

# A Story of Leadership: Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo



Community Foundation  
for Greater Buffalo

## *Learnings in Making Higher Education a Community Priority*

This story is part of a larger series by Informing Change for the College Futures Foundation to support community foundations that are working to reduce gaps in college success. As an outgrowth of Informing Change's evaluation and learning partnership with the College Futures' Community Philanthropy Initiative (CPI), these stories explore and share lessons learned from community foundations that are leaders in promoting and supporting higher education.

To learn more about CPI, please visit [collegefutures.org](http://collegefutures.org).

### TARGETING SYSTEMS, NOT SYMPTOMS

As the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo approached its 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the foundation engaged in a comprehensive strategic planning process to assess their impact on the community. In stepping back to evaluate the outcomes of their work, foundation leaders realized that despite their thoughtful and significant grantmaking over the last century, community outcomes—particularly in the realm of secondary and postsecondary education—had continued to decline. The foundation recognized that they had been addressing symptoms of community problems, not systems, and this realization prompted them to re-think the foundation's unique role and position in the community.

After soliciting feedback from a group of over 800 diverse stakeholders, the board of directors decided that, in order to increase their impact, the foundation would need to “plant a stake in the ground” around four goals—one of which was improving education achievement for students in low-income households. This decision was based on data that clearly showed low levels of educational attainment in the region, coupled with the knowledge of Buffalo's status as the third poorest large city in the United States. Additionally, foundation leaders understood that the leading indicator of economic health is the education level of its population.

The foundation had spent two and a half years conducting research to identify best practices around improving educational achievement (e.g., statewide scholarships programs in Georgia and Florida, the Kalamazoo Promise) and eventually found Say Yes to Education. Say Yes brought together many of the best practices the community foundation had identified as desirable for Buffalo, and packaged them into a cohesive and comprehensive strategic approach.

The foundation's role then became to learn as much about Say Yes and its framework as possible, and to lead an effort to bring Say Yes to Buffalo. In this way, Say Yes served not only as a model for what an effective community impact initiative could look like, but also as a galvanizing, rallying point that the community foundation board and president could leverage for coalition-building and fundraising.

***“No one is going to give you money to be a better grant maker. But they will put money behind bold, collaborative solutions.”***

— Clotilde Dedecker,  
Foundation President & CEO

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PEER-TO-PEER RELATIONSHIPS

As Clotilde Dedecker, President & CEO of the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo, describes it, the foundation felt that its most important—and most limited—discretionary asset in moving forward with a strategy to improve educational achievement was its staff time. The community foundation feels it was successful in large part because it invested the necessary time in cultivating peer-to-peer relationships with every sector. Prior to Say Yes, the foundation had not had a strong relationship with the school district; government groups in general were not included in the foundation’s grantmaking or partnerships. But as the foundation embarked on applying to be a Say Yes city, raising the initial seed funding, and generating community support for their proposal, they soon realized they would need to establish partnerships within the public sector. Dedecker cold-called school board members, superintendents, business leaders, elected officials, union leaders, parents—anyone who had a vested interest in education in the city.

***“This doesn’t happen at any other level than the CEO level. It has to be peer-to-peer, leader-to-leader.”***

– Clotilde Dedecker,  
Foundation President & CEO

***“You have to believe in the solution and the power of authentic relationships and partnerships to do together what we can’t do alone. This is not partnership in name only.”***

– Clotilde Dedecker, Foundation President & CEO

Using their plan to become a Say Yes city as their organizing talking point, foundation leaders found a receptive audience ready to buy in to such a big, bold initiative. The community foundation also strategically tapped into pre-existing relationships by, for example, bringing in early a prominent private foundation that was the largest local funder for higher education institutions in the community and using its network as an inroad to cultivating new partnerships. This one-on-one, peer-to-peer outreach and lobbying was highly effective. The relationship-building work was conducted largely by the foundation president with support from the board, which allocated 40 to 50% of the president’s time to outreach during the Say Yes organizing time period. In this way, the foundation saw a large part of its role as brokering the early partnership formation between stakeholders in Buffalo and Say Yes National.

Thanks to the remarkable amount of educational and civic energy, Buffalo earned a partnership with Say Yes in 2011. The groundwork the foundation did, both in terms of coalition building and fundraising (the foundation raised \$15 million toward scholarship funding) positioned Say Yes Buffalo to carry out its mission of convening the school district, parents, teachers, administrators, state, city and county governments, higher education, community-based organizations, businesses, and foundations to increase high school and postsecondary completion rates. Now, over 350 organizations, businesses, philanthropies, and individuals fund Say Yes Buffalo.

## BOLD IDEAS ATTRACT BOLD INVESTMENTS

Like many community foundations that focus on donor-advised funds, the community foundation was highly inexperienced when it came to raising money for Say Yes Buffalo. “We had never fundraised before for anything,” said Dedecker. “And now we were talking about raising \$33 million to pilot [Say Yes Buffalo] in the first ten years...You could argue that this was insane.” But guided by the belief that “big, bold ideas attract big, bold investments,” the

***“Problems feel overwhelming; solutions feel investable.”***

– Clotilde Dedecker,  
Foundation President & CEO

foundation's board and president were able to leverage this shared vision to attract new major donors who were looking to invest in fresh and innovative solutions, as well as solicit additional funds from existing donors who had greater capacity. When the foundation began to consider becoming more than a grantmaker, they had \$150 million in assets; today, they have over \$400 million. Say Yes has successfully raised \$25 million against the \$33 million required to fund the first 10 years of the initiative, and the foundation has increased the number of individual donors while building their relationships and assets. The foundation's decision to focus on increasing the impact of their work—as opposed to first trying to grow their assets—was ultimately a successful growth strategy, allowing them to raise their visibility and present donors with a compelling proposal, complete with institutional partners and clear potential for impact.

The deepening relationships with government and educational agencies are also bearing fruit in a variety of ways—not the least of which is New York State's decision to direct more than \$10 million to support Say Yes Buffalo's work in 2017. Public funding, generated at least in part by the community foundation's work on behalf of the Say Yes initiative, is providing stability and sustainability for the initiative. Say Yes Buffalo has also helped local government to expand a variety of its funded social welfare services into school sites. For example, a small amount of up-front foundation funds made it possible to launch publicly-funded, county-licensed mental health providers at school sites to more effectively serve under-resourced students and families. With the flexibility of its philanthropic funding, the foundation enabled a self-sustaining program to get a foothold within schools, a piece of true systems change through public-private partnership.

The community foundation also leveraged its networks of influence at the executive- and board-levels, and relied on the enthusiasm of its board to support such a bold and potentially risky endeavor. In fact, “entrepreneurs” was a category for which the board recruited new members, and Dedecker feels strongly that this was a large factor in the initiative's success—that foundation board members understood and were able to take the necessary financial risks to invest in Say Yes in ways that helped it thrive. This occurred *because* its board was composed of people who were comfortable with risk, understood the return on investment, and had succeeded in their own lives in large part because of their entrepreneurial skills.

## BETTING THE FARM PAYS OFF

In 2011, the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo faced a defining moment—it had reached 90 years of contributing to the community, but had not been able to move the needle on the issue of postsecondary attainment. The time was right for a dramatic course change. Say Yes provided a template for that change; it served as a galvanizing vision around which the foundation could organize its coalition. Say Yes National provided a validated, compelling approach for the foundation to work toward and set clear expectations for what resources the foundation would need to cultivate in order to succeed. “We didn't set out to increase our assets,” said Dedecker. “We set out to increase our impact, to increase our relevance, which would increase our visibility, which would increase our assets, which would increase our impact...and that has played out beyond our wildest dreams.”

*“This is a ‘bet the farm’ kind of moment. And I can’t think of a better issue to bet the farm on.”*

– Board Member,  
Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo

## WORDS OF WISDOM

- Use solutions to anchor your messaging—not problems. Dedecker attributes her success in fundraising for Say Yes Buffalo to the time she spent deepening relationships with donors by meeting with them one-on-one, listening to their interests, and identifying their alignment with Say Yes’s objectives. By presenting them with a bold solution to Buffalo’s education and workforce challenges, she felt she was able to get larger investments from ambitious donors who wanted to maximize the impact of their money: “People invest in solutions, not problems.”
- Nothing replaces individual, face-to-face, peer-to-peer conversations to establish new relationships—and when asking for big commitments, this outreach has to happen at the level of CEO, president, or knowledgeable, engaged board members, so people feel like they’re speaking to the real voice of the organization.
- Understand your community and their needs through data. The community foundation used data to spur the Say Yes Buffalo effort, as well as tailor its work during the program’s development. For example, in looking at local labor market trends, the foundation recognized that workforce needs spanned the levels of education and identified a variety of postsecondary pathways (as opposed to just “college attainment”) that the initiative now promotes.
- Use data to focus your efforts but don’t give in to “analysis paralysis.” Collecting the necessary data to support the community foundation’s proposal for Say Yes was invaluable for garnering support from donors, partners, and the community. But Dedecker warned against getting too caught up in collecting and presenting overly-complex data: “Make your case and make it succinctly. People don’t need reports.”

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Informing Change and College Futures Foundation extend their acknowledgement and gratitude to Clotilde Dedecker, Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo President & CEO, for sharing her time and expertise to inform this work.

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