

Greater Houston Community Foundation

Catalyzing collaborations to create communities of active donors achieving greater impact on the issues they care about

The Big Idea

Taking a donor-centered approach to collaboration, the Greater Houston Community Foundation plays a variety of roles — facilitator, convener, thought partner, researcher and fund administrator — in order to catalyze collaborations in issues that are of high interest to donors. GHCF has a practice of covering one-third of the collaborative's cost, through staff time and financial contributions; it seeks other contributions to cover the remainder to ensure the effort remains a true collaboration.

The Story

As one of the most highly donor-advised community foundations in the United States (85 percent of their assets are in donor-advised funds), the Greater Houston Community Foundation views collaboration as an opportunity to leverage donors' investments and engage donors more deeply in

issues they care about. The foundation is currently involved in three collaborative efforts. The Strategic Education Fund and the Greater Houston Fund to End Homelessness are what the foundation calls community impact funds — pooled funds involving individual donors, private foundations and

About the Grantmaker

The mission of the Greater Houston Community Foundation is to grow effective philanthropy by connecting donors to the causes they care about, providing excellent stewardship of assets entrusted to them and convening resources to address important community needs.

TYPE OF FUNDER

Community Foundation

GEOGRAPHY/ISSUE AREA

Greater
Houston

TOTAL ASSETS

\$554
Million

ANNUAL GIVING

\$97
Million in 2014

NUMBER OF STAFF

24
Employees

WEBSITE: WWW.GHCF.ORG

corporate donors that have their own governance structures. In both of these funds, GHCF staff serve as facilitator, convener, researcher, administrator and thought partner. The third effort is a working group of individual donors and foundations focused on human trafficking, which has also catalyzed a public-private partnership with the mayor's office and led to the creation of an anti-human trafficking coordinator in the mayor's office. In this effort, group members share communication, due diligence and research, and they track one another's grantmaking to try to align around the systemic change they want to see in the region. After just one year this approach is catalyzing change in the capacity of implementers in the field to combat human trafficking. In this case, GHCF plays the roles of facilitator, convener, advocate, researcher and thought partner; however, funds are not pooled, so the foundation is not playing the administrator role.

Renee Wizig-Barrios, senior vice president and chief philanthropy officer, described some preconditions the foundation considers before engaging in a collaboration. First there must be a clear connection between the collaborative and donors' interests, per the foundation's mission of connecting donors to the issues they care about. "Our model is focused on partnering with donors to achieve impact. We are constructing platforms for high-engagement philanthropy in order to make this happen. Whenever we see an opportunity to engage in collaboration, the first question we ask is, 'Do we have donors who are passionate about this subject and who might want GHCF to play a role?'" Wizig-Barrios said.

Second, the foundation is committed to ensuring that the role it plays is indeed filling a gap. "We are at an exciting time in Houston, where lots of foundations are leading collaborations," Wizig-Barrios said. "We're not interested in taking up space from others who want to lead." Often, part of the gap the foundation is helping to fill includes content expertise, convening and facilitation.

A key way the foundation signals its commitment to any collaboration it is involved in is through the willingness to invest resources — both money and staff time. The foundation has invested its own resources to cover at least one-third of the cost to do the work, including staff time, in its collaborations. The participating donors cover the remaining costs. In addition, in 2015, the foundation board approved a new philanthropic leadership fund, the purpose of which is to allow the foundation to incubate new philanthropic initiatives, including collaborations. The foundation also maintains focus on collaboration by making it part of

the organization's goals and including it in the top four priorities in performance goals of staff who are directly involved in the collaborative efforts.

“We see our work in leading and convening donor collaborations as a central part of our mission as a community foundation. It has been a meaningful learning journey for our staff and for the donors engaged in the collaboration. Together we all feel a sense of satisfaction about the impact we have created so far, and we strive for continuous improvement,” Wizig-Barrios said.

LEARNING NOTES

+ For true collaboration, share the costs with other funders.

Although GHCF's practice is to contribute one-third of the cost of running a collaboration in terms of staff time and financial resources, it looks to other partners to chip in to help decentralize control and to influence and nurture the spirit of collaboration. ***How might you apply a similar mindset to your collaborations?***

+ Use your convening power.

GHCF considers its convening power to be one of its greatest assets in connecting donors to the issues they care about. ***How might you use your connections and convening power to foster collaboration?***

+ Seek to fill in the gaps.

The foundation looks for ways to play roles that can best serve community needs without duplicating efforts. ***Where or how might you have an impact where other funders or partners are not?***

+ Tie collaboration to staff performance.

The foundation uses a list of core competencies to assess how well staff are able to foster collaboration (see below). ***What assessment criteria do you currently use, and how well does it measure staff's ability to be collaborative?***

Competencies for collaboration

The Greater Houston Community Foundation identified the following set of behavioral competencies that they find critical for collaboration among foundation staff:

- **Accepting responsibility.** Holds self accountable for delivering work in a timely, accurate manner; admits to and takes responsibility for mistakes.
- **Adapting to change.** Accepts change as a normal part of doing business, maintaining a positive attitude and exhibiting constructive work behaviors during periods of transition.
- **Championing customer needs.** Provides timely and professional service to both internal and external customers (including donors, private foundations and corporations engaged in philanthropy); is responsive to customer needs and requests; is always courteous to the customer; considers the needs of the customer when making decisions.
- **Communicating and interacting effectively with people.** Conveys ideas clearly and succinctly; gauges audiences effectively, tailoring the message appropriately to each audience; is comfortable interacting with people at all levels of the organization.
- **Displaying creativity.** Displays and encourages creativity and innovation to drive progress; is comfortable taking reasonable risks.
- **Establishing relationships.** Is comfortable starting conversations; makes good first impression and relates well to all kinds of people; is able to shift style and tone to fit the audience.
- **Inspiring and motivating others.** Encourages others to pursue and achieve their goals; helps others recognize opportunities to contribute to something bigger than themselves.
- **Making accurate judgments and decisions.** Takes a reasoned, logical approach in making judgments and decisions; carefully reviews available facts and information before reaching any conclusion.
- **Solving complex problems.** Methodically breaks down complex problems into manageable components in order to define and formulate a clear solution.