

AFRICA: Lessons from US foundation collaboration

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A "highly unusual" 10-year higher education partnership between seven US foundations, each with its distinct brand of organisational culture, leadership style and mission, is guaranteed to generate interesting lessons and valuable advice for future collaborations.

These have been collected in a newly-published case study which tracks the successes and shortcomings of the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa, **PHEA**, which began in 2000 and whose members invested US\$440 million in 65 universities across nine African countries.

Lessons from a Ten-Year Funder Collaborative: A case study of the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa reveals successes and hard lessons from an initiative to strengthen higher education on the continent.

The study is based on discussions with 30 participants, including four founding presidents, and a review of key documents, reports and evaluations. The case study is the second in a series of three publications documenting the PHEA.

According to George Soule, manager for strategic communication at Carnegie Corporation of New York - one of the founding partners - the study is aimed at assisting all grant-making foundations, especially those that have been involved in or may consider collaborative funding in the future.

Soule said although a number of important collaboratives such as the Four Freedoms Fund had been established in the wake of PHEA, collaboration among grant-makers was still "relatively novel".

And there are reasons for that.

"Most foundations prefer to make their own decisions, adhere to their own vetting processes and design their own programmatic strategies," he said. "The number and type of disincentives to collaboration are well-known and often act as strong deterrents.

"These include distinct organisational cultures that place a premium on autonomy, a demand or need for 'ownership' or recognition, and additional commitments of time and resources above and beyond what is required to make grants independently."

However, according to Soule, learning from past collaborations is necessary in a context where collaborative ventures are increasingly being seen as a way to increase impact in the context of greater financial constraints.

"The economic realities of a depressed market have impacted the endowments of foundations and have caused some funders to seek like-minded partners. Also, given that many funders have placed greater demands on the non-profits they support in these hard times, funders must be similarly demanding of themselves," said Soule.

PHEA represented some of the largest United States foundations. In addition to the Carnegie Corporation, its members included the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation and the John D and Catherine T MacArthur Foundations, later expanding to include the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Andrew W Mellon Foundation and the Kresge Foundation.

Participating countries included Egypt, Ghana, Madagascar, Mozambique, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda.

The case study states that the partnership was initiated at a "critical time in African history" when a number of nations were implementing democratic and economic reforms and universities were experiencing something of a comeback after years of neglect in favour of primary and secondary education.

Foundation leaders thus 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," states the report.

Soule said the case study was conducted by independent consultant, Susan Parker, who was given "great latitude" to "tell it as she sees it". According to Soule, the choice of a critical outsider was motivated by the "firm belief that some of the most important lessons are those that could be construed in the immediate term as failures or weaknesses".

in Africa - the partnership helped spur multi-million dollar pledges by international donors such as the World Bank - and increased investment by participant foundations.

Other achievements included institutional capacity building, the generation of more information about participating universities and a focus on large projects beyond the scope of individual foundations. The latter included a bandwidth consortium which provided cheaper and faster internet access to universities.

The study also found that the collaboration had produced a 'community of practice' which provided foundations with channels to share ideas and information with one another and improve individual grant-making.

In the first five years, the partnership could also claim responsibility for the launch of the *Journal of Higher Education in Africa*, the first to cover higher education issues throughout the continent and the creation of several new degree programmes and scholarships to encourage women in leadership.

Among the partnership's weaknesses, the study notes the following: a lack of clarity about PHEA's mission; an initial absence of a strong coordinating body and cumbersome decision-making; fluctuations in interest from presidents and changes in foundation leadership; and the absence of an exit plan to prepare for the demise of the partnership.

The study also notes that the partnership had limited engagement with African governments, leaders and international donors.

The report notes that in the second five-year phase, the partnership moved towards filling a gap that was present in the first phase by focusing on broader educational issues such as the nurturing of a new generation of African academics. PHEA also started to undertake more joint grant-making.

The case study contains concrete advice to parties who may be considering establishing a large collaborative. The study suggests that collaborations should focus on issues and ideas "of a scale that one organisation could not do alone" and should look early on in the project for a tangible common initiative around which to focus early efforts.

Critical to the success of any collaboration, it suggests further, is the sustained support of senior leadership, a coordinating body or secretariat with real decision-making power for larger initiatives. The case study also suggests that time be allocated for participants to get to know each other and build trust, and that a system be developed to gather and evaluate the outcomes of larger grants.

Soule said that while the long-running partnership had dissolved, its former members were committed to continuing their individual grant-making activities in African higher education and would be seeking seek bilateral and multi-lateral collaborations on a case by case basis.