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Lessons From the Assessment for Learning Project: Strategies for Building an Authentic Learning Community

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Keywords: Learning community, learning networks, assessment for learning, demonstration of learning, learning agenda, collective leadership, experimentation, innovation, reflective practice, funder-grantee relationships

Introduction

There is clear evidence in education, business, and philanthropy that innovation and complex problem-solving require regular reflection and learning from successes and challenges (Ashford & DeRue, 2012; Ellis, Carette, Anseel, & Lievens, 2014). This skill is vital for foundations and grantees because the complex challenges that philanthropy addresses require pioneering strategies and solutions, honed through collective trial and error (Applebaum, 2017). Even as a growing number of funders argue that solving our most pressing social challenges require strategies that embrace vulnerability, transparency, and iterative problem-solving (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015; Maxwell, 2007), it has been difficult to create a culture where grantees feel safe to talk about their hard-earned lessons (National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, 2018).

Obstacles to creating a learning culture are plentiful. Patrizi, Heid Thompson, Coffman, and Beer (2013) identified three “traps” that “hamper foundations in advancing the kind of robust learning needed to guide strategy” (p. 50): (1) linear theory of change models, which limit space for complexity and uncertainty; (2) funder distancing from the strategies being tested, making learning and adaptation difficult; and (3) allegiance to performance indicators tied to the theory of change that “distract foundations and grantees from asking and exploring more salient questions” (p. 57). Even if funders strategically sidestep these traps, power dynamics and reporting requirements often inhibit grantees from

Key Points

- This article explores findings from an evaluation of the Assessment for Learning Project, a grantee engagement strategy led by the Center for Innovation in Education focused on creating a learning community founded in continuous reflection and safety for risk-taking. The article shares the project’s model and approach, grounded in the core design elements of a field-facing learning agenda, grantmaking that leads with learning, and collective leadership.
- This article highlights the Assessment for Learning Project’s practices, such as a Request for Learning rather than traditional Request for Proposals; a requirement that grantees provide formative feedback to each other; and public demonstrations of learning in lieu of traditional reporting. And it explores how the project’s design helps flip the script on expertise by encouraging grantees to draw on one another for support and how it promotes a culture of experimentation that deepens learning relationships.
- Finally, this article points to the role of the project’s leadership team in modeling reflection and vulnerability, co-designing with grantees to bolster their leadership, and expanding its network by strategically connecting grantees to the broader field via a common learning agenda.

sharing their challenges, key learnings, and mid-course corrections (Pritchard, 2013). Because the prospect of losing funding is a constant threat, there is an incentive for grantees to “perform” for funders, avoid risk-taking, and rely on pre-existing approaches, missing the opportunity to innovate, reflect, and learn from their experiences (Center for Effective Philanthropy, 2016).

This article explores findings from the evaluation of the Assessment for Learning Project (ALP), an initiative that pivots away from the more traditional models of grantmaking and philanthropic learning. Led by the Center for Innovation in Education (CIE) at the University of Kentucky, ALP focuses on supporting educators to rethink the role of assessment in student learning. The project has applied knowledge and best practice from the field of education and learning sciences around how to support student growth to its own grantmaking processes, in order to promote a culture of continuous reflection and learning (Ancess, Rogers, Grand, & Darling-Hammond, 2019). This article describes ALP’s approach to grantmaking and lifts up lessons learned that other grantmakers can use to support innovation, iteration, and honesty among their grantee partners.

Launched in 2015 with support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, ALP is co-led by CIE, Next Generation Learning Challenges (NGLC), and 2Revolutions. The project provides funding to teams of educators across the United States working in public and charter schools, small and large school districts, state education agencies, and education networks and intermediaries that want to fundamentally rethink the role that assessment plays in student learning. Through ALP, grantees have access to personalized coaching and technical assistance (TA), thought partnership from field leaders, and a robust nationwide network of like-minded colleagues collectively working to rethink assessment — the ALP learning community.

ALP’s Strategy and Approach

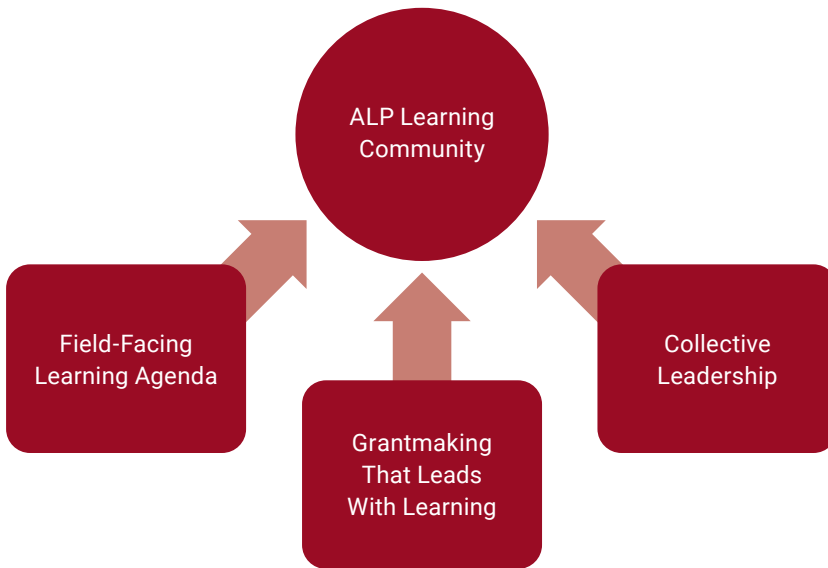
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The project’s strategy and approach is guided by a set of hypotheses about how to avoid the “traps” that commonly detract from strategic and reflective learning in philanthropic initiatives. These hypotheses, intended to support field-level innovation and change more effectively, were articulated by ALP leaders at the onset to shape the project’s overall design.

“traps” that commonly detract from strategic and reflective learning in philanthropic initiatives. These hypotheses, intended to support field-level innovation and change more effectively, were articulated by ALP leaders at the onset to shape the project’s overall design. A select sample follows:

- If we have a different type of funding process, where dollars incentivize learning and support full-cycle thinking, then we will have higher-impact investments.
- If we organize and manage our work around a field-facing learning agenda, then we can more effectively support grantee efforts and have a greater influence on the field.
- If there is a range of expertise and perspectives guiding the project, then the partnership will foster productive debate and yield new approaches.
- If we design convenings as peer-learning experiences, then grantees will build stronger connections between projects

FIGURE 1 Core Design Elements of ALP



Reflective Practice

and stronger relationships as a learning community.

These hypotheses led to the development of ALP’s core design elements: a field-facing learning agenda; grantmaking that leads with learning; and collective leadership — all of which, in combination, support the ALP Learning Community. (See Figure 1.)

Field-Facing Learning Agenda

At the heart of ALP is a field-facing learning agenda that grounds all aspects of the project, from design to execution.

A learning agenda is an alternative to an initiative logic model, which articulates a pathway to desired, often externally imposed outcomes. Instead, the learning agenda presents a set of core questions for the field and is based in the theory of emergent learning, which “can be used to support both adaptive and emergent strategy, but is designed specifically to expand agency” (Darling, Guber, Smith, & Stiles, 2016, p. 64). In this way, the learning agenda offers a framework around which ALP, its grantees, and the learning

community are organized that presents opportunities for grantees to engage in deep inquiry that can meaningfully contribute to their own evolution, ALP’s strategy, and the broader field. As Jeff Heyck-Williams, from grantee Two Rivers Charter School in Washington, D.C., observed,

[In] the traditional paradigm ... we have a logic model and all of these deliverables. It feels like we’re filling in boxes and it’s secondary to our learning. [ALP] has given me opportunities to learn deeply about how to solve this problem around assessment and realistic avenues for reporting on that: Writing in a blog or presenting at a conference are both things that are really valuable for me to synthesize and to share my learning.

ALP’s learning agenda consists of the following set of core questions:

- How can assessment support a broader definition of student success?
- What assessment practices most effectively empower students to own and advance their learning?

- How can we most effectively build educator capacity to gather, interpret, and use evidence of learning to enhance instruction?
- How does assessment for learning inform broader contexts of accountability, policy, and systems design?
- How can we pursue equity through assessment for learning?

Instead of a classic proposal, ALP asks grantees to produce a unique learning plan — a set of questions for the field they intend to answer — tied to the overall learning agenda. It invites grantees to be ambitious, take risks, and experiment with strategies they have not tried before. Because learning itself is the core objective of ALP, grantees’ deviations from their original project goals is not a problem, but rather a learning opportunity. A core benefit of the learning plan is that it does not limit grantees to prefabricated solutions, but instead encourages them to expand their field of vision and experiment with different approaches. As Justin Wells from Envision Learning Partners, another grantee, said, “The problem with the deliverable approach is that it forecloses the imagination [because] you have to think in advance as to what the particular solution is going to be, before you’ve wrestled with the full nature of the problem.”

Instead of reporting progress toward predetermined metrics, ALP grantees report on their progress toward answering the questions outlined in their learning plans. To the degree possible, these demonstrations of learning are public to an authentic audience, mirroring a central principle of assessment for learning (ALP, 2019). For example, grantees have shared their learnings in Education Week blogs, at education conferences, and with one another in learning community gatherings. Grantees often collaborate on presentations of learning, and have worked with ALP leadership to create resources for the field tied to the learning agenda. One example of this is an exhibition of student voices — a compilation of audio recordings of students from each grantee’s learning environment

Instead of a classic proposal, ALP asks grantees to produce a unique learning plan — a set of questions for the field they intend to answer — tied to the overall learning agenda. It invites grantees to be ambitious, take risks, and experiment with strategies they have not tried before.

speaking about what assessment for learning means to them.

Grantmaking That Leads With Learning

Building upon the body of knowledge around investing in impactful collaboration, ALP seeks, as described by Wei-Skillern and Silver (2013), to “focus on mission ..., manage through trust ..., and build constellations” (p. 121). The project’s grantmaking process has therefore been designed to foster trusting relationships between grantee organizations and between grantee and funder, which in turn creates the space for both individual and mutual learning and reflection. The assumption was that requiring applicants to demonstrate an interest in and capacity for this type of reflection would filter out organizations seeking to do “business as usual,” shift the funder-grantee power dynamics that inhibit innovation and sharing of lessons, and accelerate the generation of new knowledge for the field. Furthermore, the project sought to use a three-part, iterative funding strategy to slowly expand the network in phases while helping to close key gaps in the learning agenda:

1. *Request for Learning (RFL)*: In 2015, ALP released an RFL inviting proposals for projects that would support educators in “fundamentally rethinking the roles that assessment should play to advance student

The leadership structure of ALP was created through two interrelated assumptions. First, bringing together partners with diverse perspectives would foster productive debate, which would create the conditions for new and innovative approaches to funder leadership. Second, to be grounded in its own principles of assessment for learning, ALP's leaders had to "walk the talk" by engaging in their own cycle of reflection and learning.

learning." Unlike a traditional request for proposal, the open RFL invited applications from organizations that "possess a learning orientation" and seek to create transformational, rather than incremental, change. The RFL asked "that grantees enter into this work with a strong learning disposition, a readiness to be candid within the network about what you are learning from your own work, and a sense of shared collective purpose." ALP received 145 applications and used a common rubric to score the proposals on various criteria, including testable ideas, demonstrated learning stance, and readiness for transformation. Forty semifinalists were selected and reviewed by expert review panels, and the 17 final grantees fell into "learning constellations" centered on certain key aspects of ALP's learning agenda, with testable hypotheses on how to address the most pressing problems faced by the assessment field.

- 2. Concept paper and peer review:* Two years later, ALP invited a subgroup of the first round of grantees that were ready to scale their innovations to submit a concept paper on "driving scalable, sustainable impact in complex systems." These 12 grantees were asked to go deeper on issues of systems change and equity related to assessment for learning. The project asked grantees to identify the driving questions that they would explore, describe key reflection and learning milestones, and develop a formative reflection group with whom they could test their ideas and learnings. Members of each grantee team convened in Summer 2017, went through a feedback and revision process in which they provided peer feedback on one another's concept papers to enhance their collective work, and received support from ALP coaches to deepen the thinking in their proposals. This meeting not only strengthened the concept papers, it launched discussions around areas of intersection across grantee organizations. Many of these grantees identified it as a powerful learning opportunity that shifted their relationships with others in the learning community. When ALP "said, 'We want you to give each other feedback,' [it] was incredibly powerful," recalled Nancy Gerzon of WestEd, a grantee. "We had to use the feedback and put it into our proposal and say what we would do differently. ... It opened the door for new conversations."
- 3. Microgrant RFL and Assessment for Learning Self-Reflection Tool:* In 2018, the project opened an opportunity for school districts and nonprofits to receive a "microgrant" to join the ALP learning community. As part of the application, organizations were asked to assemble a team and use a Self-Reflection Tool created by ALP to discuss their current assessment practices and reflect on gaps and areas for growth. ALP intentionally made this discussion a requirement of the application so it could understand each organization's willingness and readiness for critical self-reflection. When asked later about their experiences of using the

tool, microgrant applicants indicated that the discussions helped their teams to think more deeply about their current assessment practices, and to acknowledge needed cultural shifts to implement true assessment for learning. The Self-Reflection Tool also presented an opportunity to bring together people from across systems to have common conversations with common language. “The tool helped us reflect and focus on specific areas where we have strength and needs,” said Lora Shields of Shelby County Public Schools, a micrograntee in Kentucky. “It helped us think through what we could lead ourselves and what we needed learning partners for.”

Collective Leadership

The leadership structure of ALP was created through two interrelated assumptions. First, bringing together partners with diverse perspectives would foster productive debate, which would create the conditions for new and innovative approaches to funder leadership. Second, to be grounded in its own principles of assessment for learning, ALP’s leaders had to “walk the talk” by engaging in their own cycle of reflection and learning. Having different perspectives at the leadership table was intended to be a vital catalyst for this cycle of learning.

To test those assumptions, C!E assembled a diverse group of leaders in the education field to steer and implement the project. It partnered with NGLC to lead the grantmaking and coaching aspects and 2Revolutions to serve as a design partner. C!E also recruited several education leaders — researchers, policymakers, and funders — from across the country to serve as an advisory group and provide feedback on the project’s early design. Over the course of the initiative, the eight individuals comprising the core ALP leadership team created the RFL, decided upon the learning agenda, made granting decisions, designed experiences for the learning community, and more.

Through regular virtual meetings and multiday retreats, the leadership team grappled with issues related to the design and execution of ALP. These

meetings provided ongoing opportunities for sensemaking, as the leaders reflected on the progress and challenges of their grantees and on what they themselves were learning about assessment and systems change. As a group, the leadership team invested early in building trust and creating the environment for honest exchange and feedback. The variety of perspectives at the leadership table means that differences of opinion are common and welcomed as productive tension. ALP’s learning stance also means that the leadership team takes its own risks and reflects upon its own missteps, both inwardly as a team and outwardly with grantees.

Importantly, the distributed leadership model is also mirrored by ALP’s own funders. Having two foundations engaged as partners in the initiative leads to its own productive tensions and opens up possibilities for demonstrating success that do not need to be strictly tied to either funder’s typical measurement and learning protocols.

The ALP Learning Community

Each design element is in service of the ALP learning community, which continues to expand as new stakeholders join the movement to rethink assessment. The learning community is comprised of a cohesive, yet expanding, group of education professionals — grantees, micro-grantees, and others in the field — seeking to grow their own and the field’s collective knowledge about assessment and its role in supporting learning for students and teachers.

Although the activities weaving together the learning community are common features of many foundation initiatives, the evaluation has found that the infusion of a learning orientation alters the structure of these activities and the ways in which participants engage. In the case of ALP, features of the learning community have contributed to a culture where grantees step into leadership and express a sense of investment and ownership in the community. This type of grantee leadership is itself a primary goal of ALP, which hopes ultimately to create self-reinforcing momentum within the field.

[C]apacity building through ALP evolved into a peer-driven model, where grantees in the ALP cohort provide TA, formative feedback, and thought partnership to one another; these individuals come from organizations already in the TA business, and also from organizations such as schools and districts implementing innovative practices.

Peer Learning Experiences

ALP's emphasis on peer learning experiences promotes grantee leadership while also building strong relationships between individuals and organizations.

Since 2016, ALP has held an annual, in-person meeting that provides opportunities for grantees to share progress on their learning plans and grapple with problems of practice. These convenings, which receive consistently high participant ratings, have expanded from 36 participants in 2016 to 420 participants in 2020 as the ALP network and community have grown. Convenings have included grantee presentations of learning, a design thinking lab, the student voices exhibition highlighting student reflections on assessment from across all grantees, and recently took the form of an Assessment for Learning Conference co-designed by grantees and open to the broader field.

ALP also supports virtual learning groups on assessment issues and grantee-led webinars, which have explicit ties to ALP's learning agenda. Dawn Kau'i Sang of the Hawaii Department of Education, another grantee,

explained, "The design of the convenings forces you into conversations as a network so that you learn from each other and you can see things through other people's lenses." She added:

As we've learned together as an ALP community, one of the things that I appreciate most is the ability to have this feedback loop, even if only once a year. ... [ALP] helps us to broaden our thinking around the work that we're trying to do so that it has that essence of assessment for learning embedded in our work. ... There's continuously an iterative cycle for me and the work that we're doing here, but also as that work lends to the larger conversation within the ALP group.

Demand-Driven Technical Assistance and Coaching.

In its initial phases, ALP amassed a list of experts and TA providers available for grantees to draw upon for TA and coaching. However, it soon realized that this support was underutilized, partly because grantees felt more comfortable reaching out to their peers and ALP leaders than to high-profile field leaders.

With this recognition, capacity building through ALP evolved into a peer-driven model, where grantees in the ALP cohort provide TA, formative feedback, and thought partnership to one another; these individuals come from organizations already in the TA business, and also from organizations such as schools and districts implementing innovative practices. The ALP grantees have invited their fellow cohort organizations to come to their learning environments and present on topics or conduct workshops with their staff. Tony Monfiletto, from grantee Future Focused Education, observed:

It was super helpful for us to learn about an assessment model in [another grantee's context]. ... For us to learn in a practical way how it was done has been very helpful because it's helped us think about our own critical path to getting there through their example.

Grantee Co-Design and Leadership

Since the beginning of ALP, co-design processes between initiative leadership and grantees have been baked into the project's design, including

development of ALP's principles of assessment for learning, creation of the student voices exhibition, and blogs and thought pieces for the field.

As grantees have gained an expanded sense of ownership over the project and its future, they have gradually taken on more leadership in the design of the ALP learning community itself. One example of this is the 2020 Assessment for Learning Conference, for which grantees led the development of the conference design, curated the four primary conference strands, and presented at the majority of the conference sessions. As ALP looks to the future, the leadership of grantees will become increasingly central to carrying forward the movement for assessment for learning.

The Evaluation: Key Findings

Understanding the role that evaluation plays in service of strategy (Price, Reid, & Leahy, 2019), in 2017 ALP hired Social Policy Research Associates and the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education to serve as its evaluation and learning partners. The formative and developmental evaluation findings presented in this article are focused on (1) assessing how ALP's unique model advances scalable and sustained change, and (2) identifying how the project develops grantees' capacity to catalyze meaningful change.

With the principle of "embedding strategic learning into everyday work" (Price et al., 2019, p. 112), the evaluation focuses on formative feedback to help strengthen ALP and surface real-time learnings as they emerge. In service of this goal, the evaluation includes three rounds of in-depth telephone interviews with all grantees and micrograntees, leadership team members, advisors, and others in the field; observations of ALP convenings, coupled with surveys of convening attendees; observations of all leadership team meetings and virtual learning opportunities for grantees; periodic online pulse surveys to capture how grantees are progressing toward their learning goals and their challenges; and site visits to specific grantees to observe ALP-related activities. Because the project seeks to grow the assessment for learning field, the evaluation also includes an annual social network analysis

Grantees note that a learning stance provides an opportunity for them and their partners to comfortably experiment with new approaches and explore alternative ways of thinking and talking about their work.

survey, which documents the growth of the ALP network over three years.

The evaluation has surfaced key lessons for grantmakers looking to embrace a learning orientation and interrupt the traditional funder-grantee dynamic. One mediating factor is that ALP is administered by an intermediary team — C!E, NGLC, and 2Revolutions — rather than directly by foundations, which may influence how grantees engage with the initiative (Szanton, 2003). Still, there are aspects of ALP's approach to grantmaking that can be adopted by foundations looking to partner with their grantees in a different way.

What Difference Does It Make to Approach the Work With a Learning Orientation?

Grantees repeatedly elevate ALP's focus on learning as being valuable for them personally and being fundamentally different from what they have previously experienced with funders. Grantees point to the following outcomes arising from this approach:

- A learning orientation creates opportunities for everyone to take risks, experiment, and engage in vulnerable exchanges with one another. Grantees note that a learning stance provides an opportunity for them and their partners to comfortably experiment with new approaches and explore alternative ways of thinking and talking about their work. Grantees commonly use the word "safety" to describe their engagement with others at ALP convenings, even

Learning Orientation in Action: Del Lago Academy

Del Lago Academy, a public high school in Escondido, California, focuses on how assessment can help students connect their learning to their goals for college and career. In Del Lago's first round of ALP funding, they developed Competency X, an assessment approach for workforce-informed performance tasks where learners choose how to curate evidence of their learning and earn digital badges that have currency in the workforce. In developing this approach, Del Lago realized with the help of the ALP learning community that what it was creating was a system of performance assessment. Del Lago also recognized that in order to give the digital badges more validity, it would need a partner experienced in this type of assessment practice. Therefore, it reached out to the **Center for Collaborative Education (CCE)**, an ALP grantee focusing on microcredentials as a form of performance assessment for teacher development. The CCE now provides TA to Del Lago and supports Competency X with frameworks for performance assessment and external communication about the validity of badges in today's workforce.

though they generally convene in person only once per year and participants can vary year to year. The ALP leadership team is also able to take risks in its programmatic approach and to model vulnerability in listening to grantees' critiques and constructive feedback, and then act on that feedback. For example, in the project's first year, grantees reported that they needed more peer engagement and opportunities for co-learning outside of the convenings to be a strong learning community. The ALP leadership team was welcoming of and responsive to this feedback, and provided resources for grantees to collaborate together outside of the formal convening spaces, such as by co-presenting at conferences and events, or writing thought pieces

together for the field. As Gary Chapin of the Center for Collaborative Education, a grantee, observed,

In this community, there is a fearlessness. There is an assumption of best intentions. We are able to push each other and be provocative. ... [ALP] convinced me that I had permission to learn, that I wouldn't be penalized if things didn't go as projected. That has made a huge difference. This is literally the most interesting work I've done in my professional life.

- A learning orientation flips the script on expertise, creating openings for grantees to step into field leadership. ALP's structure has supported the emergence of "lead learners," who are called upon to serve as resources for the entire learning community. Sometimes these grantees are established TA providers, but often they are individuals who would not be traditionally considered field leaders. For instance, leaders at individual schools have had their tools and processes shared and approximated by larger school districts and national education organizations. Over time, it has become clear that there is great value in drawing on "peer experts," or other grantees who are grappling with the same issues. As the ALP network has evolved, so has the perception of who holds or "owns" expertise (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2007), which has, in turn, helped individuals within the learning community see themselves as leaders in building the assessment for learning field.
- A learning orientation refocuses grantees on the reality that systems change in education cannot happen without students, families, and educators. When organizations embrace a learning orientation, they are more likely to recognize what they do not know and what they cannot do on their own (Grantmakers for Effective Organizations [GEO], 2016). This understanding has made it imperative for ALP grantees to work in collaboration with educators, families, and students to come to broader and deeper answers to the questions they are exploring.

This has emerged as a strong theme in ALP convenings — which have continually pointed to the need to center students, families, and educators — and reflects a fundamental part of the initiative’s model, both in ALP’s principles of assessment for learning and in the learning agenda questions about educator and student agency. As Justin Wells of grantee Envision Learning Partners said, “We need to keep listening to the students. ... We will recommit to the purpose of this movement if we keep checking in and asking kids what they want and need from our education system.”

What Steps Can Foundations Take to Support a Learning Orientation Among Grantee Partners?

Funders can support a learning orientation by creating a culture for learning and trusting relationships, while practicing humility and power sharing (National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, 2018). Potential steps illuminated by the evaluation of ALP include:

- Identify a learning orientation as a key dimension of grantee “readiness.” ALP screened applicants for a learning orientation in various elements of the application process, such as the RFL solicitation, the individual learning plans, the required Self-Reflection Tool discussion, the process of soliciting peer feedback on proposals, and more. The learning orientation acts as a through-line for the initiative and has given grantees the license to take risks and honestly reflect on challenges in service of learning. Amy Spicer of the Colorado Education Initiative, a grantee, said,

Being part of ALP has taught me how important it is to be vulnerable and transparent, and come with a learner mindset. It’s easy to just highlight all the things that are working well because you want to show that you are meeting grant outcomes and milestones. With [ALP], if you’re not willing to be transparent and vulnerable, then you’re not going to be a successful participant in the community.

Learning Orientation in Action: Leadership Public Schools

Leadership Public Schools (LPS), a charter high school network in Oakland, California, explores how assessment can make each student’s learning the collective responsibility of the entire class. Initially, LPS created a system of peer-to-peer feedback meant to create more equitable experiences of assessment. However, when LPS solicited feedback from students, they discovered that students with learning and English-language gaps were actually feeling unsafe because of these practices — therefore reproducing systems of inequity in the classroom. Rather than continuing to scale a practice for which it was funded, LPS brought this learning to the ALP and was supported to course-correct and examine its own biases as educators to have greater awareness of how students feel judged on the basis of their identities. This resulted in a new system of collective feedback called “identity-safe formative assessment” that brings together self-assessment, goal setting, reflection, and feedback — a system that focuses on cultivating positive student mindsets and identities to create a more equitable learning environment.

- Shift the focus of grantmaking from a performance framework, focused on compliance and accountability, to a learning framework, focused on innovation and iteration. One of the core themes arising from grantee interviews is the way in which they view the ALP leadership team as being fundamentally different from traditional funders with whom they have worked. With ALP, grantees do not feel that they are “checking boxes” to justify their merit for continued funding or spending time on reporting structures that do not support their own learning. The ALP grant requirements are viewed as worthwhile, in and of themselves, because they generate insights that help grantees advance the quality and impact of their work. Instead of asking for an accounting of

Resources created through funder-grantee partnerships act as trusted proof points for the field and catalysts for systems change (GEO, 2016). ALP grantees point to co-creation of resources, including the project's own principles of assessment for learning, as a valuable outcome of their participation in the project.

outputs tied to funding. ALP asks questions and facilitates problem solving.

- Model the risk-taking, reflection, and vulnerability that is needed to create a safe environment for breakthrough ideas. One of the most common themes arising from ALP grantees over the last few years is the way in which ALP leaders model vulnerability and reflection. According to grantees, ALP's focus on learning would not be as powerful if leaders were not willing to model risk-taking themselves. ALP leaders continuously test their own hypotheses about how to develop a learning network and engage in their own cycle of reflection and action, enabling them to pivot smoothly from strategies that are not working. This type of learning is reflected in the collective leadership model, with its focus on productive debate; and, as the evaluation team has observed, in the responsiveness of the leadership team to formative evaluation findings. Jonathan Vander Els of New Hampshire Learning Initiative, a grantee, remarked,

That's the culture of the project: It's the culture of learning and it's safe here and we're going

to make mistakes and we're going to pick each other up and we're going to move forward. I think that the leadership team ... does a good job of modeling that in their interactions with us.

- Consider relationships as one of the most valuable resources that a funder can offer to a grantee. For many grantees, the most valuable aspect of ALP thus far has been the relationships they have built with each other through in-person convenings. Although these meetings happen only yearly, grantees describe them as "qualitatively different" from other types of learning communities in which they have engaged, explaining that the convening space goes beyond "generic networking" and sets the stage for honest conversation and true relationship building. In contrast, a key part of ALP's initial design was an online hub that was intended to support ongoing communication. While a few grantees viewed the hub as a useful resource, engagement in the platform was ultimately low because it lacked the face-to-face opportunities to deepen relationships. Andy Calkins of NGLC, a leadership team member, observed,

It feels like we have been walking our talk through our designs for the convenings. ... The grantees connect with each other more genuinely and seem to feel that they are part of an authentic learning community. There's more trust among grantees than you might expect. ... A lot of that stems from our asking — our charging — them to be vulnerable in talking about their projects and lessons learned at the convenings. It's given them a sense of being fellow travelers in ways that I don't know that we'd normally see across all of these different kinds of communities.

- Build in opportunities for authentic demonstrations of learning. Rather than require grantees to submit grant reports, funders can have grantees present their progress and key learnings to an authentic audience. ALP's approach requires that grantees demonstrate their learning to the ALP learning community, and also invites grantees to present to the broader education field.

The project supports grantees to collaborate with each other on these presentations, such that their combined learning offers intriguing questions and answers for the field. A number of grantees who have collaborated on conference presentations reflected that the process also helped them deepen their relationships between in-person meetings.

- Collaborate with grantees on the creation of resources for the field. Resources created through funder-grantee partnerships act as trusted proof points for the field and catalysts for systems change (GEO, 2016). ALP grantees point to co-creation of resources, including the project's own principles of assessment for learning, as a valuable outcome of their participation in the project. The student voices exhibit has been used widely by individual grantees, which have created their own exhibitions and have used the ALP installation to garner attention and funding for their work. The exhibit "was really impactful," said Samantha Olson from the Colorado Education Initiative:

It shifted our mindset around how to bring youth voice and credibility to the work. ... Instead of recreating our own [exhibit], we realized that there was value in having people engage in what already existed and reflect on their own work relative to that. ... A funder hasn't provided us with that kind of resource before.

- Use an iterative and phased approach to expand a learning community and broader network. ALP has developed a number of strategies for expanding its network of relationships and influence. First, through individualized coaching, it has connected grantees with one another and with resources in the field. Second, the project has strategically expanded its learning community in phases, by providing microgrants to innovators in assessment, inviting field leaders to join convenings as participants, and co-locating its conferences with other aligned networks' meetings. ALP also intentionally invites local like-minded educators

and organizations to join the learning community when it holds a convening in their area. For example, when one convening was located in Santa Fe, New Mexico, ALP invited the director of a local organization working to transform that state's schools; this organization is now one of the most well-known ALP grantees in the assessment for learning field.

- Reframe challenges into learning opportunities for improvement. While the project and its grantees have experienced numerous successes, the path forward has not been without challenges and setbacks. For example, the online hub was originally a core piece of the ALP model, intended to provide a platform for engagement and learning for grantees between in-person convenings. However, the hub was underutilized and grantees described it as having limited usefulness for their work. Rather than characterize this unexpected outcome as a challenge, however, the ALP leadership team chose to see it as a valuable learning opportunity about what motivates people to connect with and learn from each other, and to course-correct to provide more face-to-face learning opportunities for grantees. Similarly, ALP found that grantees did not take advantage of its initial network of field experts and TA providers, turning instead to one another for thought partnership and support.

Conclusion

The evaluation of the Assessment for Learning Project suggests that as grantmakers seek to make progress toward solving complex social problems, there is an opportunity to reconsider the traditional, highly structured initiative focused on predetermined indicators of success that leave little room for innovation and improvement. Seeking to avoid the obstacles and pitfalls that often inhibit learning in philanthropic initiatives, ALP tested a number of hypotheses about the value of a field-facing learning agenda, grantmaking that leads with learning, and collective leadership. While each of these design elements proved important for

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the development of the ALP learning community, the leadership team also engaged in a continuous reflection and learning cycle, supported by formative evaluation data, that led to the evolution of the design elements. A powerful outcome of this process was that the project ultimately reduced its focus on traditional forms of “expertise,” while amplifying the focus on providing space for grantee relationships, leadership, and co-design.

Beyond the specifics of the initiative, ALP is a promising model for how the philanthropic field can partner with grantees in a way that fully acknowledges that finding solutions to our most intractable social problems will require experimentation, accepting uncertainty, and deep, reflective learning.

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