

A Story of Leadership: Yakima Valley Community 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.

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.

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