

The power of bridging issue silos through funding collaboratives

By Unbound Philanthropy

Unbound Philanthropy's Taryn Higashi interviews Anita Khashu of Four Freedoms Fund, Bridgit Antoinette Evans of Pop Culture Collaborative and Aleyamma Mathew of Collaborative Fund for Women's Safety and Dignity to discuss the role of cross-issue collaboratives and why they're important for grantmaker impact.

Unbound Philanthropy believes in the power of shared learning; the necessity of collaboration, alignment and coordination; and in using an intersectional lens to understand complex problems and relationships as the basis of thoughtful strategies. It is part of several funder collaboratives such as the Four Freedoms Fund (FFF), the Pop Culture Collaborative (PCC), and the Collaborative Fund for Women's Safety and Dignity. Taryn Higashi sat down with the directors of these collaboratives, Anita Khashu, Bridgit Antoinette Evans and Aleyamma Mathew, to share lessons and learn from one another.

Taryn Higashi (TH): *How do collaboratives, especially those working across intersecting issue areas, help play a bridging role among funders? What other benefits do you see for funders?*

Anita Khashu (AK): A collaborative fund that's well-resourced and has the right people at the table can hold the big picture of a movement or a field. It can supplement a program officer's capacity to track what's happening on the ground, what the trends are and where the gaps are. It can expand the program officer's body of knowledge and perspective that informs their grantmaking. A common theme we hear from funders is that they do better grantmaking now that they are at the table.

Working in collaboration also expands the collection of information, perspective and knowledge for the collaborative itself. And a collaborative ensures that grantmaking is better coordinated and that there's less duplication.

Bridgit Antoinette Evans (BAE): When we form collaboratives across an intersectional set of goals, we facilitate collaboration across fields and movements that is often not possible in direct grantmaking portfolios.

Collaboratives allow people who have spent their entire careers doing immigrant rights funding, for instance, to sit with others who have spent their entire careers doing reproductive justice work. Often, it surfaces not just common ground, but new ground.

When a funder collaborative is formed around a field that is nascent or largely unorganized, like in the case of the Pop Culture Collaborative, it also provides a space of rigorous learning for funders that's not really available elsewhere.

TH: *When I was an active participant in FFF, the LGBTQ funders transformed and made so much more intersectional our grantmaking for the immigrant rights movement. Other funders that support other movements joined FFF because they wanted to make a contribution to the immigrant community, but what they bring enriches the collaborative, too. For*

example, Luminate, which supports civic empowerment, data and digital rights, financial transparency, and independent media; The Kresge Foundation, which seeks to expand opportunity for low-income people so they can gain the tools and support needed to lead self-determined lives and join the economic mainstream; and the Wallace H. Coulter Foundation, which supports, among other areas, community building, collaboration and partnerships among Asian American Pacific Islander organizations.

Another function of FFF and PCC is to increase funding for the field through direct grantmaking by their members as well as through the collaborative funds themselves. This is important to avoid overconcentration of power and decision-making in one entity. The grantmakers at these tables are learning a lot from and are inspired by each other, and this helps develop confidence and skills to do direct grantmaking on immigration issues in addition to their funding through the collaboratives – and to use an intersectional lens.

Aleyamma Mathew (AM): Philanthropy is a place of power. How can philanthropy leverage its own power – outside of grantmaking – to also be an advocate that echoes the work of our grantees and the issues at hand?

AK: FFF does a lot of funder-facing education, informing, helping funders un-

derstand opportunities and advising. That helps to increase resources to the field.

During moments when funders have zero capacity to do rapid-response funding, such as amid the family separation crisis, they are able to do so because of the consultation and advice that we offer.

BAE: Aleyamma's point speaks to the range of roles that collaboratives can play in the process of growing fields and increasing resources. It depends on how much a field already exists. There may be a need for a communications strategy around the why, the what and the how of the collaborative. For PCC, this was incredibly important in the first couple of years.

Now, we've begun to pivot our strategy to showcase our grantees' impact. When you're thinking of starting a collaborative, a question to ask is, "What role can a collaborative play in formalizing or legitimizing a space in the eyes of your audiences?"

At PCC, we think of ourselves as a hybrid entity that has some grantmaking functionality that's common to other collaboratives, but also programmatic work, which is more unusual. This is such a nascent field; there's a lot of learning for us to support among grantmakers. Are we a member of the field or are we a funder of the field? That's something we're actively navigating

and interpreting for ourselves and others because of the many different roles we have initially played.

AM: Like pop culture, gender-based violence has been underfunded and undervalued. There's a need to connect with other funders and increase resources to the field. Donors want to integrate gender into their portfolio. They want to do it sooner than later, and they want to learn from a community of experts. For example, Unbound, which is interested in immigration, is engaging in the Collaborative Fund for Women's Safety and Dignity by looking at the intersection of gender, gender-based violence, refugee rights and immigration right now.

TH: What are some successes you're proud of?

BAE: I feel proud of the space we've opened up for artists, particularly artists of color and of immigrant and Muslim backgrounds, to be more on the leading edge of change in the systems and structures of the industry and also within their own creative processes.

The Pop Culture Collaborative is uniquely funding in the entertainment industry to invest in new creative processes, new incubator spaces and new production systems for artists to own their work, to create their work with different collaborators, and to innovate in how their stories are making their way to audiences.

One example is the work that Sameer Gardezi is doing with Break the Room. He came to the PCC with a fairly conventional request – support the production of a digital series. But through conversations and building a long-term partnership, he ultimately piloted an incredibly experimental way of developing new series content through collaboration between television writers from communities historically excluded from the American story and social justice activists.

His methods are now being institutionalized in a major production company and are being adapted by studios,



Taryn Higashi



Anita Khashu



Bridgit Antoinette Evans



Aleyamma Mathew

including a new series he is co-producing with Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson featuring an entirely Hawaiian/Polyesian writers room. That’s a really good trajectory in a short amount of time.

AK: I am proud of the way FFF can support newer projects and initiatives, which we are now seeing playing an incredible leadership role. This can lead to the launch of new organizations such as UndocuBlack Network, which we funded early on, the National TPS Alliance, Southern Border Communities Coalition and One Arizona.

We can take big risks when we see a gap in the movement or when the work is too nascent for larger funders. We not only give grants, but also capacity building support, technical assistance and peer-to-peer learning. That combination of support early on when these efforts are trying to emerge is important.

AM: We haven’t done grantmaking yet, but we’re reflecting on what the collaborative has done so far. One of the things I’ve heard from advisory members is that for some of them, it was the first time they were in such a feminist-created space. And for some of the

funders who were used to being inside their own institutions that are heavy on process, being part of this collaborative meant stepping out of restrictions and being part of a nimbler process.

I am also proud of the ways that the fund has integrated movement leaders in the initial design and thinking of the fund.

TH: Are there any other points that you’d like to share?

AM: Not only do I hope to support grantmaking efforts to the field of women’s safety and dignity, but I am also working to make sure that philanthropy is also walking the walk. How do we address behavior in philanthropy? That means having a set of policies and procedures around sexual harassment in HR manuals and bringing philanthropic leaders to the table and ensuring that they’re addressing issues around power dynamics among program officers and grantees as a step towards creating culture change within foundations.

We’ve seen a call to action in the entertainment industry, with Hollywood revisiting its policies and procedures; we also saw it in tech. Some of our tech

and corporate partners have challenged us in philanthropy to follow suit.

When I think about my participation in affinity groups, I value the networking and the spectrum of issues that we could engage such as immigration, economic justice, etc. It allows you to meet a huge span of players in philanthropy. However, it takes so long to coordinate resources because many program officers are not feeling empowered enough to move their institutions to contribute more.

I was speaking to a colleague recently who said that they have been funding more collaborative funds rather than affinity groups because collaboratives seems to go deeper in having a sustained dialogue and creating action around it because the resources are already at the table, which I thought was a great point. ■

Taryn Higashi is executive director of Unbound Philanthropy. Anita Khashu is director of Four Freedoms Fund and NEO Philanthropy. Bridgit Antoinette Evans is executive director of Pop Culture Collaborative. Aleyamma Mathew is interim director of Collaborative Fund for Women’s Safety and Dignity.

You're invited to the
2019 NCRP
IMPACT
AWARDS

Wednesday, November 20th
6-7:30 pm PT | Westin Seattle
(At the CHANGE Philanthropy Unity Summit)

<https://www.ncrp.org/initiatives/ncrp-impact-awards/2019-impact-awards-reception> #NCRPImpactAwards