

Collaborative Funding for Greater Impact: A Case Study of the Cincinnati Experience

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE SOCIAL INNOVATION FUND

INTRODUCTION

“No single organization is responsible for any major social problem, nor can any single organization cure it.”

– John Kania and Mark Kramer ¹

Good things are happening in Greater Cincinnati, Ohio. More children are entering kindergarten ready to learn. Cincinnati’s public school district has become the highest-rated urban school district in the state. And the region’s colleges and universities are seeing marked improvements in student retention, degree completion and the numbers of credentials they award each year.²

Much work remains, but community leaders and local residents are justifiably proud of the improvements they are seeing in student outcomes across the region. They also are proud that the gains have coincided with a determined effort to unite the community behind a set of shared goals for strengthening student success.

Greater Cincinnati–area grantmakers have played a crucial role in the collaborative effort, joining together to align their investments for the greater good.

“As a mid-sized city, we are large enough to have many good-sized foundations but small enough to have a tight network of people and organizations working on these issues,” said Helen Mattheis, program director for education and human services with the Greater Cincinnati Foundation. “No one foundation has the ability or the money to do this work on its own, so we rely on each other to leverage our dollars.”

In this guide, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations explores Cincinnati’s recent experience with grantmaker collaboration, with a focus on the Strive Partnership and the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky Social Innovation Fund. The intent is to identify lessons for other communities and other grantmakers interested in what it takes to make these types of collaboratives succeed. GEO hopes that the practices shared in this guide will help grantmakers weigh how best to join with others to amplify their impact and support nonprofits in more coordinated ways.

¹ John Kania and Mark Kramer, “Collective Impact,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 9.1 (2011): 36 – 41.

² For complete data, see the Strive Partnership, “Partnership Report: Every Child. Every Step of the Way. Cradle to Career,” 2011, www.strivetgether.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/2011-Strive-Partnership-Report1.pdf.

From the Strive Partnership to the Social Innovation Fund

One of the most successful collaborations in Cincinnati's recent history, the Strive Partnership began after local college and university presidents came together in 2005 to explore how to do a better job helping youth living in the urban core succeed in college. Strive eventually came to involve a wide range of community institutions that were united in supporting "every child, every step of the way, cradle to career."

Strive partners include local grantmakers, corporations, school systems, colleges and universities and nonprofits ranging from the Urban League to the YMCA. The partnership is working toward a set of five consensus goals (with progress tracked by accompanying success measures) in areas from improving early childhood education to increasing college enrollment and graduation rates.

The Strive Partnership's goals and measures, in turn, became the basis for Cincinnati's application to the federal government's Social Innovation Fund grant competition. Among the partners in the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky Social Innovation Fund are more than a dozen local funders (including private, corporate, family

and community foundations and the local United Way). These funders are using a grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service to build a larger base of support for local organizations engaged in everything from improving the quality of child care to supporting first-generation college students (see next page for more).

"Funding collaboratives have come naturally to this grantmaking community. We know how to turn to each other so we can have a greater impact on the issues we care about," said Mike Baker, director of the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky Social Innovation Fund.

According to Baker, the availability of federal funds to supplement local dollars was key in attracting collaborating funders to the Social Innovation Fund project. "There is a lot of energy in Cincinnati around these issues and a lot of interest in what it takes to really make a difference in young people's lives," he said. "We sold the idea of these federal funds as a catalyst and as a match for the local support."

About the Social Innovation Fund

The Social Innovation Fund is an initiative of the federal government's Corporation for National and Community Service intended to improve the lives of people in low-income U.S. communities. It does so by mobilizing public and private resources to grow promising, innovative, community-based solutions that have evidence of compelling impact in three areas of priority need: economic opportunity, healthy futures and youth development.

The Social Innovation Fund awards funds to grantmaking institutions ("intermediaries"), which provide the grantmaking mechanisms to deliver Social Innovation Fund dollars locally. Such organizations have a track record of identifying, supporting and investing in the growth of promising community-based solutions. Each intermediary is required

to match its federal grant dollar for dollar, in cash, and then regrant the funding to "subgrantee" organizations it has selected through an open and competitive process.

The subgrantees selected by the intermediaries must operate programs to improve measurable outcomes in one or more of the fund's designated issue areas and are required to generate a dollar-for-dollar cash match for their grants. As a result, the Social Innovation Fund provides leverage by aggregating philanthropic and government resources so that the most effective approaches can be expanded to reach more people in need and key lessons can be captured and broadly shared.

To learn more, visit www.NationalService.gov/Innovation.

The Cincinnati/ Northern Kentucky Social Innovation Fund at a Glance

Goal: To provide catalytic support — both grant funding and capacity-building services — to scale up effective organizations and programs that can move the needle on key community outcomes for young people.

Lead partners: The United Way of Greater Cincinnati and the Strive Partnership. The Strive Partnership is a cradle-to-career coalition of education, business, philanthropic, nonprofit and parent leaders committed to improving student achievement in the region. Founded in 2006, the Strive Partnership has rallied around eight priority outcomes, from kindergarten readiness to postsecondary completion. Among the keys to the partnership's work: coordinated advocacy, funding alignment and data-driven decision-making. For more information about the Strive Partnership, visit www.strivetogether.org.

Collaborating funders:

- ▷ Duke Energy Foundation
- ▷ The Thomas J. Emery Memorial
- ▷ The Greater Cincinnati Foundation
- ▷ The Carol Ann and Ralph V. Haile, Jr./U.S. Bank Foundation
- ▷ The Andrew Jergens Foundation
- ▷ KnowledgeWorks
- ▷ JPMorgan Chase Foundation

- ▷ The Daniel and Susan Pfau Foundation
- ▷ The P&G Fund (Procter and Gamble)
- ▷ SC Ministry Foundation
- ▷ Jacob G. Schmidlapp Trust (Fifth Third Bank, Trustee)
- ▷ The Strive Partnership
- ▷ Toyota
- ▷ United Way of Greater Cincinnati
- ▷ The Craig Young Family Foundation

Federal Social Innovation Fund award:

\$2 million over two years.

Sample subgrantees:

- ▷ The Consortium for Resilient Young Children (The Children's Home of Cincinnati) — connecting child care centers and mental health providers to care for children's social and emotional development through their earliest years.
- ▷ Holmes 180 (Covington Independent Public Schools) — transforming the Holmes High School campus to ensure that students can graduate with college credit and with skills that can help them attain employment.
- ▷ Bridging the Gap (Cincinnati Arts and Technology Center) — connecting youth graduating from high school with entry-level employment in the health care industry.

For more information, visit www.cincysif.org.

Creating and Strengthening Your Own Collaborative: Takeaways from Cincinnati

What does it take to bring together a diverse group of local and regional grantmakers to design and implement a consensus plan for moving forward on issues of shared concern? Here are some of the takeaways from GEO's conversations with some of the key players in the Strive Partnership and the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky Social Innovation Fund.

Leverage challenges and opportunities to collaborate. A key lesson from Greater Cincinnati is a willingness on the part of local and regional grantmakers to capitalize on crises as well as unforeseen positive opportunities.

The Strive Partnership, for example, had its roots in an earlier collaboration launched after a police shooting of an unarmed local black youth in 2001 prompted several days of riots in the city. In response to the crisis, 15 foundations and corporations came together to support a wide-ranging initiative called Better Together Cincinnati. The BTC partnership supported programs aimed at increasing educational and economic opportunities for people of color, in addition to enhanced police training.

A March 2011 evaluation of the effort noted that BTC laid the groundwork for further collaboration among Cincinnati grantmakers and others: "Today, following the BTC example, an impressive group of collaborations has been formed to address the city's core problems, with an emphasis on longer-term systemic changes."³

Another successful funder collaborative in Greater Cincinnati emerged in response to the economic recession that descended on the city and the rest of the country in late 2008. The Weathering the Economic Storm funding partnership, which the Greater Cincinnati Foundation manages on behalf of more than a dozen funders, has awarded more than \$4.3 million to 116 organizations.⁴

Grants from the partnership have supported everything from foreclosure counseling to emergency food assistance for local residents affected by the recession.

Create a unifying vision. The funders participating in the Strive Partnership and the local Social Innovation Fund initiative share an interest in achieving impact across a specific set of outcomes for young people. Some may be more focused on early childhood issues, while others target their work on college completion or the transition from college to careers.

But the cradle-to-career vision at the heart of both collaborative efforts has brought a core group of funders together in the belief that they can achieve more impact through a unified approach to these issues than they can by working alone.

"Everyone agrees this is about the kids and about the continuum of support they need to succeed in life," said Mattheis of the Greater Cincinnati Foundation.

"This community knows where it needs to make improvements and is prepared to leverage greater resources for the programs that are working," added Jeff Edmondson, president of the national Strive Network and former executive director of the Cincinnati Strive

³ Cornerstone Consulting Group, "Cincinnati in Black & White: Better Together Cincinnati — A Decade Later," 2011, 3.

⁴ For more information, see the Greater Cincinnati Foundation, "Weathering the Economic Storm: A Collaborative Response to the Economic Crisis," 2011, www.gcfndn.org/CommunityLeadership/HumanServices/WeatheringtheEconomicStorm/tabid/275/Default.aspx.

Partnership. “The Social Innovation Fund project was an opportunity to continue — and accelerate — a lot of the work we were already doing.”

Make it a true collaborative. The United Way of Greater Cincinnati applied to the Social Innovation Fund as an intermediary, with the Strive Partnership as an “implementation partner,” meaning that both groups share project responsibilities under the grant award. Together with four additional funders, the United Way and the Strive Partnership collectively committed nearly \$600,000 to the work. After the Corporation for National and Community Service awarded \$2 million to the United Way for the project, several additional funders joined the collaborative, each investing at least \$25,000.

Although the project is managed by the United Way and the Strive Partnership, funders participated in hiring a director to run it. “We decided that the director needed to report to everybody,” said Leslie Maloney, who represents the Carol Ann and Ralph V. Haile, Jr./U.S. Bank Foundation on the oversight committee for the project.

From the start, the participating funders opted for a truly collaborative, shared leadership approach wherein all funders can play an active part in everything from setting strategy to selecting subgrantees. Baker said such an approach helps ensure that the work is sustainable because “there is a sense of ownership and partnership among local funders and the projects we are supporting.”

Each of the contributing grantmakers gets one vote in all decisions regardless of its investment size. The oversight committee, which includes one representative from each of the contributing organizations, meets regularly and provides strategic direction for the project.

“We push and pull each other at times, but it is always a respectful conversation because everyone supports the vision and the goals of the work we’re doing,” Maloney said.

Mattheis said the oversight committee works on the assumption that all members have “delegated authority” to make decisions on their organizations’ behalf. “This means they don’t have to take decisions back to their boards and slow down the process,” she explained.

Maximize funder participation. Members of the oversight committee for the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky Social Innovation Fund are intimately involved in all crucial decisions, from the selection of the director to the review of proposals. In addition, the collaborative has created a wealth of other opportunities for grantmakers to participate in the work of the group.

During the subgrantee selection process, for example, the oversight committee created eight teams of three people each to review proposals from organizations it selected as finalists. Each team included an oversight committee representative, an “at-large” representative of a participating grantmaker, and an evaluation expert from a local university, consulting firm or other organization. Each application was reviewed by two of the teams, with teams using a common rating system to score proposals. As part of their review, members of the teams also went on site visits to the finalist organizations.

To spur a still higher level of grantmaker engagement in the ongoing work of the collaborative, the oversight committee created subcommittees to focus on a range of issues, from communications to evaluation. According to Baker, the subcommittee on communications has overseen the collaborative’s media outreach and branding efforts, video projects and more. A separate subcommittee was tasked with developing policies and plans for providing technical assistance to subgrantees as well as for assessing their current capacity in critical management and operational areas.

In yet another effort to engage grantmakers as active participants in the work of the collaborative, the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky Social Innovation Fund assigned a funder liaison to each subgrantee organization. Baker explained that the liaison serves as the “lead partner” for the subgrantee, attending key meetings, reviewing plans for technical assistance and serving as a resource for the organization’s leaders.

“This brings another voice to the table and helps make it so that everything isn’t coming through me,” Baker said.

Be clear about your expectations of participating funders. The Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky Social Innovation Fund operates according to the premise that participating funders bring more to this work than their grant checks. “We make it absolutely clear that we want everyone to be engaged and we want their input on decisions,” Baker said.

At the same time, however, there is a recognition among the participants that some of them will have more time to contribute to the collaborative’s work than others. Despite a determined effort to maximize opportunities for grantmaker engagement, the structure of the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky Social Innovation Fund allows for different levels of involvement on the part of different funders.

“We could have said that we want everyone at 80 percent of the meetings, but we didn’t,” said Baker. In practice, for this type of collaborative to work successfully, less-engaged funders who cannot attend every meeting need to trust the group and thus be willing to accept decisions made by others.

Share the credit. At the start, Cincinnati’s Social Innovation Fund effort was closely associated with the United Way. When the Corporation for National and Community Service announced the grant award, the

United Way was the only partner listed in news reports. Having a lead partner so much in the limelight can be a problem for grantmaker collaboratives, as other participants are eager to share credit for the larger group’s activities and success.

Over time, the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky Social Innovation Fund developed its own identity, and all collaborating funders are listed in all communications. “We want to tell a broader story about this as a partnership,” Baker said of the project’s communications goals.

Today, the project has its own branding, including a website (www.cincysif.org), logo and letterhead. Baker said he is very intentional about ensuring that all funders have opportunities to be a part of the communications for the initiative. When the project held a press event to announce its subgrantees, for example, a different funder representative introduced each one. In addition, a video about the project features representatives of the collaborating funders as narrators and in interviews to make sure that the partnership, not just the United Way, gets the attention it deserves.

Make it a learning community. High-performing grantmakers regularly use data and feedback from grantees and community members to continually assess and improve their work. The Greater Cincinnati experience shows that the same goes for strong grantmaker collaboratives.

From the start of the Strive Partnership, an important focus for the Cincinnati partners was using data to drive decision making and continuous improvement in youth outcomes in the region. The Strive Partnership releases annual report cards that capture the city’s progress according to 54 indicators of success.⁵

Building on Strive’s work, the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky Social Innovation Fund places a premium on data and measurement. The request for proposals for subgrantees stated it clearly: “The Social Innovation Fund is particularly interested in supporting and rewarding organizations with a demonstrated history and

⁵ For more information, see the Strive Partnership, “Striving Together Report Card,” www.strivetgether.org/education-results-resource/striving-together-report-card/.

commitment to using data to ... continuously improve program and organizational performance.” As part of the project, subgrantees receive technical assistance focused on developing and implementing a rigorous continuous improvement process.⁶

“When we are finished, the idea is that all of these organizations, funders and nonprofits alike, will have experience using evidence to inform decisions,” Edmondson said.

At the same time, the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky Social Innovation Fund has been careful to ensure that its emphasis on data collection and evidence does not pose an undue burden on subgrantees and project staff. To streamline the project’s own reporting, for example, participating funders have agreed to accept the progress reports that Baker prepares for the Corporation for National and Community Service as their grantee reports.

“The idea was to make sure that my position is not overwhelmed with having to do financial and progress reports for 15 different partners,” said Baker.

Evaluation is not the only aspect of the collaborative that is driving grantmaker learning. Mattheis said that participating in the subgrantee selection process alongside other funders generated a lot of new ideas about how the Greater Cincinnati Foundation might strengthen its own application and due diligence processes.

Maloney added that she has developed a much sharper sense from this work of what it takes to increase the impact of successful community solutions for young people. In particular, she said she now understands what kinds of technical assistance and other support nonprofits need to use data effectively to drive decisions and impact. “This work has been a real eye-opener when it comes to providing nonprofits with what they truly need to succeed,” she said.

CONCLUSION

When faced with a crisis or a tremendous opportunity, like the chance to apply for a federal Social Innovation Fund award, the grantmakers in Greater Cincinnati put in the time and hard work to design a collaborative approach to growing impact. Recognizing that no one organization had the capacity or the money to fully address pressing community challenges, these funders leveraged their relationships and resources to arrive at and achieve shared goals.

Other grantmakers in other communities might find the work of forming these types of collaboratives challenging at first. Greater Cincinnati has a long history as a breeding ground for partnerships among grantmakers and other local institutions, and even there it has not been smooth sailing all the way. The message from the Cincinnati experience, however, is that grantmakers who don’t give up on their collaborative efforts and who ride out the bumps can accomplish remarkable things for the communities they serve.

⁶ For more information on evaluation and learning capacity, see GEO’s briefing paper series *Reframing the Conversation on Growing Social Impact*, www.scalingwhatworks.org.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For additional resources on funder collaboratives, check out the “Useful Links” in the Resources section of our website: www.scalingwhatworks.org.

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This publication was written for GEO by
William H. Woodwell Jr.
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Grantmakers for Effective Organizations
1725 DeSales St., NW, Suite 404 / Washington, DC 20036
Tel: 202.898.1840 / Fax: 202.898.0318
Web: www.geofunders.org



About *Scaling What Works*

Launched in 2010, *Scaling What Works* is a multiyear learning initiative of Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, a thought leader for promoting grantee-centric philanthropic practices that lead to more effective results. With the support of a coalition of 22 funders, GEO aims to expand the number of grantmakers and public sector funders that are working together to broaden the impact of high-performing nonprofits. Through *Scaling What Works*, GEO offers training, networking opportunities and a host of tools and resources to better equip grantmakers to help the nonprofit organizations they support to plan, adapt and grow their impact in creating sustainable benefits for people, their communities and our planet.

For more information about GEO and *Scaling What Works*, please visit www.scalingwhatworks.org.



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