

THE POWER OF COLLECTIVE COMMUNITY PHILANTHROPY

LESSONS FROM LEVERAGING LOCAL LEADERSHIP FOR GREATER EQUITY AND OPPORTUNITY

Through a five-year initiative with College Futures Foundation, seven California community foundations refined their approach to scholarships and elevated their regional leadership toward greater equity in college attainment. Here we share our takeaways from the experience, offering insights to others invested in the success of students and a more equitable future.

STRATEGIC INTENT

Launched in 2015, the Community Philanthropy Initiative (CPI) was the first major initiative of College Futures Foundation. This \$20 million investment marked the beginning of the Foundation's pivot from directly providing student scholarships to effecting systems change to advance its mission of ensuring that more students who reflect California's diversity complete a B.A. and access opportunities for a better life.








By intention, CPI partnered with community foundations, which are well positioned to improve college completion in the locales they serve because of their experience with scholarship giving, their knowledge of local organizations and civic leaders, their relationships with area donors, and their ability to establish lasting endowments.

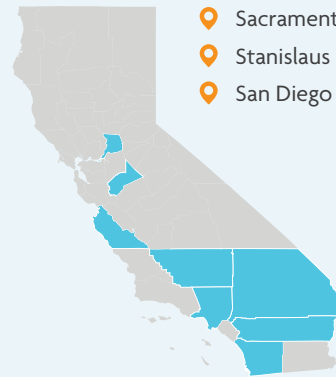
From the start, CPI sought to increase the availability of strategic need-based scholarships in recognition that traditional scholarships, which are often donor-directed and premised on prior achievement without regard for financial need, often benefit well-networked students who may already have the means to attend college. As the initiative took shape, this aim further developed into a set of goals for even greater impact.

7 community foundations

\$20M strategic investment

2015–2020 initiative period

-  Inland Empire Region
-  Kern County
-  Los Angeles County
-  Monterey County
-  Sacramento Region
-  Stanislaus County
-  San Diego Region



Initiative goals

- 1 Increase strategic, need-based scholarships** that community foundations award to low-income students and demographic groups underrepresented in higher education
- 2 Secure permanent funding** for strategic, need-based scholarships through community foundation cultivation of new and existing donors
- 3 Strengthen community foundations' role as leaders** with the visibility, credibility, and capacity as advocates and experts in regional efforts to improve educational equity and opportunity

INITIATIVE STRUCTURE

Over the course of its five years, the initiative included one round of planning grants, two rounds of implementation grants, funds to support strategic scholarships and regular learning community convenings. College Futures Foundation engaged the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University's Graduate School of Education to support learning and evaluation, documented in this [report](#). Participating community foundations also received ongoing technical assistance from consulting organizations that provided expertise in four areas: strategic use of data (Gardner Center), leadership and organizational development (Sutherland Strategies), scholarship management (National College Access Network), and strategic communications (Williams Group).



Site-specific program design

Community foundations across the cohort designed their scholarship programs differently to target scholarships to low-income students and students from groups under-represented in higher education completion in their regions. Some handled key functions—like outreach, programming, and scholarship administration—on their own, while others engaged community partners to support some of these roles.

Data-driven inquiry

Participating foundations considered a variety of data as they designed scholarship programs tailored to their communities. To ascertain the local education landscape at the outset, they examined college readiness factors, student enrollment, and the rate of degree attainment in their communities, all broken out by race, ethnicity, and gender. Understanding these needs helped guide program design, such as the use of wraparound services in addition to financial assistance. Throughout implementation, the community foundations interrogated their program data to understand equity issues within their scholarship programs, including any biases in their processes for student outreach and selection that would result in disparities across gender, race and ethnicity, income level, GPA, or first-generation college-going status. This inquiry surfaced opportunities for community foundations to adjust their approach and to better serve students.

“Technical assistance was important to strengthening our institutional equity practice and muscle—teaching us how to use data internally and with donors ... we were able to have a different conversation, use **a different process for decision making, and influence not only our scholarships but any barriers to equitable outcomes.**”

MICHELLE JARAMILLO,
THE SAN DIEGO FOUNDATION

The San Diego Community Foundation, the largest non-institutional scholarship provider in the county, now offers \$1 million in strategic need-based scholarships each year, and many of its more traditional scholarships also consider need and other student expenses. In addition, this foundation has elevated education as a programming priority and pursues investment strategies focused on educational equity.

INITIATIVE IMPACT

The seven community foundations all began their journey through the CPI at different starting points, but all made progress toward the initiative's goals. As a collective, they increased the number of scholarships going to students underrepresented in higher education, embarked on new strategies for donor development, and grew their capacity and influence as leaders within the local education ecosystem.

Increased scholarships for underrepresented students

Over the course of the initiative, the cohort of community foundations was able to reach more students who have financial need, reduce the gender gap among scholarship recipients, and consistently award scholarships to a student body that more closely mirrors the demographic makeup of their communities.



SCHOLARSHIP DEMOGRAPHICS

39% to male students,
up from 34%
95% to students of color



COLLEGE-GOING STATS

Increase in number
of students attending in
state public institutions
(California State University
and community colleges)

90%+ scholarship recipients
in high school class of 2015
remained college-enrolled
by year three



STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

3.8 median GPA,
up from 3.6

*(Grade point average was
not a focus but did rise during
the initiative period)*

California Community Foundation (Los Angeles) awards \$4–5 million each year to students to support their postsecondary education. As a result of the CPI partnership, more than 50% of these funds are now aligned with strategic, need-based scholarships. This foundation also launched an initiative to reach and serve young men of color on their path to and through college.

New approaches to fund development

Through a mix of external and internal strategies, community foundations in the cohort successfully increased the volume and consistency of funding available for strategic scholarships, for both funds distributable each year as well as endowed funding, a more permanent resource to address community needs over time. As captured in the Gardner Center evaluation, the community foundations made an effective, data-driven case to new and existing donors, encouraging them to invest in need-based scholarships or in discretionary funds that the foundations could use for this purpose. Internally, they directed more community foundation resources toward need-based scholarships. They also funded new staff positions or reallocated existing positions to support the fresh approach to scholarships, and they provided indirect support for this effort from other functional groups, such as marketing and research.

\$17M

distributed as need-based scholarships over 5 years, funded by College Futures Foundation and community foundation donors

8,125

individual strategic need-based scholarships

\$1,970

average scholarship amount

Community Foundation for Monterey County now uses scholarships to position itself in partnership with local education institutions and offer donors a community-centered avenue for supporting college success for low-income students. Using data analysis findings in conjunction with partners, the foundation has implemented a scholarship giving strategy focused on Latino male students. It is also a co-convenor in Monterey's Bright Futures Education Partnership, a cross-sector regional initiative to increase college readiness and bachelor's degree attainment.

Inland Empire Community Foundation has made steady progress in transitioning from donor-driven scholarships to strategic need-based scholarships. In addition to distributing these scholarships, the foundation has developed the capacity of a range of community-based groups across the region and convened this network to share best practices and track progress using common metrics. In recent years, the foundation has facilitated conversations on an emerging economic development effort called Inland Economic Growth & Opportunity.

Enhanced capacity to lead on education

The Gardner Center evaluation of the initiative also found that foundations grew in ways that prepared them to lead more profoundly. Participating foundations:

- Increased their capacity for a data-centered approach to continuous learning and improvement
- Increased their capacity to center and operationalize equity
- Enhanced their visibility and credibility as conveners, catalysts, and coaches
- Expanded their relational credibility and influence within their local ecosystem as they engaged in advancing educational equity and economic development more broadly

“Through this initiative we began to recognize that **we have a vital voice, that we stand at the threshold of these systems and can be both thought partners and accountability partners.** I don’t think we would have viewed ourselves that way had we not shared this experience with peer foundations in the learning community, engaged with technical support advisors, and begun to look at data differently.”

MARIAN KAANON,
STANISLAUS COMMUNITY
FOUNDATION

Stanislaus Community Foundation is one of the youngest foundations in the initiative, but quickly embraced new leadership roles. Today this foundation leads a comprehensive cradle to career effort in conjunction with the county’s largest school districts, Stanislaus County Office of Education, Modesto Junior College, CSU Stanislaus, and local business leaders.

A look at effective strategies

The Gardner Center evaluation of the CPI also identified several strategies that facilitated community foundations' progress toward the goals of the initiative and their success as regional education leaders. These included:

OPERATIONS STRATEGIES

- Situating scholarship work within broader strategy and operations
- Articulating specific goals tied to every stage of the process
- Partnering with local colleges, universities, and community-based organizations

DONOR RELATIONS STRATEGIES

- Sustaining dialogue over time with staff and donors
- Shifting narratives about "merit"
- Anchoring opportunity and impact in data
- Cultivating a personal connection
- Creatively matching donors' interests

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

- Streamlining the application process
- Shifting application requirements and selection criteria
- Supporting students, from start of application through renewals

The evaluation also identified factors that hindered the efforts of community foundations during the CPI. These included questions and challenges regarding the availability of longitudinal, comparative, actionable data that could illuminate college attainment trends; worries about "scope creep" as foundations expanded their leadership roles in various ways; and the time required to further cultivate and educate donors.

Sacramento Region Community Foundation has focused on working with local community-based organizations, high schools, and CSU Sacramento to improve college readiness and B.A. completion for African American and Latino male students. The foundation is also playing a leadership role in the California Funders for Boys and Men of Color's Central Valley Regional Action Committee.

Kern Community Foundation rallied education leaders throughout the county to sign the Kern Pledge, a collective effort to improve attainment throughout the county's K-16 education pipeline. Facilitated by the community foundation, this work helped seed a countywide economic development effort. In the final year of CPI, the Gardner Center developed a youth action research fellowship, piloted with Kern Community Foundation and then replicated in Los Angeles.

LESSONS IN PLANNING AND PARTNERSHIP

The CPI was a learning experience for both participating community foundations and College Futures Foundation in its programming and funding capacity. Presented here, the lessons that emerged are informing current work and practices of College Futures Foundation.

› **Robust initiative structure**

The structure of the CPI—with its embedded technical assistance, support for a learning community, and ongoing evaluation function—was essential to the initiative’s success. This structure supported community foundation capacity building along a number of dimensions critical to leadership, such as the use of data to inform internal decisions, to make the case for need-based scholarships to donors, and to guide community-wide conversations about equity. Likewise, because the initiative involved peer sharing and ongoing evaluation, it also generated insights that informed adaptations (among community foundations and across the initiative) that strengthened results along the way.

› **Supportive sunseting approach**

With the recognition and transparency that the initiative would eventually come to a close, College Futures Foundation made sure that key aspects of this effort focused on sustainability, such as securing permanent community foundation funds for strategic, need-based scholarships, and building institutional capacity within the community foundations to continue their leadership after the five-year funding commitment. While College Futures Foundation established some of these priorities at the outset of the initiative, as a funder, it also maintained a flexible learning stance so that each foundation could employ practices that would work in their local context over time.

› **Regional leadership**

At its most fundamental, the CPI illustrated the power of regional organizations, like community foundations, as lead partners in movement building. Place-based organizations with deep ties to and knowledge of their communities, are uniquely qualified to bring a movement to life in meaningful ways. This principle of regional leadership includes community foundations and their institutional partners, and also extends to the many other critical voices, such as those of students and parents, who must be part of the conversation and decision-making.

PATH FORWARD

At the conclusion of the Community Philanthropy Initiative, participating community foundations are not only carrying forward many of the programs and practices they established as part of the initiative; all have also chosen to continue to meet as a learning community. Today this group is actively discussing a host of new areas for leadership growth and exploration, including the desire to amplify student and parent voices and support power building in their work.

“There is a powerful story here about leadership, community, and a regional approach to bringing about greater equity in education. Through the Community Philanthropy Initiative, we have supported some of the organizational and cultural shifts by providing grant funds, structuring the learning community, and providing technical assistance—but these community foundations deserve the credit. For them, it was a labor of love, and their work really moved the needle. It also taught them and us so much about what works and what’s possible.”

JOANNA SARACINO,

PROJECT MANAGER, PROGRAMS, COLLEGE FUTURES FOUNDATION

The core lessons that College Futures Foundation distilled from this work, presented in the previous section, are also deeply informing the Foundation’s own path forward in significant ways. In May 2021, the Foundation launched the [Community Engagement for College Success Network](#), which brings together 11 community-based organizations across Los Angeles, the Inland Empire, and the Fresno area around the shared goal of boosting higher education access, affordability, and success among communities of color. In many ways, this work adapts the structure and qualities of the CPI. Building on the ongoing gains of the CPI, the new network continues to expand and deepen a movement toward greater equity of education and opportunity in California.

College Futures Foundation stands for equity of opportunity and outcome for California’s diverse students. We work in partnership with organizations and leaders across the state so that the vision of a seamless, student-centered educational path to opportunity becomes a reality.

Learn more at collegefutures.org.

Source: Geiser, K. (2021). [Community Philanthropy for Student Success Initiative: Evaluation Summary](#). Stanford, CA: John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities.