

The Experiences of the Collaborative Funders' Table: A Learning Brief

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INTRODUCTION

Efforts to increase cooperation and coordination among funding agencies and philanthropic grantmakers have been at play for more than three decades (Winer and Ray 1994; Buhl 1991). The extent of this collaboration exists along a continuum – at one end funders come together to share information about a particular social issue or population group where they have a shared interest or investment. This exchange is often short lived and can be successful without much in terms of operational supports. Somewhere in the middle, are more involved funding partnerships, typically initiated by a single donor, who convinces other donors to invest in an area of common interest but where all parties continue to provide funding independently of each other. At the other end of the continuum, are more formal and extensive arrangements, where separate organizations come together in a new structure to pool their resources and make collective re-granting decisions. These funding collaboratives go beyond information sharing and coordinated investment to create a structure where participants contribute resources, expertise and reputation and share both the risks and the results (The Philanthropic Initiative 2015; Peterson 2002). The Calgary-based Collaborative Funders’ Table is an example of this kind of more fulsome and durable partnership.

In early 2014, several funders convened to discuss the idea of collectively supporting out-of-school time programming for vulnerable youth. Over the next four years, these funders designed and implemented a collaborative funding process that reduced individual risk and administrative burden; generated rich and trusting relationships; simplified the granting process for youth serving agencies; increased participation in programming by harder to serve youth; and, lay the foundation for continued and growing collaborative investments in Calgary.

PURPOSE OF THE LEARNING BRIEF

This learning brief is designed for grantmaking and other funding organizations engaged in or thinking about participating in a funding collaborative. It describes the CFT funding model and processes, highlights lessons learned and challenges that arose along the way and captures the impact and benefits of collaborative funding. The CFT members hope that sharing these experiences will help to inform other efforts to collectively increase the impact of investments in social change.

METHODS

This brief is based on findings from a developmental evaluation of the Collaborative Funders’ Table (CFT). The information presented here is drawn from:

- Interviews with CFT members and staff from funded agencies
- Field notes
- Resources related to collaborative funding
- The evaluator’s own reflections on the process

OVERVIEW OF THE PROCESS

The idea of collaborative funding to support out-of-school programming for vulnerable youth had been explored for many years before it took off in 2014. Initial dialogue among three funding agencies (the City of Calgary, the United Way of Calgary and Area (UWCA) and Burns Memorial Fund) grew out of the collective efforts to support afterschool programming for youth in 2008. The idea lost traction after the 2008 financial crisis but resurfaced in early 2014 when Burns Memorial Fund (BMF) and the City began to revisit the idea. In September 2014, BMF took the lead to bring together a group of funders to explore the idea more fully and move it to action.

The Collaborative Funders' Table evolved through four interconnected phases:

1. Initial Engagement
2. Collaborative Selection and Disbursement
3. Ongoing Oversight and Evaluation
4. Scaling – CFT 2.0

COMING TOGETHER – INITIAL ENGAGEMENT (6 MONTHS)

Building on a series of conversations with the City and the United Way, Burns Memorial Fund worked with the support of developmental evaluators to prepare a preliminary investment framework describing the purpose, high-level approach, potential target groups, anticipated outcomes, possible roles and principles for collaborative funding. This investment framework was key to initial engagement because it acted as an invitation to other funders to participate. It was well enough developed so that potential funding partners knew what they were getting into, while remaining sufficiently open to input and ideas from new partners as they came on board.

Through meetings and on-going dialogue, potential partners came to the table to explore further the preliminary ideas, surface constraints, and develop innovative ways to enable collaborative funding. By late 2014, there was a formal commitment from four organizations¹ to pool funds and collectively make granting decisions. Two of the four partners also brought other essential supports and resources to the table. These included:

- The City of Calgary contributed a .25 FTE Community Development Worker who supported funded agencies to gather data and complete reports for the CFT. The City also contributed data analysis supports from its research department
- Burns Memorial Fund took on all administration and grants management responsibilities for the CFT. BMF received funds from the other partners, entered into contracts with the CFT funded agencies, provided contractual oversight and disbursed funds according to the contracts

¹ The four members of the original Collaborative Funders' Table were Burns Memorial Fund, the City of Calgary – Community and Neighbourhood Services, the RBC Foundation and the United Way of Calgary. Another philanthropic partner who, because of internal grantmaking policies, was unable to pool its resources provided separate financial support for the developmental evaluation of the process over three years. This learning brief would not have been possible without those resources.

The partners finalized the investment framework to include a description of roles and responsibilities; governance structure; decision-making processes; overall intent and purpose; target groups; and four anticipated outcomes:

1. Increase participation of Calgary's vulnerable children and youth in high quality out-of-school programming (OSP) by increasing the quality and quantity of recreational and developmental programming throughout the city
2. Improve participants' social and emotional development
3. Build capacity of smaller organizations to design, deliver and evaluate programs that support social and emotional development among children and youth
4. Develop a model for collaborative funding to more effectively invest in out-of-school programming for vulnerable children and youth

COLLABORATIVE SELECTION OF AGENCIES AND DISBURSEMENT OF FUNDS (8 MONTHS)

Once the partners had committed to the idea of pooled funding and collaborative grantmaking, they worked together through the details of the grantmaking process. Through regular meetings and with the extensive administrative support from BMF, the four funding partners worked over the next six months to recruit and select youth serving agencies to design and deliver programming to achieve the CFT's intended outcomes. This included:

- Development of a letter of intent process and supporting documentation to recruit youth serving agencies
- Collective review and short list of letters of intent from interested agencies
- Development of a collaborative request for proposal process
- Development of a collaborative proposal review and decision-making process that involved all partners. This included individual ranking and then collective discussion and decision-making and finally selection of successful grantees.
- Development and signing of contracts with successful agencies
- Development of a collective evaluation framework and single-point reporting process for funded agencies

Much of the administrative burden of these processes was taken on by BMF, but when it came to proposal review, ranking and decision-making all partners took part in the process and had an equal say regardless of the amount of their contribution. When there were differences in opinion about funding and other supports, decisions were made by consensus, with voting as a last resort strategy.

ONGOING OVERSIGHT AND EVALUATION (34 MONTHS)

Over the next three years, the CFT partners pooled and disbursed \$720,000 to fund five unique programs delivering out-of-school programming to more than 300 vulnerable youth. Sixty percent (60%) of these youth had not previously taken part in any kind of out-of-school programming. Capacity building, learning, oversight and evaluation was achieved through the following strategies:

- Support to funded agencies from the Community Development Worker to gather baseline and follow-up data from participating youth. The City has an extensive evaluation system to capture and analyze data from youth in a range of programs. The CFT decided early in the process to use this system to support the evaluation of programs that it funded
- Interim and annual reporting by the grantees to the CFT
- Review and collective assessment of annual reports
- Collective decision-making about renewed funding to each agency
- Program site visits by CFT partners and the CDW
- Collaborative trouble shooting
- Learning and adaptation of evaluation and reporting processes
- Allocation of resources to strengthen grantees’ capacity to deliver evidence-based programming that supports social emotional learning in youth
- Supports to current grantees to connect with other sources for sustainable program funding

CFT partners met regularly (about every two months) throughout the process. They were supported by the Community Development Worker and a developmental evaluator to stay abreast of challenges, opportunities and promising practices emerging from the programs. As issues emerged the group was able to collectively strategize and course correct, helping the programs to address challenges related to youth recruitment and retention, staff capacities and evaluation methods. CFT partners were responsive to the funded programs, open to supporting new approaches to program delivery, staff capacity building and data collection from youth participants. Feedback from program staff suggests this responsiveness and flexibility helped to strengthen the CFT funded programs and introduced new thinking and practice to the agencies.

The CFT also remained nimble. In year two, the United Way was unable to renew its financial commitment. To fill this gap, the partners reached out to another funding agency and invited them to the table. The Calgary Foundation seamlessly joined the group, signed on to the MOU and contributed sufficient resources to cover the shortfall. The United Way stayed at the table to continue to learn about the process and was able to provide funding again to CFT 2.0

SCALING – DEVELOPING CFT 2.0 (8 MONTHS)

The original CFT partners committed to three years of collaborative grantmaking and early in year three they began to think about if and how they would continue to work together. These discussions were framed around five main questions:

- Do we want to continue to fund collaboratively?
- If yes, what do we aim to achieve (outcomes), for whom (target group) and by when (timeframe)?
- Is there anyone else we should invite to the table?
- Will we establish an investment minimum? If yes, what is this minimum?
- What have we learned during this first phase that can inform and strengthen our next steps?

To answer these questions information related to funding priorities and preferences was gathered from each partner; secondary research on emerging issues and promising ideas related to youth transitions to

adulthood was reviewed; and, lessons from the CFT's first years of collaborative funding were revisited. All of this was combined to articulate three next step options for the partners to consider.

1. Discontinue – support sustainability and wrap up currently funded programs. Disband the table
2. Form a Funder Affinity Group²
3. Design and pilot programming that engages employers, youth serving agencies and youth to increase employment among vulnerable youth who are not in education, employment or training (NEET)

All original partners chose option 3 and began the work of developing CFT 2.0. Today, CFT 2.0 is well underway. The number of partners and the amount of pooled resources has grown. The governance structure, roles and responsibilities, and funding mechanisms are evolving. But much of what is emerging is the result of the relationships, processes and norms that were established in the first phase and that are being leveraged to strengthen and accelerate this second phase.

² Funder Affinity Groups can take many forms but typically support formal or informal collaboration among grantmakers with a shared interest in a particular subject or funding area.

LESSONS

Over the course of more than three years working together, the members of the CFT learned several lessons about collaborative grantmaking. They came to understand more about factors that enable these efforts and constraints that need to be worked around. Below is a summary of the most important learning.

PRESENCE OF A CHAMPION — The efforts of Burns Memorial Fund (BMF) to mobilize interest in, and support for, the collaborative funding idea was essential. Exploring collaborative funding was part of their strategic plan and the Board was supportive of the Executive Director and a program officer dedicating time to the initiative. BMF took on much of the administrative burden associated with the process (RFP, proposal review, contracting, contract compliance, contracting and oversight of the developmental evaluator and communication with agencies). Without this essential advocacy and administrative support, the CFT would never have come together, designed and implemented a collaborative funding mechanism. BMF continues to be instrumental in CFT 2.0 while also creating space for others to step into several supporting roles.

CONVENE THE RIGHT PEOPLE — The success of most initiatives is largely dependent on the individuals involved. This was true with the CFT. The professionals at the table had extensive experience; they were respected and trusted within their own organizations; understood grant-making systems; and, were willing to take risks and find creative ways to address constraints created by existing rules and procedures. They were respectful of confidentiality and of the agencies they were working with. These qualities were crucial, especially in the early days when CFT was in development and bumping up against conventional funding policy and procedures.

TRUST — Related to people is trust. The CFT cultivated trust among the partners and with the funded agencies. Partners were frank and transparent in the meetings which enabled better decision-making because all pertinent information was available to everyone. The funded agencies described feeling respected and trusted by the funders. Single point reporting, support for program adaptation based on learning and simplified funding renewal processes all contributed to a productive relationship between funders and agencies. This trust across all partners supported both the collaborative funding and stronger program delivery.

ESTABLISH A COLLECTIVE AGENDA — All partners were willing and able to set aside or accommodate individual funding priorities and procedures. The area of focus of the CFT (strengthening social emotional competencies among vulnerable youth) was either in-line with existing priorities or representatives could make a compelling case for their participation. None of the partners were pushing a particular agenda and lobbying for support of the others. Partners were encouraged to speak their mind; the pros and cons of strategic decisions were considered; and, the group typically came to consensus.

CREATE A FRAMEWORK TO GUIDE THE PROCESS – The development of an investment framework was important to enable the building of the collaborative. Initially, the framework helped to provide a high-level overview of the idea and some clarity around the purpose and objectives. Potential partners were invited to participate in its further development and refinement and as such had a say in the final product. This bolstered a sense of ownership, the establishment of a collective agenda and documentation of agreed upon procedures to support the process. Over time, this document, coupled with an MOU, supported effective and efficient communication and decision-making among the partners. Essential elements of an investment framework include:

- Purpose
- Intended outcomes
- Definitions related to the target population and/or social issue
- Roles and responsibilities of partners
- Resources
- Principles to guide the work of the collaborative
- Decision-making procedures
- Funding Guidelines including criteria for programs and expectations of grantees
- Evaluation methods and indicators

COMMIT TO LEARNING AND ADAPTATION – A learning objective was made clear in the investment framework and funders who joined the CFT stayed committed to this objective. The partners were curious and interested to try new things and learn from them. Partners describe the CFT as nimble and responsive – able to identify challenges, learn from them and adapt along the way

TAP INTO COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE – The combined intelligence of the partners at the table made for better decisions and was generative. Through sharing information, knowledge and experiences of grantmaking, of particular agencies and of research and promising practice, the partners strengthened each other’s expertise and collectively made better funding decisions.

DON’T ASK FOR TOO MUCH TOO SOON – The CFT did not initially set an explicit minimum contribution for potential partners to take part. Original partners contributed between \$50,000 and \$100,000 / year but this was not a requirement. Keeping contribution expectations low and flexible made it easier for partners to come to the table and helped reduce the risk associated with the investment. Although these contribution levels have also been identified as a challenge (see below), making a reasonable ask helped bring partners to the table initially and increased their willingness to take on the risks associated with this new venture.

HAVE SOMEONE ON THE GROUND – Partners and funded agencies repeatedly referred to the importance of the Community Development Worker’s role in the process. The CDW conducted site visits, provided support to the agencies to gather and analyze data, helped to address challenges and constraints in the programming, and brought insight and understanding from the frontline back to the CFT meetings. The CDW was also connected to broader youth programming across the city enabling connection between the CFT, the agencies, and the bigger system. These connections helped to bolster trust and responsiveness and supported broader dissemination of CFT learning. Having a content expert who represents the collective group and has connections to the agencies and the community is

particularly important in a collaborative process where individual donors do not have their own staff providing support and oversight.

DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION SUPPORT IS AN ASSET – The original conveners of the CFT brought a developmental evaluator (DE) into the process early. The role of the DE was to help the partners to map out and track the unfolding of the initiative. Her job was to provide real-time feedback, document and communicate lessons, and support course correction when required. The DE focused on surfacing tensions, documenting decisions, challenging assumptions and helping the group apply what it was learning to strengthen the process overall. The DE worked closely with the CDW to make sense of what was happening with the programs and identify implications for collaborative funding and evaluation. Partners described support from the DE as important because it helped to maintain a commitment to learning, posed challenging questions from a place of neutrality and immunity, and supported the group to think more critically about their work.

BUILD ON THE FOUNDATION – The relationships, structures, trust and momentum created by CFT 1.0 paved the way for CFT 2.0. Existing partners were confident in the process and trusted one another. They were willing to lobby additional partners to come to the table and able to rely on practices and procedures developed and tested in 1.0 to accelerate their efforts. Once collaborative funding relationships are established and proven effective it is worth leveraging these to address other social issues and/or support new target groups.

CHALLENGES

While the lessons and benefits generated by the collaborative process were significant, the CFT was not without its challenges.

INSUFFICIENT RESOURCES FOR PROGRAM EVALUATION - If they could begin again, the CFT partners would ensure that there were sufficient resources for evaluation. The CFT made an early decision to rely on one partner's existing evaluation system and indicators. Although this was cost effective initially, it became evident that the system was not ideal for the unique programs being funded by the CFT. Funded agencies were concerned about the reliability of the data collected and its ability to inform program improvement efforts. The CFT addressed these concerns by creating some qualitative tools and adapting some of the reporting requirements but ultimately the evaluation process could have been strengthened overall.

PROGRAM OVERSIGHT – Related to evaluation, the partners could have been clearer about who was responsible for site visits and program oversight. The CDW conducted periodic site visits but these were predominantly intended to support data collection and program improvement, not accountability or contract compliance. Identifying a specific partner or a staff person to be responsible could have helped to make the oversight role more explicit and consistent.

WANING INTEREST – Once the investment framework was in place and agencies were selected and funded, partner interest waned. Attendance at CFT meetings was less consistent and decisions requiring input from everyone were sometimes tabled to subsequent meetings. Interest was rekindled in year three as the group began to explore next steps and other funding opportunities.

LEVEL AND SUSTAINABILITY OF FUNDING – In the first phase, the CFT kept its contribution expectations low – donors could contribute whatever they were able to become a partner. Although, this decision helped to engage partners initially, it meant the pot was relatively small in the first years and partners made unequal contributions. Upon reflection, some partners felt that the amount made available to each agency (\$50,000) was not sufficient to design and deliver quality programming capable of building SEL capacities in youth. Further, at the end of year three the CFT partners made the decision to shift their collective focus to older youth and employment. This meant that CFT funding to the current programs would finish in 2018. The partners developed strategies to support these agencies to connect with other potential funding sources but the loss of CFT funding put these programs at risk of closure.

IMPACT

The establishment of the Collaborative Funders' Table was positive in many ways, producing benefits for the donor partners, the funded agencies and the youth serving sector in Calgary more broadly.

BENEFITS FOR FUNDERS

Better granting decisions – CFT partners believed they made better decisions not only with the CFT funded programs but in their other work as community investment professionals. The collective intelligence generated by the CFT enabled them to share knowledge and information related to the funding landscape, program delivery partners, evidence-based practice and community investment strategies.

More effective use of philanthropic funds – The small investment made by each partner was leveraged with others. Investments that would have supported only one or two small projects were combined with others to support five.

Reduced administrative burden – All but Burns Memorial Fund experienced reduced administrative burden because of their participation. Although partners were required to contribute to ideation and decision-making, they did not have to coordinate the solicitation of letters of intent, request for proposals, contract preparation, management and compliance, accounting and reporting. Partners were able to invest in programming and experiment with an innovative process without having to take on responsibilities typical of a grantmaking process.

Reduced risk – Smaller investments combined with collective intelligence and diversification meant reduced risk for each individual partner. If one of the programs floundered their entire investment was not lost.

New relationships – CFT partners have forged new relationships with each other and with the agencies. The networking and knowledge sharing function of the table strengthened each of the partners.

Increased confidence – Working together to develop and implement CFT 1.0 built trust and deeper relationships among the partners. These experiences created confidence in the group to take on more audacious initiatives. CFT 2.0 is ambitious and innovative, and without the success of the first phase of this collaborative funding, it's unlikely the partners would have been willing to move into this new territory together.

Walk the talk – Funding organizations have long encouraged recipient agencies to collaborate. The CFT gave its partners the opportunity to experience collaboration firsthand and helped to legitimize their requests for collective effort among their grantees.

BENEFITS FOR GRANTEES

Reduced administrative burden – Like the funding partners, the funded agencies experienced less administrative burden because RFP and reporting requirements were streamlined and minimized.

Funding was renewed each year based on interim reports, creating some continuity and enabling agencies to retain staff and plan programs more efficiently.

Networking – The CFT provided an opportunity for funded agencies to become known by multiple funders and helped to seed new potential partnerships. At the end of the CFT 1.0, four of the five agencies was assigned a funder from the table to assist with sustainability. Although this has not led to new funding relationships for all of them, some of the agencies are benefitting from these connections. Further, the CFT also enabled relationships across the funded agencies. Staff from CFT funded programs came together periodically to share their experiences, learn from one another and forge new partnerships. This group is currently exploring ways that it might continue to convene and partner to more effectively engage and support vulnerable youth

Access to capacity building support – Funded agencies had access to the CFT sponsored CDW and developmental evaluator. Surplus funds from year one were reinvested in the agencies through the creation of a small community of practice among the funded agencies to strengthen staff capacity to design and deliver programming to build social emotional competencies in youth. In a conventional funding arrangement, these opportunities would not have been available.

Enabled innovation – With distributed risk and collective sources of information, the CFT was able to listen to the needs of the agencies and supported them to be innovative in the ways they designed, adapted, delivered and evaluated their programming. Lessons learned with the support of the CFT are informing other programming in some of the agencies.

Increased legitimacy – Receiving funding from the CFT, provided smaller agencies with exposure to others in the sector and in some cases increased their legitimacy as an effective youth serving organization.

BENEFITS FOR THE SECTOR

Legitimized the idea of collaborative funding – There have been many collaborative efforts to support change in Calgary and area but few have actually involved pooled funds. The CFT has demonstrated that under the right conditions and with the right structures collective funding is both possible and effective. New partners have come to the table and committed to a second iteration, and other funders are more seriously exploring the idea of creating their own.

Increased alignment – CFT 2.0 is now supporting seven funders to align their priorities and streamline their grantmaking processes. This is likely to create greater efficiencies for the agencies they hope to invest in and better progress towards the outcomes they aim to achieve.

Raises the profile of an issue area – The work of the CFT has helped to raise awareness and increase alignment around the importance of social emotional learning among young people for their longer-term success. Youth serving agencies have access to better resources and grantmakers are more aligned in their expectations that SEL be integral to everything they fund.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of the Collaborative Funders' Table generated many important lessons about what it takes to create and sustain a collaborative funding process among multiple partners. Although there were challenges, the benefits to donors, recipient agencies and the sector more broadly were significant. Based on the experiences of the CFT and other research related to collaborative grant-making, there are four essential ingredients required for the success of any collaborative funding process.

- 1. THE RIGHT PEOPLE** – The community investment professionals that came to the table had the right mix of experience, credibility, creativity and a willingness to try new things to achieve greater impact. These professionals stayed committed to the process, working through and around constraints, being transparent and frank, and compromising as required.
- 2. A COLLECTIVE VISION THAT IS EXPLICIT** – The investment framework was a central tool that enabled partners to contribute to a shared vision and that made explicit processes, roles and outcomes that people would need to commit to and abide by. The document was frequently referred to as the group moved through the iterations of the CFT, helping to make good decisions and stay true to their collective intent.
- 3. BACKBONE SUPPORT** – Without the administrative and coordination support and leadership provided by Burns Memorial Fund it is unlikely the CFT would have successfully pooled and disbursed \$720,000 in support for programming; created a space for funded agencies to connect and learn; and, gone on to bring new partners to the table, grow the pool of resources and take on a new issue area. The City's Community Development Worker was also essential in providing support to the funded agencies, oversight and enabling the evaluation of the programming. The evolution to CFT 2.0 is in large part due to BMF's ability to simplify the collaborative process and consistently bring partners to the table and invite them to explore new opportunities.
- 4. VALUE-ADDED RELATIONSHIPS** – The CFT provided an opportunity for partners to come together and achieve more collectively than they could have achieved individually. Overtime, the value of these relationships and their snowballing effect to generate other benefits motivated partners to stay committed, deepen their commitment and invite others to take part. The robust and trusting relationships are both a prerequisite for and an outcome of any successful collaborative funding venture.

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