

A Story of Leadership: The Boston Foundation



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.

DATA IGNITED A CITY TRANSFORMATION

When the Boston Private Industry Council (PIC) and Northeastern University asked the Boston Foundation in 2007 for funding to conduct a longitudinal study on student outcomes, the foundation was eager to partner. “The foundation likes to fund research because we believe that contributes important evidence and fuels conversations in our city and the region. It’s part of our civic leadership role,” says Elizabeth Pauley, Senior Director, Education to Career at the Boston Foundation. The partners were interested in the postsecondary trajectories of students who graduate from Boston Public Schools. Until then, no studies had explored whether Boston students completed postsecondary degrees or certificates, despite steadily rising rates of high school graduation and enrollment in college.

To prepare for the study’s findings—which would reveal the magnitude of the gap between college access and completion for local students—staff at the Boston Foundation immediately began outreach to nonprofits that had proven strategies for supporting students to complete their postsecondary degrees. By the time the results of the full study were released in 2008 confirming that far too few Boston students were completing postsecondary degrees, the foundation had already been convening for months with a number of community stakeholders to consider effective strategies for turning the dismal statistics around.

This study sent shockwaves through a community that prides itself on—and deeply values—its higher education institutions. Rather than point fingers, the city’s mayor at that time, Thomas Menino, embraced the findings and tasked the entire community with the shared responsibility of responding to them. A city-wide multi-stakeholder coalition, including the Boston Public Schools, the

LEADING THROUGH LEARNING

The foundation-funded study found that only 35.5% of students who enrolled in college completed a secondary degree or credential within seven years—a statistic that shocked education stakeholders across the city and planted the seed for Success Boston. Funding research allowed the foundation to position itself as a leader in the field by presenting pivotal data points, using the research as a platform to raise visibility, and convening partners in the community to strategize a response. “Putting the data out there about what was happening [with educational outcomes] has been transformative in this city,” says Pauley.

“We don’t talk about college access in Boston anymore. We talk about postsecondary completion.”

– Elizabeth Pauley, Senior Director,
Education to Career at the Boston Foundation

workforce investment board, University of Massachusetts Boston, and the foundation, began working together to outline options for addressing the huge postsecondary completion gaps. From this coalition, Success Boston emerged.

SUCCESS BOSTON: SERVICES & INFRASTRUCTURE FOR AN EMERGING FIELD

Following the release of the report, the community conversation shifted from college access to college completion, and the Boston Foundation was a leading participant in the conversation, listening for new ideas and pulling in stakeholders who could add value and possibly spur an innovative solution. The stakeholders eventually settled on a new approach, titled Success Boston, that uses a model of coaching and academic and financial advising to prepare high school students to transition into, pursue, and complete postsecondary degrees. With activities on high school campuses, Success Boston prioritizes wrap-around student supports to ensure that the transition from high school to postsecondary education paves the way for students to complete their degrees.

“Today every student needs something beyond high school, and they need to start and finish it. It’s everyone’s responsibility to make sure there are clear and transparent opportunities for this to happen.”

– Elizabeth Pauley, Senior Director,
Education to Career at the Boston Foundation

While Success Boston’s direct service recipients are students, the foundation has helped to build out infrastructure to support the organizations and individuals delivering these services. The coaches who work with students to diagnose and troubleshoot emerging challenges gather monthly at the foundation offices for training and support; the mutual support extends beyond the monthly meeting and the group is essentially a professional learning community. Program managers of the nonprofit organizations involved in Success Boston also meet monthly, and foundation staff use these gatherings to elicit feedback on how the initiative is playing out in real-time. Through Success Boston’s annual survey of partners, the foundation has a mechanism for hearing directly from the student community. A Student Leadership Council made up of students receiving coaching services has been a particularly effective strategy for eliciting and incorporating students’ perspectives into the initiative.

WHY SERVE AS A BACKBONE ORGANIZATION?

The Boston Foundation believes Success Boston’s direct service for students and professional development for providers alone will not effect the systems-level change necessary to prepare a generation of young people for successful careers. In order to shift the way schools, higher education, and community institutions provide support for students to complete their postsecondary degrees, Success Boston needed an ongoing facilitator, and the foundation found a natural fit as the initiative’s backbone organization, a role seemingly no other community institution could occupy.

By virtue of its position as a community foundation, the foundation could flex a kind of convening power that has potential to bring about systems-wide change. It had the ability to bring together student-serving nonprofits, Boston Public Schools, higher education institutions, additional philanthropies, and even city hall to provide and fund direct services to students, as well as stimulate and sustain productive discussions of systemic issues. Over the years, mayors, superintendents, and higher education leaders have come and gone, but the foundation has remained the through-line in ensuring that each one of those leaders understands the stakes and necessary supports to ensure postsecondary degree completion remains a community priority. Further, with one third of foundation

“Success Boston has been successful at creating focus on the issue, sustaining that, and creating a table that others can come to as they’re thinking about it.”

– Elizabeth Pauley, Senior Director,
Education to Career at the Boston Foundation

discretionary grant funds directed to the initiative, the foundation wanted to closely monitor the initiative's progress toward its goals and intended outcomes.

However, this cross-sector, multi-stakeholder coalition is not without challenges. Success Boston is made up of 37 different institutions, creating a mammoth amount of work to coordinate and a wide range of organizational needs and perspectives to understand and consider. The foundation has been deeply involved in securing outside funding for Success Boston's operations and expansion, including a large federal grant. Furthermore, the foundation must navigate its own dual role of both convener and funder, a power dynamic that can compromise the degree to which other organizations feel comfortable in expressing opinions. Nevertheless, the foundation has not shied away from having and expressing its own point of view. Foundation staff helped develop governance structures and clarify decision-making lines, which are crucial to implementing strategy in collective action.

The relationship-building among different community institutions in Boston, and continued focus on postsecondary completion, has made possible some cross-institution policy alignments. For example, the state of Massachusetts dovetailed its Commonwealth Commitment, which provides financial support to students who transfer from a community college to a university to earn a Bachelor's degree, with Boston's community college program that provides students with free tuition and built-in individual coaching.

Success Boston's combination of providing direct services to students while also working at the institutional level has landed well with donors who want to have a personal connection to their communities, while also affecting systems-level change. Many of the foundation's most generous donors, in fact, have been at the Success Boston table from very early on, when the foundation was mapping out solutions to the postsecondary completion gap.

LESSONS LEARNED

Elizabeth Pauley has the following advice for community foundations leading coalitions in supporting postsecondary completion:

- Start with data. Partner with school districts to find out what happens to high school students when they graduate.
- Use your convening power as a community foundation, which can serve as a neutral space where other people at the table can share what they think.
- Don't let limited discretionary funds slow your community foundation's interest in developing a collaborative project. Projects grow out of ideas, relationships, and hard work, not just money. There are advantages to being one of several small or moderate funders of an initiative, including a greater sense of shared responsibility for sustainability.
- Even if you are focusing on partnerships with high schools and programs serving high school students, involve higher education as early as possible in a college completion initiative. Gaining buy-in from higher education early on distributes the responsibility for ensuring successful postsecondary transition and completion.
- Be prepared to attribute success to others. The very nature of collective impact work means your foundation may not receive all the credit—if any.

“Mobilizing the data mobilizes donors, and that mobilizes the community. We have to ask, all these young people that have been invested in different ways... where is the path for them to be successful?”

– Elizabeth Pauley, Senior Director,
Education to Career at the Boston Foundation

“Create opportunities for other partners to have the win.”

– Elizabeth Pauley, Senior Director,
Education to Career at the Boston Foundation

Informing Change and College Futures Foundation extend their acknowledgement and gratitude to Elizabeth Pauley, Senior Director, Education to Career at the Boston Foundation, for sharing her time and expertise to inform this work.

A Story of Leadership: Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo



Learnings in Making Higher Education a Community Priority

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TARGETING SYSTEMS, NOT SYMPTOMS

As the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo approached its 90th 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.”

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.

A Story of Leadership: Greater Washington Community Foundation



Learnings in Making Higher Education a Community Priority

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RAISE DC: FILLING A FUNDING & DATA VACUUM

Raise DC is an initiative supported by a number of foundations, including the Greater Washington Community Foundation, to find and address choke points in the District of Columbia's (DC) pipeline that carries young people from cradle to career. To do this, Raise DC:

- Engages institutional and community stakeholders in responding to data through action plans, including reconnecting disconnected youth, broadening pathways to high school graduation, and understanding and addressing challenges to postsecondary completion.
- Facilitates data exchange among different education institutions, including early childhood education, middle schools, high schools, and higher education institutions, to illuminate areas of high need, in particular, related to transitioning from one stage to the next.

Each of Raise DC's focus areas—increasing kindergarten readiness, reconnecting disconnected youth, and increasing high school and postsecondary completion—has a Change Network, a coalition of organizations and institutions tasked with affecting and documenting change, some of which overlap across Raise DC projects.

Currently Raise DC is a sizeable operation with its own dedicated staff, but the story of its origins is rooted in the community foundation's willingness to play a leadership role in addressing the area's low rate of college success. Raise DC emerged following a time-limited funding effort called Double the Numbers, a Gates Foundation-funded coalition for increasing secondary and postsecondary students' credential attainment. When the Gates Foundation investments shifted from regional work to a national strategy, the Greater Washington Community Foundation

DATA REVELATION: A RALLYING CALL

A critical step in building community support for Raise DC was understanding and communicating the education landscape's most pressing issues, and the community foundation has taken a leading role in doing this. In 2007 the community foundation used discretionary funding to commission a study on disconnected youth, that is, youth and young adults who are neither in school nor working. The study found that there were around 7,000 disconnected youth in DC at that time—and that an additional 1,000 young people were disconnecting every year.

The results shocked the DC education community, and reconnecting disconnected youth became a rallying cause for local political leaders as well as educators in charter school networks and DC Public Schools. From this collective energy came DC's first youth ReEngagement Center, a place where out-of-school youth can enroll in and seek support for education programs that enable them to complete their high school credentials. The Disconnected Youth Change Network works in conjunction with the Community Partnership for Postsecondary Attainment to prepare young people for successful careers.

convened players from the local collaboration with the Mayor's Office of DC to create a plan to maintain and even grow this coalition-building at the local level.

STOKING PUBLIC SECTOR DEMAND FOR A SOLUTION

Two previous attempts at collective impact around education reform had started and then stalled, due in part to turnover within the DC Mayor's Office of Education and staff changes at key government agencies. The community foundation knew that collective impact work could not be successful without strong organizational buy-in from government stakeholders, including the Mayor's Office of Education, city agencies, and the DC Public Schools. Thus, the community foundation entered this work determined to address a primary challenge: getting local government involved in and supporting its efforts to bridge the tenuous transitions in the education pipeline.

Learning from earlier failures in securing lasting government buy-in (while ensuring the work wasn't solely held within government), the community foundation and other collaborators chose to house Raise DC within the Mayor's Office for the initial two years, in order to make the fledgling organization highly visible and with easy access to the relevant political decision makers. This early integration into city government ensured that individual government actors connected with and understood Raise DC's relevance to their own work, as well as facilitated Raise DC's ability to respond—and appeal—to multiple political agendas.

“Like it or not, DC is still a government town and if you don't have government as partner, you're probably not going to make a difference.”

– Benton Murphy, Senior Director at the Foundation

“DC is strongly rooted in local politics and political dynamics. Every time there's a switchover from one mayoral administration to the next, you basically have a sweeping of the table. Anything that had been happening previously was considered old news and we had to start everything from scratch.”

– Benton Murphy, Senior Director at the Foundation

INCUBATING A MODEL FOR EDUCATION SYSTEMS CHANGE WORK

Embedding Raise DC in the Mayor's Office for two years established a critical level of government buy-in and stoked the demand for its mission and goals. But for sustainability, the initiative needed a different home. After two years Raise DC moved from the Mayor's Office to space at the community foundation's headquarters. The community foundation's support at this point in the young initiative's life transitioned to in-kind support, including office space, back office administrative support, and continuing active roles for a few Foundation staff. In this capacity, the community foundation served as a crucial incubator to Raise DC. The President and CEO of the community foundation, Bruce McNamer, sits as a co-equal member of Raise DC's Leadership Council alongside other philanthropic, government, business, and nonprofit leaders.

Raise DC's close proximity to the community foundation's education and workforce program officers created a strong, symbiotic relationship between the two entities beyond a traditional funder-grantee relationship, enabling the community foundation and Raise DC to align their activities and strategies, while also providing Raise DC with the independence to cultivate its own expertise and niche in the education landscape. Staff recall the evolution in their thinking: “Seeing Raise DC as less of an external body that just happens to be living here with us and more of a strong partner around issues that we share has been an evolution over time.”

THE POWER OF FOCUS

The community foundation's ability to concentrate attention and resources to create Raise DC was born in a time of scarce resources. In 2010, the economic downturn left the community foundation with fewer discretionary funds and diminished staff capacity. The tightened resources prompted community foundation leaders to prioritize its grantmaking activities. White papers developed by staff with community input successfully argued for coordinating grantmaking in three focus areas: education, workforce development, and safety net services. These three priorities continue to guide community foundation grantmaking today.

As education and workforce program officers discussed how to maximize their strapped resources, they realized they could accomplish more through funding a coordinated initiative like Raise DC that would address a spectrum of issue areas, particularly those they articulated as priorities, as well as the linkages between them. Staff prepared a proposal to the community foundation board for supporting Raise DC, a process which cultivated community foundation staff buy-in for Raise DC as well as the Board's.

“We had a lightbulb moment where we said, this is an opportunity for us to break through some of these siloes and think about using Raise DC as the center point, to knit a lot of these various streams together.”

– Benton Murphy, Senior Director at the Foundation

The community foundation's initial grant for operational support for Raise DC was short-term, and current support consists of in-kind support and funding from many of the foundation's donor-advised funds. Staff say it has been a relatively easy transition to move from discretionary funding support to donor-advised funding. Several board members who had been involved in determining the strategic direction of the community foundation's grantmaking were among the first donors to support Raise DC with their donor-advised funds. Donors are also encouraged by Raise DC's ability to secure funding from other foundations.

FACING PERSISTENT CHALLENGES

The community foundation's commitment to Raise DC, while also ensuring there would be involvement from a wide range of stakeholders, has faced numerous challenges. Staff share a few lessons they have learned:

- Partnering with public agencies is critically important for collective impact work in education and workforce development. If a public agency partner appears to be weak or poorly managed, the other partners need to be creative and determined in finding ways to work with them. “Philanthropy is really undersized for the size of our population for this region, so we're highly dependent on local government to support a lot of this work,” says Benton Murphy. “If a government agency or department is not stable and a strong partner, it's a big challenge for us.”
- Standing up for the needs of local youth in a highly educated, highly competitive labor market is difficult but inspiring work. Finding a niche where the community foundation's work can make a clear, measurable difference has been a helpful approach. There is a constant flow of talented young people into Washington DC to pursue internships and public service careers, making it particularly difficult for DC public school students to compete for plum entry-level positions. “There's such intense competition for jobs that local people can very easily be crowded out,” says Benton Murphy. To ease this for a targeted group of youth, the community foundation works to link disconnected youth with credential opportunities, including one-year programs, to help increase the number of local residents landing good employment opportunities in a competitive labor market.

- Everybody likes to be part of a success, and with a broad geographic mandate extending to suburban northern Virginia and Maryland, the Greater Washington Community Foundation has had to consider ways to participate in education and workforce collective impact efforts in its areas outside of urban District of Columbia. Following the successes of Raise DC collaborative work, the community foundation is now applying its learnings in different ways in the suburban contexts, for example, leveraging existing partnerships to address community concerns about public education infrastructure and sponsoring convenings, including one town hall designed for parents.

Informing Change and College Futures Foundation extend their acknowledgement and gratitude to Benton Murphy, Senior Director, Community Investment at the Greater Washington Community Foundation, for sharing his time and expertise to inform this work.

A Story of Leadership: Yakima Valley Community Foundation



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THE FOUNDATION AS THE CONVENER & CONNECTOR

The Yakima Valley Community Foundation, by community foundation standards, is very new to the funding landscape, having started a little over a decade ago in 2004. In considering the community's highest needs, the foundation has always placed the issue of education at or near the top of the list.

Among the first calls Linda Moore made as the foundation's second CEO was to Heritage University, a local university dedicated to removing barriers and increasing access to higher education for historically place-bound populations. Her purpose for the conversation was not to promote the community foundation; she went to listen and understand. Moore was highly aware of the distinct characteristics of the Yakima Valley, having grown up in the area and returning to the new foundation after a successful legal career on the East Coast. She knew only 15% of County residents had bachelor's degrees. She also knew that college success for first generation students coming from low-resource schools is difficult, and that students who left the familiarity of the Yakima Valley need advice and support to imagine post-secondary education and to persist through four or eight semesters of college coursework. Following Moore's one-on-one conversations with leaders of local educational institutions, the community foundation saw how it could play an important role as a convener and connector.

The community foundation brought together leaders from higher education institutions, including Whitman College, Yakima Valley Community College, the University of Washington, Heritage University, and others, to discuss options for increasing the rate of higher education success. It sought scholarship administration that could go beyond "cutting the check" and deliver mentorships and other student supports. From these efforts emerged **One Voice in Higher Education**, a partnership among the Yakima Valley Community Foundation, Heritage

MEETING PLACE-BASED CHALLENGES

The community foundation operates in the context of—and thus finds its niche by addressing—community challenges specific to Yakima County:

- Yakima County is one of two majority minority counties in the state with over 50% of its population Hispanic or Native American. Nearly a third of the County is part of the Yakama Indian Reservation, which has historically lacked comprehensive resources for education.
- The County is predominantly agricultural, which shapes not only the land and concentration of resources, but also the community experience with post-secondary education.
- A property-based tax system makes statewide funding for education inherently disparate in poor counties.

University, and Yakima Community College. One Voice’s goal was to establish a strong coalition of diverse stakeholders in secondary and post-secondary education who could advocate for key interventions to increase the rate of high school completion and college degree attainment in the County. The partnership’s community-based conversations and research explored the most salient needs and attributes of the community and compared them with evidence-based programs in use in other communities. In addition to research, the partnership elevated the visibility of the community’s education needs.

Informed by its experience in the One Voice partnership, the community foundation has adopted a mix of strategies to address preparation and support for higher education, including:

- A specific focus on education in the community foundation’s Strategic Plan, particularly in Early Childhood Intervention
- A specific focus on attendance in K–12 schools
- Transforming its scholarship programs to measure, monitor, and support persistence and attainment
- Partnering with community-based organizations and local Educational Service Districts to link students with services that could improve their educational development
- Understanding that parents and children of color face unique challenges in pursuing post-secondary attainment

A TWO-STEP PROCESS TOWARD COMMUNITY BUY-IN

The One Voice Partnership in Higher Education formally existed for approximately five years. The partnership’s intention was to first determine a starting set of evidence-based strategies that would align well with the community’s needs and improve college attainment, and second, to find a way to continue a steady awareness and vigilance around college success for the community’s youth. Rather than looking to centralize the responsibility for this within one entity, One Voice transitioned its work to a cradle to career approach, which has raised the visibility of higher education issues—and their possible solutions—and stimulated buy-in among a more diverse group of stakeholders.

The community foundation is pleased with the broader coalition strategy that emerged from One Voice: rather than the foundation as sole actor, or one of a few, the larger and growing coalition ensures that the efforts do not begin and end with the community foundation. Should leadership shifts change the foundation’s directions away from the coalition, the groundwork has been laid for other partner organizations to “own” the work.

Yakima Valley Community Foundation’s focus in education fits within this cradle to career educational approach supporting young people and families. After reviewing evidence-based practices and considering the needs and resources within the community, the foundation chose three primary action areas representing three stages of the continuum: early childhood education, increasing attendance in K–12 schools, and increasing post-secondary attainment. Data for school attendance and post-secondary attainment in the County, in particular, were below national averages and spanned multiple demographic categories. Community foundation leaders believed they had a good opportunity to improve outcomes in all three areas for a wide range of constituents, which would then leverage further change within the County’s education system.

“We decided to focus on three specific areas along the [cradle to career] continuum that could give us a chance to make a beachhead in each one of those areas: early childhood, K–12 attendance, and postsecondary attainment. Tentacles stretching out from those three allow us to touch the whole system.”

– Linda Moore, Foundation President & CEO

For Moore, the decision to focus on post-secondary attainment was deeply rooted in the data and clear evidence that Yakima County lagged far behind the rest of the state and the nation. From 2010 to 2014, only 72% of Yakima County residents 25 years or older had finished high school (compared to 90% in the state and 86% in the country); similarly, only 16% of adults obtained a BA degree or higher, in comparison with 32% of adults at the state level and 29% nationally.

SHIFTING THE COMMUNITY FOUNDATION MINDSET

Stepping into the convener role felt right to Moore and the community foundation's board members, although it also felt riskier than the previous focus on grantmaking and scholarships. But the community foundation's newness to the philanthropic landscape was an impetus for its leaders to thoughtfully consider how to strategically contribute to improving educational outcomes for the region. Serving only as a facilitator of donors' wishes and making small grants to struggling grantees was not going to effect the kind of systems-level change in education that was going to be needed.

“The foundation had to change itself. It had to move from being a well-oiled machine that dispenses checks to getting involved in the messy business of making community and educating kids. And that meant we as a group, staff and board, had to feel passionate about what we're doing and be prepared to tolerate failure.”

– Linda Moore, Foundation President & CEO

This mindset shift was critical for the community foundation's convening work. Board and staff agreed they could not wait for state tax dollars to bring about the kind of large educational changes needed in the region. In terms of defining and communicating its identity, the community foundation reframed its activities and role to focus on making investments in the community's people, resources, and ideas—rather than framing and executing its work in terms of giving money to charity. The community foundation also revamped its board structure and member recruitment process to focus on board members' governance and human capital responsibilities, rather than filling board spots with candidates offering operational skills similar to staff's work.

Externally, the community foundation is also slowly reworking how philanthropy is perceived in the Yakima Valley. The One Voice Partnership and the coalition work it spawned have expanded partner organizations' views of scholarship administration and their understanding of the need for more wrap-around services for scholarship recipients, such as assistance with FAFSA and ongoing mentoring along with a scholarship check.

THE RESOURCES TO LEAD

Linda Moore is aware of her good fortune to have a small operations endowment that generates unrestricted funds to support the staff work for the One Voice Partnership and a leadership role in the cradle to career coalition. This has allowed the community foundation greater flexibility to experiment with innovative partnership and funding models, without deviating from donors' wishes. This flexible funding, Moore says, allows her foundation to be engaged in the long-term work of systems-level change in education. “We have more capacity to play a leadership role and we can take the risk that doing so will create more goodwill and not alienate any donors. So far, so good. In fact, we have created more goodwill [than donor concerns].”

The community foundation is finding that systems change work can attract new supporters. In their education work more broadly, the community foundation is experimenting with different strategies to increase K–12 attendance and improve early childhood education. In showcasing these funding experiments, and sharing their

lessons learned, the community foundation is attracting a fresh wave of funders to a county that has historically seen little interest from other philanthropies. The community foundation was selected for Building Community Philanthropy (BCP), an initiative for community foundations in Washington and Oregon facilitated by Philanthropy Northwest and funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The BCP Initiative connects community philanthropies with one another in a peer learning network, while also providing expert resources for affecting systems-level change.

“[The BCP Initiative] gave us access to peer learning and expertise about systems thinking in education. The Initiative was inspiring, educational, and a safe space to fail.”

– Linda Moore, Foundation President & CEO

WORDS OF WISDOM

Linda Moore, Foundation President and CEO, had the following words of wisdom for community foundations embarking on efforts to shift the paradigm of community giving:

- Do not be afraid about losing a return on a risky grant, but do be afraid of wasting relationship capital as you build community infrastructure. To this end, the community foundation has set aside resources for staff to serve on coalitions and to engage and be present at gatherings at the local and state level.
- Community input on foundation strategies is important—particularly hearing from parents and children who might be recipients. Recognize the inherent capacity of individuals to solve their own problems.
- Think very carefully about the infrastructure necessary to sustain the kind of community involvement that you seek. Input without sustaining infrastructure and action can be insulting and ineffective.
- Use data that already exists to understand the landscape and to inform decisions about an initiative’s direction and strategy; “ground the truth” of that data by asking its participants to interpret the data.
- Known, simple data points grounded in a specific community’s experience can provide the basis for the biggest element of success—a community owning the responsibility of creating opportunity and a bright future for its children.

Informing Change and College Futures Foundation extend their acknowledgement and gratitude to Linda Moore, Yakima Valley Community Foundation President & CEO, for sharing her time and expertise to inform this work.
