

2017

ANNUAL LEARNING REPORT

Over the past year, Foundation associates and grantees have captured new insights and lessons drawn from their work. This brief synthesizes the key themes we see across learnings coming out of our grant reports, conversations with grantees, and community engagements.

We found the lessons generally clustered around four categories.

Starting a new organization involves risks which must be considered in the **planning process**

1 EXAMPLE

One of our grantees has always been an effective partner in placing high quality new teachers in KC classrooms. However, in 2016 the national office decided to change several policies that ultimately led to a sharp decline in the number of participants coming to the KC chapter. The Foundation's ability to influence this decision was severely limited because ultimately we represent a small portion of their overall program and funding stream.

- When launching a new organization there is a tendency to focus heavily on the design of the program delivery plan. However, strong oversight of basic operations and implementation of effective governance policies are just as important, if not more so.
- Grants that are part of projects dependent on construction or facilities acquisition create significantly higher risks of delays and should be factored into expectations for when key deliverables will be met and the requirements for release of funds.
- There are important tradeoffs between inviting a national organization to start a chapter in a new city and growing a new organization from scratch. For a new organization created by the Foundation we retain greater control over its operations, but it may take longer to establish and require greater resources. By contrast, the national organization will likely have existing capacity that allows it to move quickly and with less risk, but the Foundation would have more limited influence over operational decisions.



Talent and leadership at all levels is critical to the success of any grant

- The loss of a key leader can single-handedly sink a program or organization. It is critically important to have a plan in place to mitigate this risk, even if the likelihood seems small.
- A leader with a strong vision is not sufficient to accomplish ambitious goals. In general, that leadership needs to be paired with effective capacity to implement, iterate, and then scale with fidelity.
- Talent pipeline shortages can disrupt even the best designed programs. Part of the due diligence process for starting a new organization or program should include an assessment of whether there exists a ready supply of capable people to staff the project.
- The successful implementation of new programs in existing organizations can often require significant professional development or training for staff to learn how to effectively deliver them.

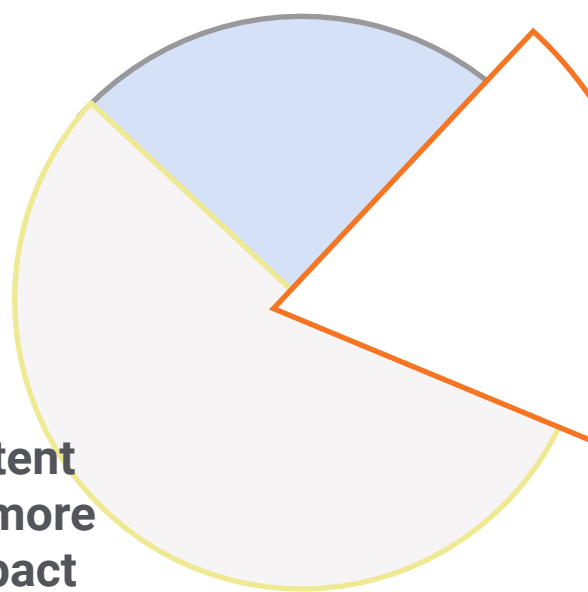
2 EXAMPLE

We currently work with a grantee who plays an important role in helping to build the capacity of local nonprofits by providing support services. However, we've learned that the lack of a strong talent development and retention plan during a period of increasing scale led to high rates of staff turnover, which in turn led to lower customer satisfaction. As a result of this lesson, we're working with them to explore new talent strategies to stabilize retention rates and increase customer value.



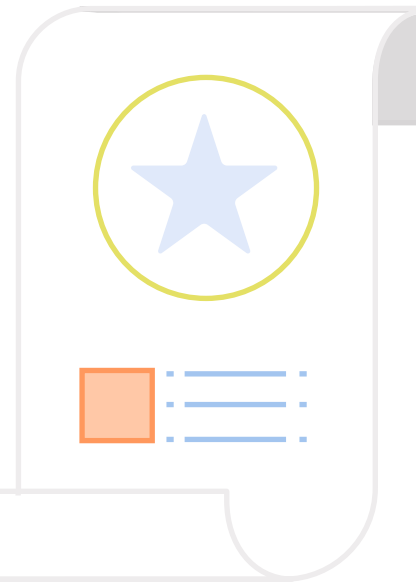
3 EXAMPLE

We fund a grant portfolio that supports entrepreneur support organizations that focus on removing barriers for underserved groups seeking to start, sustain, or grow their own business. By including a set of common metrics in every grant this year we were able to create greater clarity among all of the grantees around the key goals for the portfolio and how their work connected to our strategy here at the Foundation. It will also allow us to create better and more direct comparisons among the individual grantees in time, generating stronger lessons that we can use to improve next time.



Strong metrics and consistent measurement can lead to more learning and increased impact

- Measurable and meaningful metrics can drive clarity around a program's theory of change and provide an anchor for developing concrete and actionable lessons at the end of a grant.
- The hypotheses and assumptions in a program's theory of change will sometimes be wrong. This is why it's important to test those hypotheses explicitly, and as rigorously as possible, and generate evidence that can drive learning and strategic adjustments.
- Monitoring grant performance through regular check-ins with a focus on the metrics can help surface issues or challenges earlier, allowing for necessary modifications to the strategy, deliverables, or timeline.
- For portfolios of grantees that are seeking to accomplish similar outcomes, we should assess the feasibility of creating a single, common set of metrics to measure collective impact. This approach creates more leverage for identifying patterns across the portfolio and drawing broader lessons at the end of the grant period.



Grants focused on **policy and advocacy** have the opportunity to amplify our impact

- In some cases, the absence of key supportive policies, or the presence of obstructive policies, can greatly limit the impact of our work. In these instances, the Foundation should either determine how to mitigate the risks posed by those policies in advance or create an active advocacy plan to improve them.
- We have learned that to influence policy effectively, we need more grass-roots voices at the table. This can include key constituencies and others directly affected by the policy issue on the agenda – such as parents or entrepreneurs.

4 EXAMPLE

We launched a new grant portfolio specifically designed to cultivate policy advocates from among real, everyday entrepreneurs. We believe their voices, often missing from current policy debates, will significantly increase the effectiveness of our broader efforts to influence policy.