

Case in Brief No.6

PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE EDUCATION GRANTMAKING

Engaged Partners: The Achieving the Dream Partnership

PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE EDUCATION GRANTMAKING

Discipline & Focus	Knowledge	Resources Linked to Results	Effective Grantees	Engaged Partners	Leverage, Influence & Collaboration	Persistence	Innovation & Constant Learning
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“Engaged Partners” focuses on the decisions made by the creators of the Achieving the Dream initiative to build a broad and diverse range of stakeholders—including funders—who would take ownership of the problem of poor student success rates in community colleges.

The case study illustrates the virtues—and some pitfalls—of encouraging stakeholders with different agendas and missions to work together on a common problem and find common solutions. In doing so, the case study is intended to help grantmakers think more deeply about the concept of *engaged partners*, one of Grantmakers for Education's Principles for Effective Education Grantmaking.

Just four years after it began, Achieving the Dream—a nationwide initiative supported by a national funder, many local and regional funders, and national research and advocacy organizations—was well on the way toward its initial goal of creating a national movement focused on improving the success rates of minority and low-income community college students.

This growth generated difficult questions for Achieving the Dream's designers and funders: What impact would continued expansion have on the initiative's original design? Could one of the initiative's key engagement strategies—giving all partners and funders an equal voice in design and governance—be maintained? Was a new model of decision-making now necessary to sustain the work?

Conceived by Lumina Foundation for Education in late 2001, Achieving the Dream reflected the foundation's conclusion that improving student attainment in community colleges would be a key way to advance its mission of “expanding access >

to and success in post-secondary education in the United States.” Funded in 2000 by proceeds from a student-loan company asset sale, the foundation is among the nation’s largest, with more than \$1.5 billion in assets and paying out approximately \$50 million per year in grants.

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“Community colleges enroll almost half of the nation’s undergraduates, and the students they serve often have few other options for higher education,” explained Martha Lamkin, the foundation’s first president and CEO. However, while data showed that large numbers of low-income and minority students were enrolled at community colleges, “they were not succeeding at levels comparable to students from the majority group,” noted Samuel Cargile, senior director of grantmaking at the foundation.

Recognizing that they alone did not possess the expertise needed to define or address the problem of student attainment at community colleges, foundation leaders resolved from the beginning to engage other stakeholders in the design of Achieving the Dream.

To begin, in 2003 the foundation convened stakeholders—from organizations with a track record of working either with community colleges or with underserved students—to review its basic design for the initiative and identify barriers and opportunities. Eventually, the foundation selected eight of these organizations as partners and invited them to collectively determine the specific details of how Achieving the Dream would accomplish its goals.

“We wanted something in which our grantees would become so deeply invested that if we walked away from the work they would continue it without us,” explained Leah Austin, vice president of programs at the foundation. “Co-creation is the most basic principle when you want deep investment in social change.”

The partner organizations and Lumina Foundation crafted an initial theory of action for the initiative—which assumed a college could improve student attainment if it routinely used data analysis to diagnose, develop and implement strategies to address student success barriers—and they organized the initiative into five work strands:

- Promote and support institutional change at community colleges;
- Develop supportive public policies for community colleges;
- Engage the public to support all community college students’ access and success;
- Build knowledge about strengthening student outcomes at community colleges; and
- Enhance the capacity of national organizations to work long term for improved community-college student success.

Lumina Foundation designated \$11.8 million for the first round of community colleges grants in 2004. To inform the selection process, the partners identified a national pool of eligible colleges based on the enrollment of low-income students and/or students of color. And, given the initiative’s focus on promoting change both on community college campuses and in the

surrounding policy environment, the partners further narrowed the pool by seeking to work initially in a handful of “promising” states: Florida, New Mexico, North Carolina, Texas and Virginia. The partners selected 27 of the 60 colleges that eventually applied from these five states.

With this first round of grantmaking completed, the partners set out to recruit new funders who could support the participation of more community colleges in additional states in future rounds. From the start, Lumina Foundation had made it clear to its national partner organizations that it planned to fund the initiative’s infrastructure development, knowledge base, and initial round of colleges and lead organizations. “We sought other funders not only to expand the program but, even more importantly, to demonstrate to the partner organizations that their efforts would be rewarded by more than the Lumina Foundation,” remarked Austin.

The partners looked for ways in which the initiative complemented the work that prospective funders were already doing. They also emphasized the benefits of working with a national initiative for which the infrastructure was already built.

But working with new funders brought a new set of challenges: Accommodating special requests and the unique needs of each funder consumed significant time. Also, because an essential design principle for the initiative was that all key decisions would be made by consensus of the partners, the influx of more and more funders made day-to-day management and coordination more difficult.

By 2007—which was the last year the partners had originally planned to offer planning grants to community colleges—18 additional

Lessons learned

This case study—the full text of which is available at www.edfunders.org—suggests three important lessons for grantmakers seeking to increase their impact:

- **“Co-creation”—in which grantees and funders work side-by-side in creating a new change strategy and its components—can be an important element for creating engaged partners.** “The base of power, the base of intellect, the base of creativity had to be external to the Lumina Foundation,” argues the foundation’s Leah Meyer Austin. “We had to sow the seed somewhere else and grow the initiative’s base of support.” Even though Achieving the Dream is a large national initiative that involved dozens of funders and grantees, its lessons about co-creation at the front-end are applicable for smaller donors too.
- **Social change is complex—and more complex than what any one funder can control by itself.** And thus social change grantmaking initiatives need to be tackled creatively with multiple levers and multiple leverage points. And even if a funder can support only a few levers itself, it should seek to work in tandem with other funders who are committed to the same problem but using some of the other necessary levers.
- **Even while co-creation and collaboration can lead to more serious, engaged efforts at change, it also can bog down the work.** Collaboration creates up-front costs in time and effort spent in communicating and making decisions together. The process can often be frustrating, and a beneficial outcome is not assured. Similarly, a replication strategy that allows local autonomy and customization may also create more engaged partners—but it also creates possible transactional costs by complicating the work, slowing it down and perhaps diluting the original effort. Key questions to consider: Are the potential benefits likely to outweigh the costs? Are the reasons for collaborating and the expectations about the benefits clear?

fundes had signed on to support the initiative, nearly matching Lumina Foundation's investment dollar for dollar and supporting 84 colleges across 15 states. Of the \$100 million committed to the initiative since its beginning, \$56 million had come from Lumina Foundation and \$43 million had come from other funding partners.

When does a partnership get so large that it requires a new way of working?

Looking ahead, the partners were anxious to figure out how to adapt the existing model to accommodate more states, funders and community colleges.

Any expansion would require tough decisions about how to adjust the initiative's operating model, which had recently reached its capacity threshold. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to offer more

community colleges the same level of direct support; if Achieving the Dream were to grow, it would need to do so using fewer resources.

Another issue of concern was the growing number of partners who had an equal say in framing the direction of Achieving the Dream. With the influx of so many funders, some partners worried that building consensus on key decisions affecting the future of Achieving the Dream would grow increasingly difficult.

Austin wondered whether it would be necessary to consider a new form of governance for the initiative. "During the current demonstration phase, our collaborative governance model is what succeeded in building this movement for change that community colleges now seek to join," she said. "But when does a partnership get so large that it requires a new way of working?"

Drawn from the experience and wisdom of our members, GFE's Principles for Effective Education Grantmaking are designed to help strengthen philanthropy's capacity to improve educational outcomes for all students. Our series of accompanying case studies is designed to help donors, leaders and program staff reflect more deeply on what the principles mean for their own grantmaking, how to integrate them into their efforts and how to improve the results of their grants in education.

This Case in Brief provides a synopsis of an in-depth case study and the lessons it suggests for other education funders. We encourage you to review and consider the full text of the case study; free copies of it and others are available online at www.edfunders.org or by calling 503.595.2100. In addition, the case studies in this series are being taught at many of GFE's programs, and also can be taught in individualized settings by special arrangement.