

Blueprint Research & Design, Inc.



# The Power of Learning: Funders and Grantees Getting Smarter Together

February 2006

Written by:  
Jack Chin, Blueprint Research & Design, Inc.

---

DISTRIBUTED AT: Grantmakers for Effective Organizations  
2006 National Conference  
Session A3 - Learning Communities: Enhancing Learning for Greater Impact  
March 8, 2006  
Atlanta, GA



## About the Author

Jack Chin is Senior Analyst and Vice President for Organizational Learning at Blueprint Research & Design, Inc. He played a role in each of the four learning communities examined in this study: He co-facilitated the final session of the Community Foundation for Southeastern Michigan's Great Outdoors Forums; co-facilitated each of the Barr Foundation's four learning community sessions; facilitated the seven sessions of the Bay Area Environmental Education Evaluation learning community; and served as an advisor to the evaluation of the Marguerite Casey Foundation's learning clusters.

Jack can be contacted at: [jack@blueprintrd.com](mailto:jack@blueprintrd.com)

## About Blueprint Research & Design, Inc.

Blueprint Research & Design, Inc. is a strategy consulting firm that specializes in helping foundations and other philanthropic entities capture, use, and share information in ways that will amplify the impact of their philanthropic practices. Specifically, our work with these clients falls into three interrelated categories:

- Program Design and Strategic Planning
- Evaluation
- Philanthropic Industry Analysis

Blueprint's clients include foundations, regional associations and affinity groups, funder networks and collaboratives, and management support organizations. Our combination of consulting services and industry expertise provides the following benefits to clients:

- Closer alignment between mission and strategies
- Clarity about how foundation strategies lead to desired outcomes
- Feedback on impact of existing strategies and identification of new strategic opportunities
- Customized measurement tools and evaluation systems
- Practical knowledge about an organization's position in the philanthropic industry

More information about Blueprint can be found at: [www.blueprintrd.com](http://www.blueprintrd.com)

## Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Form Follows Function</b>	<b>3</b>
<i>Table 1: Comparison of Learning Community     Format and Purpose</i>	5
<b>The Right Mix: Building Relationships</b>	<b>6</b>
What Success Looked Like	6
Key Considerations: Composition	8
<i>Table 2: Comparison of Learning Community     Participant Composition and Roles</i>	9
Key Considerations: Roles/responsibilities	9
<b>Give and Get: Creating Common Knowledge</b>	<b>10</b>
What Success Looked Like	10
Key Considerations: Process	13
<i>Table 3: Comparison of Learning Community     Activities</i>	14
Key Considerations: Structure	15
<b>The Added Value: Applying What Was Learned</b>	<b>16</b>
What Success Looked Like	16
Key Considerations: Participants' capacity for applying lessons learned	17
Key Considerations: Additional investment to support application of lessons learned	18
<b>New Ways of Knowing</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>21</b>

A downloadable, pdf version of this report can be found  
on the publications page of Blueprint's web-site:  
<http://blueprintrd.com/pubSDL.htm>

## Executive Summary

Money is not the only currency of exchange between funders and grantees. A number of foundations have mounted efforts recently to engage grantees in ongoing discussions with structured learning agendas, where funders and grantees work together to compile, analyze, synthesize and integrate information for mutual benefit. This comparative study finds that such learning communities, where knowledge is exchanged, accrue significant benefits to grantees and funders alike. In each of the four collective learning processes examined in this study, grantee organizations gained practical knowledge and skills, developed new knowledge together, developed a deep sense of collegiality that oftentimes led to joint action planning, saw their work in a larger context, and experienced a different type of relationship with funders. Through these learning activities, funders added value to their regular grants and were better able to assess the soundness of the thinking behind their grant programs.

While similar benefits were reported across the four cases, the formats and approaches varied considerably, each influenced by the sponsoring foundation's purpose for the learning and how the foundation chose to exercise power in this different kind of relationship with grantees. Each case is embedded within unique foundation and community situations so this study does not attempt to generalize from the particular experiences, nor are specific "best practices" identified. Rather, this study draws out useful themes from across the four cases for consideration by funders interested in this approach: What facilitates positive relationship building among learning community participants? What enhances the development of a common knowledge base among participants? How can funders support the application of what is learned through the learning community?

Rather than the "fewer, bigger grants" approach to derive greater impact, funders might take a "give more to get more" approach that enables their grantees to develop denser relationships through learning communities, which then leads to greater impact at the field level. These four cases show that supporting multiple grantees in this way can lead to better results.

## Introduction

Foundations often acknowledge that program providers and community members possess knowledge that is indispensable to the philanthropic partnership. Without that know-how, philanthropic resources could not be applied effectively.

Yet foundations rarely tap into that knowledge in comprehensive or systematic ways. While foundations use site visits, issue briefings by practitioners, community advisors, and other “engagement” activities to be more directly informed about community conditions, these activities primarily aid the funders, with little substantive benefit for the grantees. They also tend to be sporadic and brief, leaving it to the funder to “fill in” the bigger picture. Given the inherently different perspectives that funders and grantees hold, the ensuing impressions that funders develop might well be incomplete or inaccurate. Further, as foundations focus ever more on achieving results, reconciling these different perspectives becomes an even greater challenge, particularly when foundation interests do not align with community notions of what “better” is, and how to attain it.

A number of foundations have mounted efforts recently to engage grantees in ongoing discussions with structured learning agendas, where funders and grantees work together to compile, analyze, synthesize and integrate information for mutual benefit. These foundations and their grant recipients are using knowledge (not just grant money) as a currency of exchange. The “on-the-ground” view of nonprofits helps funders gain a more authentic understanding of field conditions. Reciprocally, foundations bring a “bird’s eye” view that can inform nonprofits’ contextual understanding of a given field and/or community. This approach, by casting grantmaker and grantee alike in the roles of knowledge contributor and knowledge consumer, promotes more effective use of knowledge and consequently, philanthropic, resources.

This comparative study examines the experience of four learning communities in which foundations and nonprofits worked together to improve programs and organizations through collective learning processes. Various written reports produced for each of the learning communities as well as meetings with the respective sponsoring foundations informed the writing of this study.

Each case is embedded within unique foundation and community situations so this study does not attempt to generalize from the particular experiences, nor are specific “best practices” identified. There is ample literature on effective group facilitation techniques. The sponsoring foundations of the four cases in this study may be contacted for details about their respective learning communities (see Acknowledgements on page 21 for web-site addresses).

Furthermore, this study makes no attempt to compare the learning community approach with other methods that funders use to learn about community- or field-

level issues and practices. Rather, this study draws out useful themes from across the four cases for consideration by funders expressly interested in the learning community approach: What facilitates positive relationship building among learning community participants? What enhances the development of a common knowledge base among participants? How can funders support the application of what is learned through the learning community?

Even with the recent, growing emphasis on learning and evaluation within the foundation world, there is little published research on foundation-convened learning communities involving grantees<sup>1</sup>. We hope this comparative study contributes to increased understanding within the philanthropic community about the power of learning among funders and grantees.

### Form Follows Function

The Kellogg Foundation's Leadership for Institutional Change (LINC) initiative,<sup>2</sup> in one of the few specific references to learning communities in the philanthropic literature, offers this description:

*A learning community looks like people exhibiting genuine respect for each other. It looks like individuals who are comfortable with shared responsibilities and possessing an unflinching curiosity about "hot" issues. It also looks like a place of safety, i.e., a practice field, where new ideas and behaviors may be "tried on" in the pursuit of ways that work rather than right answers.*

The four learning communities in this study employed different models to achieve this desired "place of safety," each influenced by the foundation's purpose and approach for the learning cluster.

One learning community – the Great Outdoors Forums sponsored by the Community Foundation for Southeastern Michigan – was the introductory phase of a three-year, \$2 million grants initiative. The forums involved over 200 participants from seven counties in the greater Detroit region to consider how the out-of-doors can be used to improve the learning, health and well-being of young people. This series of forums was structured like a *symposium* with presentations by national issue experts and regional program exemplars to the large audience of program nonprofit and governmental providers (not all of whom were grantees). Attendees were invited after completion of the Forums to apply for two-year Leadership Grants that would support the development of 12 model programs. These grantees

---

<sup>1</sup> See *Building an International Learning Community: Lessons and Insights from the Transatlantic Community Foundation Network* by Robert H. Martin, Diana Haigwood and Alan Pardini for a recent discussion of a funders-only learning community.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.fspe.org/linc/glossary.asp>

## The Power of Learning: Funders and Grantees Getting Smarter Together

would then share what they learned from their programs, even with those Forum participants who did not receive Leadership Grants.

The Barr Foundation's environment program convened 17 participants from eight Boston metro area organizations to explore ways to advance the experiential environmental education field. This learning community was structured more like a *seminar* with guest speakers and peer-to-peer sharing focused on select topics.

Four community foundations in the Bay Area - East Bay, Marin, Peninsula, and San Francisco – brought together representatives from 20 organizations to explore how to increase the evaluation capacity of environmental education providers. This learning community was conducted in *workshop* format, with structured activities that resulted in a regional program model from which an evaluation plan was devised.

The Marguerite Casey Foundation enabled staffers from 32 grantee organizations from different regions of the U.S. to meet in four clusters in order to share lessons learned and gain greater insight into ways in which they might be even more effective in social change work. Since these learning clusters were self-designed, they took on the characteristics of *independent study*.

Table 1 compares the format, purpose and schedule of the four learning communities. The design dictum “form follows function” certainly pertains here - the learning communities differ in the approach taken to achieve their respective goals. The various aspects of learning communities – composition, structure, activities, results, etc. – are fundamentally contextual. While each case is different, several common characteristics can be drawn:

- A shared purpose in learning together for mutual benefit
- Multiple learning sessions that enable the development of a group culture over time
- Knowledge drawn from multiple sources, ranging from participants' own experiences to outside expertise
- Knowledge from one session feeds into later sessions
- Results of the learning have individualized meaning, that is, each participant takes away personalized lessons from the collective learning experience.

Closer examination of the four learning communities suggests three basic stages of a learning community process:

- The Right Mix: Building Relationships
- Give and Get: Creating Common Knowledge
- The Added Value: Applying What Was Learned

## The Power of Learning: Funders and Grantees Getting Smarter Together

**Table 1: Comparison of Learning Community Format and Purpose**

Sponsoring Foundations	Community Foundation for Southeastern Michigan (CFSEM)	Barr Foundation	Bay Area Community Foundations: East Bay, Marin, Peninsula, and San Francisco	Marguerite Casey Foundation
<b>Format</b>	"Symposium"	"Seminar"	"Workshop"	"Independent Study"
<b>The Essential Question</b>	How can the out-of-doors be used to improve the learning, health and well-being of young people?	How can the field of experiential environmental education be advanced in the Boston metro area?	How can the evaluation capacity of environmental education providers be increased?	How can the Foundation support movement building among and for low-income families?
<b>Purpose</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To inform organizations about strategies and interventions that they may incorporate in their local communities to achieve the objectives of The Great Outdoors initiative.</li> <li>To assist CFSEM's development of an RFP for Leadership Grants that would support model projects.</li> <li>To enhance organizations' ability to apply for Leadership Grants.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To help organizations implement strategies and tools based on best practices, develop a continuum of programming linking participants across orgs, increase their cultural competence, and sustain an organized community of practice.</li> <li>To test and further develop the Foundation's theory of change relating to experiential environmental education.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To develop a common understanding of the process whereby environmentally-responsible behavior can be promoted through environmental education so that program providers can improve programs, coordinate efforts and make a stronger collective positive impact.</li> <li>To increase the capacity for evaluation of environmental education in the San Francisco Bay region</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To help the foundation better understand the impact of its grantmaking by looking across groups of grantees;</li> <li>To help grantee organizations reflect on their work and gain greater insight into ways in which they might be even more effective;</li> <li>To build connections among grantee organizations to share lessons learned and begin to build a learning community across the geographic regions in which we are doing our grantmaking;</li> <li>To help the Foundation learn about the best ways to evaluate the work of organizations involved in social change.</li> </ul>
<b>Schedule</b>	Monthly forums over four months (October 2002 through January 2003)	Four sessions over a year (June 2003 through May 2004)	Seven sessions over a year (June 2003 through May 2004)	Three face-to-face meetings over 18 months (March 2004 through September 2005)

## The Power of Learning: Funders and Grantees Getting Smarter Together

Drawing on the experience of the four cases, the following sections highlight what success looked like in each of these stages, with supporting statements extracted from participant evaluations and facilitator reports. Each section also contains key considerations for funders to weigh when using learning communities as a strategy to advance their goals.

### The Right Mix: Building Relationships

Organizing a learning community is like planning a dinner party: What is the proper mix of people (who may well be interacting for the first time) that would lead to a worthwhile experience for all? What's a theme that could lend some common focus? What are the "little things" (the menu, the setting, the way the invitation is written, etc.) that could increase the comfort level of the group? Proper design and deft execution over the entire duration of the learning community are essential to transforming a collection of individuals into a learning *community* with shared values and common goals.

#### What Success Looked Like

When trusting relationships and good will are established, they not only lay the groundwork for the knowledge creation stage of the learning community process, they often lead to networking and affinity beyond the learning community context. Effective relationship building at the early stages of the learning community process yield a range of social capital benefits as outlined below:

<b>Benefit</b>	<b>Supporting <i>Quote</i> or Example</b>
Participants enjoy a "place of safety" for knowledge sharing	Participants reflected on the safety they felt during this [cultural competence] session. Some of this was credited to the way content was introduced, i.e., focusing on many dimensions of diversity. Much can be credited to the relationships that participants had had the opportunity to build up to this point in the cluster. (Barr facilitators' final report)  <i>Enough trust has been established between organizations to demand a deeper level of conversation about specific fundraising (outside of foundations), tools and strategies and constituency building.</i>  (Casey participant)
Participants develop a sense of collegiality that promotes collaboration	Participants in the Barr case worked together to develop an online database of experiential environmental education programs targeting Boston youth. The database was designed to facilitate better collaboration among various organizations and, at the same time, act as a valuable resource for parents, students, and teachers.  One Barr participant noted: <i>We have networked to combine services with at least 4 other organizations and I am not sure this would have happened to the depth and degree of rich collaboration had this cluster not taken place. [We] feel this cluster provided time to build shared understanding that will improve our ability to work together. The shared goals and vision for this movement and the sense of community with the other organizations.</i>

## The Power of Learning: Funders and Grantees Getting Smarter Together

Benefit	Supporting Quote or Example
<p>Participants develop a sense of collegiality that promotes collaboration (cont'd)</p>	<p>Participants in the Casey clusters also started collaborating:</p> <p><i>By the end of our third face-to-face gathering, our two groups in Chicago were planning to launch a collaborative employment-related project. Before the [cluster], these two organizations were not familiar to one another.</i></p> <p><i>...a local organization helped a national organization gain entrée to a new community, thus spreading the reach of the national organization and building the organizational base of the local partner.</i></p> <p>In the CFSEM case, 48 of the 62 Leadership Grant applications represented partnerships involving about 130 organizations. The 12 Leadership Grants that were awarded encompass 65 partners. One particularly “unlikely alliance” involved the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services, University of Michigan-Dearborn’s Environmental Interpretive Center, The Henry Ford Museum, the National Wildlife Federation, Southwest Detroit Business Association and Salina Elementary School.</p>
<p>Participants find a sense of belonging to a larger whole</p>	<p><i>...meeting with like-minded colleagues who work for the same causes, had eased the sense of isolation they often experience as advocates for the poor and disenfranchised, and created a fertile ground for collaboration.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Casey facilitator’s final report)</p> <p><i>Participants reported looking forward to the cluster gatherings as opportunities to remind themselves of the importance of the movement and that they, as individuals and organizations, were “not alone” despite often feeling otherwise.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Casey facilitator’s final report)</p>
<p>Participants and funders experience a different type of relationship</p>	<p>The Casey cluster “presented participating organizations with a unique philanthropic opportunity. Rarely are grantees given a mandate from a funder to learn and share together coupled with the resources and support to execute the mandate. Perhaps more rare is the expectation on behalf of the foundation that a learning process would inform philanthropic strategy.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Casey facilitator’s final report)</p> <p><i>A funder who is able to listen is a good thing.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Barr participant)</p> <p><i>Our idea was to redefine the relationship with nonprofits and grantees. Therefore, when we made the Great Outdoors grants, we created a partnership with the grantees that included a grant but also a commitment on both sides to a continuing learning process.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(CFSEM report)</p>

### Key Considerations

In order to build a learning *community*, the sponsoring funder(s) has to address very intentionally the issue of how power is exercised and the way this affects the relationship building stage of the learning process. Key considerations are:

- Composition – Who gets to participate (and who decides)?
- Roles/responsibilities – What are appropriate expectations to set?

### *Composition*

The challenge – and opportunity – is to arrive at an optimal mix of participants. Learning community designers need to develop the right balance of heterogeneity (to stimulate creative exchange) and affinity (to maintain group cohesion).

CFSEM and the Marguerite Casey Foundation did not exercise the power to be selective – given the respective aims of their learning communities, it was not necessary to restrict participation (indeed, increased numbers might have accelerated achieving the aims of their learning communities). Therefore, participation in the “symposium” and “independent study”-style learning communities they sponsored was open to any organization that wanted to devote the time and energy.

On the other hand, the Bay Area community and Barr Foundations chose among organizations, seeking an optimal number and composition for their particular purposes. By being selective, these sponsors had to consider the implications of excluding some grantees from participation. They took several factors into account to make up their “seminar” and “workshop”-style learning communities, including:

- content focus of the organization’s work,
- range of program approaches/strategies across the invited groups,
- organization size/stage of development,
- likelihood of shared learning interests,
- perceived openness to a learning experience of this type, and
- organization’s capacity to participate.

These foundations also considered which person(s) within these organizations would be the best contributor(s) as well as the best recipient(s) of information. The Barr Foundation required one of the two organizational representatives to be the executive director to ensure that knowledge shared among learning community participants was applied to build the organization’s capacity. The Bay Area learning community developed a regional program model and therefore needed the perspectives of program staff.

## The Power of Learning: Funders and Grantees Getting Smarter Together

**Table 2: Comparison of Learning Community Participant Composition and Roles**

<b>Sponsor</b>	<b>CFSEM</b>	<b>Barr</b>	<b>Bay Area</b>	<b>Casey</b>
<b>How were participants chosen?</b>	Voluntary	Selected by sponsoring foundation	Selected by sponsoring foundations	Voluntary (Fdn staff grouped into four clusters of 8)
<b>Who was invited?</b>	Any nonprofit from the seven county service area in the greater Detroit region (over 200 representatives from 150 organizations and governmental entities participated)	Two representatives each from eight grantee organizations	One representative each from 20 organizations that reflect a cross-section by org type, location, approach, audience, and other key dimensions	Two representatives each from interested grantee organizations
<b>Funder participation?</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
<b>Agenda set by?</b>	Foundation	Participants + Foundation	Steering committee	Participants
<b>Facilitated by?</b>	Foundation staff + consultants	Consultants	Consultants	Consultants

### *Roles/responsibilities*

Given the power differential between funders and grantees, careful consideration also has to be given to the roles and responsibilities of those involved in the learning community.

Should sponsoring funder(s) even participate in the learning community sessions? In three of the four cases, the funder(s) chose to participate, with the Marguerite Casey Foundation being the exception. The presence of funders no doubt impacts the dynamics of the interactions. Even so, the learning format enables funders to play a different role than is typically the case in a funder-grantee relationship. Funders can bring knowledge from other contexts and, at the same time, they are also learners. So to a greater extent than is the case in the exchange of grant dollars, funder and grantee are both contributor and recipient in a learning context.

Should the funder be directly involved in facilitating the learning community? All four learning communities used outside facilitators to help plan and conduct the sessions (more on this in the next section). The use of experienced, outside facilitators is critical given the complex nature of group dynamics, particularly among funders and grantees.

## The Power of Learning: Funders and Grantees Getting Smarter Together

Who sets the agenda and how is it done? CFSEM defined the topics of the symposium based on the parameters of its Great Outdoors initiative. The Barr Foundation used facilitators to interview staff from each organization to identify potential learning interests which the Barr Foundation staff then winnowed into the final four topics. In the Bay Area case, a steering committee comprising foundation staff and volunteers from the learning community participants set the session agendas. The members of the Marguerite Casey Foundation's learning clusters worked with their facilitators to jointly determine a set of activities and outcomes.

The range of agenda-setting approaches, from top-down to inclusive to self-determined, reflects the varying goals and philosophies of the sponsoring foundations. In those instances where they are given some decision-making responsibility, grantees certainly appreciate it. Even then, they instinctively know that funders ultimately retain power. Regardless of the degree of influence, grantees participate (without additional remuneration in these four cases) because they appreciate the opportunity to gain knowledge that is useful to their work, and the opportunity to develop a different kind of relationship with funders and other participating organizations.

What matters most may not be how much power is shared so much as being clear and consistent about roles and responsibilities. Especially early in the learning community process, and starting with the initial notification, grantees need to know what is expected of them, their peers and the funders; in other words, what are the group norms. Lack of clarity or unexpected shifts in roles and responsibilities can seriously hinder the learning process.

### Give and Get: Creating Common Knowledge

Soon after the relationship-building stage begins, participants in the learning community are engaged in the task of collective "sense making" – taking disparate, "siloes" knowledge from different sources (whether these are participants or external resources) and synthesizing that into a common knowledge base of, by and for the group. When facilitated well, participants build off each other's knowledge, simultaneously playing the roles of knowledge contributor and knowledge consumer. Table 3 on page 14 describes the learning activities used in the respective learning communities.

#### What Success Looked Like

By blending the "on-the-ground" experience of the grantees, the expertise of external sources, and the perspectives of funders, learning community participants develop together a useful knowledge base – one that has been synthesized and vetted, and from which they can enrich their own content knowledge and skills.

## The Power of Learning: Funders and Grantees Getting Smarter Together

These knowledge-building benefits include:

Benefit	Supporting Quote or Example
Participants increase understanding in the specific content areas covered by the learning community sessions	<p>Barr Foundation learning community participants commented after their second session on how systems thinking helped increase understanding on both the planning and programmatic levels:</p> <p><i>...while we had an internal planning process in place before the cluster began, some of the tools we learned will be of interest, including especially logic models and perhaps systems maps. The cluster challenged me to think (and ACT!) on a systems level - the work had some good transferability to network-building I am doing with folks from strategic partner organizations.</i></p> <p><i>The Learning Cluster provided a venue to discuss theory and strategy issues, as well as concrete issues about fund development, organizational and staff development and messaging issues.</i></p> <p>(Casey participant)</p>
Participants learn "tricks of the trade" from one another	<p><i>First, the most valuable outcome was to be able to reflect with partner organizations and within our own organization within a learning setting. We (the two participants from the same organization) frequently met to problem solve or trouble shoot. This experience allowed us to be able to think through the learning materials and incorporate new ideas offered by peers, our discussions and readings.</i></p> <p>(Barr participant)</p> <p><i>...members benefited from learning deeply about one another's variable approaches to moving a social change agenda. They were able to look at the world through a different lens and extract new knowledge to apply to their own practice.</i></p> <p>(Casey facilitator's final report)</p>
Participants build new knowledge together	<p>One Casey cluster developed "a common language and framework for community organizing. The group was able to reach consensus on a definition for community organizing, to identify a draft set of principles for community organizers and reach near consensus on a definition for leadership development...The group viewed their ability to distill organizational learning and craft common language for that learning to offer the field for feedback and improvement as a significant advance.</p> <p>(Casey facilitator's final report)</p> <p>Similarly, Bay Area learning community participants worked together to create a logic model for advancing environmental education on a regional level. One participant observed that the learning community represented an "opportunity to share a common understanding and approach when we're talking about results...this will make us more effective and empowered."</p>

## The Power of Learning: Funders and Grantees Getting Smarter Together

Benefit	Supporting Quote or Example
Participants feel validated on what they are already doing	<p><i>[P]articipants and organizations received some validation from the process, recognizing how much they were 'doing right' as the work in the movement...The value of this validation should not be understated, as many organizations reported during initial site visits that "isolation from others like us" was a contributing factor to the decision to participate.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Casey facilitator's final report)</p> <p><i>Coming together...has reinforced what we are doing and it is on the right track.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Barr participant)</p>
Participants see their work in a larger context	<p><i>I'm re-energized by the good work others are doing. I'm seeing ourselves as connected to one another's work more than before.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Barr participant)</p> <p><i>There is a common agenda that can be developed that affects us all, so we can work together on issues from a larger perspective. I kind of forgot that before this experience...It kind of empowered me to say "Yeah, it can be done." The challenge is to build on that momentum and that idea, and that ideal, that it can be accomplished.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Casey facilitator's final report)</p> <p>After development of the regional program model, 15 of the 16 Bay Area participants who responded to an evaluation survey agreed with the statement: "I am better able to understand how our work fits within the larger context of Bay Area environmental education."</p>
Participants become motivated to apply newly-acquired skills	<p><i>Our participation in the Cultural Competency discussion provided the opportunity for our leadership to see other organizations working to increase their competency levels... We are making a concerted effort to address issues of cultural competency in our organization with our board...</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Barr participant)</p>
Funders are better able to assess the soundness of the thinking behind their grant program activities	<p>The Great Outdoors Forums enabled the CFSEM to gauge interest among service providers in forming collaborative projects and informed the development of the guidelines for its leadership grants: <i>"It's fair to say that the grant program looked somewhat different from what we had originally envisioned, based on what we learned through the forum process."</i></p> <p>The San Francisco Foundation refined its own environmental education grant guidelines based on the knowledge that came out of the Bay Area learning community.</p> <p>The Barr Foundation engaged learning community participants to test and further develop the logic model for its experiential environmental education grants program.</p>

### Key Considerations

To ensure that discrete bits of knowledge are integrated into a larger whole, consideration has to be given to process and structure of the learning experience.

#### *Process*

As with any learning situation, attention has to be paid to the flow of activities that make up the learning process as well as the content. How can a learning community be effectively facilitated? This study will not examine this question in-depth since there is robust literature on group facilitation practice. Nevertheless, there are a few things that are worth noting about working with foundations and their grantees.

Since most grantees are practitioners, “learning by doing” is a favored mode for most learning community participants. They prefer practical and action-oriented approaches rather than abstract content and methods. This favors peer-to-peer learning modes, such as ones used in the “seminar” and “independent study”-style learning communities that draw on the participants’ own experience.

That said, conceptual frameworks are often needed in order to organize separate bits of experience-derived information into a coherent knowledge base. This suggests a need for group learning modes such as the expert presentations or discussion of reading assignments used in the “symposium” and “workshop” approaches.

Reconciling these different considerations suggests that sponsoring foundations will need to find facilitators who have a combination of content knowledge, process expertise, and an understanding of funder-grantee dynamics. This could be difficult to find in a single consultant; a facilitation team that encompasses these various qualifications would be a better way to go.

With these considerations in mind, designers and facilitators of learning communities can adapt the assumptions used by the Barr Foundation team, which believed a successful learning community would incorporate activities that:

- Center on the shared interests of participants and draw on their experiences;
- Blend opportunities to learn about one another’s work;
- Build a shared knowledge base from the wider field; and,
- Make links between theory and field perspective on the one hand, and program operations on the other.

Table 3: Comparison of Learning Community Activities

<p align="center"><b>CFSEM/"Symposium"</b></p> <p>The foundation planned and conducted a series of forums to increase the knowledge base and capacity of local organizations to develop effective outdoor programs for children. The forums <u>involved local and national leaders</u> in the areas of child development, environment-based interventions for positive youth development, and strategies for strengthening parent/adult caregiver support for children's learning and health. <u>Representatives from local organizations doing similar work</u> also presented their experiences. The final forum engaged participants in <u>brainstorming</u> ideas for program plans that applied the information given in the first three forums.</p>	<p>Open Enrollment ↕ ↕ ↕</p>	<p align="center"><b>Marguerite Casey/ "Independent Study"</b></p> <p>The four cluster facilitators proposed and led participatory, rigorous, and utilization-focused processes that were similar in structure, beginning with <u>in-depth site visits</u> to each of the organizations, <u>preparation of profiles</u> of each organization and its work, and <u>convening of the entire Cluster to share those profiles</u> and develop a shared learning agenda. The group also devised <u>mechanisms for connecting with each other in between meetings</u>. That initial meeting was then followed by a <u>repeated cycle of site visits</u>, complemented by <u>telephone interviews</u>, <u>focus groups</u> and other means of data collection, leading up to a second, and eventually a third face-to-face meeting.</p>
<p>←←← More Group Learning</p>		<p>More Peer-to-Peer Learning →→→</p>
<p align="center"><b>Bay Area/"Workshop"</b></p> <p>A facilitator worked with a steering committee to organize a combination of <u>reading assignments</u>, <u>presentations</u> by resource people, <u>sharing of professional knowledge by participants</u>, and <u>interactive activities</u> to build knowledge by and among participants.</p> <p>The first two sessions focused on environmental education research and practice. Sessions 3 and 4 were devoted to creating a common regional logic model. The final three sessions focused on identifying key evaluation questions and designing a plan to increase capacity for evaluation of environmental education in the San Francisco Bay region.</p>	<p>Selective Participation ↕ ↕ ↕</p>	<p align="center"><b>Barr/"Seminar"</b></p> <p>Learning managers were responsible for creating opportunities for emergent, peer-focused learning and peer sharing: A blend of <u>reading assignments</u>, large <u>group dialogues</u>, <u>presentations</u> on specific skills and tools, <u>guest speaker presentations</u>, and both <u>small and large group sessions</u> to apply the skills and tools.</p> <p>The four sessions focused on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Logic models as a planning tool and best practices in experiential environmental education.</li> <li>- Systems thinking</li> <li>- Cultural Competence</li> <li>- Evaluation and Assessment</li> </ul>

## The Power of Learning: Funders and Grantees Getting Smarter Together

### *Structure*

While what happens within sessions certainly matters, what happens from one session to the next is also important. Careful consideration should be given to ensure that knowledge is built upon and reinforced. This entails such matters as:

- *Frequency of sessions.* The interval between sessions will affect how effectively knowledge can be reviewed and retained. The “symposium” and “workshop”-style learning communities met monthly since it was important for content to flow and be synthesized from one session into the next. Barr’s “seminar”-style learning communities dealt with issues that were more self-contained so linkage between sessions was less of an issue.
- *Number of sessions.* The optimal number of sessions for each learning community will vary depending on purpose, format, composition and budget, among other factors. Some participants in the Marguerite Casey Foundation clusters (who were from across the country) indicated that the three sessions were not sufficient but budgetary and logistical limitations precluded additional sessions. Barr participants found four sessions to be the right number. The Bay Area learning community added a seventh session to complete their collective learning process.
- *Evaluation of sessions.* Each of the learning communities gathered feedback on sessions and solicited data to inform the design of subsequent sessions. For example, in the Bay Area case, participants were surveyed to learn more about their current data collection and analysis activities between the fourth and fifth sessions, as the learning community shifted from regional model building to development of an evaluation capacity-building plan.
- *Facilitating communications.* Providing some mechanism for participants to stay in touch and/or share information between sessions contributes to relationship-building and collective sense-making. CFSEM posted information from its forums on its web-site. Barr and the Bay Area set up list serves. Two of the Marguerite Casey Foundation clusters set up web-based communications vehicles. Assessments of these cases, however, suggest that online communications was not as actively used by learning community participants as desired, mainly because of limited time and comfort with using technology.
- *Learning community “reunions.”* The Bay Area sponsors reconvened participants nine months after their last session to reflect on the learning community experience and share stories about how they implemented what was learned. This reinforced key lessons and motivated participants to continue using the resources, skills and tools developed by the cluster.

The challenge for the sponsors is determining how much burden to impose on participants (see earlier discussion about clear and consistent expectations). These and other mechanisms to maintain that momentum between sessions require a

## The Power of Learning: Funders and Grantees Getting Smarter Together

bigger investment of time by participants – time that is diverted from program delivery and day-to-day management (that may also be supported by the foundation). Sponsors will have to weigh this cost against the benefit of a solidifying a common knowledge base.

### The Added Value: Applying What Was Learned

If knowledge is a currency of exchange in philanthropic relationships, it would be fair to ask what has resulted from the transaction – same as would be asked about grant dollars. Funders and grantees alike want to see some concrete change result from knowledge and networks generated through the learning community process.

#### What Success Looked Like

The four cases demonstrate real, lasting benefits from applying what had been learned in learning communities at the organizational as well as at the collective level. Knowledge-application benefits include:

Benefit	Supporting Quote or Example
Participants gain practical resources, skills and tools that benefit their programs	<p><i>There are pieces of the learning that will enrich the way we work. This has challenged us to do new things as well. I think the resources that we have been given have been great.</i> (Barr participant)</p> <p><i>[I will use] the triangle model. Given the challenges we've been facing, it put our organizational growth into perspective. It enabled us to step out of crises and look at it in a more academic fashion. We've had a tumultuous year but this way of thinking prepared us for the year we're going into. The systems stuff helped us look at [our challenges] institutionally, take the personal out of it! That really helped!!! We have talked about it a lot [since the session].</i> (Barr participant)</p> <p><i>The actual logic model is the most valuable outcome to my work with EE groups in the Bay Area. It serves as a framework for teaching organizations about basing an evaluation on a logic model and it is something that resonates with program providers.</i> (Bay Area participant)</p> <p><i>...[W]e found that many organizations that attended the Great Outdoors forums used that information to begin new programs, even if they did not apply for a grant. In addition, many of the Great Outdoors grantees have expanded their programs to include additional partners, and a few are already developing new programs and partnerships...</i> (CFSEM report)</p>

## The Power of Learning: Funders and Grantees Getting Smarter Together

Benefit	Supporting Quote or Example
Participants change their organizational practices	<p>As a result of the logic model developed by the Bay Area learning community, one environmental advocacy organization restructured its entire education program to align more strategically with its public policy goals. Another Bay Area participant noted: <i>"I have started to work with the logic model to identify program strengths, weaknesses and to find organizations to link our programming for a more effective regional effort."</i></p> <p>One Casey cluster executive director <i>acknowledged that he intends to apply what he has learned from his colleagues about community organizing and advocacy to help him in the reorganization of his agency.</i> (Casey facilitator's final report)</p>
Participants plan for joint action	<p><i>The [most important outcome was the] sense of community and the commitment to joint action. I think we see our organization now as a part of a larger movement and can envision working towards city-wide outcomes.</i> (Barr participant)</p> <p>A subset of the Bay Area learning community is proposing a peer coaching system based on the regional program framework and evaluation plan that was developed.</p> <p>Barr Foundation learning community participants have been developing plans for increasing cultural competence among the participating organizations.</p> <p>Several Casey cluster participants <i>identified common ground on which they can build around immigration reform issues...The possibility of starting small local campaigns to change the negative image of immigrants in their communities was discussed.</i> (Casey facilitator's final report)</p>
Funders extend the value of their regular grants activities	<p>By providing a place for information to be shared in a structured way, grantees in all the learning communities were able to build on each others' knowledge resources and avoid re-inventing the wheel.</p>

### Key Considerations

Factors associated with lasting benefit from a learning community experience include: the participating organizations' capacity to integrate the lessons learned, and more significantly, additional funding support for the purpose of applying lessons learned.

#### *Participants' capacity for applying lessons learned*

The four cases suggest that application of knowledge gained through the learning process is related to the capacity of the organization to integrate what was learned

## The Power of Learning: Funders and Grantees Getting Smarter Together

(see discussion about composition earlier). Given day-to-day realities of program operations, adopting new practices is challenging, an issue common to many professional development experiences. As one participant in the Barr case noted:

*"[It] has been good to hear from everyone, but frustrating. It's great to have dedicated time to think. Sometimes it is hard to be thoughtful and then return to the reality of our worlds."*

The learning communities employed several techniques to address this issue. The Barr Foundation had two participants per organization (one of whom is the executive director) to help ensure that lessons are incorporated into program operations. Similarly, one of the Casey cluster facilitators found *"the design of the cluster that allowed for more than one person to participate was ideal for organizations to build 'bench strength' – that is, to develop new skills in current and future leaders of the organization."*

With an emphasis on the practical, several of the learning communities introduced tools such as stakeholder/power analysis and systems mapping that participants could easily adopt. Even then, some participants requested technical assistance, as noted below.

### *Additional investment to support application of lessons learned*

A more significant consideration is whether the funder should be responsible only for the learning process or should the funder also support the application of what is learned. The choice has repercussions for allocating resources as well as for setting expectations (see earlier roles and responsibilities discussion). These cases indicate that participants need additional supports to apply what they have learned, whether as individual organizations or collectively. For instance, when a novel practice or tool is introduced during a learning community session, participants may need on-site coaching or technical assistance to implement that practice or tool effectively. Should the sponsoring funder allocate in advance a technical assistance fund for learning community participants? If a funder already has a technical assistance program, should preference be given to its learning community participants?

On the collective level, an opportunity for joint action frequently emerged from a group of participants learning together. While these opportunities might be anticipated and even desired, they can not be specified in advance. Should funders budget funds to implement yet-to-be-developed joint action ideas? In the CFSEM case, Leadership Grants (supported by large grants from the Kellogg and Wallace Foundations) were included in the overall initiative so that participants could develop model projects based on what they learned. As noted by the Foundation, "The real payoff of what we began with the four forums is being seen now in what the grantees are doing and accomplishing."

## The Power of Learning: Funders and Grantees Getting Smarter Together

In the Bay Area case, the potential value of an evaluation tools database wasn't apparent until after the fifth session. Funds were reallocated within the existing budget to support development of the database, which participants have subsequently reported to be a useful resource. In several instances, joint action ideas were "orphaned," as was the case in the Casey immigration reform idea noted above: "*However actual implementation of any of these ideas is beyond the scope of the Learning Cluster project, and will have to be undertaken by group members on their own.*" (from facilitator's report)

If sponsoring foundations do set aside funds (or recruit funding partners) for possible joint action, how would it affect the learning dynamic if participants knew in advance of these additional resources? How would it affect the funder-grantee relationship - would such additional activity be perceived to be funder-driven or would grantees have greater ownership? These issues are similar to those encountered in other grantmaking initiatives – except that these opportunities flow out of an extended learning situation through which deeper relationships with grantees have developed. When a learning community experience leads participants to the brink of collective action, what obligation, if any, does a funder have to provide seed funding for implementation? How does this additional investment weigh against other opportunities to use grant funds? Funders will have to reach their own conclusions on these questions. Whatever choices are made, the key issue for the sponsoring funder once again will be one of setting expectations – and being clear and consistent about them.

### New Ways of Knowing

*In philanthropy as it is now practiced, learning is isolated and largely based on secondhand information. New ways of working based on more direct learning and feedback need to be invented, proven successful, and made visible so they can spread.*

- *Cultivating Change in Philanthropy*<sup>3</sup>

#### **Learning and Growing**

*We foster a driven learning community, where we learn from experience, each other, and the communities we serve. We believe that knowledge is powerful and that learning never ends.*

- *Marguerite Casey Foundation, Values*<sup>4</sup>

As foundations seek ways to derive greater impact through their work with grantees, many are choosing to devote more concentrated funding resources on fewer issues and grantees. At the same time, many funders are moving toward a

<sup>3</sup> Global Business Network and the Monitor Institute, <http://www.futureofphilanthropy.org/files/workingpaper.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.caseygrants.org/pages/www/wwa\\_values.asp](http://www.caseygrants.org/pages/www/wwa_values.asp)

## The Power of Learning: Funders and Grantees Getting Smarter Together

more proactive relationship where grantees receive monetary resources to carry out work that meets funders' specifications. This kind of relationship exacerbates a "hub-and-spoke" situation where the funder is at the center of the system and grantees may or may not have the opportunity to work synergistically.

This study describes how funders can develop more reciprocal relationships with and among grantees by convening ongoing learning forums for deep, knowledge sharing. By taking more of a networked approach, funders can foster the development of social capital for collective learning and action. Rather than the "fewer, bigger grants" approach, funders might take a "give more to get more" approach that enables their grantees to develop denser relationships, which then leads to greater impact at the field level. Supporting multiple grantees in this way with an additional investment of resources (above and beyond grant dollars for project or core operating support) offers the possibility of achieving better results.

More funders have been willing to try, and learn from, this different approach. As the Community Foundation for Southeastern Michigan notes:

*Through the Great Outdoors, we are trying to encourage the development of a holistic approach to children's learning and health that draws upon the resources of different sectors of the community. This requires new thinking and behavior. It is not easy and does not come quickly...[W]e are interested in encouraging leadership... This means we want organizations to provide exemplary programs for children, but we also want and expect them to be committed to and engaged in learning from others, critiquing their work, sharing lessons learned, and in communicating what they are doing and learning with others. This is a tall order and a more ambitious set of expectations than our typical grantmaking. We believe we have a strategy for making this happen through the Great Outdoors Leadership Grants Program, but we know that this breaks new ground for both the Community Foundation and our grantees.*

As we have seen, learning communities accrue significant benefits to grantees and funders alike. While these observable benefits are considerable, foundations have to consider carefully how to exercise power in this different kind of relationship with grantees. The willingness to learn – and to change how one works in response – is both the prerequisite and the goal for successful learning communities. And all participants - funders and organizational leaders both - must commit to those tasks in order to get smarter together.

## Acknowledgements

This report was initially developed as a background paper for the Marguerite Casey Foundation Board of Directors meeting in November 2005. Thanks to Chantel L. Walker, Director of Programs and Evaluation, and Pat Vinh-Thomas, evaluation consultant, for the opportunity to pull together this comparative analysis. More information about the Marguerite Casey Foundation can be found at [www.caseygrants.org](http://www.caseygrants.org).

A big thank you to Beth Brown, Vice President for Planning & Facilitation at BTW Consultants, Inc., who was one of the Marguerite Casey Foundation learning cluster facilitators. We met during the evaluation of the learning clusters and agreed upon the value of sharing the lessons learned with the larger field of philanthropy. I greatly appreciate her making possible the distribution of this report at GEO's 2006 national conference. More information about BTW can be found at [www.informingchange.org](http://www.informingchange.org).

Further thanks to the sponsoring funders of the three other learning communities cited in this report:

- From the moment we met, Anne S. Weekley, Director of Communications, and Larry C. Coppard, Senior Consultant, for the Community Foundation for Southeastern Michigan, were keen on sharing lessons from the Great Outdoors initiative with other funders. Also, thanks to Geri Unger of the Funders' Forum on Environment and Education who co-facilitated the concluding Forum session with me. Information about the Great Outdoors initiative can be found at <http://greatoutdoors.cfsem.org>.
- The Barr Foundation provided me the wonderful opportunity of working with Cynthia Parker of the Interaction Institute for Social Change. Appreciations to Pat Brandes, Senior Advisor, Roberto Cremonini, Chief Knowledge & Learning Officer, and Mariella Tan Puerto, Senior Program Officer. Information about the Barr Foundation can be found at [www.barrfoundation.org](http://www.barrfoundation.org).
- The four Bay Area community foundations modeled the collaborative learning that is to be desired – kudos to: Bob Uyeki, former Program Officer, and Allison Brooks, Director of the Livable Communities Initiative, at the East Bay Community Foundation ([www.eastbaycf.org](http://www.eastbaycf.org)); Don Jen, Program Officer, Education and Training, and Sallyanne Wilson, former Program Officer, Environment, at the Marin Community Foundation ([www.marincf.org](http://www.marincf.org)); Carol Welsh Gray, Executive Director of the Center for Venture Philanthropy and Jed Mitchell, former Program Manager of the Environmental Solutions Forum, at the Peninsula Community Foundation ([www.pcf.org](http://www.pcf.org)); and Arlene Rodriguez, Program Officer for the Environment at The San Francisco Foundation ([www.sff.org](http://www.sff.org)). The final report on the Bay Area Environmental Education Evaluation collaborative can be found at: <http://blueprintrd.com/text/baeelc.pdf>.

Special thanks go to the many grantee organization representatives who participated in the various learning communities. It is their knowledge that is the foundation for all the learning that took place in these settings.

Finally, I extend deep gratitude to my colleagues at Blueprint Research & Design, Inc. whose commitment to learning and improvement supports and challenges me every day.

## The Power of Learning: Funders and Grantees Getting Smarter Together



Blueprint Research & Design, Inc.  
San Francisco Office (headquarters)  
720 Market Street, Suite 900  
San Francisco, CA 94102  
T: 415.677.9700  
F: 415.677.9711  
E: [info@blueprintrd.com](mailto:info@blueprintrd.com)  
[www.blueprintrd.com](http://www.blueprintrd.com)

Blueprint Seattle (satellite office)  
Securities Building  
1904 Third Avenue, Suite 927  
Seattle, WA 98101  
T: 206.324.4999  
F: 206.324.4989