The Institute for College Access and Success (TICAS), a research, design, and advocacy organization working to ensure every student has access to a quality higher education program without debt, put it this way: “This group brings together a nice Venn diagram of folks in different lanes and with different tools in their toolkit, but aiming at similar systems change.”

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3 BE CONSISTENT IN HOSTING SHARED SPACES TO COLLABORATE.

The College Futures Policy Ecosystem is moving into its fifth year, convening quarterly since 2020. This consistency is necessary as it takes ample time to build trust, develop relationships, and act collectively on issues in a complex policy environment. Regular touchpoints have enabled organizations to act meaningfully and strategically. Participants have bonded around insights from expert speakers from research and policy who were brought in at critical times and in ways that allowed for intimate connections. They learned of new approaches and frameworks, and followed up with one another on ways to apply these to their own work. Sara Arce, Vice President of Policy and Advocacy at the Campaign for College Opportunity, working to ensure all Californians have an equal opportunity to attend and succeed in college, noted, “Consistently bringing partners together to learn together and/or to understand each other’s work has been the most valuable. We are all so busy and we don’t always have the capacity to take the time [on our own] to know what each other have going on or to do the types of learning that is so important to our work.”

TICAS, along with NextGen Policy, a policy advocacy and civic engagement organization dedicated to supporting and advocating for progressive policy, and Young Invincibles, an advocacy organization that works to amplify the voices of young adults in the political process, were able to collaborate around common goals for student loans and tax-free debt cancellation. “Everyone was in one space and in-person, which naturally helps move work along,” explained Samantha Seng, legislative director & policy advisor of NextGen Policy. According to Seng, it “helps align all our work and helps us be more productive and efficient. When the student debt taxation piece came up, we quickly recognized that TICAS and others wanted to work on this, so we could just work on it together.”

Another example occurred when Public Advocates, a nonprofit law firm and advocacy organization, launched the California Affordable Student Housing Coalition to bring together education advocates to find solutions to the student housing crisis. After sharing their priorities with Policy Ecosystem grantees at a convening, four organizations promptly joined the Coalition.

Over time, the convenings have become an expected meeting point that spark grantee interactions. Dr. Christopher J. Nellum, executive director of EdTrust-West, an advocacy and research organization committed to dismantling racial and economic barriers in the California education system, described how “when the agenda comes, folks start emailing asking if we’ll all be there and sharing what we should talk about, and then we’re checking in for a few weeks [after the convening] about things that came up.”

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4 UTILIZE YOUR POWERFUL POSITION AS A CONNECTOR.

Philanthropy can build bridges between organizations and share opportunities that would benefit grantees and the field. While some grantee organizations had known each other prior to Policy Ecosystem convenings, others were meeting and interacting with one another for the first time.

College Futures often directly connected organizations with one another when Foundation staff saw specific potential for alignment. John Affeldt, managing attorney at Public Advocates, said “It was helpful for us to be introduced to other players through this policy network so folks understand that our goal is to use legal advocacy to leverage systems change. Through College Futures, we connected with Rise, a student-run organization that has become part of a coalition we’ve put together to expand student housing.”

Dr. Su Jin Jez, CEO of California Competes underscored the need to increase coordination: “Because the State does not have a coordinating entity, we leverage this policy ecosystem to help bridge the gap.”

Rise, a student-led organization that advocates for increased higher education accessibility and affordability, was newer to the field when they joined the Policy Ecosystem. Liz Conn, Rise’s Chief Operating Officer, emphasized how the opportunity to connect with seasoned leaders and organizations fostered professional growth and mentorship, greatly contributing to their organizational journey.

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CONCLUSION

With grantmakers playing a convening and connecting role, grantees leveraging each other's expertise and tactics, and facilitation by an effective third party, new ideas and approaches take shape. Collective wisdom is brought to bear in strategic policy change efforts, and all are strengthened to move the meter on educational equity. Organizations can build their own strengths while collaborating rather than competing with others—and the result is a better outcome for underserved communities and the state. Under this model, the power and impact of the whole ecosystem truly is greater than the sum of its parts. We urge other funders working on statewide policy and systems change to consider a similar approach.

When organizations collaborate rather than compete with others, the result is a better outcome for underserved communities and the state.

For College Futures, this responsive, collaborative, and ecosystem-based approach to movement building has provided valuable experience from which we will draw as we implement our [new strategy](#). College Futures is now focusing on playing two key roles in the years to come, with the goal of ensuring that, by 2035, at least 70% of underserved California learners will complete a postsecondary degree or credential that increases opportunity for economic mobility. Those roles include: focusing the field by elevating ideas, innovations, and changemakers inside and outside public higher education; and brokering relationships between innovation leaders, decision-makers, and expert practitioners with purviews in policy, practice, and funding. Convening grantees, leaders, and thought partners will be a primary activity.

For Cities and People, this learning engagement has transformed how we partner with our clients, particularly funders. We have actively shared the valuable lessons to build bridges between funders and grantees in other equity and justice fields. Our vision is for this bidirectional thought partnership to create a ripple effect—encouraging many movements to collaborate as much as possible to build power and create lasting change.

This journey has been meaningful and inspiring for all of us, reinforcing the immense potential of philanthropy to create shared impact for our grantee partners and, ultimately, the communities we serve together.

ABOUT CITIES & PEOPLE ADVISORS

Cities & People Advisors partners with organizations to achieve transformational change and end systemic oppression. For over a decade, we've been bringing our intersectional lens and multi-disciplinary approach to these partnerships through services including equity-focused research and evaluation, organizational development, project design and sustainability, strategic planning, and the design and facilitation of meetings, trainings, and convenings.

Our team members are racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse, and we bring our lived experiences as members and allies of the LGBTQIA+ community, children of immigrants and refugees, members of working-class and working-poor families of origin, and first-generation college graduates.

[CitiesandPeople.com](https://citiesandpeople.com)

ABOUT COLLEGE FUTURES FOUNDATION

At College Futures Foundation, we believe in the power of postsecondary opportunity. We believe that securing the postsecondary success of learners facing the most formidable barriers will ensure that all of us can thrive—our communities, our economy, and our state. We believe that the equitable education system of the future, one that enables every learner to achieve their dreams and participate in an inclusive and robust economy, will be realized if we are focused, determined, and active in our leadership and partnership.

We also know that the past few years have brought profound shifts in California's education and workforce landscapes—including college enrollment declines alongside high demand for affordable, career-connected training, national conversations on student debt and mental health, and numerous other changes prompted or accelerated by COVID-19 and a nationwide racial reckoning. These changes have underscored the realities of how inequitably our systems center and serve diverse people. We know that the coming years will present equally significant challenges and opportunities, and that we must be well-prepared to meet these moments.

Our Vision: We envision a California where postsecondary education advances racial, social, and economic equity, unlocking upward mobility now and for generations to come.

Our Mission: Our mission is to increase postsecondary completion for learners who are underserved. We center learners and their aspirations and needs on the path to achieving their educational goals.

CollegeFutures.org

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