



PERRIN FAMILY
FOUNDATION



Strengthening a Nascent Field:

Lessons from the Building Leadership

and Organizing Capacity Initiative



Introduction

Over the past five years, the need for – and power of – young people’s leadership and action in the civic sphere has been palpable. Whether challenging the criminalization of youth of color in schools and communities, advancing the rights of immigrant and undocumented youth and families, or mobilizing to challenge current gun policies, young people have disrupted the status quo, advanced a bold vision for equity and justice, and held those with governing power, from city councils and school boards to the halls of Congress, accountable in order to change unjust laws and policies.

Philanthropy must be held to account as well. Young people have long been the “beneficiaries” of charitable largesse. But providing philanthropic support to “help” young people without addressing underlying policies and systems is tantamount to using one’s fingers to plug the holes of a dam.

If we are to realize the vision for justice that young people are boldly advancing, philanthropy must invest in building young people’s power to bring about the changes they are calling for.

In 2012, the Perrin Family Foundation (PFF) shifted its mission and strategy to focus on supporting youth-led social change. *A New Role for Connecticut Youth: Leaders of Social Change*, a field scan which PFF published in 2013, found that youth organizing in Connecticut was a nascent field and documented numerous obstacles facing youth led social change groups, including the historic underinvestment in youth and community organizing and leadership of

people of color in Connecticut. The scan also made clear that our desire to support youth-led social change in Connecticut would require a commitment to more than just a grant strategy.

Over the past six years, we have begun to see tangible shifts in our state’s social change landscape. The number of youth organizing groups across the state is growing, and they are securing local and statewide campaign victories. Youth organizing groups are networked and connected to each other and collaborating across issue areas. Local and statewide coalitions of youth groups are emerging in order to develop and advance shared agendas. Racial justice has become more central in the analysis of groups working for social change, and the philanthropic support for youth and community organizing work across Connecticut is slowly beginning to grow.

This brief examines the role of the Perrin Family Foundation’s Building Leadership and Organizing Capacity (BLOC) initiative on the youth organizing landscape in Connecticut. Drawing from archival documents associated with the BLOC initiative, from documents and reports from participating organizations, and from an evaluation of BLOC conducted by an external researcher, this brief explores the following questions:

1. How did the BLOC initiative impact the participating organizations and the broader field?
2. What aspects of the BLOC initiative’s design and practices contributed most significantly to its success?
3. What lessons and recommendations can be drawn from the BLOC initiative that would be relevant to the broader philanthropic sector’s efforts to invest effectively in organizing, capacity building, and movement building?

Building Leadership And Organizing Capacity: An Overview

PFF’s Building Leadership and Organizing Capacity (BLOC) is a multiyear grantmaking and capacity building initiative that responds to field-wide challenges identified in our 2013 scan.

BLOC represented a significant departure from PFF’s prior grantmaking. It was our first foray into capacity building, our first commitment to multiyear grants, and the largest financial investment we had made in a particular strategy. From the outset, PFF viewed BLOC as *more than just a grantmaking program*. BLOC aimed to strengthen the capacity of individual organizations while at the same time nurturing their potential to coalesce as an interconnected field with a shared vision and access to the philanthropic resources necessary for sustaining it. As PFF embarked on the BLOC Initiative, we found ourselves faced with formidable questions.

How do we responsibly nurture a nascent field? How do we honor the existing work that is happening while also encouraging and supporting groups to explore shifts in structure, culture and strategy that may be necessary to achieve their social change goals? How do we work in partnership with groups to tackle the obstacles and challenges facing the field that are structural and beyond the control of any individual group to change? How do we increase the pool of resources available to support youth organizing across the state?

In the early planning of the initiative, PFF engaged a BLOC Advisory Team, comprised of local experts in the fields of community organizing and youth leadership development, to help ensure that the design of the initiative was consistent with its broader field building goals.

BLOC PARTNERS: The Organizations

Organization	Constituency	Structure	Geographic Focus	Issue Focus
Connecticut Students for a Dream	Undocumented and immigrant youth in high school and college	Youth-led; Fiscally sponsored	Statewide	Immigrant Rights and Education
Hearing Youth Voices	Black and Latinx youth of high school age	Shared youth-adult leadership; Fiscally sponsored	New London	Education and Racial Justice
SAVE: Youth Coalition for Justice (YC4J)	Black and Latinx youth in alternative schools or involved in the justice system	Youth program within adult organization; 501c(3) status	Norwalk	Juvenile Justice
Hartford Food System: Grow Hartford	Black and Latinx youth of high school age	Youth program within within adult-led organization; 501c(3) status	Hartford	Food Justice

Organizations spanned geography, issue area, organizational structure and lifespan.

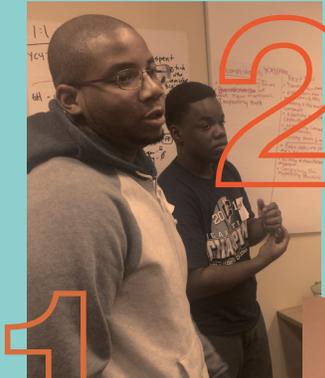
BLOC Partner Organizations

For the first BLOC cohort, which took place between 2013-2016, only organizations that were already funded through PFF’s youth-led social change grant portfolio were invited to apply. Those applying had to attend an information session, complete a statement of interest form, and organizational representatives, including youth, staff, and board members, participated in an interview. The organizations selected to participate in BLOC spanned geography, issue area, organizational lifespan and structure. While

the selected groups self-identified as social change organizations, they also communicated a candid self-awareness about their limitations and ways in which they wanted to grow and deepen their social change work. Some organizations had been operating for more than 30 years, and were trying to figure out how to shift their youth leadership work into youth organizing work; others were fiscally sponsored projects that did not yet have paid full time staff but were explicit that organizing was core, not corollary, to their mission.

BLOC BASICS: The Initiative At-A-Glance

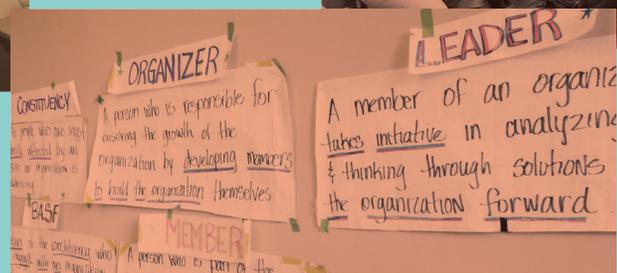
GOALS



Build the power of youth organizing groups to implement effective youth-led campaigns that lead to concrete and lasting change around the root causes of injustice and inequity in communities.



Increase the meaningful inclusion of youth in leadership or decision-making roles in their organizations.



Build collaborative relationships and partnerships with others who are similarly committed to building a movement for youth-led social change in Connecticut.

Cohort Outcomes

Over the course of the initiative, BLOC expected to see partner organizations make progress towards the following outcomes:

- Evidence of institutional buy in, commitment and support of youth organizing.
- Implementation of a program model that deepens youth leadership over a sustained period of time
- Development of an intentional base-building strategy and a defined membership base to which the leadership is accountable.
- Process for consistently engaging in research and power analysis.
- Development and launch of a campaign.

BLOC partner organizations received a general operating grant

BLOC Member Teams

Each BLOC partner organization was asked to identify an intergenerational team of up to five members that would be responsible for participation in the initiative. Because of the range of organizational structures and staffing models, BLOC did not prescribe who should attend, but rather required that each team have at least two youth members and a staff or adult representative with enough autonomy in their role to implement all that was learned from BLOC trainings and retreats. While it was understood that the

composition of the BLOC team might shift over the course of the three years there was, on the whole, a remarkable consistency of participation, with more than eighty percent of individual BLOC team members participating in at least two years or more of the initiative. Over the course of the initiative, BLOC engaged a total of 44 youth and staff leaders. 75% of the participants were people of color, and approximately 60% of the participants were youth and young adults age of 24 or younger.

Program Components

Cohort Meetings and Retreats: BLOC teams participated in monthly cohort workshops. During the first half of the initiative, the cohort meetings were training focused, but later shifted to focus on coaching, troubleshooting, and strategizing. BLOC teams also participated in annual retreats.

Organizational Self-Assessment: All BLOC partners engaged in an organizational self-assessment process. The assessments helped shape cohort-wide trainings and served as the basis for annual workplans completed by BLOC partners. They also helped ensure that organizational development needs—beyond organizing and leadership development—were identified and addressed.

Individualized Support and Follow Up: BLOC teams received technical assistance and coaching support between cohort meetings provided by the BLOC Facilitation Team.

Study Visits and Access to National Trainings: Each year of the initiative, BLOC teams conducted a study visit with an established youth organizing group on the East Coast and were supported to participate in national youth organizing trainings and conferences.

Reflection and Evaluation: Each year, BLOC partners reflected on progress towards their work plan objectives. BLOC partners were also asked to provide ongoing feedback to improve and strengthen the initiative as a whole.

Resources Invested

\$415,000	in operating grants to BLOC partner organizations
\$35,000	in supplemental minigrants to BLOC partner organizations (technical assistance, training, study visits)
\$250,000	in capacity building program supports (consultants, meetings, retreats)
\$700,000	TOTAL INVESTMENT over the three year initiative

and capacity building support over a three-year period.

Mapping BLOC'S Impact

After the first BLOC cohort came to a close, PFF engaged Dr. Dana Wright, an expert in education and youth action research, to conduct a participatory evaluation of the BLOC initiative. Her report, “Strategies to Support Youth Organizing and Movement Building,” concluded that BLOC not only had a significant impact on the organizational, leadership development, and organizing capacity of BLOC partner organizations, but enabled a “movement building orientation” to take hold and flourish within – and ultimately beyond— the BLOC cohort¹. BLOC’s most salient impacts on the participating organizations and the broader field are outlined below.

1 Shared Frame for Youth Organizing

When BLOC began, partner organizations self-identified as “social change” groups, but there was not a shared language, lens and understanding about what youth organizing actually entailed. While BLOC did not prescribe a particular model of organizing, it did ask organizations to reflect on and address how their organization’s culture and structure supported essentials of youth organizing: base building, ongoing leadership development, political education, and issue-focused campaign work.

For some BLOC partners whose prior work was anchored in youth leadership development, this meant recognizing that politically conscious programmatic work with young people was a component of, but not synonymous with, youth organizing. As one partner noted:

We needed to examine...how deep into organizing we wanted to be, what our goals were... a lot of those things were catalyzed by being around groups who were doing organizing work—not program work.”

“Making that shift into organizing work from program work [had] always been bubbling. But, what does it really mean, how do we really do it?”

For another group, this meant grappling with how their concerted focus on “policy change” was undercutting their commitment to broad and deep development of new youth leaders. Over time, BLOC groups coalesced around a shared framework, making youth organizing a recognizable and clearly defined field. When asked about BLOC’s impact on the field, one member of the BLOC Facilitation Team reflected:

It cannot be overstated. Before, there was no space being held for youth organizing in the state prior to BLOC. Now, as a result of BLOC, you’ve got strong youth organizing groups, you’ve got other funders recognizing and prioritizing youth leadership in their organizing funding, and you’ve got traditionally adult led organizations trying to figure out how to incorporate youth organizing in their strategies.

1. Wright, D.E. (2018). *Strategies to Support Youth Organizing and Movement Building*. New Haven, CT: The Perrin Foundation. Findings and quotes highlighted throughout this brief are excerpted from Wright’s report as well as grant progress reports submitted by grantee partners to the Perrin Family Foundation.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

YOUTH IN DECISION-MAKING ROLES

INCREASED STAFF & RESOURCES



SHARED FRAME FOR YOUTH ORGANIZING

SHIFTS IN PROGRAM MODEL & STRUCTURE



FIELD CAPACITY

LEADERSHIP PIPELINE FOR YOUTH OF COLOR

EMERGING COALITIONS

MOVEMENT MINDSET

CORE COMPETENCIES FOR YOUTH ORGANIZING

ORGANIZING CAPACITY



SUCCESSFUL CAMPAIGNS



2 Enhanced Organizational Capacity and Stability

Although BLOC was envisioned as an initiative to build organizing capacity, it could not do so until it addressed key areas of partners' organizational capacity.

“BLOC’s financial support allowed us to be at capacity to have year-round staff positions.”

BLOC organizations tapped into technical assistance and coaching to aid in everything from strategic planning to human resources support, including drafting staffing plans, job descriptions, and hiring protocol.

The financial resources provided through BLOC grants enabled organizations to build out staffing infrastructure and expand their resource base.

For staff members at BLOC organizations, many of whom were young in their organizing careers and new to their organizations, BLOC was a space that supported their professional development and created a community that could help sustain their commitment to working in the organizing field.

For nascent groups, who had no other philanthropic support at the start of the initiative, the multiyear BLOC grant enabled them to leverage support from other funders. As one partner noted, “we have been able to mention the participation in BLOC as a way to demonstrate long-term sustainability of our organization in other grant applications.”

Before BLOC

Two BLOC partners had budgets < \$50,000.

No BLOC partners engaged youth year-round.

No BLOC partners had dedicated, paid full time organizing staff.

BLOC partners did not have relationships with each other or engage in work together.

One BLOC partner was actively engaged in an organizing campaign.

After BLOC

These same BLOC partners more than tripled their organizational budgets.

All BLOC partners engaged young people year-round.

All BLOC partners had at least one dedicated, paid organizing staff person.

BLOC partners supported each other at more than 15 action, events, workshops, and worked together to launch a new coalition, the Black and Brown Student Union.

Three BLOC partners launched organizing campaigns and experienced at least one organizing victory.

“BLOC’s financial support allowed us to be at capacity to have year-round staff positions.”

3 Shifts in Program Model and Structure

All four BLOC partner organizations changed aspects of their program model, structure and content to deepen young people's critical consciousness and more effectively cultivate youth leadership.

BLOC partners understood that youth-led social change is a long term process that requires sustained engagement of young people, but at the start of the initiative, none of the organizations had programs that engaged young people over the course of a full year, much less over a multiyear period. During BLOC cohort meetings and retreats, exercises that required groups to map their leadership development pipeline, combined with study visits to other organizations, sparked moments of organizational reflection and clarity that translated into concrete changes in program models, structures and curriculum.

“We realized that our leadership pipeline lacked clarity and intentionality.”

Moments of critical self-awareness led groups to make significant and concrete changes in their program design. One group explained their shift: “we were able to establish a tiered system where if we could keep youth for more than a year, then they have the opportunity to mentor new youth coming into the core group.”

“In the afterschool model, there was significant focus on analysis, doing research and telling our stories - but we felt locked into a closed loop. BLOC has enabled [us] to break out of that closed loop.”

Groups also shifted their program content and curriculum. One group described how the exposure to political education throughout BLOC shifted the workshops they conducted with young people from a focus on behavioral choices to a focus on analyzing systems and structures:

The workshops over the last year switched from: What is health? How do I cook for myself? This year we talked about food sovereignty, land issues, labor. Who has access to food and why? So it's political education more than nutrition education.

4 Heightened Youth Decision-Making Roles Within Organizations

BLOC partners entered the cohort with varying degrees of youth engagement in organizational decisionmaking outside of programming and campaigns. As a result of BLOC, partner organizations developed structures that clarified and formalized youth decision-making roles throughout their organizations. For many groups, these shifts were prompted by study visits to other, more

“Our organization’s leadership structure has changed completely. . . . We will now be able to engage more youth and leaders in decision-making and build ownership among members. This change in structure will also serve as a way to safeguard the long-term sustainability of the organization.”

established youth organizing groups. Importantly, BLOC partner organizations perceived this shift in their practice as an important step in advancing their organizations’ long-term viability. Engaging

young people in key aspects of organizational operations and decisionmaking was instrumental both in young people’s leadership development and in cultivating a leadership base that could sustain the organization’s future work. As one group explained:

Prior to BLOC we didn’t have any systems in place for when people messed up or when we needed to make decisions. We were inspired to finally sit down and create something that would work for us. Because we strive to be non-hierarchical with a focus on youth leading the organization it was important that structures were put in place that allowed us to make decisions as a big group. If we didn’t have that in place then we might refer to those with more privilege and power to make decisions. . . this system makes it possible for our youth to be in better leadership positions. It involves them in the planning of internal work that makes the organization run.

Leadership Pipelines for Youth of Color



While BLOC’s design emphasized organizational capacity, BLOC’s impact on its individual participants was also significant. BLOC created a space for young leaders of color to see themselves in organizing work and to see the future of organizing in themselves. Seen in this light, BLOC’s impact extended beyond supporting organizations to develop their own internal leadership ladders, it also played a critical role in building a leadership pipeline for organizers of color in our state.

“It was an amazing experience. It was life changing...it’s shifted everything in me. It’s hard to pinpoint, ‘Yeah I learned this,’ when at the end of the day it was an internal change – like, ‘I realize this is what I want to do with my life.’”

5 Core Competencies for Youth Organizing

BLOC partners gained tools and skills that allowed them to understand the fundamentals of youth organizing, including growing a membership base, identifying issues, applying a power analysis and developing organizing campaigns. While each of the partner organizations began at various levels of organizing experience and organizational capacities to undertake organizing work, all BLOC organizations moved forward from their baseline self-assessment to arrive at an organization with stronger capacities to engage in organizing efforts.

“Being in BLOC, and actually learning what organizing versus activism is, and building those skills, I’ve grown from a 13-year old shy girl in the corner, to a trainer.”

One of the most frequently cited areas of growth for organizations was the role of conducting “one-on-ones” in their base building efforts. In organizing, one-on-ones are relationship-building conversations that happen between organizers and prospective leaders or members. One-on-ones help to illuminate areas of self-interest and potential issues people may want to organize around, and help expand an organizations’ membership base.

“Youth leaders are now directly communicating with targets instead of via staff.”

For many youth organizations, which are accustomed to recruiting youth to be “program” participants, grasping one-on-ones is a critical step in expanding the potential scale, reach, and impact to a constituency broader than just those young people “enrolled” in a program.

One organization described how learning about one-on-ones in BLOC resulted in new organizational practices and staff expectations that not only increased their base, but also built greater momentum and traction for their campaign:

As we were discussing what next steps to take in regards to the campaign, our BLOC Team members made it clear that 1-1 relational meetings needed to happen in order for us to be successful. Prioritizing 1-1s [was] significant because we were able to bring into the organization and campaign coalition partners, get commitment from specific people [and] legislators on our campaign, and outreach to more young people...

BLOC partners also noted that their analysis of power – both how it showed up in the dynamics of their everyday work and as it related to campaign strategy development – grew more nuanced and sophisticated as a result of BLOC, thereby enabling organizations to pursue and achieve their campaign goals with greater success. Comparing a meeting with district officials to one that occurred prior to BLOC, one group reflected:

We became more politically engaged and better able to deal with school lunch politics as a result of BLOC.... more aware and conversant with adultism. We came into the meeting having written an agenda, having identified a facilitator, timekeeper, and notetakers. We went into the meeting from an empowered perspective, where we had the youth lay out what we wanted to achieve and confronted power dynamics by calling out adultism in the room.... Last year we met with one of the [school district] directors and we just felt tokenized and patronized. This time around, with a different approach, we were able to leave feeling empowered.

One BLOC partner, who already had a campaign underway when they joined BLOC, commented:

[Our] involvement in BLOC this past year allowed the organization to grow a deeper understanding and analysis of campaign work.... BLOC sessions gave a more technical overview of what it takes to lead and win successful campaigns and how to engage these stakeholders in different scenarios and group power analysis. We realized that we are capable of winning and creating change with this deeper analysis in our campaign work.

“We collectively realized the importance of having ‘strategy meetings’ that brings together all stakeholders of a campaign.”

6 Successful Campaigns

The skills and support afforded by BLOC enabled groups to develop and execute successful organizing campaigns. At the start of BLOC, only one organization had ever run an organizing campaign. By the end of BLOC, three of the four partner organizations had launched a campaign, and all three of those groups had secured a campaign win in the year after the first BLOC cohort came to an end.

7 Movement Mindset

In *Strategies to Support Youth Organizing and Movement Building*, Wright concluded that BLOC enabled a “movement building orientation” to take hold and flourish among groups, evidenced by “the meaningful and enduring relationships and alliances that BLOC member organizations have built with each other; their eagerness to engage in collective visioning and shared strategizing with one another; and their commitment to sustained, collaborative work together both during and beyond the three years of the BLOC initiative.”²

BLOC partners developed enduring relationships with each other that crossed geographic boundaries and an intersectional analysis that wove together issues areas that are often addressed in silos. The result was not only stronger organizations, but a stronger, more interconnected field of youth organizations that approach their work with a commitment to movement building that centers a racial justice analysis.

2. Wright, D.E. (2018).

CT Students for a Dream

#AffordToDream Campaign

In April 2018, after a five-year campaign, Connecticut Students for a Dream (C4D) secured the passage of statewide legislation that equalizes access to institutional aid at public colleges and universities in Connecticut, regardless of immigration status. Launched in 2013, the #AffordToDream campaign grew out of the challenges C4D members frequently faced in pursuing higher education: the inability to pay tuition. Institutional aid at the state's public colleges and universities is funded by tuition revenue; undocumented students were paying into those funds, but couldn't access the aid. The #AffordToDream campaign sought to change that. Across the course of the campaign, C4D submitted hundreds of public testimonies, gathered thousands of signatures on petitions, secured statements of support from more than 75 organizations across the state, and organized hundreds of constituents to apply pressure



through events and actions in local districts and at the state capitol. When the new law goes into effect in the spring of 2020, thousands of students across the state of Connecticut – who previously would not have had financial support for college – will now have access to resources to support their pursuit of higher education.

Hearing Youth Voices

We Want to Graduate Campaign

In the fall of 2015, Hearing Youth Voices (HYV) won its We Want to Graduate campaign by successfully changing the New London Board of Education's attendance policy. Youth leaders at HYV had been researching the issue of absence-based credit loss since 2013. Through community-based outreach and research, they found that students in New London high schools were not graduating on time, not as a result of failed classes, but because absences were causing credit loss. 87% of the students that participated in their survey reported that credit loss had negatively impacted their desire to go to school. Surveys also revealed that students of color were far less likely than their white peers to be warned of their credit loss or to be given the opportunity to recover credits. Over the course of their two year campaign, students developed and won their central demand: a revised attendance policy that would create a warning system so that students were informed before losing credit due to absences and an opportunity to appeal



the loss of credit in the same semester it was lost. In addition to ultimately winning the new attendance policy, the campaign process also forced the local Board of Education to reinstate its long-defunct "policy committee," and HYV successfully advocated that new committee structure include student and parent representation.

Grow Hartford Youth Program

10 Slices of Justice Campaign

Launched in the spring of 2016, the 10 Slices of Justice Campaign is a 10-point platform outlining changes that Hartford youth are fighting for order to improve the quality of food served to Hartford public school students. The campaign platform grew out of community-based research, one-on-ones with young people, and community planning meetings. Each "slice" represents an actionable change that collectively will lead to the creation of a just school food system. More than 84% of Hartford students qualify for free or reduced price school lunch, but through surveys, youth organizers learned that many students go the entire school day without eating. After publicizing their campaign goals, testifying before the local board of education, and meeting with school and district officials, youth experienced wins on three of their 10 Slices. Organizers increased youth voice within the district by winning a commitment from the



district to incorporate student surveys about food options on a regular basis (Slice 10); the district also agreed to increase access to information about food served by posting nutrition labels (slice 5); and the district committed to serving hot breakfast at all Hartford high schools (slice 8).

BLOC partners came to see each other as resources, supports, and accountability partners.

Prior to BLOC, groups had little to no connection with other regional or national youth organizing groups or networks. PFF provided supplemental resources to BLOC partners enabling them to attend national organizing trainings, (such as those offered by School of Unity and Liberation, Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity, the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond, and FCYO’s Youth Power conference). In addition, BLOC partners participated in study visits with youth organizing groups on the East Coast and, in the final year of the initiative, engaged in deeper peer-mentor learning relationships with well established youth organizing groups outside Connecticut. This not only deepened BLOC partners’ learning, but expanded their relationships, networks and broadened the scope of what’s possible to accomplish through youth organizing.

Over time, BLOC partners came to see themselves not as “participants” in a foundation-led initiative, but as their own collective, working towards building a movement that centers the leadership of black and brown youth across the state. The young organizers coming out of BLOC, one of the BLOC Facilitators noted, “are actually driving the racial justice analysis that most adult organizing groups have ignored and are now having to account for.”

In reflecting on the initiative, many BLOC participants underscored that a critical part of the role BLOC played was creating a space for groups to “vision” together:

I need to see what we’re fighting for because if I don’t see how, as a Black person, my liberation is tied to someone who is Latinx and vice versa, or someone who is LGBTQ, or even a white ally, then I won’t understand that our liberation is bound together and so our struggle for a more just society must be bound together. Visioning is a necessary part of the process.

The collaborative visioning and strategizing in BLOC trainings and retreats was applied and extended both within and beyond the cohort environment. BLOC partner organizations engaged in work together both during – and after – the three-year initiative. When BLOC began, partner organizations did not have preexisting relationships with each other. Over the course of the BLOC initiative, groups shared documentation of more than fifteen instances where they supported one another’s efforts – conducting workshops for each other and traveling hours across the state to attend each other’s events and actions. Moreover, staff at BLOC partner organizations continued to meet with each other independently on nearly a monthly basis even after the BLOC initiative and PFF-convened cohort meetings had ended.

“As part of our process of liberation, we need visioning. We need that vision.”

“It clicked for us that if we are really building a movement then it is our relationships that matter most.”

That groups continued meeting monthly even after the end of the initiative speaks to the depth of the relationships formed, to the authentic ownership that BLOC partners felt over the cohort space, and to the sense of investment and responsibility they hold for building youth-centered collective power across Connecticut.

8 Emerging Coalitions

The deep connections groups built with each other during and through BLOC have led to emerging local and statewide coalitions anchored by, but not limited to, BLOC partner organizations.

As a result of what began as local base building work, one BLOC partner organization has taken on a lead role in fostering an emerging network of youth-serving organizations in their city called the Youth Action Affinity Squad. The group initially coalesced to plan a conference, and they now are exploring how to formalize some of their work together. As a BLOC participant leading that work explained,

We have different missions and different arenas that we work in, but what would it really look like to create some shared goals and visions, and show up for each other... and just create more visibility, not just on [our organization's] issues but on youth as a priority in the city of Hartford.

During the retreats in the final year of BLOC, partner organizations began working together to create a Black and Brown Student Union, a statewide coalition of youth organizing groups committed to advancing racial justice. One of the BLOC cohort participants, a young adult at the time BLOC launched, received a Youth Activism Fellowship from the Open Society Foundation, and has been working with BLOC alumni organizations and other youth groups to launch that coalition. Over the past year, the Black and Brown Student Union initiated that work by hosting several workshops. Referencing that work, one of the BLOC Facilitators observed,

Just to underscore, underscore, underscore, because it should not be a footnote, is the fact that there was a first-ever collaborative partnership training of youth-led organizations—of three or four different organizations from around the state—co-facilitated by young people. That's a major shift in the landscape.



Design Choices Matter

While the menu of BLOC “program components” includes approaches commonly found and utilized in capacity building programs, intentional design choices made throughout the initiative made a critical difference in BLOC’s success.

1 Prioritizing Field-Informed Design

Just as listening to and learning from practitioners was a central component of the field scan that led to the creation of BLOC, the intentional engagement of seasoned field

leaders informed the design of the initiative itself. In the early planning stages, PFF engaged and compensated a BLOC Advisory Team, composed of local experts in the field of community organizing and youth leadership development to help think through BLOC’s design, structure and outcomes. Drawing from their own experience as practitioners in the field, the Advisory Team was asked to identify what did – and did not – work about the organizing training and foundation capacity building initiatives that they had participated in. Their candid feedback,

Building a Local Consulting Team of People of Color



The BLOC Facilitation Team, Chiedza Rodriguez, Caprice Taylor-Mendez and Lorenzo Jones, brought decades of experience in youth leadership, youth action research, and community organizing. As a team, they planned and facilitated cohort meetings and retreats and provided coaching.

Because facilitators had deep local roots, they were able to help groups understand the local historical and political dynamics and relationships of power. It also meant that BLOC facilitators were literally in the communities of the groups they were supporting, helping to extend the experience and relationships of BLOC beyond the walls of the

foundation-structured space.

In Connecticut, where investment in social justice work has been scant, and investment in leadership of color in social change spaces has been even more limited, the composition of the Facilitation Team also allowed those participating in BLOC – particularly young people of color – to see themselves as part of Connecticut’s organizing legacy and future in a clear way.

“To see a really strong, powerful woman—a kind woman, empowering, who doesn’t bring people down, only builds you up—out there in front, it’s great. People walking in from outside of the community, they may be great and they try to help, but unless you’ve really been there, you can’t really get it. And so when you have people of color coming in who are real and authentic and are really trying to help—it was an amazing space.”

combined with PFF's own intentional learning and exploration of best practices and approaches in capacity building, helped to ensure that BLOC's design was intentionally structured to challenge, disrupt, and depart from the "philanthropic norms" that were identified as obstacles in the field scan.

Equally important, the BLOC Advisory Team, which evolved into the core Facilitation Team over the course of the initiative, held a commitment to advancing social justice work in Connecticut that both preceded and extended beyond their engagement as PFF consultants. This played a central role in building a culture and environment that nurtured and reinforced a movement building orientation among BLOC partner organizations, and pushed PFF to deepen and sharpen its own lens around how philanthropy can engage in a way that is conducive to movement building.

2 Providing Multiyear Support

Recognizing that both organizational and community change takes time and requires sustained investment, BLOC took place over the span of three years. The multiyear support was significant in helping organizations prioritize the time to engage in and focus on the intensive work required by BLOC, and it also helped organizations demonstrate stability and leverage other resources. Often, multiyear support decreases in steps over a specified time period. Because there were a number of nascent and emerging organizations, some of whom had never received a grant, BLOC took the opposite approach – it stepped up support over time, and has continued to provide multiyear grants to BLOC alumni organizations after the BLOC initiative ended.

The multiyear support also afforded groups the space and time required to learn, experiment, engage in honest reflection, and course correct.

3 Navigating Responsible Exits

Not all of the organizations invited into the initial cohort completed the initiative. Over the course of the three years, two of the initial five organizations were released from the cohort, and a new organization was brought on in the second year. One organization was released from the BLOC cohort after the first year because significant fiscal challenges resulted in the loss of core staff and a lack of internal capacity necessary to fully participate in BLOC. After they exited, they received a general operating grant to focus on board development and strategic planning, which ultimately led to an executive transition, a stabilization of financial resources and a reassessment of the role of youth organizing relative to their mission. The other organization exited the cohort after the second year because they concluded that engaging in direct-action organizing methodology wasn't an approach that best aligned with their mission, structure, and model. They received an exit transition grant so they were not left with a significant unplanned gap in their budget.

The diverse profile of organizations helped to reinforce a culture of reciprocal learning.

Throughout the BLOC initiative, PFF and the Facilitation Team emphasized that we wanted partner organizations to be honest, candid, and vulnerable about the challenges they were facing. Our commitment to providing continued support even after the organizations exited the cohort reinforced that their honesty about learning, challenges, and evolving priorities would not be “punished” with loss of resources. In order to model transparency and honor group norms and dynamics, PFF also directly acknowledged and addressed with remaining BLOC partners why organizations exited.

4

Spanning Organizational Life Stages

BLOC partner organizations were in different stages of their organizational life cycle and varied in organizational structures. These were established nonprofit organizations and non-incorporated volunteer-led efforts. Some organizations had existed for decades; others were less than two years old. While this made the design and execution of BLOC significantly more challenging from a design perspective, it was also a critical factor in the initiative’s success. No one organization was the luminary or authority on all things, and each group came to recognize its own strengths and areas of growth. This also helped create an equalizing dynamic that enabled groups to understand their unique roles and contributions and to see each other as assets rather than competitors. In written reports, BLOC partners consistently offered unsolicited examples of how their own practice had been strengthened and improved by what they had learned from other

Field Building Requires Organizing Funders Too

Prior to BLOC, PFF was the only foundation in CT explicitly supporting youth organizing work in CT. In 2018, two years after the first BLOC cohort concluded, there were at least nine local, statewide, and regional foundations co-investing in youth organizing groups.

Throughout the initiative, PFF played a proactive role in expanding resources for the field by introducing BLOC partners to funding colleagues, promoting the benefits and impacts of youth organizing on youth development and community change outcomes, and launching a local funder network called Supporting Organizing Work Connecticut (SOW-CT) to explore shared strategies for strengthening organizing infrastructure. During BLOC, all four cohort partners were able to secure at least one additional grant from another foundation in support of their organizing work. While this marks significant progress, there is a long way to go towards ensuring the youth organizing field has the resources necessary to sustain and grow its impact.

In Connecticut, the youth organizing field was not underdeveloped because youth and community leaders were unaware of its value or disinterested in the approach. The field was “nascent” because foundations had not prioritized investing in it.

Disrupting Silos of Geography and Issue Area

organizations. As one group explained, “because of the diversity of the BLOC cohort members, we were able to be exposed to a variety of different organizational models and issue-specific organizing tactics. With this greater context, our team was able to see our organization, and our role in the greater organizing landscape of the state, more clearly.”

5 Holding Intergenerational Space

BLOC’s commitment to holding a shared learning space for youth and staff added layers of complexity to the implementation of the initiative. Cohort meetings had to occur at times that enabled and maximized young people’s participation, and the cohort had real-time, live practice unpacking and addressing the ways in which adultism and power dynamics appear in multigenerational settings. Holding intergenerational space presented challenges. In the middle of one retreat, for example, youth held an accountability action targeting adult staff – including those at PFF – for making a change to the agenda without including them. At times during BLOC, PFF also received pushback from adult staff desiring a deeper dive and increased rigor around certain content areas to sharpen their own skills, analysis and strategic capacity. Ultimately, however, the commitment to holding an intergenerational learning space was an essential ingredient in modeling and actualizing youth leadership pipelines. It also played a key role in building a culture of accountability within BLOC partner organizations, across the cohort as a whole, and among PFF and our BLOC partners.



BLOC was the first – and only – organizing capacity initiative in Connecticut to ever bring organizations together across geography and issue area. The wide range of issue areas that groups were focused on – from food justice to immigrant rights to education and criminal justice – meant that BLOC became a silo-shattering space in which organizations stretched their own understanding and analysis of how issues intersect and overlap. This played a critical role in cultivating the “movement mindset” of BLOC partners, and fostered a shared analysis that racial justice was central in all groups’ respective efforts.

At one point during the initiative, one of the planned BLOC retreats coincided with an action that had been planned by one of the groups. The BLOC facilitation team incorporated participation in the action in the retreat agenda, and the hands-on, lived experience of joint participation in a rally helped folks move beyond making analytical connections between issue areas to feeling what it was like to be part of a community that honored shared struggles.

“Going to the rally it clicked more for a lot of people that – this might not be my struggle, but it’s someone’s struggle, and I’m gonna help them fight it. We are movement building, and that means fighting each other’s fights. And seeing exactly how it’s all one fight. Later we then invited BLOC groups to our rally, and [they] participated, helping sow the seeds of intersectionality and cross-issue connection.”

6 Creating a Learning and Accountability Community

Learning involves gaining new concepts and skills. Accountability requires building deep relationships. BLOC created a community that enabled both. The cohort approach emphasized creating room for each organization to share its expertise and learn from others while building trust, respect, and a sense of belonging to a broader youth-led social change movement in Connecticut.

“BLOC provided a network of colleagues with which to grapple with hard questions about the nuts and bolts of organizing as well as the administrative challenges of non-profit management.”

The collective space pushed groups to become stronger and sharper. As one participant shared:

One of the things that we would talk about on a regular basis when [staff participating in BLOC] would get back is how hard they were being pushed to be better. And that even if we believed that we had made some good progress, each time there was an interaction there was not only recognition of progress made, but also equal recognition of how much further there was to go to get better.

What is perhaps most important about BLOC’s cohort-based approach, however, is that the BLOC Facilitation Team prioritized relationship building and shared accountability as equally important to learning or skill-based cohort “content.” Over time, BLOC partners’ increased willingness to be vulnerable and transparent about their struggles and challenges with each other meant they came to see each other as resources rather than competition, a compelling counter-point to the prevailing “isolation” and “turf” dynamics so frequently cited as an obstacle when PFF conducted its field scan.

As a result, the cohort model not only strengthened each organization’s own learning, but it cultivated a sense of commitment and accountability to each other and a shared sense of responsibility for growing a broader movement for change across the state. As one participant noted:

When you’re in the space where you’re getting a lot of training and you’re able to talk about how you’re applying the trainings in your campaigns and you’re able to offer advice to one another, I think that set up allows you to be vulnerable on your end, to be able to share that, but it also allows you to feel more connected to other people’s campaigns.

The cohort space inspired groups to work harder and become better – not to “outperform” other groups, but to do justice to their collective efforts.

Lessons Learned

The design and implementation of BLOC was not only a fruitful source of learning for PFF's organizational partners, it was also a critical reflection and learning space for us. Below, we outline several key lessons learned that would enhance philanthropic efforts to meaningfully invest in organizing, capacity building, leadership development, and field building.

1 Take the long view. Engaging in this work as a responsible and accountable grantmaker requires genuine flexibility and a willingness to consistently revisit and recalibrate our expectations around activities, outcomes, and the timeframe in which they will occur. While the initial capacity building plan called for jumping into organizing skill building within the first year of the initiative, the reality is that almost the entire first year of BLOC was spent doing organizational self-assessments, exploring aspects of basic organizational development, and developing a shared understanding language and frame around organizing. If we want deep, lasting shifts in organizational structure and culture, we must meet organizations where they are, not where we think they ought to be. We realized we could not get to organizing without strong organizations, and we recognized that if organizations lacked deep capacity around leadership development, then campaigns would be hollow and ineffective. In light of pressure groups often face from funders to achieve campaign “wins” or policy outcomes, we wanted to send a clear message – we are invested in your long-term capacity to build sustained power – and that doesn't always translate into a campaign win – even across a three-year span. Seeing the “results” you desire may take longer than you anticipate or longer than you think they should. When foundations are able to take the “long view,” organizations are able to do so as well, creating room for a level of intention,

creativity, and depth of work that may otherwise be encumbered by an insistence on short-term outcomes. Embrace a frame that advances long-term capacity instead of short-term results, and provide multiyear support to help organizations get there.

2 Rather than focusing on proving efficacy, ask organizations to commit to learning and evolving over time. When we lead with asking grantee partners what they are learning rather than what they have accomplished, we not only get more honest and authentic responses, we also build more trusting relationships. While progress reports and check in conversations throughout BLOC certainly asked groups to benchmark what they had accomplished against the goals they articulated in their workplan, we came to understand that a group's ability to contextualize why they were struggling to meet an outcome was just as, if not more, important than their ability to meet the outcome itself.

3 Start by asking organizations to “be” together, rather than “do” together. While the BLOC design advanced collaboration as a value, it did not force collaboration among participants. In fact, an initial program component – asking groups to plan a collaborative event/action together each year – was eliminated in favor of

simply creating time and space for BLOC partner organizations to learn and be together. This freedom from external, funder-initiated pressure enabled more authentic collaboration to flourish. If you want sustained impact, invest in relationship building. This can be particularly challenging for funders precisely because the outcomes or results may seem unclear or be difficult to articulate. The impact of BLOC on the broader Connecticut landscape is a direct result of the decision to prioritize space for groups to develop deep, meaningful, authentic relationships with each other on their own terms.

4 **Directly engage the constituents of the organizations you are supporting, including young people.**

Too often, foundation engagement of the “voices” of those directly benefiting from their grantmaking is relegated to singular stories, presentations or snapshots of impact. BLOC took a different approach, instead seeking to engage young people as participants, learners, and leaders alongside the adult staff at their respective organizations. Doing so extended the investment in leadership development across all levels of the BLOC partner organizations. It also made our work more authentic and accountable, cultivated trust with our grantee partners, and positioned us a funder to better understand the challenges inherent in what we ask of those we fund - like how to execute the program components in a way that accommodated the work, family, and school commitments of youth leaders. Finally, it meant that throughout BLOC, there were instances where young people pushed back on foundation-initiated or endorsed processes and

decisions, which improved BLOC and pushed PFF to analyze and address power dynamics in our own institutional practices.

5 **Interrogate your role and how you hold power.**

Investing in capacity building efforts of grantee partners and providing access to training and technical assistance is an effective and well-documented best practice in the philanthropic sector, but playing the role of a “capacity builder” in an emerging field is complex. The context of our work in Connecticut meant that we were working to build organizing capacity in a local landscape where the infrastructure was similarly underdeveloped. In the absence of any Connecticut-based entities specifically focused on building capacity for grassroots groups and social change organizations, we grappled with how best to provide the supports we heard groups asking for while guarding against making ourselves, as a foundation, the center of gravity for work that should ultimately live beyond a foundation. BLOC sought to address gaps in the field, but wanted to do so in a way that would lead to sustained infrastructure, located in and held by leaders in the local field, rather than to a time-bounded philanthropic initiative that was managed by foundation staff. Our willingness to hear pushback from our consulting team and BLOC partners, explore nuanced questions, and examine the power we hold as a philanthropic institution has ushered in an exciting new set of strategic questions, about how to engage as a partner, ally, and funder in a meaningful way when the “connective tissue” infrastructure required to support a growing field is missing, underdeveloped, or not perceived as a necessary investment.

Looking Ahead

About a year after BLOC's first cohort had drawn to a close, PFF held a feedback session facilitated by the researcher who had conducted an evaluation of BLOC. The goal of the meeting was to share the research findings and recommendations, verify that its conclusions accurately reflected their experiences, and begin a conversation about how PFF intended to use the results of the evaluation to inform our future work.

A pointed question, raised about 10 minutes before our time together was scheduled to conclude, threw the buzzing room into complete silence.

“Is BLOC ours or is it the Foundation’s?”

The question simultaneously speaks to the power of BLOC as a space that cultivated deep ownership among its partners, and to the inherent tension around what and when, in the context of field-building work, a foundation should hold or let go. What seemed like the ethically, morally obvious choice given our commitment to power building and sharing – that we ought to let go – collided with the reality that BLOC partner organizations were themselves not yet equipped with sufficient resources and bandwidth to do their own work and develop a shared statewide agenda and independently lead the capacity building work of BLOC.

Sustaining and expanding the gains made in BLOC require greater investment, not just in co-funding the work of youth organizing groups, but investments in the “connective tissue” infrastructure that will deepen and broaden their reach, and ensure that the ongoing “infrastructure building” work is able to be driven by organizations in the field rather than by foundations. As one BLOC partner said:

When I think of actual movement building, like BLOC or whatever the future of BLOC is, it should be an open space. If we're trying to build something, we don't want to build something that constantly has closed doors. I should be able to—at any moment—say to somebody ‘come to meet these other people who are doing this work in Connecticut.’

As we work towards that vision, our aim, informed by the words of one of our BLOC Facilitators, is to hold our continued commitment to building the field “without making ourselves the center of gravity for that work.” The second cohort of BLOC launched in the spring of 2018. Alumni from the first cohort joined a co-design team responsible for designing and facilitating the new BLOC cohort; and we have invested in the Katal Center for Health Equity and Justice, an organization co-founded by a member of the original BLOC Facilitation Team, to support organizers to learn, build, and strategize together across issue area and geography. The work already looks and feels different – in ways that are positive and ways that are challenging. But this is to be expected. As one BLOC alumna wisely cautioned, “the next iteration of BLOC has to look different, because the landscape is different now.”



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