

Impact Networks Roundtable June 22, 2016

This document summarizes the key findings from the Impact Networks roundtable convened by the Melton Foundation and hosted by the Paul & Daisy Soros Fellowships for New Americans on June 22, 2016 at the Open Society Foundations in New York City.

IMPACT NETWORKS ROUNDTABLE JUNE 22, 2016

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OVERVIEW

On June 22, 28 representatives from 24 institutions and networks attended a roundtable. Their goal was to further develop a community of practice in support of the various leadership networks they serve. In addition to sharing knowledge and best practices, attendees sought to build the case for more intentional support of our leadership networks so that they can grow and expand their impact.

The framework for our session was based on three key categories: 1) emerging best practices, 2) the unique potential of leadership networks, and 3) common constraints to achieving that potential. Small group dialogue combined with plenary discussion revealed a series of common goals as well as constraints across all organizations. The Melton Foundation now invites attendees to join a Working Group, whose members will use the results of this roundtable as the basis to present an evidence-driven case for more robust funding, institutional, and policy support of impact networks. (See the Working Group section of this report.)

ROUNDTABLE SUMMARY

Network Potential

Roundtable attendees indicated that today's increasing emphasis on networked leadership presents an exciting opportunity to bring about systemic change. Today's ever more daunting global challenges require people and institutions to work effectively across silos

of place, sector, and institution. Leadership networks can effectively meet that requirement.

Networks' ability to "*cascade impact*" across sectors and communities also signals their strong potential to *scale and help sustain* initiatives that address social challenges at local and global levels.

Networks of fellows, scholars, grantees, and social entrepreneurs offer powerful ways to foster *collaborative leadership* and *connect grassroots people and ideas* to global movements. More flexible than traditional institutions, networks can evolve organically over time to meet the changing needs of a local community, a program mission, or a social sector challenge. In the case of fellowship or scholarship programs, networks can *reconnect program alumni* around a shared mission, acting as collaborators, mentors, leaders and effective problem-solvers.

The specific goals of a network vary. Some bring diverse stakeholders together to *take action on a shared problem or social issue*, from public health to governance. Others serve as a *pipeline of new ideas*: a venue for generating, disseminating, or scaling innovations. Others focus on *developing leadership skills; enabling individual access to education, employment and opportunity; and empowering entire communities* through collective action. Other networks emphasize *peer-to-peer learning*. Many networks have combinations of these goals. In some cases, *cross-cultural or cross-disciplinary collaboration* serves as the primary mission or purpose of a network.

Emerging Best Practices

Attendees shared best practices for leadership networks that are emerging as a result of trial, error and iteration within our various programs.

On a strategic level, many participants advocated for the need to *be visionary, to think long-term about network design for maximum impact*, and to define the type of network structure (i.e., hub and spoke, nodes and clusters, membership, coalition, hybrid, etc.). *Maintaining transparency* with regard to program mission and goals, as well as strategic vision and long-term expectations for networks and their members, is key. Ideally, plan for what your network should look like and have accomplished at the 5-year mark, or even 10 years. Be sure to *engage your program beneficiaries (ie. fellows, scholars) or other relevant constituents in this process*. Finally, given the "organic" nature of network growth, it is critical to *test new approaches, iterate, and learn-as-you-go* when building a leadership network.

A key reason that building networks requires long-term thinking (and patience) is because successful networks are about *relationships*, and these take time to form. The match-making and support required to enable these "nutrient relationships" is labor intensive. Therefore,

organizations with impact networks should include hiring staff –sometimes referred to as a “*network weaver*” – to carry out this vital role.

Engagement tools that help secure a long-lasting “web of nutrient relationships” include seed grants or research prizes; non-financial incentives such as mentorship or links to professional networks; and face-to-face events or convenings that help create opportunities for collaboration, not to mention lifelong friendships.

Leveraging technology to maintain connections across borders, whether through an online platform or mobile app, can be a useful engagement tool. Face-to-face convening and online collaboration can complement each other in powerful ways.

Empowering individual members to take leadership within the network is critical, especially if the network is to scale. It is critical to pursue participatory approaches for co-creation, feedback loops, and ownership of a network and its outputs. Peer *mentoring* is also a key incentive for many to participate. The “*long tail of alumni*” is one such resource. *Grants, prizes, awards, and travel* to convenings are also great incentives and help raise the visibility for innovations and best practices within the network.

Measuring the impact of a network is a challenge – and a burgeoning field – since networks do not always lend themselves to clearly-defined metrics. Impact measurement around idea-generation, diffusion of innovation, learning, and collaboration is not easy to capture. Consequently, fundamentally different metrics —ones that use the language of *transformation instead of impact*— are needed to illustrate how networks open up access, empower, influence, and contribute to systemic change. *Including potential measurement and evaluation tools in your network-building strategy* is an important part of the design process.

Barriers to Realizing Network Potential

Efforts to build cohesive networks often lack the required mix of leadership, skillset, effective management, financial resources, and patience. Building a network from within a traditional institution can be especially difficult. An impactful network is not simply a small-scale add-on to an existing program.

Many leaders of networks struggle to get the necessary buy-in from their institutions or funders. Grant makers often still use criteria that are narrowly focused on one sector or location, while networks are inherently interdisciplinary and dispersed.

Institutional barriers often stem from a mismatch between networks and the more traditional, “vertical” structures of management and accountability which limits the flow of communication, production, and authority across institutional, sector, and geographic

boundaries. Many implementers of networks are still under pressure to call all the shots and claim direct credit for outputs.

As a result, efforts to grow and measure the impact of effective networks get lost in translation. Human *bandwidth* is a scarce commodity – both among understaffed network and program leadership, as well as members whose participation competes with their “day jobs”. Thus, the absence of a “network weaver”, can make the development, growth and sustainability of a leadership network next-to-impossible.

Further, not all networks can *scale*. Those that require deeper relations and hands-on work are inherently limited in scope or must have many nodes or specialized clusters.

WORKING GROUP TO BUILD THE CASE FOR SUPPORT

As one roundtable participant asked: “Can the program *be* the network?” We think the answer is yes, just as Ford’s “horseless carriage” finally became the car. Whether or not you envision your network as a program outgrowth, outcome or legacy (or all of the above!), we need to make the case for more appropriate governance, staffing, and support for networks, along with an informed “network mindset” which is long-term, cross-sector, and systemic. We also need to define and advocate for different metrics to show networks’ impact.

The Melton Foundation proposes a Working Group that draws on this growing community of practice (we are, in fact, our own leadership network) to develop the case for support for impact networks, backed by:

1. evidence to demonstrate best practices and ongoing constraints within our programs and networks, including brief case examples, survey findings, etc; and
2. the concrete and felt needs of our community members to fully realize our networks’ potential, including sample staffing profiles, support structures, sample budgets, policy requirements, etc.

We envision that the Working Group would carry out out desktop research, information-sharing, possible small-scale surveys, and writing work, with a published report and/or article as an end-product, along with talking points that members can use within their own spheres of influence. However, in practicing what we preach, we also will let the group itself define these priorities. We expect commitment requirements to be:

1. Time Commitment: July – November 2016
2. Bi-monthly meetings (3 total); at least one of which will be in-person;

3. A commitment to carrying out research or other relevant activities during this time frame;
4. Possible modest financial contributions for publishing; travel to New York for the in-person meeting.

This report was drafted by Winthrop Carty, Executive Director of the [Melton Foundation](#) and Rachel Clift of [Rachel Clift Communications & Engagement](#) based on the input by the following people:

ROUNDTABLE ATTENDEES

Name	Institution
Andrea Brown Murga	IIE
Betty Borden	Japan Society
Chris Kasabach	Watson Foundation
Christina Lovely	MacArthur Foundation
Craig Harwood	Paul & Daisy Soros Fellowships for New Americans
Dana Gorodetsky	MIT D-Lab Practical Impact Alliance
Devin Stewart	Carnegie Council
Edith "Didi" Goldenhar	Consultant & Author
Eric Stephenson	Cordes Foundation
Heather Haines	END Fund
Ian Fisk	Mentor Capital
Jessie Clyde	International Women's Health Coalition
Kate McKeown	Education Networks
Liz Maxwell	Socap 365
Martha Loerke	Open Society Scholarship Programs
Micah Trippe	Melton Foundation
Oliver Libby	Resolution Project
Phillip Watkins	Open Society Scholarship Programs
Rachel Clift	RC Communications & Engagement
Rob Garris	Schwarzman Scholars Program
Shana Dressler	30 Weeks
Shashi Neerukonda	The Wellbeing Project
Steve Fox	Think Impact
Steve Hubbell	Open Society Fellowships Program
Sujatha Sebastian	Conveners.org
Winthrop Carty	Melton Foundation
Yulian Ramos	Paul & Daisy Soros Fellowships for New Americans