Austin Catalyst Fund
Exploratory Community Conversation

April 26, 2018
LBJ Presidential Library
Exploratory Community Dialogue on Austin Catalyst Fund  
Thursday, April 26, 2018  
4:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m., networking directly after program until 7:00 p.m.  
Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library (10th Floor), 2313 Red River St., Austin, Texas 78705

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Session</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4:00 - 4:15</td>
<td>Registration &amp; Networking</td>
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<td>4:15 - 4:25</td>
<td>Welcome</td>
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<td>- Ray Brimble (Founder, One Skye Foundation)</td>
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<td>- David W. Springer, Ph.D. (Director, RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service; University Distinguished Teaching Professor)</td>
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<td>4:25 - 4:45</td>
<td>RGK Center: Strategic Collaboration for Sector Sustainability: A Study of Community “Catalyst” Funds &amp; Austin Area Collaboration</td>
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<td>- R. Patrick Bixler, Ph.D. (Research Fellow, RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service)</td>
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<td>4:45 - 5:00</td>
<td>Facilitated Table Activity</td>
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<td>- David W. Springer, Ph.D. (Director, RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service; University Distinguished Teaching Professor)</td>
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<td>5:00 - 5:20</td>
<td>Better Together Fund</td>
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<td>- Ashley Brundage, MSSW (Senior Vice President, Community Impact at the United Way of Metropolitan Dallas)</td>
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<td>5:20 - 5:40</td>
<td>Local Panel Discussion &amp; Reaction</td>
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<td>- David W. Springer, Ph.D. (Director, RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service; University Distinguished Teaching Professor)</td>
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<td>- Gretchen Ellis (Board Member, The SAFE Alliance)</td>
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<td>- Denise Herrera (Senior Capacity Building Officer, St. David’s Foundation)</td>
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<td>- Jack Nokes, (former executive of The Contemporary Austin)</td>
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<td>5:40 - 5:55</td>
<td>Facilitated Table Activity: Audience Reactions</td>
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<td>- David W. Springer, Ph.D. (Director, RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service; University Distinguished Teaching Professor)</td>
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<td>5:55 - 6:00</td>
<td>Closing Remarks &amp; Call for Action</td>
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<td>- Rich Smalling, (CEO, American Innovations)</td>
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<td>6:00 - 7:00</td>
<td>Adjourn &amp; Unstructured networking commences</td>
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This event is made possible by the collaborative guidance and generosity of the following organizations:  
Austin Community Foundation // Better Together Fund // CivicAIM // I Live Here, I Give Here  
Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library // Mission Capital // One Skye Foundation  
Anne & Rich Smalling // RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service  
St. David’s Foundation // United Way for Greater Austin
Ray Brimble, Founder & Acting CEO, Lynxs Group LLC and Co-Founder, One Skye Foundation is an Austin, Texas-based businessman with a portfolio combining entrepreneurial and managerial accomplishments spanning a 40 year career. He founded has established more than 50 companies on four continents with activities ranging from the oilfield, to technology, to logistics and aviation related real estate. Mr. Brimble has transacted well over US$2 billion in business. His current commercial activities and investments center around the Lynxs Group of Companies, founded in 1994. Lynxs' holdings include AirLogistix USA, the perishables logistics and handling center at George Bush Intercontinental Airport (IAH) in Houston.

Mr. Brimble has held numerous board positions over the years including the Austin Chamber of Commerce, the Center for International Business Education and Research at the McCombs School of Business (CIBER)- University of Texas at Austin, The Camino Real District Export Council, Austin Social Venture Partners, Conspirare, Interfaith Action of Central Texas, KIPP Austin Public Schools, the Mueller Foundation and I Live Here, I Give Here-Austin. In 2006 Karen and Ray Brimble formed the One Skye Foundation, which provides catalyst funding for a wide variety of the community’s most innovative social and civic efforts. Mr. Brimble’s current efforts focus on “social entrepreneurial” ventures which include support and investment in both non-profit and for-profit venturing which has proven social impact with clearly defined metrics and results.

Mr. Brimble holds a B.A. in International Studies, Ampla Cum Laude, from the University of Texas at Austin and an M.A. in International Affairs from the George Washington University, which he attended as a Scottish Rite Fellow. Mr. Brimble was also a member of the International Business faculty at the McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin from 1990 to 1993 and Executive in Residence thereafter. Mr. Brimble's writings appear frequently in many trade publications as well as the Austin American Statesman. He has authored two books, and received numerous awards for both his commercial and civic efforts, including the Small Business Administration’s “Exporter of the Year” award, the Academy of International Business- Southwest USA Region “International Businessman of the Year”, the City of Austin Distinguished Service Award, and the “Hope Award” presented by Interfaith Action of Central Texas.

David W. Springer, Ph.D., Director, RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service, is a University Distinguished Teaching Professor, and a Fellow to the Sid Richardson Chair of Public Affairs in the LBJ School of Public Affairs. After receiving his Ph.D. in social work from Florida State University, he joined the faculty at UT Austin in 1997. Professor Springer began his professional career as a clinical social worker in community and school-based settings with adolescents and their families. Today, his research and teaching coalesce around effective leadership, nonprofits and systems to strengthen communities, especially at the intersection of juvenile and criminal justice. He and the RGK Center team are committed to preparing the next generation of nonprofit and philanthropic leaders.

Spanning across direct practice, policy practice, community building, nonprofit management, system reform, research and leadership, Professor Springer and the RGK Center team work to find innovative solutions to some of today’s most pressing global social challenges. He is recognized as being among the 100 most influential social work journal authors by the British Journal of Social Work. He has received a number of university-wide teaching honors at UT including the Outstanding Graduate Teaching Award, the Outstanding Graduate Adviser Award and selection into the Academy of Distinguished Teachers. In 2016, Professor Springer was selected to the Nonprofit Times Power & Influence Top 50, a national list of the top working executives in the nonprofit sector, and he was recognized as a Distinguished Alumni in Social Policy and Administration by the Florida State University, College of Social Work.
R. Patrick Bixler, Ph.D., Research Fellow, RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service in the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin. Bixler’s work focuses on collaborative governance and the ways that cross-sector networks influence policy and on-the-ground outcomes. He recently published a book, *Forest Conservation in the Anthropocene*, that examines the impacts of climate change on America's forests and policy responses to facilitate adaptation. More generally his research and teaching focuses on the interplay between society and environment. He has published in numerous social science and environmental science journals on topics of land and water management, biodiversity conservation, climate adaptation, residential development, and urban resilience.

Ashley Brundage, MSSW, Senior Vice President of Community Impact, United Way of Metropolitan Dallas, leads the team responsible for United Way grants and initiatives that make measurable contributions to the North Texas community’s ten-year goals. She focuses on making sure that all facets of United Way community impact work are integrated so they achieve the greatest results possible. Ashley joined United Way of Metropolitan Dallas in 2007 and tweets @MommaBrundage. Ashley has a bachelor's degree in Psychology from Texas A&M University and a Masters in Social Work with an emphasis on Community and Administrative Practice from the University of Texas at Arlington. During her time, she has led the change to an open grants process; from annual funding to three-year funding; and worked internally to help improve the culture of UWMD. Ashley is involved in the community on the Dallas Area Partnership to End and Prevent Homelessness, and the Dallas Metro Homeless Alliance’s Board of Directors and she is the Treasurer for her children’s PTO.

Denise Herrera, Senior Capacity Building Officer, St. David’s Foundation has devoted much of her academic and philanthropic career to leveling the playing field so underserved populations can receive quality health services and education. Denise’s experience includes consulting and collaborating on a host of federal and statewide initiatives – often serving as a liaison or intermediary among various educational, governmental, and private sectors. She has provided programmatic and evaluation expertise on advisory committees, community development, education, and civic engagement efforts in rural and urban areas in the U.S. and abroad.

Denise earned a BS in Health Education from the University of New Mexico; an MS in Family Studies and Human Development from the University of Arizona; and a PhD in Health Education from the University of Texas–Austin. Denise is a Hispanics in Philanthropy Next Generation Fellow, was a Robert Wood Johnson Evaluation Fellow (2010-2011), and is also an alumna of the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program (University of New Mexico). Denise is the first person on both sides of her immediate and extended family to pursue and complete a doctoral degree.

Jack Nokes, Retired Nonprofit Executive & Consultant, has a career spanning over three decades serving museums and nonprofit organizations in Texas. Prior to retirement he was a Senior Consultant with Mission Capital, a nonprofit organization that provides management consulting to nonprofits in Central Texas. His expertise includes strategic planning, financial administration and budgeting, legal/legislative, personnel, mergers, board governance, museum management, meeting facilitation, and continuing professional education. As a member of the Mission Capital consulting team, Jack focused on strategic and business planning, board building, and mergers. During 2011-12, Jack served as interim
Executive director for the Austin Museum of Art. During that time, he was involved in the successful merger of AMO and Arthouse at the Jones Center (now The Contemporary Austin.)

Jack received a B.A. in English with Honors and a law degree from the University of Texas at Austin. He still lives in Austin with his wife, Jill, and two dogs. He loves spending time with his two daughters, son-in-law, and granddaughter, all Austinites. He and Jill also enjoy traveling and messing around at their ranch in Llano County.

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Gretchen Ellis, Principal, Co-Founder and Chief Financial Officer at GWA Partners, LP, with expertise in strategic financial planning. Prior to that, she served as chief financial officer at Broadband Corp. and Prime Cable. Gretchen has served as a member of the Board of Directors of Austin Children’s Shelter from 2010 until 2013. She also served for more than a decade on the SafePlace Foundation Board and currently serves on the board of The SAFE Alliance.

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Rich Smalling, Chief Executive Officer, American Innovations, Ltd. has led American Innovations since 1994. Prior to this, he worked for FMC, General Electric and Borg Warner, both in the U.S. and Europe. Rich is past President and Finance chair of the Austin chapter of Young Entrepreneurs’ Organization. From 2003-15, he was a member of the board of directors of Creative Action, an Austin non-profit organization delivering interactive theatre programs to youth in Central Texas, where he was President, Treasurer and chaired its only capital campaign. He is former board member of the NACE Foundation.

Rich is an advisor to the Center for Positive Business at the Michigan Ross School of Business and member of its industry consortium and an advisor to the College of Engineering at Virginia Tech. He is on the board of Origin Materials, a Sacramento-based start-up working on the world’s first 100% bio-based plastic bottle. He was formerly on the board of Garrison Brothers, the first legal bourbon distillery in Texas and maker of the finest bourbon on the planet. Rich received a B.S. in Chemical Engineering from Virginia Tech in 1985 and an MBA from The University of Michigan in 1993. Rich loves to spend time with Anne and daughters Marina and Samantha, especially if it involves travel, music, good food, golf, biking, hiking and wakeboarding.

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Summary
Austin’s nonprofit sector is experiencing rapid growth, outpacing most cities nationwide. In an effort to close the need-funding gap and deliver deeper impact, many communities across the United States have launched “catalyst funds” to encourage nonprofit collaboration. This study of six catalyst funds across the country identified common elements and lessons that could be applied in Austin, including the need to have broad community support and developing a long-term sustainable approach. Nonprofit and donor perspectives on recent collaboration in Austin were also included as part of the study. Interestingly, as this research was being conducted, the Better Together Fund in Dallas became the first catalyst fund in Texas. For donors and nonprofit leaders interested in further developing social impact collaboration in Austin through a catalyst fund, the intention of this report is to highlight the most salient issues and strategies for success.

Introduction
Across the nonprofit sector, organizations are faced with increased competition for finite resources and increased pressure from funders and stakeholders regarding their efficiency and effectiveness. By the numbers, Austin had 7,704 registered 501(c)3 nonprofit organizations in 2017.¹ This is a 30% increase over a decade. Austin has more nonprofit organizations per capita than any other city in Texas and more than any other in the Southwestern region of the United States. In fact, the number of nonprofits per capita in Austin is more than major metropolitan areas of New York, Los Angeles, and Boston and more than comparable cities such as Philadelphia and Charlotte. Approximately half have missions focused on providing health and human services or education/research services.² Meanwhile, the number of foundations in the area, along with total foundation assets, have failed to return to pre-recession levels of 2007. Many nonprofits operating in Austin are disproportionately small: 54% have revenues less than $100K³ and 72% of the nonprofits report a budget of less than $1 million.⁴

¹ Data from Guidestar
³ Ibid
⁴ Ibid
Community challenges grow increasingly complex and demand for services continues to rise. A 2015 study in Austin reported that 81% of nonprofits report an increase in demand for services. As organizations emerge to address local needs, they must compete for clients, funding, and other resources making them less able to work collectively toward system wide goals. Nonprofits are increasingly asked to accomplish more with less resources. While it is unlikely that giving will ever meet demand, outcomes can be improved by implementing more strategic approaches that expand the reach and depth of collective nonprofit efforts. Research indicates that nonprofit collaboration can increase efficiency and effectiveness in the nonprofit sector, ultimately producing increased access and improved outcomes for populations served.

Nonprofit collaboration refers to informal or formal joint-working arrangements between organizations that remain autonomous while engaging in ongoing, coordinated collective action to achieve outcomes none of them could achieve on their own. On one end of the collaboration spectrum rests informal working relationships. On the other end of the spectrum is collaborative restructuring, best exemplified by mergers and acquisitions. In between exists a range of working relationships, including models of collective impact.

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5 Ibid
6 See Panepento 2017; Sagawa 20016; Bixler et al. 2016 for work in the Texas Hill Country
Key Findings

This study reports a qualitative inquiry into the motivations, barriers, and opportunities that drive nonprofit collaboration in the Austin, TX metropolitan area. Some key findings include:

- Project manager support plays a key role in successful collaboration.
- The benefits of professional and personal relationships, including trust, are a key factor for success.
- Funders can play a role helping nonprofits explore collaboration and restructuring from a position of strength, rather than when organizational pressures lead to it as required option.
- Many success stories go untold, leaving some funders with the misconception that collaboration is not happening in Austin.

This study also includes a qualitative inquiry into the six different community catalyst funds across the country. Some key findings include:

- Catalyst funds must have broad support and understanding from the entire nonprofit community; collaboration dictated by donors is unlikely to succeed.
- Collaborations are most successful when they are undertaken from a position of strength as part of a strategic plan and with the full support of the fund manager.
- Strategic restructuring takes time and funding to succeed; nonprofit leaders need support for confidential exploratory discussions on the long journey toward any restructuring.
- Collaborative restructuring processes that don’t succeed should not be labeled “unsuccessful”. Sometimes the exploration process helps a nonprofit realize that collaboration is not in the best interest of the nonprofit.
- There is no one ‘right way’ to run a catalyst fund; differences include the size of the fund, how grant applications are processed and how funds are provided.
# Table of Contents

Summary ........................................................................................................................................... 1
Introduction ....................................................................................................................................... 1
Key Findings ....................................................................................................................................... 3
Purpose and Methodology .................................................................................................................... 5
Catalyst Funds Across the Nation ........................................................................................................ 6
Collaboration Fund Structure ............................................................................................................. 6
Nonprofits drive the conversation ....................................................................................................... 7
Education first ..................................................................................................................................... 8
Lead by example .................................................................................................................................. 8
Normalizing Collaboration ................................................................................................................... 8
Nonprofit restructuring: mergers, acquisitions, and partnerships ...................................................... 9
Critical Issue: Lack of Fund manager Education .............................................................................. 9
Critical Issue: Finding the Right Partner ........................................................................................... 10
Success Driver 1: Be Mission Focused ............................................................................................... 10
Success Driver 2: Financial Support for Collaboration ..................................................................... 10
Collective Impact ............................................................................................................................... 12
Critical Issue: Trust and Relationships ............................................................................................ 12
Success Driver 1: Making the Benefits Obvious ............................................................................... 13
Success Driver 2: Being Nimble ........................................................................................................ 13
Success Driver 3: A “Home-Grown” Backbone Organization .......................................................... 14
Conclusion .......................................................................................................................................... 14
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................................ 15
Bibliography ....................................................................................................................................... 15
Appendix A: Characteristics of Catalyst Funds Interviewed ............................................................... 16
Appendix B: Map of Catalyst Funds Across Country ......................................................................... 17
Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of this study was threefold. The first purpose of the study was to interview catalyst funds across the United States and learn best practices that may assist such a fund in Austin. Catalyst funds, sometimes referred to as collaboration funds, are donor collaborations designed to provide support for nonprofits interested in collaboration or strategic restructuring. Second, the study sought to learn of the drivers and barriers to nonprofit collaboration in the Austin area by focusing on a range of collaborative efforts from mergers and acquisitions to collective impact alliances. The third purpose of this study was to provide a set of recommendations based on the findings gleaned from the two separate inquiries. In presenting the findings, the objective is to help nonprofits, their stakeholders, and their funding partners innovate and improve the practice of collaboration.

Research for this study was conducted by the RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service from July – December 2017. The study began by interviewing the leaders of six community catalyst funds and one organization that more broadly supports such funds nationwide. The study also presents a qualitative analysis of 14 nonprofit collaborations that occurred in the Austin metro area. Thirty interviews with nonprofit executive staff, board members, collaboration consultants, and funders were conducted. Participants were interviewed either via phone or in person, with interviews lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. Interviews were semi-structured, allowing the interviewer to follow up with additional questions to clarify or elaborate on a response. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using NVIVO software. An informal interview was also conducted with Better Together Fund, which launched in June 2017. The donors who launched the Better Together spent five years studying the landscape of nonprofit collaboration and catalyst funds.

Through participant interviews, the study offers a qualitative analysis of the drivers and challenges organizations experienced in the collaboration process. The principle research questions were:

1. What are the drivers of nonprofit collaboration? What are the barriers?
2. Across the range of nonprofit collaboration from informal to mergers, are the barriers and/or motivations similar or different?
3. What funding structure is necessary, or possible, to support nonprofit collaboration?
4. How and why were catalyst funds launched, and how were they managed?
5. Have catalyst funds been successful and how has that been measured?

Though the collaborations presented here varied in type, process, and degree of success, all study participants had invaluable observations and suggestions that can be used to guide organizations contemplating a strategic collaboration. These observations and suggestions serve in this study as a key tool to educate nonprofits, funders, and stakeholders about successful strategies.
Catalyst Funds Across the Nation

In 2008, the Great Recession threatened the viability of many organizations and there was an urgency for nonprofits to consider strategic restructuring and alliances to share in burdening operational costs and delivery of services. In many ways the sector has rebounded from the financial crisis though the most recent report from the State of the Nonprofit Sector still shows that 76% of nonprofits reported an increase in demand for services and 52% of nonprofits could not meet demand.\(^7\) Nonprofit leaders remain concerned of their readiness to remain financially sustainable. As a direct result of the Great Recession and the continued uncertainty in the post-recession climate, catalyst funds have sprung up around the nation to provide support for nonprofits exploring long-term strategic and sustainable collaborations that would deepen mission impact. See Appendix B for a map of existing catalyst funds. The Better Together Fund in Dallas launched in 2017 and new funds are in the works in Chicago, Houston and New Orleans.

Catalyst funds in Charlotte, Boston, New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Cincinnati were interviewed for this report.

Collaboration Fund Structure

Catalyst funds, sometimes referred to as collaboration funds, typically consist of a pooled fund structure combining the resources of multiple foundations. Although the award structures vary by fund (see Appendix A for a table outlining different structures and functions of funds), three types of grants were identified:

- Exploration
- Planning, and
- Implementation.

Exploration grants gave nonprofits the space to experiment and test the waters of a new venture. Specifically, in exploration grants nonprofits were given the leeway to “fail forward,” meaning that, if the organizations decided not to proceed with an integrated venture because they learned that they were incompatible, then the grant was still considered a success. These grants almost always were used to hire consultants that helped facilitated the exploration. Exploratory grants are awarded to organizations that are at the early stages of determining compatibility with the ultimate goal of deciding whether or not to move forward with a formal partnership. At this stage, Funds emphasize the learning process and recognize success even if organizations decide not to move forward together.

Planning grants focus on the due diligence required to determine if the collaboration can legally and fiscally benefit both parties with the output of this stage typically being a Merger Agreement or Memorandum of Understanding that includes the collaboration details. The third grant is for implementation which focuses on the execution of the plan and provides technical assistance in legally

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closing the transaction, a new integrated website, branding, program restructuring, combining work cultures, etc.

All funds that were identified emphasized collaboration in a variety of forms from informal to formal collaboration, merger, acquisition, or other form of integration. Grant sizes increase significantly from exploration to planning to implementation. There was wide variability in the size of the funds and how the funds were managed. Half of the funds are still operating and the average term of these funds is six years.

The catalyst funds are regionally focused and have a pooled funding structure. With the exception of one fund, each funding partner has one vote and therefore equal decision-making power within the group despite the quantity of the gift. The fund that does not share this commonality has a core group of three managing funders that make the decisions on behalf of the entire group. Half of the funds dedicate their resources to select nonprofits sectors based on the interests of the funders while the other half of the funds do not restrict who can apply for a grant within their region.

All funds emphasized the role of evaluation in grant making as a means to know if grantees were able to do what they set out to do. Most funds simply required their grantees to complete a pre- and a post-survey on the impact of the negotiations once an outcome was achieved. Though none of the funds set a timeline for which negotiations must be complete, most fund managers reported that they would ask for some informal update every six months. Only one fund required their grantees to go beyond a one-time post-survey and required a report on the impact of the collaboration or partnership semi-annually for two years after implementation.

Key Findings

Nonprofits drive the conversation

Cognizant of the negative reaction that can arise from the top-down donor suggestions that nonprofits merge, the catalyst funds that were interviewed emphasized collaboration in a variety of forms. Further, funds stressed the importance of focusing on the message of mission and deepening impact through collaboration rather than financial savings when communicating about the fund to the nonprofit community. In several cases it was noted that positive reception of the Fund came from communities where the Funds were created in response to demand from the nonprofit community rather than from a report stating or suggesting an overabundance of nonprofits.

The underlying purpose of catalyst funds is to help nonprofits explore collaboration and restructuring from a position of strength, rather than when organizational pressures lead to it as a required option. Yet, many nonprofits reaching out to a catalyst fund may be in a vulnerable financial state and confidentiality was noted as extremely important initially between the Fund and the nonprofit community. All the catalyst funds that were interviewed are managed by a third-party organization, rather than in-house of one of the Fund partners. This structure allows for confidentiality to be maintained throughout the application process. Often the fund manager helped serve as a facilitator for early merger conversations.
Ensuring that nonprofits were in the driver seat, catalyst funds required applicants to show “readiness” for exploration or negotiations by requiring participation or a letter of intent by the Board of Directors of partnering organizations. The inclusion of the Board of Directors in this early phase is important due to the strategic nature of the deal and the understanding that collaborations are highly likely to fail without board support.

Each of the funds that interviewed recognized the importance of being flexible. Several iterations or adjustments were made to the fund application and review process to better accommodate needs of nonprofits. All funds allowed grantees to dictate the timeframe in which they needed to complete the project and offered advice on the selection of technical assistants to guide them through the collaboration process. Some funds provided a list of vetted experts in the field. In at least one case, funding was provided directly to the outside consultant rather than to the nonprofit.

**Education first**

The spectrum of collaboration is varied and wide from programmatic partnership to shared back-office support to restructuring including mergers. All funds stressed the need to educate the donor and nonprofit community on the breadth of collaboration ventures. Most funds held community-wide events to prime the community and gauge market demand for the fund prior to launch. Fund managers singled out board education to be of upmost importance given that boards are often a major impediment to successful collaboration. As one fund manager put it “collaboration is not for the weak,” it takes patience, perseverance, and strong leadership to go through the process. Having an informed understanding of strategic collaborations will help nonprofits deepen their mission impact, rally stakeholders to the cause, and permit organizations to have a nimble reaction in times of stress.

Part of the education process and the determination of collaboration “readiness,” four out of five pooled funds required a preliminary application conversation with the fund manager. The fund manager is able to be a sounding board for the nonprofit partners and provide applicants with the long-view process that partners will undergo to get the work done. Many boards and nonprofit leaders are unfamiliar with the merger process and guidance about what to expect removed some of the mystery and anxiety.

**Lead by example**

Participating Collaboration Funds in this study had a pooled funding structure. The fund managers noted the importance of modeling the type of collaborative behavior funders intended to support. The donor collaborative, like the grantee collaborations, required trust to make the venture a success. In some cases, donors had pre-established relationships with each other and in other cases, the fund manager was the trusted party.

**Normalizing Collaboration**

One of the main goals of these various Funds was to normalize the idea of strategic restructuring and alliance partnering among the nonprofit community. This might include mergers, acquisitions, shared back office functions, and other strategies for administrative and programmatic consolidation. To reach this goal, the Funds stressed the importance of framing the conversation on the many forms of
collaboration instead of suggesting that mergers are the solution which can generate a negative response from the nonprofit community.

Fund managers believe that collaboration in their community has become normalized or is on the way to being normalized. Managers are seeing the landscape of collaboration work changing. From 2008 to 2010, at the height of the Great Recession, most applicants were approaching Collaboration Funds because there was a funding crisis. Today, however, Funds are mostly approached by organizations considering strategic mission alignment.

Nonprofit restructuring: mergers, acquisitions, and partnerships
The concept of strategic restructuring has come to be inclusive of a set of approaches available to nonprofits to increase organizational effectiveness and sustainability. However, research and experience elsewhere indicates that restructuring can be viewed by a mission-driven nonprofit as risking identity and independence. The risks are frequently clear and substantial, while the potential benefits are more often diffuse and unknown. This study sought to deepen understanding of the experiences of nonprofit mergers in the Austin area through interviews with the philanthropic community, consulting experts, and organizational leaders.

Not all restructuring collaborations are successful and this study included both collaborations that had completed restructuring as well as those that were uncompleted or resulted in a “divorce,” in which two organizations dissolve their partnership. Understanding the challenges that arise during the collaboration process can be helpful for those considering or engaged in a partnership. This study highlights what the participants considered to be the most significant issues.

Those readers more familiar with for-profit mergers will note the many similarities in the findings below. The merger process, keys to success and pitfalls are the same. The nonprofit world and the for-profit world often mistakenly define failure as ‘not completing the merger’ when, in fact, failure should be defined as pushing ahead with a merger that does not create an aligned organization that has a greater impact than that of the two individual organizations alone.

Key Findings
Critical Issue: Lack of Board Education
The lack of education of nonprofit board members was the number one cited roadblock to mergers, acquisitions, and other types of strategic restructuring by research participants. Additionally, participants also disclosed that board members lacked general education on their purpose and role in the process. Without board training nonprofits cannot move forward with a collaboration effort no matter how well planned. Evidence suggests that once board members understand and accept the

“Boards have to understand their role in the community and the role in the partnership or the network of providers in which the organization exists. The mission is more to the clients receiving the services and not the success of the organization.”
collaborative restructuring, that they can become important messengers to convey the message to other organizational leadership, staff, and volunteers.

Critical Issue: Finding the Right Partner
The “courtship” process between nonprofits is fraught with potential pitfalls, delays, and politics. Prior cultivation of personal and professional relationships between organizational leaders can prove valuable when the road gets rough. In this research, strong relationships frequently existed prior to the time the collaborative restructuring process began. Participants noted that mission alignment, cultural fit and trust were the most important elements in finding the right partner. In particular, trust serves as the foundation of the collaboration process. In the case of dissolved or divorced processes, trust between

“All of us had some sort of service collaboration, formal and informal that we were involved in. Some of the executive directors had both professional and personal relationships that extended over longer periods of time. Those help, it really helps particularly during what could grow into bumps in the road.”

the partner organizations was not strong enough to overcome the cultural differences and structural barriers.

Success Driver 1: Be Mission Focused
Participants pleased with their partnerships cited the mission as playing a central role in the success of the collaboration. Though financial stress or a leadership change can inspire a restructuring process, participants from successful collaborations repeatedly emphasized the importance of finding and committing to common goals and a common vision for the community. Many found that by keeping the community at the forefront helped smooth out disagreements and kept the momentum going to complete the partnership. As one participant from an uncompleted partnership put it, “they [the board] were very committed to the mission of the organization but they were not as committed to the bigger vision of addressing the systemic problem for the region.”

“The mission is much more to clients that are receiving the services in the community and not the success of the organization.”

Success Driver 2: Financial Support for Collaboration
Conducting a due diligence process requires time, ability to manage complex schedules, and skill in facilitating tough conversations. Unfortunately, most nonprofit organizations are already working on

“... it comes down to bandwidth. We've already put in hours and hours and hours of very expensive time to just get to the point where the collaboration is strong, and the collaboration can try to get a grant.”
shoestring budgets and cannot afford to dedicate staff time to quite a lengthy process. As one participant illustrated, “there’s so much upfront work that has to be done, in putting together a strong, good collaboration. The amount of time that is spent in meetings and pulling in the right people and having the facilitation of meetings, and going out and finding out who are you missing, what are the gaps, doing the strategic piece of it. All of those things. Generally, the funding comes when you get to direct service.”

Evidence suggests that direct funder involvement in mergers is associated with positive outcomes such as continuation of services following a merger and improved financial stability. Funders can play multiple roles in collaborative restructuring, including facilitator, organizational matchmaker, and financial support of the process. These various functions surfaced as important in interviews.

In all successful merger cases, participants noted the critical need for professional facilitation to help ask the hard questions and dig into the details of the partnership. Consultants helped them keep momentum and stay focused on completing the task at hand as well as ensured that all parties were fairly represented. All participants stated that there is not enough financial support to help organizations shoulder the cost of collaboration process from due diligence to integration. Without financial assistance, the costs of the undergoing the process impact the probability for success.

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8 Owen et al. (2012). Success factors in nonprofit mergers
Collective Impact

Collaboration between organizations are everywhere and come in infinite forms. However, in conducting this research, the collective impact model was commonly cited by participants as “how they were collaborating. The collective impact model was established in 2009 with the publication FSG’s “Breakthroughs in Shared Measurement.” Unlike other collaborative endeavors, the collective impact model relies on five conditions: a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support organizations (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

The current study does not explore those five conditions, rather focuses on the broader barriers and drivers of collective impact efforts in Austin.

Key Findings

Critical Issue: Trust and Relationships

The importance of trust in all stages and aspects of a collaboration can’t be overstated. Trust in collaborations is not only based on both reputation and past performance of the partners but also forged through daily interactions, personal friendships, and social bonds. The majority of collective impact initiatives interviewed started because of a funding opportunity. Participants however stated that once the funding dried up it was the trust in the backbone organization and the relationships with the other partners that continued to bring people to the table.

“We’re not worried about folks liking us, but they must trust us. And they trust us because we provide relevant, objective data because we convene the relevant and important stakeholders whether education based, politically appointed or even business. From the business world, we’re able to convene all these relevant stakeholders, which keeps these organizations and the individuals fired and coming back to do this work even when say grant funds have dried up.”
A key factor in fostering trust and maintaining positive relationships for the backbone organization with all partners is the ability to stay neutral and communicate with everyone. Interviews suggest that partners rely on the backbone organizations to mediate, maintain equity amongst the partners and keep the vision of the group at the forefront of the work.

**Success Driver 1: Making the Benefits Obvious**
Collaborations at the periphery of an organization absorb time, demand resources, and start to compete with other essential tasks of the organization at the expense of the overall health and balance of a sound impact strategy. Some organizations have dozens of collaborative agreements and in order to curb collaboration fatigue, collective impact groups have to make the costs and benefits transparent: training, access to improved advocacy opportunities, a seat at the table during policy creation, funding for a new program, etc. Participants were frank in stating that mere benefit of belonging to a network related to your nonprofit’s mission is not what brings people to the table.

**Success Driver 2: Being Nimble**
Important to the continued success of all the groups interviewed was their ability to solve problems within the group. Evaluation efforts should focus on learning and self-improvement throughout the initiative in ways that ask critical questions regarding initiative effectiveness, efficiency, and structure. All collective impact initiatives had revised their decision-making frameworks at least once during the course of the initiative. Through flexible structures and giving space to “fail forward”, collaborations became learning laboratories. Staying nimble and flexible allows the collective to stay fresh, scale the opportunities for the sector as a whole, and deliver better services to as many clients as possible.
Success Driver 3: A “Home-Grown” Backbone Organization

The backbone organization for a collective impact initiative is important in as far as the message that it sends. If the backbone organization is recognized as one that has been seeking to positively impact the community for some time, then there is an instant sense of trust and legitimacy which often results in a desire to see the initiative succeed. All the backbone organizations interviewed were “home-grown” Austin organizations and have a deep history of working in the Austin community. The strength and credibility of the backbone organization is essential to the success of a collective impact initiative. Each of the backbone organizations interviewed in this study stressed the importance of having the trust of the members as well as the community at large to speak to the vision the group is trying to achieve. The backbone organization must take on the roles and responsibilities of goal setting, assessment, communication, education and engagement. Additionally, being a competent, reliable, and transparent source of data to evaluate the impact effort is an important role for a backbone organization.

Conclusion

Three central themes came forth in this study that suggest Austin could benefit from a catalyst fund. First, the spirit of collaboration in Austin is strong. This research, and previous community research efforts, identified a number of examples the illustrate that nonprofit organizations are working collaboratively to successfully deepen impact. Programmatic partnerships, collective impact, and mergers are all happening in Central Texas. This spirit and general willingness to collaborate contributes value to the social impact sector. As seen from collective impact initiatives, nonprofit leaders are willing to take shared responsibility of their community and approach new ideas and solutions with a sense of togetherness. Second, there is a natural realization among the community that the issues we are facing are complex and require greater coordination than what is currently in existence. Despite interviewees feeling that collaboration is somewhat normalized and welcomed in the Austin community, each of the collaborations mentioned were issue-specific. While this is important, measurable impact has yet to be gained on any pervasive and complex social issues. This may be because people have still not fully realized the type of collaborative structures that can address the interconnected nature of the issues. Collective impact initiatives seek to remedy the silo focuses of nonprofits by helping the community take full context of the issue into account. Finally, the conditions in Austin appear right for a catalyst fund, similar to ones analyzed in this research. At a minimum, the community seems to need a source of funding that can catalyze exploratory collaboration discussions. Additional sector-wide conversations are necessary before launching such a fund to confirm the need and help determine how to implement it. Known as an entrepreneurial region, this same “start-up” mentality can help community leaders embrace a community-wide vision and discover shared elements of their missions. Austin will need all of its entrepreneurial muscle and creativity to close the growing gap between need and funding and deepen impact.

“It's the trust that the organizations have for the backbone, because the objective data produced and the research that is done is not only objective but it's so poignant and so relevant and gets into gaps that other kind of research centers and think tanks just aren't touching on.”
Strategic Collaboration for Sector Sustainability:  
A Study of Community “Catalyst” Funds & Austin Area Collaboration

Recommendations

- Identify nonprofit sub-sectors with the highest potential for collaboration
- Conduct outreach and education on collaboration opportunities
- Develop an investment strategy to support and promote nonprofit collaborations
- Invest in fund manager and leadership education on collaboration models, strategies, risks and potential benefits

Acknowledgements

The Austin Nonprofit Collaboration Research Project was conducted by Patrick Bixler and Rochelle Olivares at the RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service. The study was commissioned by two Austin businessmen and philanthropists, Ray Brimble and Rich Smalling. We are grateful to everyone who participated in this research.

Bibliography

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https://ssir.org/articles/entry/nonprofit_collaboration_2.0

https://ssir.org/articles/entry/nonprofit_mergers_the_missing_ingredient
### Appendix A: Characteristics of Catalyst Funds Interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Catalyst Fund Boston</th>
<th>Catalyst Fund Charlotte</th>
<th>NYMAC</th>
<th>L.A. NSI</th>
<th>Philadelphia Repositioning</th>
<th>Patterson Foundation</th>
<th>Green Acres Foundation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ended</td>
<td>2016 – end of piloted time</td>
<td>2016 – funding ran out</td>
<td>Continuing</td>
<td>Continuing</td>
<td>Continuing</td>
<td>2015 – no demand</td>
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<td>Structure</td>
<td>Pooled</td>
<td>Pooled</td>
<td>Pooled</td>
<td>Pooled</td>
<td>Pooled</td>
<td>Single</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fire Starter</td>
<td>Report</td>
<td>Funder &amp; NP Community</td>
<td>NP Community</td>
<td>Report then conference</td>
<td>Funder &amp; NP Community</td>
<td>Part of org mission</td>
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<td>Initial Nonprofit Reaction</td>
<td>Skeptical</td>
<td>Skeptical</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Positive</td>
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<td># of Grant Types</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Application Process</td>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>Online App</td>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>Conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Req to apply</td>
<td>Fund manager resolution; Joint application</td>
<td>Fund manager chair signs application</td>
<td>Fund manager resolution</td>
<td>Fund manager resolution</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
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<tr>
<td>Good Fit</td>
<td>Fundamentally change the way NP do business</td>
<td>Measure impact of partnership</td>
<td>Readiness – fund manager resolution</td>
<td>Readiness – pre-existing relationship</td>
<td>Clear purpose/readiness</td>
<td>Leadership, willingness, readiness, capacity, culture</td>
</tr>
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<td>Grant Distribution</td>
<td>Direct to third party</td>
<td>Flexible</td>
<td>Flexible</td>
<td>Single grantee</td>
<td>Single grantee</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<td>Vetted Consultants</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Match Partnerships</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Help with exploration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Successful?</td>
<td>Yes &amp; No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td># of grants total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50-75</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>handfuls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lessons Learned</td>
<td>Language; Education first; Forum to meet</td>
<td>Funder collaboration; Education; Language</td>
<td>Database system; Language; NPs drive</td>
<td>Flexibility; NPs drive; Fast decisions</td>
<td>Confidentiality Lots of startup work</td>
<td>Fund the journey</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Map of Catalyst Funds Across Country
FORMAL COLLABORATION

We see formal collaboration as a relationship between one nonprofit and another nonprofit, corporation or governmental agency that:

- changes the way participating organizations do business for the long-term,
- has board involvement and endorsement, and
- preserves, expands or improves efficiency or services to constituents.

WHAT WE PROVIDE

1. Encouragement and thought partnership for nonprofit leaders to explore a range of formal collaborations with other nonprofits or key strategic partners focused on solving a big need with minimal overlap, including but not limited to:
   - strategic alliances
   - back-office consolidation
   - long-term programmatic joint ventures
   - strategic restructuring
   - mergers

2. A repository of tools, research and best practices that arm nonprofits with why and how to formally collaborate.

3. Grant funding from $4,000 to $600,000 to pay for costs associated with exploring, designing and/or implementing a formal collaboration. Grants cover staff, facilitator, consultant time and resources associated with assessment, planning, implementation and successful collaboration.

4. Better Together Fund aims to stretch these grants by matchmaking grant seekers with pro-bono or reduced-rate facilitators, consultants and professional service providers.

SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

1. **Big ideas.** Multiple organizations create significant impact doing together what they could not have done individually.

2. **Efficiency.** The region’s nonprofit sector is strengthened by aligning complementary strengths and resources.

3. **Exploration only.** We’re even excited by organizations that explore coming together formally and strategically elect not to. They’ll move on with a better understanding of the landscape and their unique roles.

4. **The new norm.** Conversations become more routine at the board and leadership level about considering formal collaboration as a way to solve problems and have more impact.

STRUCTURE

Sponsorship and oversight of Better Together Fund is provided by its founding steering committee: The Dallas Foundation, The Lyda Hill Foundation, The Meadows Foundation and United Way of Metropolitan Dallas.

Grants are approved by the Steering Committee and awarded through the Dallas Foundation with the anticipation of awarding $2-3 million in the first few years of the project.

Recognizing the importance of nonprofits being able to seize unpredicted catalytic moments, the Better Together Fund will consider applications on any issue, at any time until the dollars run out.
## TYPES OF SUPPORT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grant Type</th>
<th>Exploration</th>
<th>Implementation</th>
<th>Better Together Grant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Readiness Assessment &amp; Feasibility Grant</strong></td>
<td>Support to explore: 1) organizational readiness for formal collaboration; 2) feasibility with potential partner(s); and/or 3) high-level analysis on fit with potential partner(s). May include online readiness self-assessment survey and half-day onsite consultation led by La Piana. May be used to cover staff time or external consultants.</td>
<td>Support for one-time costs to assess, negotiate and design a <strong>formal implementation plan</strong>, timeline and business model for the collaboration. May be used to cover staff time and pay external facilitators/consultants. May include developing a vision for what the entities aspire to pursue with a “Better Together Grant” post-implementation.</td>
<td>Support awarded post-implementation to pursue mission-based growth and innovation. This award aims to energize teams to dream big together; ideas for how to put this capital to work may be conceived in the Exploration Phases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Planning Grant</strong></td>
<td><strong>Implementation Grant</strong></td>
<td><strong>Better Together Grant</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pre-requisites</strong></td>
<td>✓ LOI with support of Executive Director(s) and Board Chair(s) ✓ Brief <strong>Readiness Assessment Application</strong> OR <strong>Feasibility Grant Application</strong></td>
<td>✓ LOI with support of Executive Director(s) and Board Chair(s) ✓ <strong>Planning Grant Application</strong> ✓ Rationale for the potential collaboration</td>
<td>✓ Better Together Grant Application ✓ Contingent on successful completion of the repositioning activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grant Size</strong>¹</td>
<td>$4000 assessment paid and/or a grant up to $15,000</td>
<td>Up to $60,000</td>
<td>Up to $200,000</td>
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¹Best estimates for what these phases cost
²Grants may cover staff time up to 20% of the amount requested
Participant List

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Organization/Role</th>
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<tr>
<td>Jon Armstrong</td>
<td>Celeste Flores, I Live Here, I Give Here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cindy Abell</td>
<td>Teresa Granillo, Con Mi Madre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ade Adeyokunnu</td>
<td>Chelsea Hartness, Mission Capital</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neeraj Aggarwal</td>
<td>Denise Herrera, St. David's Foundation</td>
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<td>Michael &amp; Susan Dell Foundation</td>
<td>Loretta Holland, Waterloo Counseling Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deirdre Anderson</td>
<td>Kody Jackson, Blackbald</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jeremiah Program</td>
<td>Dylan Jones, Anthropos Arts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kyle Anderson</td>
<td>Karen Kahan, Foundation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Melisa Atkinson</td>
<td>Shawn Kotoske, Public Consulting Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chase Bank</td>
<td>Mary Lagomarsino, Caritas of Austin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Awais Azhar</td>
<td>Mike King, RGK Center, UT Austin</td>
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<td>David Baker</td>
<td>Tara Kirkland, Mission Capital</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wimberley Watershed</td>
<td>Jaclyn Le, Anurodh Sarkar</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bobbi Barker</td>
<td>Lin Rui Li, Jordan Scott</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teresa Bayer</td>
<td>Andy Roddick Foundation, Hill Country Alliance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amy Bell</td>
<td>Karen LaShelle, Creative Action</td>
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<td>Tideline</td>
<td>RLG Center, UT Austin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Patrick Bixler</td>
<td>Karen LaShelle, Creative Action</td>
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<td>RGK Center, UT Austin</td>
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<td>Ray Brimble</td>
<td>Lin Rui Li, Jordan Scott</td>
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<td>One Skye Foundation</td>
<td>Meagan Longley, Austin Community Foundation</td>
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<td>Karen Brimble</td>
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<td>Trish Brown</td>
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<td>Thinkery</td>
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<td>Ashley Brundage</td>
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<td>United Way Metropolitan Dallas</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jay Campion</td>
<td>Amy Madore, Jessica Slade D'Arcy</td>
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<td>Liang Chen</td>
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<tr>
<td>Christina Collazo</td>
<td>Laura McCanlies, Anne Smalling</td>
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<td>Todo Juntos</td>
<td>Laura McCanlies, Anne Smalling</td>
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<td>Ashton Cumberbatch</td>
<td>Matt McDonell, David Smith</td>
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<td>Urban Roots</td>
<td>Notley Ventures, United Way of Central Texas</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kristin Donaldson</td>
<td>Susan McDowell, Colin Wallis</td>
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<td>LifeWorks</td>
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<td>Erica Ekwurzel</td>
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<td>CivicAIM</td>
<td>Jackie Montaine, Mark Williams</td>
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<td>Max Elliott</td>
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<td>Urban Roots</td>
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<tr>
<td>The SAFE Alliance</td>
<td>Susan Moore, Noah Wright</td>
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<tr>
<td>Angelica Ferrandino</td>
<td>AMD, Office of the Texas Governor</td>
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</table>
PARTICIPANT SURVEY - AUSTIN CATALYST EVENT

Thank you for your feedback to this evening’s convening!

Select the title that best represents your role within the nonprofit community (select one):
- Nonprofit executive director/staff
- Nonprofit board member
- Donor/Funding Agency
- Other: (please specify):

How large is the organization you represent (annual budget):
- <$999,000
- $1 million - $4.9 million
- $5 million - $25 million
- >$25 million
- N/A

Most people are well aware of the collaborations going on in Austin today:
- Yes
- No

A catalyst fund should be open to all community initiatives and should NOT be limited to one set of needs:
- Yes
- No

Please rank obstacles to collaboration in Austin from most challenging (1) to least challenging (5):
- Availability/quality of consultants
- Board involvement/support
- Education about the process
- Funding
- Leadership time/interest (i.e. executive director and/or board)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being low/not much and 10 being high/a lot:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How big is the problem of the growing gap between need and funding in Austin?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How ready are nonprofits &amp; donors to collaborate today?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How interested are you in helping to establish a catalyst fund in Austin?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on what you learned today, how much of an impact would a catalyst fund have today?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on tonight’s program, what three ideas that excite you the most?

What, if anything, was missing or would have been helpful to better understand the catalyst fund concept?

Optional, for purposes of follow-up to continue being part of the catalyst dialogue:

Name: ___________________ Organization: ___________________ Best way to reach phone/email): ___________________
Event Steering Council Members

Anne & Rich Smalling

One Skye Foundation

I Live Here I Give Here

rgk Center