

Equity in Funding:

Perspectives from the Field of Creative Youth Development During COVID-19

For over twenty weeks the Mass Cultural Council held space for Creative Youth Development programs to connect with one another, share breakout rooms with funders, and find solutions to shared challenges. With CYD cohorts of the Heinz Endowments in Pittsburgh and the Clare Rose Foundation in San Diego, we decided to invite CYD organizations and CYD Funders into direct conversations about philanthropy in the midst of COVID-19. Early on in the discussions, the topic of inequities in funding in CYD work rose to the surface and over a period of four weeks we unpacked this topic and brainstormed possible solutions. The commonly felt point was that funders needed to be more in direct partnership with those in Creative Youth Development. Therefore, we hosted a large (99 people attended) Zoom call to better address how funders could partner more effectively with practitioners.

What the CYD Field Would Like Funders to Know *Our work will be more effective if foundations acted more like collaborators, offering thought partnership and ways to innovate.*

1. FUNDERS as PARTNERS

We need to shift power dynamics to have true partnerships between organizations and funders.

- We need you to help leverage your position of power of influence to increase resources and opportunities for us. It is so helpful when you can also be our thought partners, connectors, conveners, advocates, influencers, and problem solvers. Funders who help to connect the dots and connect groups to other opportunities and other funding are immensely appreciated.
- Funders need to be willing to change the power dynamic and stop doing “invitation only” and “one year only” fundraising. It would be great to get away from transactional relationships and build more real, trusting relationships over multiple years. We need empathy and understanding without judgement.

2. GRANT APPLICATIONS and TRUE IMPACT

Grants need to be multi-year because change takes time. Honor both the holistic nature and the individual uniqueness of the work.

- How can philanthropy support a more wholistic perspective of funding? We need to tie the work to the whole of the lives of our young people - transportation, housing, food, etc. Funders may have to sacrifice their desire for the display of constant growth in order to increase or maintain relevance. Address the changes of outcomes and impact given these times and given the complexity of CYD work.
- Funders need to see individual aspects of each organization because we are all so different. Take the time to learn about us and in your grant application ask, "What question did we not ask?" so we can tell you more.

3. SYSTEMS CHANGE

Funders need to innovate for greater equity and systemic change so that funding does not just keep protecting the system that we have.

- We must dismantle the sustained culture of, 'Don't call us, we'll call you.' Funders need to create better public-private partnerships where empathy and innovation can work to authentically change the system.
- Philanthropy needs to be more responsive and work to place Artists of disabilities in community and not separate from community.
- Philanthropy needs to better support capacity building for smaller, flexible CYD organizations who are usually funded locally and/or receive less funding. A lot of funding goes to the same bigger more established institutions, which are also frequently white-led institutions.

4. SUPPORT NETWORKS and LEARNING

Philanthropy needs to develop and fund more broad support networks.

- Funders need to fund networks to codify best practices and ways to assess program impact by investing in better systems for collecting CYD data. Evaluations need to honor the complexity of the work. Funders need to understand about the value of the deep caring adult relationships that young people connect to, which is not easily reported on or measured. The reality is that many youth development outcomes cannot be realized in a grant cycle and youth themselves may not be able to articulate these changes until years later. Funders investing in understanding long-term impacts through longitudinal studies or increased funding for support of CYD alums would be helpful.
- There is too much bias about evaluation, allowing numbers and "objectivity" to count more than stories and other ways of showing impact. Not considering first person testimony as being valuable and only looking for metrics creates inequities.
- In order for CYD organizations and their communities to most effectively reach their young people, organizations and funders need to prioritize the design of programs together WITH the community so that the community is truly reflected in the nonprofit programming and decision making. Prioritizing and funding this collaboration will enable foundations who ask, "What do you need?" to be able to trust and fund their answers.

5. DIVERSE LEADERSHIP and CYD ALUMS

CYD organizations need to be better challenged and supported to have leadership that reflects the population they work with.

- We need to work together directly on issues of equity and reduce the barriers for leaders of color in our field. "The road for Black Executive Directors is not nearly the same as our white peers and colleagues."
- Foundations need to hire youth and POC to identify, advocate and support orgs with POC leadership.
- Foundations need to hire those from the field -- including young people.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, these conversations gave voice to a field that was struggling and offered ideas to the funding community around how to better support those voices. Encouraging funders to be more proximate to the work of Creative Youth Development was the overarching priority that had impact in other areas. Understanding true impact and how to craft an application that authentically grows from that partnership would begin to address systems change with intentionality. Supporting the field of practice with a greater understanding of impact, with systems to better document and analyze effective practices, and with a diversity of voices in leadership, has the potential to help both funders, programs and community to create authentic partnership. The ideas the field articulated lay the foundation for more effective work for all of us who invest deeply in the work of Creative Youth Development.