LESSONS FROM A TEN-YEAR FUNDER COLLABORATIVE

A Case Study of the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Partnership for Higher Education in Africa (Partnership) was a ten-year funder collaborative that sought to strengthen higher education in Africa.

Established in 2000, the initiative came at a critical time in African history. A number of nations were implementing democratic and economic reforms. Universities and other institutions of higher education were experiencing resurgence after years of neglect in favor of primary and secondary education. A new energy and resourcefulness was apparent.

Leaders of the Partnership foundations saw an opportunity to make a difference by encouraging systemic and sustainable change to higher education institutions in countries where they were already actively working. The Partnership focused its support on universities in nine countries: Egypt, Ghana, Madagascar, Mozambique, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda.

The original members of the Partnership were Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Rockefeller, Ford and John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundations. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Kresge Foundation later joined the Partnership.

In 2010, the Partnership secretariat closed. In ten years, the Partnership could count several successes among its work, including a collective investment of nearly half a billion dollars aimed at strengthening higher education in Africa. Achieving such a scale of funding and period of working together is highly unusual among funders, particularly given the complex logistics of working across nine countries, seven foundations, and five time zones. Specifically, the Partnership could point to the following successes:

- **Increased spotlight on the importance of higher education in Africa.** The Partnership's work helped spur additional investments in higher education, including multimillion-dollar pledges by international donors such as the World Bank.
- **Increased investment in African higher education by participant foundations**. Between 2000 and 2010, the seven partner foundations invested $440 million in African higher education, surpassing their original pledge by $140 million.
- **Strengthened universities through core institutional development and other capacity-building activities in areas such as financial management, administrative systems, and development.** Several universities strengthened or established development offices for the first time, giving themselves the ability to attract funding from local and private donors instead of relying solely on government support.
- **Increased focus by Partnership members on larger initiatives than would have been possible individually by foundations.** Those initiatives included a bandwidth consortium that provided faster and cheaper Internet access to universities, a project that focuses on e-learning, or educational technology, to improve teaching and learning, support of higher education research and advocacy, and steps to nurture the next generation of African academics.
- **Creation of a community of practice within the foundations to share ideas and information with one another and improve their individual grantmaking.** Participating foundations came to a consensus about common approaches to improving higher education in Africa in areas such as fundraising, gender policies, next generation of academics, and e-learning.
- **Generation of more data and information about universities and other higher education institutions in Africa than available previously.** Case studies and broader research on higher education in Africa provided new and previously unavailable information to the participating foundations and others.

During the 10-year collaborative, participants encountered challenges in working in this unique fashion. Over the course of this large and complex collaborative, participants from seven foundations with different cultures, leadership styles, and missions came together to find ways that their work could enhance their individual foundation grantmaking and the collaborative's impact on Africa.

In conversations about their experience with the Partnership, participants offered the following advice to others who may consider starting or joining a similar large collaborative:

- **Collaborate on issues and ideas of a scale that one organization could not do alone.** Working in a collaborative takes time and money, especially program officer time. To make it worthwhile for participants, focus on an area in which a foundation wants to make an impact but cannot make that desired impact by working on its own.

- **Secure senior leadership support and engage them throughout the collaborative.** The support of senior leadership means that program officers will have the time and access to grant funds to make the work of the collaborative worthwhile and potentially effective.

- **Ensure that senior leadership delegates authority to program officers.** While senior leadership support is vital, it is also critical that program officers receive authority to make decisions on behalf of their foundations.

- **Set clear goals and expectations to keep members focused on what success looks like.** While any collaborative will start with broad goals, it is vital to take the time at the beginning of a collaborative to map out specific areas to focus on to achieve those goals.

- **Carry out a brief planning period.** This period, which can involve surveys, interviews of leaders, and a literature review, provides guidance in formulating initiatives and plans.

- **Establish a clear structure and participation rules, including how to make decisions.** Those rules include whether joint activities will be funded, how much funding each foundation must contribute to participate, and how to create consensus.

- **Create a secretariat or coordinating body to provide the infrastructure to carry out the work.** The secretariat also needs some decision-making powers including the ability to set deadlines for participants, convene meetings, and answer grantee questions on joint grants.

- **Be clear about the time commitment of a collaborative and set it aside.** It is important that senior management understand and value the time it takes for program officers to be involved in a collaborative.

- **Look for a common initiative soon.** Finding a common project to collaborate on at the beginning of a collaborative helps participating foundations immediately bring their joint funding, knowledge, and strengths to bear on something tangible.

- **Take time for participants to get to know one another and build trust including frank discussion of the agendas of each foundation and limitations of what they can do.** Offsite retreats can allow participants to learn more about one another on a personal and professional level.

- **Consider pooled funding to work on joint activities.** The advantage of pooled funding is that it gives a collaborative an efficient way to tap money for joint activities.
- **Set up a system to gather data and evaluate the outcomes of larger grants.** Data and evaluation are important in order to gain a clear picture of the work's impact.
- **Establish single-reporting templates and contact person or organization for joint grantees where possible.** Single-reporting templates minimize the burden on grantees for these projects.
- **Consider broad and deep partnerships—with local agencies, with organizations that participating foundations support, and with other large agencies and government bodies.** By actively seeking other partners, collaboratives can greatly extend their impact.
- **Establish an exit plan that includes developing strategies for long-term sustainability of work and ways to embed it in established institutions or organizations.** An exit plan entails developing strategies for long-term sustainability of the work and ways to embed it in established institutions or organizations.

INTRODUCTION

In 2000, the presidents of four U.S. foundations announced a $100-million initiative to support the improvement of higher education institutions in a number of sub-Saharan African countries.

The initiative, called the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa (Partnership), came at a critical time in African history. A number of nations were implementing democratic and economic reforms. Universities and other institutions of higher education were experiencing resurgence after years of neglect in favor of primary and secondary education. A new energy and resourcefulness was apparent.

Leaders of the original Partnership foundations saw an opportunity to make a difference by helping encourage systemic and sustainable change to higher education institutions in countries where they were already actively working.

The original Partnership foundations were Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Rockefeller, Ford and John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundations. They were later joined by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Kresge Foundation.

In 2010, the formal operations of the Partnership secretariat closed. In ten years, the Partnership foundations had collectively invested $440 million in nine countries as well as in regional networks aimed at strengthening higher education in Africa. Achieving such a scale of funding and period of working together was highly unusual among funders, particularly given the especially complex logistics of working across nine countries, seven foundations, and five time zones.

Purpose of Case Study

The purpose of this case study is to describe lessons that can be drawn from this unique, ten-year philanthropic collaborative, particularly for foundation program officers who may be interested or involved in similar collaboratives. Over the course of the collaborative, participants from foundations with different cultures, leadership styles, and missions came together to find ways that their work together could enhance their individual foundation grantmaking and their collective impact in Africa.

During the decade of work, the collaborative experienced some notable successes, struggled with challenges, and made corrections along the way.

This case study describes the work of the Partnership, its structure, its accomplishments, its challenges, and advice that participants would give others considering starting a similar collaborative.

Methodology of Case Study

The Partnership for Higher Education in Africa hired Susan Parker of Clear Thinking Communications (consultant) to carry out the case study. To gather information for this study, the consultant reviewed documents from the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa including meeting notes, internal memos, case studies commissioned on universities and higher education in Africa, a 2004 evaluation, a 2008 midterm review and documents describing the Partnership's structure, organizing principles, vision of success, and accomplishments. The consultant also reviewed a 2009 report by GrantCraft on funder collaboratives entitled "Funder Collaboratives: Why and How Funders Work Together."

In addition, the consultant facilitated a workshop session of Partnership members in January 2010 to describe the key successes, challenges, and lessons learned from the collaborative. Finally, the consultant conducted individual interviews with 30 participants of the Partnership including the four founding presidents. (See Appendix for list of those interviewed.)

How the Partnership Came About

The Partnership for Higher Education in Africa came about from a confluence of rapid changes in the continent, keen interest on the part of foundation presidents, many of whom had been university presidents themselves, and determined groundwork by foundation staff, especially at the vice-presidential level.

Opportunities in Africa

In the 1970s and 1980s, many countries in sub-Saharan Africa struggled with domestic and international conflict, diseases such as malaria (and, eventually, HIV/AIDS), sputtering economies, poverty, corruption, and natural disasters. Their universities, which depended on government funding, suffered from a steep decline in that support. Donors turned their focus to primary and secondary education, believing that they could accomplish more there in a continent where only half of the population was literate.

What's more, enrollment in sub-Saharan African universities was only about 3.5 percent of the college-age population, the lowest of any region in the world, according to a 2000 article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education.* Universities also lagged behind in serving women and the poor.

Moreover the physical facilities were decaying, universities lacked up-to-date technological infrastructure, had sparsely stocked libraries, and, most difficult of all, many academic staff had left for Western Europe or the United States, and their departure led to a severe brain drain. Administrators of many universities had often been appointed according to the number of years they had spent teaching, rather than for possessing the experience and skills needed to run a large institution. In sum, many universities lacked the ability to produce professionals required to ensure stable and sustainable societies and economies.

The 1990s, however, marked a significant shift for many African nations and universities. Nations began implementing political and economic reforms for the first time in more than three decades. At the same time, despite having suffered from neglect by their government and international donors for years, some universities and other higher education institutions began responding creatively and entrepreneurially to these new reforms. Among the changes they were making are the following:

- Undertaking strategic plans, many for the first time, to revamp the functioning of the university and to develop new financial resources outside of the government.
- Introducing new degree programs including business administration, nursing, biomedical lab technology, and tourism.
- Hiring new faculty to reduce high student-teacher ratios and improve the quality of teaching.
- Actively recruiting women and students from low-income backgrounds to reduce inequalities in the composition of the student body.

Much of this work had been done with minimal funding and, while promising, was still in its early stages.

Origins of the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa

These changes caught the attention of foundation presidents and their staff.

It is not entirely clear who came up with the idea for the Partnership as different participants have different recollections. But the broad outlines are as follows: In 1997, the Carnegie Corporation of New York named Vartan Gregorian as its new president. Gregorian, the former president of Brown University, wanted foundations to tackle big issues through collaborating in a deeper way than they usually do. As a former university president, he also deeply believed in the key role that higher education could play in improving society.

"I wanted to make collaboration among foundations a natural act instead of an unnatural act," he said. "We wanted to tackle issues that are too big for one foundation....We wanted to make higher education in Africa a natural priority because it was considered a luxury."

At the same time, senior staff at Carnegie and the Rockefeller Foundation saw opportunities for greater engagement in higher education in Africa with the changes taking place at the university and political levels. These staff members had become dismayed at the international focus on supporting primary education in Africa in recent years. Their foundations had helped build up universities in newly independent nations. They wanted to return to that work. They felt strongly that the continent would not progress without a strong higher education system.

With that start, Gregorian and staff members at Carnegie and Rockefeller reached out to presidents of other foundations who were working in Africa. As a result, in addition to Carnegie's president, the presidents of the Rockefeller Foundation (Sir Gordon Conway), Ford Foundation (Susan Berresford), and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation (Jonathan Fanton) agreed to form what became known as the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa. With the exception of Berresford, all of the presidents had been university presidents in the past, a fact that likely influenced strongly the decision to focus on higher education in Africa, several participants said.

The presidents also knew each other and worked together well, which made it easy to agree to the Partnership, they all said.

Regardless of whose idea initially sparked the Partnership, it was a strongly directed presidential initiative, which influenced much of its structure and dynamics. That also made this different from many other foundation collaboratives, which normally bubble up from staff working together.

Overview of Funder Collaboratives

Funder collaboratives have likely been around as long as funders themselves. Foundations working in similar areas often see opportunities to work together and form a collaborative. According to the GrantCraft publication "Funder Collaboratives: Why and How Funders Work Together," interest in collaboratives is increasing among foundations.

The economic downturn in 2008 and 2009 may be prompting foundations to look at ways to make more effective use of their funds and resources, the GrantCraft report stated. In addition, other trends may be affecting a push for greater collaboration. Those include the emergence of high net worth individuals, venture capitalists, and small foundations that seek new opportunities to make the most of their investments, according to the report. There is also a growing recognition that few philanthropists can achieve their intended results on their own. What's more, a new generation of young philanthropists may be more comfortable working collaboratively, the report stated.

According to the GrantCraft report, funder collaboratives tend to fall into three broad types:

- **Learning networks.** A learning network is a group of funders who come together to hear what's happening in a field or issue area, share information, and explore potential strategies for making more effective investments.
- **Strategic alignment network.** A strategic alignment network is made up of funders who share a mission, strategize together, and work in concert to obtain publicity, traction, and impact but still do all of their grantmaking independently. Some networks of this type create intermediary organizations or other structures to advance a strategy, which then receive support directly from network members.
- **Pooled fund.** A pooled fund is a "pot" of money toward which funders contribute and from which grant dollars (or program-related investments) are disbursed. Money from the pot is used without distinguishing the original donor.

The Partnership for Higher Education in Africa—Strategic Alignment Network

The Partnership for Higher Education in Africa was a strategic alignment network. Foundation program officers and presidents met regularly to talk about and share their strategies for funding higher education institutions in Africa. Each foundation awarded its grants independently based on its criteria and processes.

Collaborative members also made some joint funding to grantees in areas such as information and communications technology and research and advocacy. Grantees, however, had to apply to each foundation individually and follow each other's processes for funding.

According to participants, the collaborative had four broad purposes:

- **Make a public affirmation of the critical importance of higher education to Africa's future.** While some universities were experiencing resurgence, higher education as a whole was still suffering from neglect in favor of primary and sometimes secondary education.

  "[The presidents] had a belief that Africa needed a strong, vibrant higher education and these institutions could serve as economic and social development engines," said one early participant. "They felt that philanthropy could shed a spotlight in this area."
- **Raise visibility of higher education in Africa and increase funding for African universities by other donors.** This was an area where the collective strength and reputations of the foundations could make a difference. The foundations not only committed to fund higher educa-

tion in Africa, they also hoped that their united focus would send a signal to African governments and other donors about the importance of supporting higher education.

The Partnership in 2000 was launched with considerable publicity in New York that included all four original presidents, such influential officials as U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, and vice chancellors of African universities (the equivalent of presidents of U.S. universities).

"No matter how big one institution is, it's not as powerful as the voice of many institutions," said Susan Berresford, former president of the Ford Foundation. "And it doesn't appear as self-serving when it's a group of institutions with different purposes saying that they are all making a common commitment."

- **Tackle larger initiatives than were possible individually.** Participants hoped to tap one another's expertise, networks, and funding to work in bigger initiatives that would have a longer-term impact on African higher education than they could do alone. Several members pointed out that participating in a collaborative is time-consuming and not always easy. So they were eager to focus on identifying and carrying out large initiatives that they could not execute on their own.

  "We could work with each other and make things happen more readily," said Sir Gordon Conway, former president, the Rockefeller Foundation. "We wouldn't just work in one country. We could make a significant impact on higher education in Africa."

  Conway and others hoped their work would lead to lasting changes not only among individual universities but also among higher education as a whole.

  By working together, foundations might also take more risks than they were willing to do individually, said Joyce Moock, former associate vice president, the Rockefeller Foundation and who, along with Pat Rosenfield, now program director, Carnegie Scholars Program, at the Carnegie Corporation of New York, participated in the initial thinking about the shape of the Partnership.

- **Learn from one another's work in a more systematic way and improve individual grant-making.** Collectively the four foundations and their staff represented a depth of experience that each could learn from as they sought to tackle some of the systemic problems facing African universities. Since they were all working in Africa, it made sense to learn from one another, said Jonathan Fanton, former president, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

  "This was a nimble and convenient way to learn about what foundations were doing," Fanton said. "The important thing about the Partnership was not that we were going to do many new joint activities. But we were going to talk together and find themes that we could work together on."

FOCUS OF THE PARTNERSHIP–FIRST FIVE YEARS

The Partnership for Higher Education in Africa was established in April 2000 as a collaborative of four foundations—Carnegie Corporation of New York, Ford Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation. The presidents announced a five-year collaborative in which they pledged to commit $100 million to higher education in Africa in the next five years.

The goals for the Partnership were broadly stated by the presidents. They were also somewhat vague.

According to the press release announcing the Partnership, "the initiative will support efforts, many already underway, by leaders of African universities and academic associations to expand and improve the education of the next generation of African leaders in fields necessary for continued development of the region." As a shorthand, presidents described the goals of the initiative as "strengthening higher education in Africa."

In 2002, the Partnership presidents identified more specifically what "success" would ultimately look like. They identified these key dimensions:

- Effective use of information and communications technologies
- A diverse student body
- Creation of high-level professional talent and new ideas
- Transfer of skills essential for national development
- Strengthened university management and global engagement

The Partnership initially concentrated on supporting six sub-Saharan countries that were undergoing systemic public policy reform and where at least two of the foundations were working: Ghana, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda.

The foundations based their selection on the existence of improving economic conditions, emerging levels of public policy reform, and existing foundation participation. Partnership participants also decided to focus on universities that they saw as actively taking steps to strengthen themselves. They referred to the countries and universities as "on the move."

Initial Structure of the Partnership

The initial structure of the Partnership was loose and informal. That loose structure appealed to most of the original presidents, who did not want to set up a cumbersome bureaucracy. At times it posed problems for many of the program staff who had to carry out the work of the Partnership in addition to their ongoing duties.

The structure worked as follows:

- Each foundation agreed to engage in at least one priority area for joint funding. While foundations had to agree to participate in some joint funding, there was not a strong push for joint activities.

  Joint grants were mainly for research and case studies, workshops and seminars, regional institutions and networks, information and communications technology initiatives, and, later on, Partnership communications and coordination.

- The presidents chose seasoned program officers and vice presidents to oversee the work at their foundations. Because this was a high-level initiative that reported directly to presidents, they wanted their top staff to work in this area.

Initially, program officers and their staff did all the work of the Partnership; there was no outside group to oversee the work and grantmaking. In 2002, realizing that there was too much work for program officers to do, Partnership presidents hired a coordinator, who served as an administrative and organizing center for the work. The coordinator, Liz Levey, had been involved with the Partnership from the beginning as a consultant for Ford and Rockefeller in Nairobi. She brought needed organization and central locus for the work of the Partnership.

New York University served as the host agency for funding for the coordinator's position, office, and activities such as travel.

- Shortly into the Partnership, participants formed a steering committee to oversee the work. The steering committee consisted of at least one person from each foundation. Typically, though, many more people were involved—often up to 15, which slowed down the work of the Partnership, according to participants.

As the Partnership evolved, participants appointed a chair to coordinate the work. The role of the chair rotated every six months among foundations.

One participant, however, described the decision-making process as “painfully, painfully slow. Something would be proposed in the committee and talked and talked about. It could take months before the committee decided to move forward.”

- Over time, the Partnership developed an executive committee consisting of just one representative from each foundation. That committee met more frequently and was empowered to finalize strategic decisions within the parameters defined by the presidents, make decisions on a day-to-day basis, and oversee the work of the coordinator.

  The broader steering committee advised the executive committee on strategic decisions including joint grants to be considered by the Partnership. Partnership participants also developed working groups on specific issues, such as information communications and technology, and publishing case studies and an international journal on African higher education. Levey, who had a background in information and communications technology, spearheaded that subcommittee, which made the most notable progress during that time.

- The presidents met together about once a year to discuss and oversee the Partnership and make decisions on joint funding.

- Once on board, the coordinator also oversaw the creation of a website for interested grantees and others to learn more about the Partnership. The website housed a database of all the grants made under the Partnership aegis. The coordinator shepherded the publication of the case studies as well.

First Steps

The presidents felt strongly that their funding under the Partnership must be based on the needs of universities, as identified by university leaders. To learn about those needs, the Partnership commissioned seven case studies on either individual universities or the higher education system in the country that they were funding.

The Partnership also commissioned a “landscape” description of the sector and the systems, an inventory of transformative innovations in African universities, and a description of how global trends were affecting higher education in Africa.

In addition, foundation staff and presidents met several times with experts on issues of higher education in a series of workshops to discuss higher education development.

Early Challenges

Notes from early meetings of the Partnership signaled issues that would challenge the Partnership throughout its existence. Among the earliest was how to reconcile the independent paths that foundations are used to taking with the need to work together to carry out major strategies.

Participants were limited in the decisions that they could make without consulting their presidents or boards. In one initiative, one foundation representative indicated he could approve only up to $50,000 for grants and another up to $25,000 in grants without checking with the respective foundations.

In interviews with participants, several said that cultural differences between their foundations posed some of the biggest difficulties in the Partnership. Some foundations had a top-down approach in which the presidents wanted to hold close control of decision making, while others had a more decentralized approach and ceded much authority to their program officers.

One of the original participants said that getting staffs from four different foundations to work together was not easy. They were not used to collaborating closely; rather, they were more comfortable simply co-funding projects.

Other challenges include how to efficiently share information—one of the core purposes of the Partnership. Following the highly publicized announcement of the formation of the Partnership, member foundations received a flood of unsolicited grant applications.

Because the Partnership had not established a coordinating body, such as a secretariat, there was no central system to oversee and route these applications to the appropriate foundation. Instead, grantees applied to individual foundations and program officers shared applications that might be appropriate for "Partnership" funding. Some participants also complained of being inundated by e-mails on sometimes minor matters.

In addition, participants were often unsure how to carry out the broad goals identified by the presidents for the Partnership. In a nutshell, it was difficult to figure out what exactly it meant to "strengthen higher education in Africa."

Despite these struggles, notes from these early meetings describe a fair degree of openness and an appreciation of candor among participants, especially as participants continued to meet. The 2004 evaluation of the Partnership found "evidence of an evolution throughout the four years of the Partnership marked by increasing collaboration between the foundations and greater synergy of grantmaking for some key initiatives"

Through the first five years of the Partnership, participants could point to some early successes. They included the following:

- The creation of the case studies, many of which influenced university strategic plans and government initiatives.
- The launch of the *Journal of Higher Education in Africa,* the first to cover higher education issues in all of Africa.
- The creation of a bandwidth initiative to help universities they were funding secure faster and cheaper Internet service.
- The creation of several new university degree programs as well as scholarships to encourage women leadership.
- The influence on individual foundations to make grants to universities to help them transform the universities as institutions rather than just use funding to conduct and manage projects. Individual foundations funded universities in areas like strategic planning, curriculum development, and financial autonomy.

The Partnership, however, had done little joint grantmaking. From 2000 to 2005, 88 percent of were individual foundation grants and 12 percent were joint foundation grants. Some participants and presidents did not worry much about those lopsided numbers. They felt that the Partnership, at its core, was still about sharing information to improve the individual grantmaking of foundations. But other participants, and the evaluators, urged the Partnership to embark on more joint grantmaking.

Two Joint Initiatives Highlight the Difficulty and Promise of Funding Collaboratives

Early on in the Partnership, participating foundations embarked on two joint activities that illustrate both how collaboratives can achieve a bigger impact than members could on their own and the difficulties of working on complex projects with multiple foundations.

The first joint project funded by all four original foundations was the creation and funding of the *Journal of Higher Education in Africa.* While many scholarly journals existed in Africa, the only one dedicated to the field of higher education focused on South Africa only. At about the same time, Boston College and an African organization, the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), both proposed a project to create a new journal. Boston College won the grant, but at the insistence of the Partnership, it undertook the work with CODESRIA, which already published several academic journals.

According to participants and the 2008 midterm review, the forced partnership of the two organizations did not work from the beginning. Journal issues were not published on time and each partner accused the other of failing to carry out its respective obligations. In 2006, after four years of funding, the Partnership ended its support. CODESRIA took over the journal and continues to publish two to three issues each year.

The 2008 mid-term review criticized the Partnership for failing to manage the project and the tense relationships between Boston College and CODESRIA. The evaluator wrote: "[This] initiative is a clear case of a joint activity with a flawed implementation process reflecting in part inadequate interaction and oversight by the Partnership with the co-grantees. For example, despite early and clear evidence of difficulties in the working relationship between Boston College and CODESRIA, no one foundation program officer nor the Partnership's Coordinator was charged with keeping in touch on behalf of the Partnership and no one visited CODESRIA. Both observations suggest weaknesses in the Partnership's way of handling joint activities."

Partnership participants agree that many parts of this project went wrong, including a lack of clear plan from the beginning and a thoughtful discussion about whether funding such a journal even made sense at a time when the field of higher education scholarship in Africa was still new.

At about the same time, the Partnership undertook another joint initiative that was much more successful though also complicated and rife with difficult challenges.

At a Partnership-organized workshop in Africa of grantees in 2002 attendees said that they could not take action on nearly every single agenda item presented because they did not have the bandwidth to do so and could not afford to get it. While bandwidth may cost $100 for U.S. households a month, African universities paid thousands for much slower service. In addition, only a tiny percentage of the population had online service.

Partnership members took notice and formed the Bandwidth Consortium, a complex endeavor that took more than three years to establish. The aims were to lower costs of Internet service for universities and eventually allow universities to use their bulk purchasing power to buy cheaper and faster service on their own.

"This was not in our realm of experience," said Andrea Johnson, program officer at the Carnegie Corporation of New York. "We would much rather deal with scholarly publications or applications for teaching and learning. It's what foundations do. This took it back to the fundamentals. If you don't have bandwidth you can't take advantage of the information revolution."

She added, "A lot of people were complaining about this issue but they weren't addressing it. It would not have happened without the Partnership. There was safety in numbers. None of us would have come up with so much money (a total of $5.5 million) on our own mandate. We shared the risk. We convinced our foundation leaders this is worth it."

The process was more complicated than anyone had imagined. Over the years, three different institutions housed the consortium, local project directors changed and foundation program officers had to learn about complex business negotiation and assist university members in the intricacies of the work as well. Collaborative members, which were all contributing funding to the project, also operated on different budget calendars. That meant that the African organization implementing the work was often waiting for funding, which it needed to provide the bandwidth to participating organizations.

Despite ongoing difficulties in managing the project, it made a real difference to the universities.

The Partnership investment enabled participating universities to purchase faster, cheaper Internet and saved them more than $19 million in the first three years. The work also paved the way for the Partnership's largest project. The Education Technology Initiative is a $6.7 million project that focuses on educational technology to improve teaching and learning in seven universities.

EVOLUTION OF PARTNERSHIP—THE SECOND FIVE YEARS

In 2005, encouraged by the successes of the first five years of the Partnership, the four founding presidents as well as presidents from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation committed their foundations to fund another five years of the Partnership.

It was an unusual and noteworthy step for the foundations to commit to an additional five years of working together. This time, the now six foundations pledged to contribute a combined $200 million in the next five years.

In the second phase of the Partnership, Kenya, Egypt, and Madagascar were added to the list of countries the Partnership would support, which brought the number of countries to nine. In 2007, the Kresge Foundation joined the Partnership, for a total of seven foundations as members.

During this next five years, the Partnership began to evolve in other ways as well.

Greater trust

Many original program officers from the participating foundations were still part of the Partnership. At this point, some had logged more than five years of meeting and collaborating with one another. Simply the time invested with one another, and the expertise gathered from working together, helped to develop closer ties among the program officers.

"The most dramatic evolution was the creation of bonds between staff of different foundations," said Janice Petrovich, former director of education programs at the Ford Foundation. "Here you have a bunch of different people thrown together by their presidents. Everyone at first was concerned that his or her foundation was well represented. They were working under guidelines and constraints. What happened ultimately was that people became friends and good working colleagues. The respect for each other grew and they began to do things that were very interesting."

Added Raoul Davion, program officer and co-chair, Higher Education in Africa at the MacArthur Foundation, "Over time, I experienced greater trust and awareness of colleagues' areas of interest. It became a safe space for developing ideas. That was the result of individuals building knowledge together and spending time together."

It took two or three years of program officers working closely together to develop deep trust and to understand the cultures of the different foundations, several participants said.

From presidentially-directed to program officer-embraced

At its start, the Partnership had been a largely presidentially-initiated and -directed collaborative. Program officers had to be responsive to their presidents, but for many it was neither their idea nor always their first choice of how to spend their time in an already crammed schedule. Over time, however, the Partnership shifted from a presidentially directed initiative to one that most program officers embraced and took an active role in directing.

Part of the reason was that the program officers began to see the value of meeting and learning from their peers in such a complex field as higher education in Africa, participants said.

While many program officers had embraced the Partnership, some observers also noted that the program officers seemed subservient to presidents during annual meetings and reluctant to assert their roles as experts in African higher education.

Coordinator takes on more central role/more efficient decision making

In 2006, Suzanne Grant Lewis took over the role of the coordinator. A former faculty member at Harvard University, Grant Lewis had years of experience working in higher education and Africa. As coordinator, she imposed more structure on the Partnership.

She reduced the raft of e-mails by collecting comments first on proposals then forwarding them on to Partnership representatives. She set deadlines for responses and followed up if they weren't met. She also established more regular meeting times, which had become less frequent in recent years. After a frustrating meeting with the presidents in 2006 in which participants felt ill-prepared, Grant Lewis established annual off-site retreats prior to presidential meetings to make strategic decisions and set agendas.

The Partnership also set a proposed limit of six months to discuss proposals for joint funding.

"We became more effective in our decision making by recognizing that yes, these were good ideas but we couldn't pursue them if there was not a champion in the foundations," said Raoul Davion, program officer and co-chair, Higher Education Initiative in Africa, at the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

Davion pointed out that while it took three years to establish the Bandwidth Consortium, it took fewer than two years to create the Education Technology Initiative, which built on the work of the Bandwidth Consortium.

The Partnership also established more formal rules for participating, including a requirement that foundations contribute $400,000 each year for joint activities. It lengthened the terms of the chairs and established two co-chairs to manage the group, which added continuity to the work.

In 2006, the Partnership contracted with the Institute of International Education (IIE) to administer funding for joint activities such as travel, workshops, regional meetings, and consulting work.

"When the Partnership established the kitty with IIE that was probably one of the best things that they ever did," said Liz Levey, the first Partnership coordinator. "That pot of money could be used for activities and people didn't have to check back with the foundations."

Greater focus on big-picture funding and more joint grantmaking

The Partnership began to focus on larger issues facing higher education in Africa and undertake more joint grantmaking, though joint funding remained a small percentage of the overall spending.

"In the second phase we started to grapple with some of the big issues facing higher institutions in Africa like replenishing professors who were retiring," said Greg Anderson, former program officer, Ford Foundation. "Towards the end we really had a coherent plan for nurturing the next generation of academics] where we could see the value added of being in the Partnership."

Newer foundations to the Partnership, which did not already have large investments in higher education in Africa, put a larger percentage of their funding into joint projects than did the original foundations. The Hewlett Foundation, which joined in the second phase, contributed 35 percent of its funding for joint projects, while the Kresge Foundation, which was the last foundation to join in 2007, invested 28 percent of its funding in joint initiatives.

"Because we were starting new and fresh we could help fill in the gaps with joint funding," said Bill Moses, Program Director for Education at the Kresge Foundation. "We didn't have preexisting grantees to work with."

SUCCESSES OF THE PARTNERSHIP

The Partnership could point to successes in specific areas, such as creating a bandwidth initiative that provided faster and cheaper Internet access to universities, helping faculty, administrators, and students connect with one another and the world more efficiently. The Partnership created regional networks where universities could come together and collaborate; it strengthened individual universities, and at the end it laid the groundwork for future work to tackle one of the most pressing issues in African higher education: nurturing the next generation of academics.

Among the key outcomes were the following:

Increased spotlight on importance of higher education in Africa

The Partnership spurred investments from other donors including international funders, the African government, and the private sector. In the clearest example, the original four foundations attracted three more foundations to the partnership (the Kresge, the William and Flora Hewlett, and the Andrew W. Mellon foundations), which contributed $91.5 million to the partnership.

In addition,

- The Partnership case study of higher education in Mozambique helped to influence a World Bank loan of $60 million. That loan in turn enabled the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology to leverage major support from the European Union and several bilateral donors including the Swedish International Development Agency–Department for Research Cooperation and the Netherlands Directorate General for Development Cooperation.
- Partnership grants of $1.36 million that established the Higher Education Research and Advocacy Network in Africa (HERANA) leveraged an additional $1 million from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) for the Higher Education Masters in Africa program.

- Ford and Rockefeller provided support to the Kenya Education Network Trust (KENET), which promotes the use of information communications technology for universities in Kenya. That support helped KENET establish its reputation and secure a $19-million grant from the government of Kenya's ICT Board for bandwidth expansion for its members.

"Although it might appear that aid is provided randomly, in the longer term whoever articulates an agenda significantly impacts how aid is applied," said Ken Wilson, former deputy to the vice president of the education, media, arts, and culture program, Ford Foundation. "We impacted quite significantly the debate that is going on in Africa. That spilled over consciously and unconsciously into how donors spent their money."

Increased investment in African higher education by participant foundations

In the ten years of the Partnership, the seven partner foundations had invested nearly $440 million in African higher education since 2000. By contrast, in the previous ten years (from 1990 to 1999), the original four foundations had invested only$103 million in this area.

Vartan Gregorian, president, Carnegie Corporation of New York, and Jonathan Fanton, former president, theJohn D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, said that their membership in the Partnership exerted pressure on them and their individual foundations to keep up with the other members in terms of providing financial support to African higher education.

"I think MacArthur and the other foundations probably did more for higher education in Africa because of the Partnership," Fanton said. "It raised the visibility of the issue in the foundation with me and our trustees. Since we were in it with other foundations it brought an upward pull on spending."

Strengthened individual universities

According to the 2008 midterm review, the universities that initially engaged in the case studies showed a range of achievements from foundations' funding that included core institutional development and other capacity-building activities. The most success came from information communications technologies, professional development of academic staff, and fundraising. Other program innovations include efforts devoted to new research, teaching approaches, and responding to national development needs.

Several universities, especially in South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Tanzania, and Uganda, strengthened or established development offices for the first time, giving them the ability to attract funding from local and private donors, instead of relying solely on government support. The Partnership also provided universities with general operating support, which made those institutions less dependent on government funding.

Increased focus by Partnership members on larger initiatives than would have been possible individually by foundations

Participants said that the Partnership allowed their foundations to tackle bigger projects, and take bigger risks, than they would have done as individual foundations.

Among the key joint activities accomplished by the Partnership were these:

- The Bandwidth Consortium Initiative. It was launched in 2005 and designed to help universities and other higher education institutions increase their Internet access and use by forming a bandwidth buying consortium and obtaining training to manage their bandwidth capacities. The initiative saved universities \$19.7 million in the first three years, which was 3.5 times the Partnership investment of \$5.5 million.

  According to the 2008 evaluation, the faster Internet access spurred increased academic uses of information communications technology in areas such as communicating on class assignments, collaborating on shared data, and integrating processes such as admissions, transcripts, and library services.

- The Education Technology Initiative, a \$6.7 million ongoing project that builds on the work of the Bandwidth Consortium. The largest joint initiative of the Partnership, it focuses on e-learning, or educational technology, to improve teaching and learning in seven partner universities.

  While the project does not end until June 2012, the seven participating universities have begun implementing action plans and have created a community of practice for knowledge creation and dissemination. Among the innovations are digital content development (e-courses and open courseware) in education, pharmacy, medicine, science and technology, law, history, the arts, and others, and development of multimedia "tele classrooms."

- The Partnership supported several indigenous technical assistance organizations that have been strengthened and can in turn support African higher education needs in the future, which reduces reliance on expensive and sometimes ill-fitting advice from overseas.

- To support higher education research and advocacy in Africa, Partnership funds established the Higher Education Research and Advocacy Network in Africa (HERANA), a think tank run by the Centre for Higher Education Transformation Trust. The network supports more than 20 researchers in eight countries who educate and advocate for higher education in Africa. As a result of this work, the field of higher education studies in Africa is much more developed now than it was at the outset of the Partnership.

- The Partnership laid the groundwork for foundations and other donors to pursue work to foster the next generation of African academics. This focus area, which was begun under the Partnership, convened a University Leaders' Forum in 2008 where vice chancellors and colleagues from 18 African universities met to discuss the development and retention of the next generation of academics. Some 23 African higher education leaders signed a communiqué in which they committed to address the needs at institutional, national, and regional levels.

  The Partnership also supported Higher Education South Africa, South Africa's university leaders' organization, to produce a national strategic framework document on building the next generation of academics. In addition, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Ford Foundation and the MacArthur Foundation have each developed new strategies focused on cultivating the next generation of academics. The Andrew W. Mellon and Kresge foundations have provided funding in this area in South Africa as part of their existing strategies.

Creation of a community of practice within the foundations

Participants appreciated the opportunity to take the time to think about the big picture of what they were trying to accomplish and how their grantmaking could influence that vision. In the daily grind of getting grants out at foundations, that was a welcome and needed respite. Participants said that the intense intellectual questioning of one another helped them think more deeply about their grantmaking strategies than they might have otherwise.

Participating foundations also came to a consensus about common approaches to improving higher education in Africa in areas such as fundraising, gender policies, next generation of academics, and e-learning.

"We're much more subtle and savvy about how to approach needed changes in higher education in Africa," said Dina El'Khawaga, higher education program officer, Ford Foundation, Cairo Office. "Before we were too broad and generic. Now we have an idea about how to go on with higher education in Africa—the financing, the research and advocacy and the next generation of academics. Now we have a vision."

Drawing on their colleagues' deep experience and networks led to smarter grantmaking, they said.

"I was a new program officer [when I started in 2007] and I was surrounded by these experienced program officers who were working in the field of higher education," said Karl Brown, associate director of applied technology at the Rockefeller Foundation. "A lot of discussions with Andrea Johnson [from Carnegie] and Raoul Davion [from MacArthur] helped me think about what questions to ask on a proposal, when to push back and to understand the importance of relationships and networking in grant making."

Grantees from joint projects also said their participation created a community of practice among themselves to share information as well as to learn from a variety of perspectives and experts from participating foundations.

Generation of more data and information about universities and higher education in Africa than available previously

The case studies and broader research on higher education in Africa provided new and previously unavailable information to the participating foundations and others. That information was valuable at several levels—for the universities in embarking on strategic plans, for regional networks to compile country- and region-wide information on the state of higher education and for government and donors to better understand and respond to the needs of higher education in Africa. These resources have been used by the World Bank, other foundations, international organizations, and universities outside Africa.

CHALLENGES OF THE PARTNERSHIP

In 2010, at the formal close of the Partnership, original and former participants in the Partnership reflected on their experience of working in such a large and long-running collaborative. They noted the following key challenges:

Lack of clarity about the mission of Partnership

Ten of the 30 people interviewed for this case study said that the lack of clear goals and measureable outcomes from the start was one of the most challenging aspects of participating in the Partnership. Several participants said that while they understand that presidential initiatives by their nature typically have broad objectives, the Partnership could have benefitted from more clarity and specificity in trying to determine what the collaborative was meant to accomplish.

Because of the lack of clarity, participants said they spent a lot of time, especially in the early years, trying to figure out exactly how to meet the broad goal of "strengthening higher education in Africa."

"The presidents wanted to develop an initiative on higher education in Africa but they didn't really provide a whole lot of guidance on what they wished to see or not see," said Jorge Balan, former senior program officer for education and scholarship, Ford Foundation, and an original participant in the Partnership. "It was up to staff to develop ideas that they could present to the presidents. Everyone was trying to please the presidents but they weren't quite sure what the presidents wanted."

Added Teboho Moja, who conducted the 2004 evaluation, "The goals were defined very broadly—strengthening higher education institutions in Africa. That is a very broad goal. Was it strengthening capacity building in terms of management of the institution? What is strengthening? You have to define what strengthening institutions is. Leaving the major goals as vague as it is makes it open to different interpretations of what it means."

In interviews, three of the four founding presidents disagreed with the idea that they should have been more specific in their goals. A common theme was that if the goals were too narrow it would be difficult to bring in foundations that already had their own objectives in this area. Another theme was that making the goals too specific would constrain the Partnership from finding a variety of creative responses to strengthening higher education in Africa.

Cumbersome decision-making and administrative tasks

Even more participants spoke of the difficulty of a cumbersome decision-making process—21 of the 30 interviewed.

Among the biggest challenges were the inability of many of the representatives of foundations to make a decision on behalf of their foundations without checking back with their superiors and often the presidents themselves. This requirement, imposed largely by presidents who did not delegate much authority to their program officers, greatly slowed down decision making.

This was also a complex collaborative to work in. By the end it involved seven foundations working in nine countries that had to collaborate across five time zones and two continents, often with multiple program staff from each foundation.

The burdensome requirements extended to grantees, which at the start of the Partnership, had to submit separate proposals and reports to each foundation for joint projects. As the Partnership developed, grantees were permitted to submit common proposals and reports on joint projects, though in practice few did.

Another burden on grantees working with several foundations is that they would receive their funding at different times, depending on each foundation's decision-making timetable. That meant that a grantee might receive funding for the same project from one foundation in April, another foundation in June, and still another in July, which made it difficult to begin work.

Initial lack of strong coordinating body and expertise on specific issues such as bandwidth

When the Partnership first began, there was no outside staff or organization funded to oversee the work because the founding presidents were not interested in creating a "bureaucracy." However, that decision placed a large burden on already busy program staff and slowed down the work of the Partnership. It also brought to light some differing objectives between the presidents and program staff.

"The reason that we didn't have an office of secretariat was because the presidents didn't want it," said Andrea Johnson, program officer, Carnegie Corporation of New York, and an original participant of the Partnership. "They saw it as less operational and more as a learning group. The staff envisioned it as more operational—identify things to fund together, either jointly funded or aligned funding but heading in the same direction. That immediately ran into problems."

Large time commitment

The two evaluations and interviews for this case study all highlighted the large time commitment that the Partnership took for program officers. This was especially true at the beginning of the Partnership, when there was no coordinator to handle administrative duties. While estimates vary widely among program officers about the time they devoted to the Partnership, they ranged from about 15 to 50 percent of their job.

In some cases, foundations hired consultants to help relieve the time commitment on their program officers. In other cases, the time spent was viewed as worthwhile because of the added knowledge and expertise participants gained. But, at least for some participants, the time commitment was an added burden to an already busy schedule.

In 2007, just two years after joining the Partnership, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation decided to become a silent partner. Hewlett staff, who had urged their foundation to join because they believed in the goals of the Partnership, said they had not fully understood the labor-intensive way in which the Partnership worked. Despite hiring a consultant to help them manage the work (Liz Levey, who had earlier served as Partnership facilitator), the work was still too time-consuming for Hewlett staff. The foundation maintained its financial commitment but removed itself from the decision-making process.

Lack of joint grantmaking and "big picture" grantmaking

Several participants said that they wished the Partnership had done more joint and "big picture" grantmaking. From their perspective, one of the main advantages of the Partnership—and what made up for the time it took—was the ability for individual foundations to take on bigger projects than they could do alone. The limited pooled funding made it more difficult to carry out many jointly funded activities.

There were several notable projects where they did joint activities, such as the Bandwidth Consortium and the research and advocacy work. But both evaluations and seven of those interviewed said they wished the Partnership had been able to tackle even more such joint activities.

"The Partnership could have been improved if there had been more examples of truly joint efforts," said Stuart Saunders, senior advisor, the Andrew T. Mellon Foundation, Cape Town. "I don't think that the Partnership had many programs that were truly cooperative."

Another participant said that while the Partnership was conceived as broadly supporting and strengthening higher education in Africa, in reality, the Partnership mostly focused on supporting individual institutions, which limited its impact.

The lack of joint grantmaking also makes it difficult to clearly distinguish between the work that can be attributed to Partnership from the work that individual foundations would have done in any case.

Different cultures among foundations

From accounts by participants, it appears that this collaborative was generally marked by collegiality and good working relationships, which is not always the case in this type of work.

But it did take time for program officers to get to know one another and the agendas of each foundation for the Partnership. The foundations also brought different cultures to the Partnership. Some, like Ford, Hewlett, and Mellon, had a decentralized structure, with the presidents giving their staff broad directions and then letting them execute. Others, like MacArthur and Carnegie, had a more tightly controlled culture in which the presidents were closely involved in decisions.

That difference in cultures caused tension at times among the participants.

For example, it took time for participants to understand what their colleagues could and could not do and the constraints that they operated under. One participant described an ongoing difficult relationship with a colleague at another foundation—until the participant realized that the colleague simply could not make many decisions without consulting with the president.

Several participants also said that even after many years of meeting together, they were still too polite with one another, which inhibited frank discussions that could move work forward. A 2007 minutes of a Partnership meeting, seven years after the Partnership had formed, still spoke of the need for participants to be more direct with one another. The minutes stated, "we should feel free to debate ideas and not be concerned about offending colleagues."

Lack of communication among foundations and to external audiences

The Partnership struggled with communication on several issues. At times, participants were so busy with their work that they did not communicate to their colleagues what they were doing or share proposals that might have been ripe for joint funding.

"I wish I had more knowledge about some of the work that other foundations were doing even within Nigeria," said Kole Shettima, program officer at the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. "It was always difficult for me to know what was going on. Although we were in the same country there was not as much collaboration. Maybe I should have tried to find out more about what they were trying to do."

Some participants worried that the presidents did not have enough ongoing knowledge about the Partnership to keep them engaged. They said that the annual meetings and occasional informal briefings might not have been enough to keep presidents interested over time. Interestingly, none the founding presidents felt that they needed to have been better informed about the Partnership.

At another level, grantee organizations did not always know that the funding they were receiving was "Partnership" funding. As a result, the Partnership did not become well known in Africa. More visibility could have given the Partnership greater legitimacy in Africa, especially as one of the key goals was to use the clout of the foundations to increase the visibility of higher education's importance in Africa.

Lessening interest and changes in leadership from presidents

Over time, participants said they sensed a lessening interest from the presidents of their foundations. This could be in part due to multiple commitments that presidents must juggle. And in the second phase of the Partnership, three of the four founding presidents retired. The timing varied but because presidents typically give lengthy notice, it meant that for much of the second phase of the Partnership most of the original presidents had either left or knew that they were leaving their organizations.

One of the advantages of a presidentially directed initiative is that program staff know that their time and programs will likely be supported by their presidents—after all, they are the ones directing the work. But when the presidents began to leave, and new presidents arrived with their own agendas, participants questioned how much of their time and energy to devote to the Partnership, which now had a more uncertain future.

Limited outside partners including African governments, African leaders, multilaterals, and local nongovernmental organizations

The 2004 and 2008 evaluations found that the Partnership had limited engagement with African governments, African leaders, and international donors such as the World Bank.

The 2008 evaluation concluded, "The partnership foundations' increased convening power has not yet extended to sufficient engagement with government officials. At national, and especially, regional or continental events, there have been, at best, a handful of government representatives."

Other potential partners, such as the World Bank, may have contacts with branches of African governments (such as finance) that foundations do not normally have. Those contacts could have provided inroads and connections that the Partnership was unlikely to achieve on its own, a participant said. On the other hand, not having these connections may have preserved the foundations' political independence from sometimes problematic government or multilateral agencies.

Lack of data to show collective impact of work

Although individual foundations had their own internal evaluation and monitoring systems, and the Partnership kept track of relevant grants as part of monitoring the pledge, the Partnership did not have a collective, ongoing system of evaluating its joint and individual grants. It did commission a midterm review, which examined the work of universities from 2000 to 2006. While helpful, the review did not extend beyond 2006, when many of the Partnership's projects began to bear fruit.

The Partnership also did not have a formal means of sharing evaluations conducted by individual foundations among the group. Thus, while the Partnership can point to its overall grantmaking, and individual foundations (or, sometimes, pairs or groups of foundations) can point to specific grant impact, it becomes more difficult to make a comprehensive judgment on the impact of all of the Partnership's grants. Lacking that data, program officers also found it difficult to demonstrate to incoming presidents the value of a collaborative such as this one.

Lack of exit plan when Partnership ended

In 2008, the presidents of the Partnership foundations decided to close the Partnership secretariat and not embark on a third formal phase with a public pledge of funding. At first, they planned on closing it in just two months. Senior participants persuaded the presidents to continue the Partnership until the planned end in 2010. In theory, the work will continue among the foundations but without a coordinating body. In practical terms, that will be difficult to carry out, especially as new priorities emerge for foundations.

With new presidents at several foundations it may have made sense to end the collaborative. However, some participants felt that there could have been more thoughtful planning on how to sustain or continue the work begun by the Partnership. The decision left them scrambling to explain the implications of the decision with their grantee organizations including how those organizations could sustain the work.

ADVICE TO OTHERS CONSIDERING SIMILAR COLLABORATIVES

In conversations about their experience with the Partnership, participants offered several pieces of advice to others who may consider starting or joining a similar large collaborative.

Collaborate on issues and ideas of a scale that one organization could not do alone.

Working in a collaborative takes time and money, especially program officer time. To make it worthwhile for participants, it is important to focus on issues where a foundation knows it wants to make a big impact and cannot make that impact on its own. Approaches that individual foundation members are taking can sometimes serve as models for testing ideas on a larger scale through such collaborative.

Programs that seek to build or change a field and programs or approaches that may be controversial can be logical ones for a collaborative one to undertake. Those approaches often require more funding, collective expertise, and even "cover" than one foundation alone can provide or is willing to risk. Problems that are timely and ripe for change are also good to focus on. In this case, a confluence of events made higher education in Africa a good issue for the foundations to take on.

Secure senior leadership support and engage them throughout.

While this strongly directed presidential initiative made it at times difficult for program officers to make decisions, it was also vital in the Partnership's success. Any funder collaborative must have the support of senior leadership. Several participants said that they never would have met together and collaborated—especially over such a long period of time—without the directive of their presidents.

Having the support of funder presidents means that the program officers' time spent on a collaborative will be valued in the foundation and that the officer will be given funding to make the work of the collaborative worthwhile and potentially effective.

A common theme among participants is that it is important to stoke the interest of the presidents by providing ongoing feedback and ways for them to become engaged in the work. Several participants felt that the annual meetings and occasional briefings to the presidents were not enough to keep their interest over the years. More formal and regular briefings, perhaps three or four times a year, may be necessary to keep the work of a collaborative on the radar of presidents whose many initiatives require their attention. Enthusiasm of program officers can be contagious, especially when it is backed up by results.

Feedback alone, however, is probably not enough to capture the ongoing interest of presidents. They need ways to engage in the work of a collaborative, perhaps through visiting grantees or participating in high-level gatherings. As one participant put it, "don't just give them information, give them something to do."

It is also helpful to anticipate the turnover of participating presidents and program staff and to create an orientation to introduce new leaders and staff to the work of the collaborative including goals, successes, and challenges.

Ensure that senior leadership delegates authority to program officers.

While presidential direction and support is crucial to the success of any collaborative, some degree of autonomy by the program officers and others doing the work, such as the secretariat, is also vital. For a collaborative to move forward efficiently, program officers need authority to make some decisions on behalf of their foundations.

Set clear goals and expectations to keep members focused on what success looks like.

A common theme among participants was the difficulty, especially at first, in meeting the goals of the Partnership because they weren't entirely sure what the goals meant in terms of practical steps to take. While any presidential-directed initiative is likely to start with broad goals, which can also bring important attention to an issue, it is helpful—and probably much more efficient—to take the time at the beginning of a collaborative to map out specific areas to focus on to achieve those goals.

Doing so provides those who are carrying out the work a common vision of success and keeps them motivated and on track to achieve that vision.

Carry out a brief planning period.

One way to make goals more concrete is to carry out a brief planning period. Before making an announcement of a collaborative it can be helpful to engage in a planning period to better understand the landscape and issues of the area that a collaborative is trying to influence.

This planning period, which may take no more than three months, can consist of surveys or interviews of key leaders in the field and a review of the literature.

This information can guide program staff in formulating initiatives and plans so that when a collaborative is announced, they will have a clearer idea of what their grantmaking will look like. This initial planning also provides a basis for responding to grantees who may be interested in securing funding. It should also be flexible enough to allow for evolution within foundations and the field.

Establish a clear structure and rules of participation including how to make decisions.

Once a collaborative is established, it is important to develop a structure for how it will work. That includes rules for participation such as whether joint activities will be funded, how much funding each foundation must contribute, how proposals for joint initiatives will be brought to the collaborative, and how to come to a consensus in a timely fashion.

Simple but at times overlooked decisions are important, such as establishing an executive committee consisting of one representative from each foundation and ensuring that those representatives attend meetings consistently and report back to their colleagues. Doing so greatly speeds up the time for participants to know and trust one another. If more than one program officer or staff member from a foundation is participating, it is important to designate one person who represents the voice of the foundation and makes final decisions to avoid confusion.

For large initiatives, create a secretariat or coordinating body and give it decision-making power.

A secretariat can carry out time-consuming work that would otherwise require the attention of foundation program officers. It also provides the infrastructure to support the work of a large collaborative. While a secretariat adds to the initial cost of a collaborative it is also important to consider the cost of a program officers' time in handling additional duties as well as the cost of lengthy decision making without an outside body to guide that work. The secretariat also needs some decision-making powers including the ability to set deadlines for participants, convene meetings, and answer grantee questions on joint grants.

For the Partnership, the cost of the secretariat was 0.4 percent of all grants and less than 3 percent of joint grants.

Be clear about the time commitment and set the time aside.

Make clear to new participants the time commitment required. As noted earlier, one of the newer foundation participants, the Hewlett Foundation, decided to become a silent partner after becoming dismayed by the time the Partnership consumed including how long it took to make decisions.

It is important that senior management understand and value the time it takes for program officers to be involved in a collaborative. The initial one or two years of such work may consist primarily of planning and of staff from other foundations building trust and collaborative relationships with one another. This time can pay dividends in the future, but while it is taking place program officers need the support of their supervisors.

Look for a common initiative soon.

Finding a common project to collaborate on at the beginning of a collaborative helps participating foundations immediately bring their joint funding, knowledge, and strengths to bear on something tangible. It helps participants work on a concrete initiative that moves them closer to reaching the broader goals they and senior leadership have set for the collaborative.

In addition, carrying out a joint initiative helps deliver value of the collaborative more quickly and justify the time and expense of working together in this way.

Take time for participants to get to know one another and build trust.

Much of a collaborative's success or failure will depend on the relationships established among program staff. If they like, respect, and understand one another they are more likely to work well together and more quickly come to a consensus on decisions. Some of this understanding can take place only when participants spend time together in person. Holding off-site retreats, especially at the start of a collaborative, can be worth the investment because it allows participants to get to know each other on a professional and personal level. Those bonds are important for the difficult and often tricky work of negotiating individual foundation needs and the needs of a collaborative.

It is also important to make it a priority to talk openly about the agendas of each foundation and what a program officer can realistically be expected to do. These discussions are not always easy but they cannot be put off for a collaborative to be effective. Understanding the abilities and constraints of each foundation is vital for collaborative members to make decisions and saves an enormous amount of time and energy in wondering why a particular foundation or officer is not more receptive to an idea or approach.

Consider pooled funding to work on joint activities.

Persuading foundations to agree to put a sum of money in a common pot to work on joint activities can be difficult because it means that they have to relinquish a degree of control. But pooled funding gives a collaborative an efficient way to tap money for joint activities and provides grantees with their funding at regular intervals, which can increase their effectiveness. Such funding can also lessen the burden on the grantees because they can file one report to a secretariat rather than file multiple reports to different foundations.

The Partnership had some small pooled funds but several participants wished there had been a larger pool to use for joint activities.

Set up a system to gather data and evaluate the outcomes of large grants.

It is important to measure the work of a collaborative through its grants in order to have a clear idea of the work's impact. Establishing a database from the start and tweaking it periodically can provide critical information to a collaborative about where their money is going and how it's been spent. Without that information, there is no knowledge of how a collaborative's money was spent. The Partnership established a database and improved it over time.

But a database alone is probably not enough. Collaboratives also need a collective system to monitor and evaluate their grants on an ongoing basis to see what difference, if any, they are making in achieving the goals of the work. While the Partnership commissioned the midterm review of the work, which provided helpful information, the review did not include the last four years of the collaborative's work. Without putting in place ongoing monitoring mechanisms from the start, it is difficult to know the impact of large initiatives. Taking the time to collect and monitor data can help initiatives such as these (1) better respond to questions about their impact from new leadership, and (2) make midcourse corrections that can improve the work.

Establish single-reporting templates and contact person or organization for joint grantees where possible.

Funding collaboratives can impose large burdens on grantees, which are forced sometimes to fill out multiple grantee applications to each funder for the same project. These requirements take up valuable time that grantees could spend working on projects. They are also frustrating to grantees and can diminish their willingness to participate in such collaboratives. Creating single-reporting templates and contacts or organizations for joint grantees where possible goes a long way in minimizing the burden on grantees for these projects.

Consider broad and deep partnerships—with local agencies, with organizations you are supporting, and with other large agencies and government bodies. Both evaluations as well as some participants said that the Partnership would have been more effective if it had had greater engagement with other partners, such as African governments, other donors, and local nongovernmental organizations that could help carry out the work. By actively seeking other partners, in addition to foundation partners, these collaboratives can greatly extend their impact.

Establish an exit plan.

Once the leadership decides to end a collaborative, it is a good idea to establish an exit plan. In fact, it probably makes sense to start thinking about an exit plan at the inception of a collaborative. That means developing strategies for long-term sustainability of work and ways to embed it in established institutions or organizations. A well-thought-out exit plan also gives program officers a guide to speak with grantee organizations, which will likely have questions when news of a funding wind down reaches them.

CONCLUSION

Funder collaboratives offer foundations and other funders the opportunity to make a much bigger impact than they might on their own. They pose the possibility of tapping collective expertise, networks, and funds in a way that no single donor could do alone. These collaboratives also take time, energy, commitment, and a thoughtful approach to work well. The Partnership for Higher Education in Africa represented some of the largest U.S. foundations in one of the longest-running collaboratives. It provides a picture of what a collaborative can achieve as well as concrete lessons learned that might help other collaboratives work even more efficiently and effectively from the start.

APPENDIX

Interviewees for Case Study

Omatade Akin Aina, Program Director, Program Officer, Higher Education and Libraries in Africa, Carnegie Corporation of New York

Gregory Anderson, former Program Officer, Ford Foundation, NY

Jorge Balan, former Senior Program Officer, Ford Foundation, NY

Alison Bernstein, former Vice President, Ford Foundation, NY

Susan Berresford, former President, Ford Foundation

Alice Brown, Representative, Office for Southern Africa, Johannesburg, Ford Foundation

Karl Brown, Associate Director, Applied Technology, the Rockefeller Foundation, NY

John Butler-Adam, Program Officer, Office for Southern Africa, Johannesburg, Ford Foundation

Sir Gordon Conway, former President, the Rockefeller Foundation

Raoul Davion, Program Officer and Co-chair, Higher Education Initiative—Africa, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

Dina El'Khawaga, Program Officer, MENA Office, Cairo, Ford Foundation

Jonathan Fanton, former President, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

Jonathan Friedman, Project Associate, Partnership for Higher Education in Africa

Claudia Frittelli, Program Officer, Higher Education and Libraries in Africa, Carnegie Corporation of New York

Suzanne Grant Lewis, Coordinator, Partnership for Higher Education in Africa (2006–2010)

Vartan Gregorian, President, Carnegie Corporation of New York

Phillip Griffiths, Senior Advisor, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation

Andrea Johnson, Program Officer, Higher Education and Libraries in Africa, Carnegie Corporation of New York

Lisbeth Levey, Facilitator, Partnership for Higher Education in Africa (2002–2006), Senior Advisor to the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

Narciso Matos, former Chair, Carnegie Corporation of New York

Teboho Moja, evaluator, New York University

William Moses, Program Director, the Kresge Foundation

Joyce Moock, former Associate Vice President, the Rockefeller Foundation

Katherine Namuddu, former associate director, the Rockefeller Foundation, Nairobi

Janice Petrovich, former Director, Ford Foundation, NY

Pat Rosenfield, Program Director, Carnegie Scholars, National Program, Carnegie Corporation of New York

Stuart Saunders, Senior Advisor, the Mellon Foundation

John Schoneboom, ICT Associate, Partnership for Higher Education in Africa

Sara Seims, Program Director, Population, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

Kole Shettima, Director, Africa Office and Co-chair, Higher Education Initiative—Africa, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

Ken Wilson, former Deputy to the Vice President, Ford Foundation, NY

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Dina El'Khawaga, Program Officer, MENA Office, Cairo

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Biko Gwendo, former Consultant, Office for Southern Africa, Johannesburg

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