

Tool: Engaging Local Funders in Degree Attainment Collaboratives

Degree attainment collaborative efforts can use this tool to better understand their local funder landscape, determine the roles local funders can play to support their work, and consider a set of success factors for local funder engagement.

1. Understand the Local Context

The first step for college attainment collaborative efforts looking to increase local funder engagement is to understand who the different funders in their region are to determine how best to involve them. **College attainment collaborative efforts should consider engaging with the different types of local funders in their area:** community foundations, United Ways, family foundations, corporate foundations, regional education conversion foundations, and national foundations investing in the communities and regions in which they are based. **Collaborative effort leaders can use the following questions to assess their local funder landscape.**

Local Context Diagnostic

- What types of local funders are currently investing in the community or region?
- Which of these different types of funders are investing in education? In degree attainment?
- To what extent are different types of local funders investing in partnerships and collaboration?
- What is the relationship between different funders? Do funders actively collaborate with each other? Is there a forum or venue for funder collaboration that already exists in our community? If so, how can we potentially engage with this forum?

2. Explore the Roles Different Local Funders can Play in the Effort

After understanding the local funder landscape, it is important for collaborative efforts to determine how different local funders might engage in the work. Our research identified **six roles local funders are best positioned to play at different points in the journey of a collaborative effort.**

These roles are not mutually exclusive (i.e., local funders can take on multiple roles simultaneously), and the most engaged local funders often take on many of these roles over the course of their engagement with a collaborative effort.

A brief description of each of the roles in this framework and a set of success factors for local funder engagement follows.



1. **Catalyst.** Local funders can initiate the effort, bring partners together, or create a sense of urgency among community stakeholders to start the collaborative.
2. **Community Connector.** Local funders have strong relationships with a range of key community actors across different sectors and can bring those actors together to start or increase support for the effort.
3. **Collaborative Host Organization.** Local funders can host the collaborative infrastructure required to create and sustain the collaborative (e.g., play the backbone role in a collective impact effort).
4. **Infrastructure Funders.** Some funders might not be willing or positioned to host the collaborative infrastructure, but they can provide valuable funding to develop and sustain it.
5. **Community Funders.** Local funders can be effective representatives of the community and play a leadership role participating in the collaborative infrastructure (e.g., steering committee or working groups) to ensure momentum is maintained as the effort evolves.
6. **Program Grantmakers.** When efforts are established, local funders can align their current education grantees with the effort (e.g., identifying opportunities for current grantees to partner with the effort), or provide new funding for existing or new programs related to the effort (e.g., increasing the reach of a program already supported by the effort or funding a new program).

3. Consider the Following Success Factors for Local Funder Engagement

As collaborative effort leaders consider the success factors below, it is important to keep in mind that **for many of the local funders they are hoping to engage, supporting collaborative work is a fundamental shift from how they have traditionally engaged in philanthropy.** Instead of only focusing on the number of individuals served or the percentage change in degree completion as the result of one program, local funders are seeking to improve the overall system of degree attainment in their community in order to engage in the effort.

1. **Engage local funders as soon as possible.** Local funders are more likely to engage in collaborative work if they can help shape the goals of the collaborative and ensure that the effort's strategies relate to their own goals. Their ability to catalyze, convene, and connect is absolutely central to the early stages as well as the long-term sustainability of the effort.
2. **Use data to create a sense of urgency in the community.** Collaborative efforts can engage local funders by supporting research and evaluation that demonstrate the urgency to work on degree attainment in their community. Sometimes it is only a matter of putting publicly available data together in a way that presents a compelling case of how the lack of degree completion affects the local economy and the community.
3. **Highlight the benefits of investing in collaboration.** Demonstrating the benefits of investing in collaboration compared to individual organizations or programs can help efforts attract local funders. Collaborative efforts should highlight benefits such as greater efficiency and alignment of investments, increased trust and relationship building in the community, and greater impact at the systems and population levels.
4. **Show how effort's goals align with local funder's goals.** As collaborative efforts look to engage with local funders, it is crucial to spend some time looking at the local funder's strategy and finding potential overlaps and opportunities for engagement. Leaders of collaborative efforts should come to the table with a clear articulation of how investing in the collaborative effort aligns with the funder's current grantmaking.
5. **Demonstrate measurable long-term, community-level impact.** Given that collaborative efforts require funders to take on a new orientation to social change, it is important that efforts demonstrate how they intend to measure broad community-level impact. Many efforts do this by building robust data systems that allow them to measure changes across multiple indicators at the community level across different population groups.

This tool is part of a research project conducted by FSG in partnership with Lumina Foundation to better understand how degree attainment collaborative efforts can more effectively engage with local funders. For more information on this topic, including examples from collaborative efforts effectively engaging local funders, please review the [full brief](#).



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