

# Philanthropies Working Together

## Myths and Realities

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*Practice Matters: The Improving Philanthropy Project* presents a series of papers that explore, and ultimately aim to advance, key practices in philanthropy. Written by national experts, the titles address ten core philanthropic practices: using intermediaries, sponsoring policy commissions, effecting community change, attracting and managing talent, creativity in grantmaking, using ideas in building a field, building organizational capacity, communications for social good, foundation partnerships, and evaluation.

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## Editors' Note

In recognition of the complex problems that foundations seek to impact, and the scale of attention and investment needed for success, collaboration has become an important topic in philanthropy. When the aspirations are great, the financial support needs to be commensurate. To achieve real effects, the funding must be sufficient, yet the question remains: How can foundations pool their resources without ceding control of their values and goals? And how can they overcome the practical impediments to financial collaboration, such as the added paperwork and the differences in institutional practices? There have been some notable efforts to pool resources, led by the Living Cities initiative (formerly known as the National Community Development Initiative), a 13-year-old public-private collaboration of 15 funders to improve distressed inner-city neighborhoods. On the other hand, there has been a lot of talk and less action than might be expected.

In *Philanthropies Working Together*, Robert Hughes provides a scan of philanthropic collaboration, including the elements that catalyze or impede it, the key models in the field, and the advantages and disadvantages. The paper offers practical advice on when it may be fruitful for foundations to collaborate and when it may not.

# Executive Summary

Collaboration is on the rise in philanthropy, yet it is still relatively infrequent. Based on interviews with 19 leaders in philanthropy, this paper examines the forces that promote or stifle collaboration, and highlights the advantages and disadvantages of the major approaches now in use. Funders are advised to carefully assess the potential costs and benefits of engaging in collaborative activities because they can require more organizational and financial resources than expected.

The terms “collaboration” and “partnership” are often used interchangeably, but this paper draws an important distinction between the two. Here, the term “collaboration” encompasses the full continuum of inter-foundation relationships—from informal sharing of information and advice to much more complex and structured arrangements. “Partnerships” are a particular form of collaboration characterized by formal relationships that involve investment of money or other tangible resources. Not surprisingly, the loosest arrangements are the most common, and involve few if any changes in a foundation’s usual way of doing business. Partnerships, on the other hand, require more time, resources, and flexibility in foundations’ normal practices than other forms of collaboration.

The recent spurt in joint initiatives among foundations can be traced to at least six factors:

- The proliferation of foundations, with overlapping programmatic and geographic interests.
- The desire for more effective approaches to grantmaking, which are assumed to be more achievable when multiple funders contribute to a project, or share expertise that increases the chance of success.
- Information technology that makes it easier than ever for foundations to learn about funders with similar priorities, projects, and goals.
- Application of business practices to foundations, including the use of networks and partnerships.

- Changes in fields of foundation investment, such as welfare reform and health care. As the focus in these fields has shifted to the state and local arena, national philanthropies are looking to local funders for information and perspective.
- Re-examination of philanthropy's role in relation to government. Funders recognize that it is difficult, even for the best projects, to obtain long-term funding from government sources. Working together, funders hope to leverage their resources, and assist grantees to seek public or alternative funding sources more effectively.

Within the context of these overall trends, several specific circumstances tend to trigger collaboration among funders. When a new foundation is created, or when an existing foundation seeks to enter a new funding area, it is common for them to look for guidance from more experienced funders. Also, collaboration can be natural when foundations with similar substantive or geographic focuses seek to share knowledge or resources, or when they share a common applicant pool and wish to streamline the grantseeking process. A history of working well together in the past, or interpersonal contacts among foundation board or staff members, can also lead to good working relationships. External events, such as crises or changes in the policy environment, can also stimulate joint activity.

Foundations contribute many assets to their collaborations, including money, information, reputation, knowledge and experience of staff and board members. By pooling these resources, they can strengthen the effectiveness of their initiatives. Another resource is the culture—including the norms, values, decisionmaking processes, and operating styles—that each foundation embodies. Culture clash is always a risk; it is best to test compatibility before embarking on a joint project.

Conditions are right for *collaboration* when:

- Strong personal relationships exist among staff
- Institutions are open to outside ideas
- Foundation interests coincide
- Foundations respect each other and appreciate one another's constraints
- Staff turnover is low and organizational support is high.

*Partnerships* are more likely to succeed when the foundations involved are:

- Open about their goals, interests, and decisionmaking authority

- Willing to negotiate and accommodate
- Able to spend the time to work out logistics
- Prepared to commit resources
- Ready to persevere through implementation.

Collaboration can have great value, providing funders with the chance to share perspectives, build networks, increase organizational learning, prevent problems, generate innovative solutions, and extend influence.

Yet, collaborative efforts can also entail more time, resources, and frustration than foundation staff expect. Funders should enter into collaborative relationships only after a careful assessment to gauge the likelihood of success. Particularly in the more formal forms of collaboration, such as partnership, the participants may need to change their usual procedures, administrative systems and staffing, and they must be willing to devote energy to clarify goals, implementation plans, and other issues, such as expectations about funding duration.

Collaboration among foundations takes many forms. Three general types of collaboration can be identified based on their major structural features and the roles the participating foundations play:

- Foundations play the same role—for example, when foundations share information, experience, expertise, or best practices with each other.
- Foundations play complementary roles—for example, when national foundations work with federal or state policy, and local funders work with communities.
- Foundation collaboration is managed by an outside organization. The mediating organizations can vary from large membership associations to small consultative entities that sponsor meetings, serve as information clearinghouses, or administer a program on behalf of foundations working together.

A fourth and particularly intriguing form of collaboration involves the relationships among large, mostly national foundations and local funders. The growth of local/national funder relationships is driven by the philanthropic focus on issues such as education, health, social services, the environment, and economic development—issues that are dealt with practically at the local level, but are influenced through funding and policy at the state and national level. In the most successful examples, both sides benefit. Local funders benefit from the financial resources and networks of the national funders; and the national funders gain from local

philanthropies' understanding of community politics and the nonprofit sector. There are also risks due to the power imbalance between local and national funders, as well as the fact that locals are invested in a given community for the long haul, whereas national funders' interests can be transitory.

Deciding to collaborate should begin with the mission and purpose of the foundation. It is then important to weigh the potential costs and benefits of collaborating, particularly for more formal and structured efforts such as partnerships. Much of the rhetoric in the field implies that collaboration is almost always beneficial. A clear-eyed look at the practicalities is essential, however, because the most salient feature of foundation collaboration is that it requires exceptions to an institution's normal business practices.

# Introduction

*“ . . . Much of philanthropy, especially at the 100 largest foundations, with perhaps half the field’s endowment, works in isolation, rarely sharing the task or the results. We make grants based on inadequate due diligence, partially relevant information, or simple intuition. . . . We are novices at cross-program, cross-sector collaboration and rarely buddy-up for mutual gain.”*

(Skloot, 2001, p. 3)

*“While foundations are, by nature, individualistic in their structures, the truth is that they thrive on networking and associating with each other.”*

(Bernholz and Guthrie, 2002, p. 3)

At last count, the U.S. was home to 3,000 staffed foundations—many with similar goals, funding priorities, or geographic focuses. It would seem natural for philanthropies with common interests to collaborate, especially given that these organizations are immune to the market dynamics that drive competition in business. The public certainly expects that collaboration among funders is commonplace, and foundations are routinely encouraged to cooperate and praised when they do.

Yet, most people with direct experience with philanthropies—foundation staff, grant applicants, and grantees—view coordination or joint planning among philanthropies as relatively rare and difficult to achieve. A frequent critique is that philanthropies ask, if not require, grantees to establish coalitions or to collaborate with other organizations, yet seldom follow their own advice. The reality of philanthropic practice seems at odds with the perceived value of working collaboratively. Why is this so? This paper provides a scan of philanthropic collaboration, including the forces that drive or inhibit it, the key models now in use, and the benefits and challenges. The paper offers practical guidance on when it may make sense for philanthropies to collaborate and when it may not.

## Method

The paper is based on in-depth telephone interviews conducted in 2003 with 19 leaders in the field. (See appendix for a complete list.) The interviews asked respondents to describe specific examples of foundation

Philanthropies ask grantees to collaborate with other organizations, yet seldom follow their own advice, critics say.



collaboration and to assess how well the initiatives had worked. The protocol concluded with a set of general questions about collaboration and partnerships. The questions were open-ended and intended to leave room for a broad range of views.

Also, the paper draws heavily on several excellent reports on foundation collaboration: Backer (1999, 2004); Bernholz (1999, 2000, 2001, 2004); Buhl (1991); Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (2002); Hamilton (2002); Isaacs and Rodgers (2001); La Piana (2000, 2001); Mofson (2002); Sharp (2002); Stevens and Peikes (2001); and the Council on Foundations Committee on Community Foundations (2000). While each report differs in some ways from the others, the basic themes are remarkably consistent. Collectively, they provide a rich picture of foundation collaboration and contain many case examples, some of which are cited here.

In addition to these sources, I draw upon my fifteen years of experience first as senior program officer and director of program research and then as program vice president at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Over this period many of my colleagues have developed and implemented projects with other foundations. They have shared generously their experiences and taught me about the accomplishments and the pitfalls of this work. But my perspective is inherently limited because the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation works only on U.S. health and health care issues and has a unique culture and history that has undoubtedly shaped my views.

Accordingly, it should be noted that this paper does not attempt to provide a comprehensive review of foundation collaboration. Instead, it seeks to synthesize key elements of the field's experience, and to provide guideposts for foundation staff considering using collaborative approaches in their work. The paper builds upon the findings from earlier reports and attempts to integrate them into a broad framework. The cases cited here are not meant to be representative, but to highlight the challenges and dilemmas inherent in collaboration and partnership.

I am immensely grateful to the survey respondents for their willingness to share their ideas freely. They drew on experiences with many foundations of varying sizes, styles, and fields from insider and outsider vantage points; and they were generous in offering their wisdom and insights. In addition, I am indebted to my colleague Jean Lim, who was a full partner in the interviews and was invaluable in developing many of the ideas presented in the paper.

## Defining Terms

Confusion about terminology emerged as an important issue in our interviews. Often the terms “collaboration” and “partnership” were used synonymously and referred to almost any degree of interaction among philanthropies. This paper distinguishes between the two terms. Collaboration is defined broadly to mean “working together,” and covers the full spectrum of relationships among foundations.<sup>1</sup> Partnership refers to a specific form of collaboration characterized by formal relationships that involve investment of money or other tangible resources. In distinguishing among these concepts, I have tried to use language consistent with everyday speech and understanding.<sup>2</sup>

Collaboration can best be viewed as a continuum that starts with the loosest forms of association and extends to the most highly structured forms of engagement. At one end of the continuum are information sharing, peer advice, and informal learning. These activities often begin informally through personal relationships among colleagues from different foundations. These are the easiest kinds of collaboration; they tend to be short-term, easy to arrange, and require few if any changes in a foundation’s method of operating. As collaboration becomes more formalized, the arrangements take more time, require greater investments of staff, and engage more people in each organization involved. Partnerships anchor the most structured, formal end of the collaboration continuum. Hamilton (2002) describes relationships ranging from information exchange, co-learning, informal strategic alignment of funding through formal strategic alignment, pooled funding, and joint venturing; and he gives examples of each type. Partnerships entail more intensive work and staff time than informal types of collaboration, and are more administratively complex. Almost all partnerships require the participating funders to make exceptions in their usual ways of doing business, so it is not surprising that partnerships are among the least frequent types of collaboration.

As collaboration becomes more formalized, the arrangements take more time and engage more staff in each organization involved.

# Growth in Collaboration

Although the total funds specifically earmarked for collaborative projects still accounts for only a relatively small percentage of total foundation spending, collaboration unquestionably is on the rise in philanthropy. Several factors are driving the interest in joint initiatives:

*Dramatic growth of philanthropy.* Stan Katz, a long-time foundation observer, commented recently that: “The main fact of the foundation situation today, and let’s say over the last twenty years, is the tremendous proliferation of numbers and kinds of foundations” (Katz, 2001, p. 14). The statistics tell the story:

- Overall foundation endowments nearly tripled from 1991 to 2001.
- Per capita giving doubled in the 1990s.
- The number of grantmaking foundations more than doubled from 1985 to 2001.
- More than 40 percent all foundations with assets greater than \$1 million started in the 1990s (*Foundation Yearbook*, 2001 and 2002).

Despite the recent economic downturn and some endowment decreases, the number of foundations continues to grow. This means that, today, virtually no foundation is alone in its program area, its geographic focus, or its goals, thus increasing the prospects for collaborative endeavors.

*The search for more effective grantmaking.* Another factor is the experience of many funders that their programs have been ineffective. As one foundation official noted in describing business as usual: “We always over scale, over scope, and over sell.” The impact of foundation programs can be disappointing, the outcomes difficult to capture, and performance hard to track. Many funders are seeking new ways of working that could overcome some of the perceived limitations of operating alone. In addition to the obvious benefit of increasing the funds devoted to a project, collaboration offers another advantage: More realistic goals can be established for each project. The multiple perspectives inherent in a collaborative

Virtually no foundation is alone in its program area, geographic focus, or goals, thus increasing the prospects for collaboration.

initiative can provide a reality check on over-inflated expectations. (Of course, having many funder perspectives is no guarantee that collective inflated expectations will not still occur.)

*Information technology.* With advances in information technology and access to information, philanthropies can become knowledgeable about one another's funding priorities, supported projects, and goals much more easily than ever before. As the transaction costs for learning about other funders diminish, so do barriers to working together.

*Application of business practices to foundations.* A fourth factor is the trend for funders to import concepts and practices from the business sector and apply them to their own activities. Katz has described this as a "task reorientation" for foundations. By this term he means, "their use of partnerships, their use of benchmarks, their specification up front of deliverables from grantees, a general narrowing of focus and the creation of avowedly dependent relationships with grantees" (Katz, 2001, p. 16). While Katz viewed these developments critically, many leaders in philanthropy embrace the emergence of networks, the impact of technological advances on interorganizational relationships, the emphasis on strategy, and the ascendant role of customers in shaping business behavior.

*Changes in the fields of investment.* Changes in grantmaking areas are a fifth factor stimulating interest in funder collaborations, especially among national philanthropies looking to local foundations for an understanding of state or regional perspectives on the issues they are addressing. Welfare reform, the increased importance of local markets for health care delivery, and devolution to the states for many governmental activities accentuates the value of understanding local conditions. Increasingly, national funders are looking to local funders for that knowledge.

*Re-examination of philanthropy's role vis-à-vis government.* Foundations recognize that stable long-term funding, even for the very best projects, is hard to obtain from governments at any level. An economic downturn exacerbates this problem. Funders working together can leverage one another's funds to achieve greater impact, share ideas for grantees to generate alternate income sources, and more effectively assist grantees to seek whatever government support is available.

Advances in information technology enable philanthropies to learn about one another's funding priorities, projects, and goals more easily.

# When Do Foundations Begin to Collaborate?

Amidst these overall trends in philanthropy, several specific circumstances motivate collaboration among funders:

*Creation of a new foundation.* New foundations frequently consult with more experienced funders as they develop their own institutional policies and practices. Board and staff of new philanthropies seek guidance from seasoned funders about how they do their work, including how they organize and implement their administrative systems and grant-making approaches. Typically, such advice is exchanged informally through visits by new staff to several experienced funders, with the visits structured according to the interests of the new foundation.

*A foundation's entry into a new funding area.* Funders entering a new program area frequently look to others who are experienced and join them in a project—in order to garner expertise, benefit from the other funder's developmental work, increase the money devoted to the project, and learn about the way others do their work. For example, when the Ms. Foundation for Women started the Collaborative Fund for Women's Economic Development in 1991, it reached out to bank foundations for their expertise in making loans to small businesses.

*Foundations with common substantive and geographic domains.* The increase in the number of foundations in the U.S., and the resulting geographic, topical, and constituency overlaps, has been another trigger for foundations to work together. This is most notable in California, which was home to 2,702 grantmaking foundations in 1991 and 4,208 foundations by 1999. Forty-two percent of the foundations in the state were created in the 1990's (Ferris and Sharp, 2002), with a strong concentration in health philanthropy among the new ones (Ferris and Graddy, 2001).

For example, in the late 1990's, the chief operating officers of some California foundations began to meet quarterly. As one outgrowth, the California HealthCare Foundation took the lead in building what has become the "California HealthFunders Extranet," which links the state's health care foundations electronically and allows them to pool valuable data. The

Funders entering a new program area frequently join others who are experienced.

extranet enables participants to get to know colleagues at other foundations, as well as to learn about funding priorities and practices, coordinate projects and avoid duplication.

*Foundations with common applicants.* The Foundation Center's Web site (fdncenter.org) contains a listing of 13 groups of grantmakers using a common application. Other funders may link together to fund common applicants for a jointly sponsored program. For example, in Milwaukee, the Nonprofit Management Fund (nonprofitmanagementfund.org), supported by 14 local funders, helps local nonprofits improve their management effectiveness and efficiency.

*Joint responses to crisis situations.* In some cases, crises stimulate cooperation among philanthropies that have not worked together before. When an earthquake hit the San Francisco Bay area in 1989, local philanthropies teamed up to respond. Similarly, in 1992, the Los Angeles riots prompted foundations in the area to look beyond funding individual agencies and toward creating a new vision for more fundamental community change. They created the Los Angeles Urban Funders (LAUF) coalition, which involves a partnership among the funders and with community organizations. Funders in the coalition contributed to a core fund supporting comprehensive initiatives aimed at outcomes important to the community. Also, each funder provided individual grants to support components of the broader initiative, with the hope that this layered and coordinated effort will yield long-term change in Los Angeles neighborhoods.

Most recently, the tragedies of September 11th stimulated an unprecedented outpouring of generosity, both by individuals and foundations. The New York Community Trust and United Way of New York established the September 11th Fund on the day of the attacks, and the Ford Foundation deployed several staff members to help guide and manage what was an inherently difficult effort to coordinate. As in New York, Washington, D.C. grantmakers were catalyzed by the attack (Brody, 2001).

*Policy changes in a field of work.* Changes in the policy environment also can spark funder collaboration. For example, state legislation in California to start after-school programs prompted what was to become the Foundation Consortium for California's Children and Youth, which hosts annual policy summits concerning school-linked services.

*Interpersonal contacts among board or staff members.* As noted in our interviews, interpersonal contacts among board or staff members are a powerful catalyst for working together. Conversations between board members from the Rockefeller Foundation and the California Endowment led to the idea that the two philanthropies could collaborate on projects that took advantage of each institution's unique core competencies.

Among foundation staff, affinity groups are a frequent venue to meet counterparts from other foundations. Forty-one affinity groups are listed on the Council on Foundations Web site (cof.org), ranging from the Affinity Group on Japanese Philanthropy to the Women's Funding Network.

*Previous experience.* Foundations that have participated in successful collaborations often look to these partners for future work. As one funder noted, "Having addressed one problem through working together, why aren't we doing this in other areas?" Repeated successes can create a receptive climate for subsequent work, as in San Francisco where a senior consultant observes, "there is a warm collegiality among arts grantmakers that has fostered a number of collaborations." Some funders—such as the George Gund and Cleveland Foundations—work together so often that it becomes almost routine. The John M. Olin Foundation, Inc., the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the Sarah Scaife Foundation, and the Smith Richardson Foundation support so many of the same activities that some call them the "four sisters." The William and Flora Hewlett, James Irvine, and David and Lucile Packard Foundations cooperate so regularly that their joint activities are informally called "HIP" projects.

"Having addressed one problem through working together, why aren't we doing this in other areas?"

# Foundation Resources for Collaboration

Clearly, foundations bring money to their collaborative activities, but that is not the only important resource they invest. Indeed, other resources—information, reputation, the knowledge and experience of staff and board members, and a foundation’s unique culture—also can be valuable assets useful in working with other foundations.

The typical situation of grantmaking foundations—having an endowment and the responsibility to grant about 5 percent of assets for charitable purposes each year—makes grants a leading vehicle for foundations working together. One example of an explicit funding partnership is the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Local Initiatives Funding Partners Program, which matches dollars from local foundations that support community-based health projects throughout the U.S. ([lifp.org](http://lifp.org))

A second foundation resource is information. As noted earlier, foundations entering new areas or testing new grantmaking approaches often learn from other funders’ priorities and decisionmaking processes. Information about program development can be equally useful but it is less commonly shared. Staff papers, consultants’ scans of a field, and program development documents are usually internal documents and are seldom disseminated to other foundations, the public, or potential grantees. Papers sometimes are circulated after they have been edited for a particular audience, but information about program development typically is closely held, especially in the time leading up to a decision about funding.

Why is this? One reason is that ideas are the currency of foundation program staff, and keeping control over them is a powerful, if short-sighted, strategy to enhance personal influence. A more compelling reason is that program development information can be misleading because the approval process often changes the program under consideration. Funding levels, program leadership, and so forth are contingent on higher-level decisions. Therefore, it often makes sense for program staff to wait until a program is likely to proceed before sharing detailed information about it. Finally, program staff have few formal incentives for sharing program development information with colleagues in other institutions. As one foundation program officer commented, “there’s not much institutional reward for sharing.”

In addition to money, funders contribute information, reputation, knowledge, and experience to collaborations.



A third foundation resource is its reputation. An organization's reputation can increase the attention given to the projects it funds, enhance the prestige of its staff, and establish expectations about the quality and type of activities its grantees undertake. As foundations become more aware of this resource, many are seeking to integrate it into their overall strategy, often through analysis and application of the institution's "brand." Among the leaders in adopting an effective branding strategy are the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, with the focus on health care and media, and the Pew Charitable Trusts, with their Pew Centers. Institutional reputations can be a resource for all foundations participating in a collaboration. Telling a board that other funders have or will support a proposed project indicates that respected foundation peers have deemed the project worthwhile.

A fourth foundation resource is staff and board—the people who make decisions and represent the foundation in a variety of activities. These individuals bring their personal networks, experiences, and content expertise to bear on the project. A foundation's human resources are often overlooked, but they are crucial in influencing the quality of collaborative projects. (For an in-depth discussion, see "Foundation Strategies for Attracting and Managing Human Talent" by Nadya Shmavonian in the *Practice Matters* series at [www.fdncenter.org/for\\_grantmakers/practice\\_matters](http://www.fdncenter.org/for_grantmakers/practice_matters).)

The fifth type of resource is the foundation's culture. Each foundation has a distinctive style, influenced by the source of endowment, location, the donor's intent, its mission, and other characteristics of its history. In turn, these factors affect the funder's values, norms, decisionmaking processes, leadership choices, and grantmaking approaches. Finding a close match in foundation culture can make joint work easier, such as when the parties involved value collaboration as a form of philanthropy. Not surprisingly, collaboration can be awkward when foundation cultures do not mesh. In such cases, it might be best to test compatibility first through a pilot project.

Other funders' support for a proposed project indicates to a board that the project is worthwhile.

# Conditions for Successful Collaboration

Given the state of the field and the myriad possible ways foundations could collaborate, when does it make sense to do so? What are the conditions that lead to effective relationships, and what are the benefits?

Based on information gleaned from the literature and interviews with foundation representatives, Table 1 synthesizes the circumstances that foster effective collaborations and partnerships. Collaboration flourishes when strong personal relationships exist among staff from the participating foundations, when the institutions are open to outside ideas, when their interests coincide, when they respect each other and appreciate one another's constraints, when staff turnover is low, and when there is organizational support for staff to engage in collaborative activities.

Conditions are right for partnerships when the foundations involved are clear about their goals, honest about foundation interests and decision-making authority, and when they are willing to negotiate and accommodate. Also, there must be sufficient time to work out logistics, a willingness to commit resources, and the ability to persist throughout implementation.

The benefits are manifold. Collaboration provides an opportunity to compare perspectives, establish benchmarks, build peer networks, increase organizational learning, anticipate possible problems and generate proposed solutions, extend influence, validate existing practices, and expose staff to innovations. Partnerships offer many of the same advantages, but they also allow the participants to share risk as well as to maximize their combined leverage and strengths. Working with a partner also helps to keep unrealistic expectations about impact in check and to overcome institutional myopia.

When the conditions for effective relationships are not present, even the best efforts are likely to founder. Foundation staff should embark on partnerships, especially, only after carefully assessing that the conditions for a successful relationship exist; otherwise, the initiative can lead to frustration, wasted resources, and a burden for all involved.

Foundation staff should embark on partnerships only after carefully assessing that the conditions for a successful relationship exist.

Table 1. Conditions and Benefits of Effective Relationships Among Foundations\*

	Conditions for Effectiveness:	Benefits:
<b>Collaboration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong personal relationships among staff from different foundations</li> <li>• Institutional openness to outside ideas</li> <li>• Common organizational interests</li> <li>• Appreciation of other funders' constraints, mutual respect</li> <li>• Organizational support for staff to engage in collaborative activities</li> <li>• Low staff turnover</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develops a comparative perspective on foundations, provides benchmarks</li> <li>• Establishes peer networks</li> <li>• Fosters organizational learning</li> <li>• Helps anticipate possible foundation problems, consider proposed solutions</li> <li>• Extends organization's influence</li> <li>• Reassures confidence in existing practices</li> <li>• Exposes staff to innovations*</li> </ul>
<b>Partnerships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear mutual goals</li> <li>• Honesty regarding foundation interests and decisionmaking authority</li> <li>• Institutional willingness to negotiate and accommodate</li> <li>• Sufficient time for working out logistics</li> <li>• Willingness to commit resources</li> <li>• Persistence throughout implementation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared risk</li> <li>• Mutual learning</li> <li>• Larger overall investments</li> <li>• Greater leverage for each partner</li> <li>• Multiple perspectives can check unrealistic expectations of impact, overcome institutional myopia</li> <li>• Draws on different strengths of partners, which can lead to better project</li> </ul>

\*Backer (2004), Bernholz (2004), Buhl (1991), Gates Foundation (2002), Hamilton (2002), Isaacs and Rodgers (2001), La Piana (2001), Mofson (2002), Sharp (2002), and the Council on Foundations (2000) were the primary written sources for this list.

Joint working relationships, whether collaborations or partnerships, require exceptions in foundation routines.

# The Downside to Collaboration

Even when the conditions for an effective collaboration exist, the benefits are not assured. Indeed, experience from the field shows that the risks and barriers can be considerable. Collaboration often takes more time, staff effort, and organizational support than expected. Joint working relationships can require exceptions in foundation routines, distract staff with passing fads with little true relevance to a foundation's work, and expose foundation practices to a wider array of critics. Because of the risks, many experienced foundation staff counsel caution in embarking on collaborative efforts. The greater the formality of the relationship, the more caution is advised.

Among the issues that can cause collaborative efforts to falter are funders' unique decisionmaking processes, grantmaking approaches, and organizational cultures. Few foundations have the special internal capacity to support the work—including the administrative systems, designated staff, decisionmaking mechanisms, or the methods to assess the consequences for applicants and grantees. Reaching agreement on specific goals and implementation plans can be an arduous process. "Potential partners quickly realize how very difficult cooperation is, once they start negotiating the exact structure of a cooperative venture and the exact nature of their common interests" (Reinicke, 1997, p. 98). What may appear a common goal can be broad enough to encompass quite different conceptions of specific activities. Reaching formal agreements may be unusually difficult for foundations because the language foundations typically use is vague, open to interpretation, and may obfuscate real differences in understanding and expectations. Mundane issues like placement of logos, inconsistent reporting requirements, or perceived credit for jointly funded projects can cause problems.

One difficulty in assessing collaborations is that they are typically viewed in a favorable light, but the costs are largely invisible. For example, most observers acknowledge privately that collaboration can require more staff time, slow down activities, reduce flexibility, be difficult to manage, and dilute the clarity of purpose for an initiative. Yet, with few exceptions (such as Kitzi, 1997, and Schambra, 2003), published reports about collaborations tend to focus on the benefits and neglect the downsides.

The costs of collaboration are largely invisible.

# How Foundations Collaborate

Collaboration among foundations takes many forms. To make sense out of the array, we have identified three general types of collaboration based on their structure and the roles the participating organizations play:

- Foundations play the same role
- Foundations play complementary roles
- Foundation collaboration is managed by an outside organization.

The three types of collaboration highlight the structural aspects of foundation relationships, but by no means capture the variation of collaborative activities underway in the field. The intent is to help organize the plethora of examples around their major structural features.

## Similar Roles

In many collaborations, the participating foundations play essentially the same role. For example, staff from the W. K. Kellogg and David and Lucile Packard Foundations met at each other's offices for two days to compare strategies to strengthen the nonprofit sector and explored topics such as due diligence and evaluation. Similarly, the Rockefeller Foundation and California Endowment held a joint meeting focused on information technology and health and potential applications to underserved populations. The discussions led to programs to improve the health of agricultural workers on both sides of the California-Mexico border. In the youth policy area, the William T. Grant Foundation has partnered with the Jacob Foundation in Europe to share expertise regarding the youth policies of different countries. The two philanthropies jointly funded projects after reviewing proposals and budgets together.

Some foundations meet together periodically to exchange experiences in working on common issues. In our interviews, several foundation CEOs reported that they meet with others from the same region to discuss common challenges and issues in leading their foundations. These sessions are one of the few opportunities to talk with peers about difficult issues in a safe, confidential setting.

In other cases, various types of managerial staff set up joint meetings to discuss ways of tracking proposals as well as information, evaluation and grant management systems, communications and human resources issues. Foundation staff typically enjoy these gatherings—after all, who better to share professional experience with than counterparts from other foundations with similar responsibilities and interest? Colleagues from other foundations are often the only peer group.

In many collaborations, funders look to a peer's successful practice and then adapt it to their own needs and circumstances. For example, the Meadows Foundation in Dallas, Texas, established a "campus," the Wilson Historic District, for local nonprofit grantees. Encouraged by their example, other funders such as the Seacoast Health Foundation in Maine have picked up the idea and established a similar home for nonprofits.

## Complementary Roles

In a second form of collaboration, each foundation has a unique role that builds on what it does well. In many ways it is similar to a potluck supper. Coordination is needed so that everyone does not bring dessert (although that would not be all bad), and allows each guest to prepare whatever he or she does best—an appetizer, entrée, salad, etc.

An example of this type of collaboration is the California Wellness Foundation's Violence Prevention Initiative. Eight local funders played the role of supporting an agency to start a new program, allowing work to begin quickly in 18 communities and almost doubling the size of the initiative. In another example, the W. K. Kellogg and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundations collaborated on the Turning Point Program to strengthen public health departments (Isaacs and Rodgers, 2001). In this initiative, Kellogg provided grants to local health departments and Johnson supported state health departments. The program took advantage of each funder's strengths—Kellogg's expertise in community work and developing local leadership, and Johnson's focus on policy and state level programs.

## Collaborations Managed by Outside Organizations

In a third type of collaboration, a third-party organization (not a foundation) manages the collaborative activities of foundations. (For an in-depth discussion of intermediary organizations, see *Toward More Effective Use of Intermediaries* by Peter L. Szanton in the *Practice Matters* series at [www.fdncenter.org/for\\_grantmakers/practice\\_matters](http://www.fdncenter.org/for_grantmakers/practice_matters).) In this arrangement, foundations can be major sponsors or simply event participants. The distinctive feature is the role of a third-party organization.

In many collaborations, funders look to a peer's successful practice and then adapt it for their own needs and circumstances.

Mediating organizations can take on many roles to aid foundation collaboration.

The mediating organizations can form around a:

- Substantive area of grantmaking, such as services for the elderly
- Geography, such as regional associations of grantmakers (RAGs)
- Foundation functions, such as program evaluation.

Often established by a group of funders to meet their common information needs, the mediating organizations can vary from large membership associations to small consultative entities. Their roles range from sponsoring meetings and serving as an information resource to taking leadership and catalyzing major advances in a field. (Some view affinity groups and other networking opportunities as distinct from foundation collaboration. While this is a growing and increasingly diverse field—see [geofunders.org](http://geofunders.org), “Managing the Field of Funding Networking”—these venues are fertile ground for extensive informal collaboration.)

In financial terms, the biggest example of this type of collaboration is Living Cities (formerly the National Community Development Initiative), which was established to increase the stock of low-income housing. It has a large number of funders (currently 17), a long history (it began in 1991), and it receives large grants (millions of dollars from each funder; see [livingcities.org](http://livingcities.org) for an overview). One participating funder noted that Living Cities is a real test of a foundation’s willingness to fund an activity that is not directly on its agenda in exchange for the benefits of collaboration and the learning achieved through it.

Three more examples are the Grantmakers Income Security Taskforce (GIST), Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO), and the Evaluation Roundtable. One GIST role is to reduce the likelihood of two large-scale funders working on similar initiatives without being aware of each other, thus avoiding potentially embarrassing and inefficient duplication. Other functions include:

- Helping new program staff enter the field
- Simplifying reconnaissance of current work
- Helping funders understand how their projects fit into the larger context of funding in the field.

Founded in 1997, GEO has quickly become a useful resource for many foundation staff. Its listserv has become an efficient way to gather information on specific organizational practices from the more than 500 participants (representing more than 340 organizations) with experience in grantmaking. Recent queries include experiences with technical assistance grants, surveys of grantee attitudes on foundation processes and

operations, and use of faculty from nearby universities as consultants to provide technical assistance.

The Evaluation Roundtable is a peer network structured around the practices of evaluation. Several funders with evaluation staff support the network to help them think about the roles of evaluation as well as learn through a case study approach how evaluation is used in other organizations.



# A Special Case: National and Local Foundations Working Together

In our scan of philanthropic collaboration, the extensive relationships among large, mostly national foundations and local foundations stood out as the most important and intriguing set of relationships in American philanthropy. The W. K. Kellogg Foundation, Lilly Endowment, Inc., David and Lucile Packard Foundation, California Endowment, Kansas Health Foundation, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, James Irvine Foundation, Ford Foundation, California Wellness Foundation, and Charles Stewart Mott Foundation are among the large funders that have programs with local funders.

The growth of local–national funder relationships is driven by the philanthropic focus on issues such as education, health, social services, the environment, and economic development that are important on regional as well as the federal policy agendas. The growth is also consistent with American preferences for decentralized power and strong beliefs in the value of self-reliance in addressing community issues. We envision an increasingly prominent role for these relationships, in what might be called “foundation federalism.” The private sector will need to develop an analog to the devolution trend seen in the public sector. Community foundations’ understanding of local practices and delivery systems will be increasingly important for national foundations whose programs rely on effective local organizations.

Some of these local–national collaborations are built around specific topics, but others have emerged as part of national foundation missions to strengthen the philanthropic infrastructure. Examples include Lilly Endowment support of community foundations in every Indiana county, and Kellogg Foundation support of the Michigan Community Foundations’ Youth Project. In addition, several other funders, such as the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, and the Northwest Area Foundation, have chosen, either on the basis of their mission or for strategic reasons, to work with local foundations in selected communities for a long period of time.

Local and national funders bring complementary resources to these relationships. Local foundations, which include community foundations,

We envision an increasingly prominent role for local–national funder relationships, in what might be called “foundation federalism.”

bring financial resources but also important knowledge about local politics and the nonprofit sector. This local knowledge is a resource that national funders value; it helps assure that a project is consistent with local values and practices. Community foundations can act as liaisons between national funders and the local stakeholders, dampening community concerns that big outside foundations are imposing their agendas. Large national, regional, or state-level funders bring money and networks of national expertise to these collaborations.

However, these very real benefits are balanced by risks. As one observer noted, “all of these [relationships] are two-edged swords.” One risk for large funders lies in the variation among local foundations. Some may have limited capacity, and others may bring an incomplete or even biased understanding of the communities in which they operate. When there are multiple local funders, national funders can have trouble figuring out how they relate to each other (are they in competition?) and what roles they play in the community.

A risk for local funders, especially community foundations, is the orientation of the national funders. Some large funders view relationships with community foundations mainly as a funder–grantee relationship, while the community foundations often seek more of a partnership. This set of mixed expectations was documented in assessments of the Irvine Foundation’s Community Foundations Initiative (*Irvine Quarterly*, 2001) and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Local Initiatives Funding Partners Program (Stevens and Peikes, 2001).

The perceived power difference can generate difficulty in local–national relationships. One large national foundation staff member noted, “Community foundations perceive private foundations as holding more of the cards. While we get tons of value from working with them, the money flows in one direction. We have to go to extraordinary lengths to create true partnerships.” From the other perspective, a community foundation staff member noted that, when working with a national foundation, “You’re always looking over your shoulder,” implying concerns that the local foundations’ work may be judged harshly, or that the national funder may not continue support. Sometimes such relationships never get off the ground, and local funders can find themselves “holding the bag” if a national foundation decides not to fund a project important to the local community.

Identifying and developing a project can start locally or nationally. When the project starts at the local level, the ideas emerge from the people and organizations in the community, and are thus presumed to fit with the local situation. In other cases, a national funder selects a topic and tries to influence local funders to devote time and resources to the topic. Both approaches can be helpful. For example, the Ford Foundation’s work on HIV allowed some community foundations to begin activities for people with HIV well before their communities would have done so on their own. The Robert Wood Johnson’s Local Initiatives Funding Partners

Local knowledge is a resource that national funders value; it helps assure that a project is consistent with local values and practices.

Program, in which local funders nominate the projects, has been a more grassroots approach (Wielawski, 1999).

National foundations and local foundations have important differences that affect their relationships. One difference is that community foundations have no exit from an activity in the sense that they will be operating in the same place, with the same people, and the same organizations; they have to live with the long-term consequences of their decisions. Meanwhile, national foundations wrestle with the question of how to sustain projects after their own funding commitments are over, but they have the freedom to fund a project for a period of time and then leave that locale.

Another difference is that community foundations, in particular, have “walked in the shoes” of nonprofit grantseekers. Community foundations have experience in fundraising, and thus they are in the unusual position of looking at the grantmaking enterprise from both sides. This gives community foundations a better appreciation of applicants’ views.

Staff expertise is one area where perceived differences between local and national funders are disappearing. One observer noted that, until the last decade, national foundations were viewed as the primary source of expertise but that is changing. “Big national foundations used to be viewed as where the action is; now there is lots more expertise in local funders.”

“Big national foundations used to be viewed as where the action is; now there is lots more expertise in local funders.”

## Conclusion

The decision to collaborate should begin with the mission and purpose of your foundation. This implies that advice about engaging in collaborative activities is contingent on each foundation's situation. As Prager has noted, "A major implication of the independence, diversity, and decentralization of the field of philanthropy is that, while it may be possible and useful to develop common frameworks and guidelines for the field, each foundation will have to develop standards, performance criteria, and assessment strategies that best suit its particular situation" (1999, p. 2). The field's diversity also means that on many issues foundations are as likely to be adversaries as allies. For example, environmental regulation is a contentious national policy issue that has found the National Environmental Trust (funded by Pew Charitable Trusts) and the Joint Center for Regulatory Studies (funded by the Smith Richardson Foundation) on opposite sides (Fialka, 2002).

Collaboration should not be an objective in and of itself; it is simply a tool that foundations can use to pursue their program goals. As such, it is important to assess both the potential costs and the benefits of engaging in collaborative activities, especially for more formal and structured efforts such as partnerships. These require more organizational resources than informal collaborations such as learning and networking, and hence deserve more attention to the potential costs.

Foundation collaboration has received much attention in recent years (Council on Foundations, 2003). The generally positive tone used to describe collaborations (e.g., Richardson, 1998; Mahoney, 1999; Beresford, 1999) can convey unintentionally that these activities are almost always worthwhile. In fact, the behavior of foundations does not reflect this view. A recent Urban Institute study found that even among foundations that say it is important to collaborate with external groups, 41 percent had not participated in a formal co-funding arrangement in the past two years (Ostrower, 2004). Nevertheless, most foundations do view collaboration as important to their effectiveness, and most organizational learning grows out of collaborations of one sort or another.

The future of collaboration among foundations may look quite different than it does today. The factors that changed the landscape from a decade ago—number and size of foundations, the internet, adoption of business practices, search for effectiveness, public policy scrutiny—continue to unfold. These factors may combine with new forms of philanthropy, such as pooled investment trusts, to transform parts of the sector, including the relationships among foundations (Bernholz, 2004).

Most foundations view collaboration as important to their effectiveness, and most organizational learning grows out of collaboration.

## Endnotes

1. Other sources use different definitions. For example, the seminal review of research on collaboration written by Mattessich et al. (2001) and published by the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation defines collaboration more restrictively as “a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals.”
2. Note that I have used the definition of partnership by Mattessich, et al.: “An association of two or more who contribute money or property to carry on a joint business and who share profits or losses.” The concept is largely consistent with the idea of a legal partnership. See Proscio (2001) for a discussion of the abuse of the word “partnership” by nonprofit organizations.

# Appendix

## People Interviewed (as of 2003)

**John Bare**

Director of Program Development Evaluation  
John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

**Lucy Bernholz**

President  
Blueprint Research & Design, Inc.

**Elizabeth Bremner**

President  
The Foundation Incubator

**Martha S. Campbell**

Director of Program Development and Evaluation  
The James Irvine Foundation

**Tom David**

Executive Vice President  
California Wellness Foundation

**Tom Deans**

Senior Vice President  
New Hampshire Charitable Foundation  
President  
Northern New Hampshire Foundation

**Mark Greenberg**

Senior Staff Attorney  
Center for Law and Social Policy

**Paul Harder**

President  
Harder & Co. Community Research

**Karen Hein**

President  
William T. Grant Foundation

**Marguerite Johnson**

Vice President for Programs  
W. K. Kellogg Foundation

**Barbara Kibbe**

Director of the Organizational Effectiveness and Philanthropy Program  
David and Lucile Packard Foundation

**Alicia Lara**

Vice President of Program  
The California Endowment

**Carol Lukas**

Director of National Services  
Amherst H. Wilder Foundation

**Frances N. Phillips**

Senior Program Officer, The Arts  
Walter and Elise Haas Fund

**Tom Reis**

Program Director  
W. K. Kellogg Foundation

**Pauline Seitz**

Director, Local Initiative Funding Partners  
Health Research and Educational Trust of New Jersey  
Deputy Directors, Ted Hardgrove and Sandy Lopacki

**Christopher Stone**

Director, Vera Institute of Justice

**Anna Wadia**

Director of Program, Economic Security  
Ms. Foundation for Women

**Gene Wilson**

Senior Vice President  
Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation

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