

The Philanthropic Collaborative Landscape

By Alison Powell, Wendy Castillo, and Simon Morfit

Over the past decade, philanthropic collaboration has entered a new era of popularity and ambition. The number of collaborative-giving platforms is rising (see our [growing database of philanthropic collaboratives](#)), as is their annual giving. Collaboratives currently deploy billions annually: the nearly 200 who responded to The Bridgespan Group’s survey, who are part of a larger field, collectively deploy a total of \$2 billion to \$3 billion alone.¹

We attribute the recent surge, in part, to increasing interest in new ways of giving. Many newly wealthy individuals and families have become philanthropists without setting up foundations that have large staffs. Philanthropic giving through collaboratives already primed for grantmaking enables this lean approach. Collaboratives also provide donors the same advantages that mutual funds, private equity, and venture capital provide investors—portfolio diversification placed in the hands of specialists.

Bridgespan research over the past few years has highlighted the great promise funder collaboratives hold for unlocking more philanthropy and deploying it to advance social change. We’ve found:

- They are [one of four compelling pathways](#) to increase philanthropic contributions among high-net-worth individuals.
- When executed well, [they can produce significant impact](#).
- A substantial number of them have charted a course that [differs from traditional philanthropy](#). They tilt toward equity and justice, field- and movement-building, and leaders of color.

To help release the potential of philanthropic collaborations, we’re eager to shine more light on their growing and evolving presence in philanthropy. This publication is the first of what we anticipate will be an annual report characterizing the state of the field. This year, we focus primarily on painting the current landscape. In future years, we’ll offer more trend data as well as deeper explorations of specific themes.

This report is based on a survey of funder collaboratives conducted in the summer of 2022. For this research, we defined collaboratives as entities that either pool or channel resources from multiple donors to nonprofits. (We call them “collaboratives,” “funds,” and “platforms” interchangeably in this report.) We reached out to over 400 such entities globally, and nearly 200 responded to our survey. (See “[Research Methodology](#)” for more on our research approach.) While this is a strong response rate, we acknowledge there are many initiatives and organizations whose input we didn’t capture. We also convened survey respondents, as well as facilitated a full-day meeting with leaders from 12 of the largest collaboratives, to discuss the findings and glean more insights.

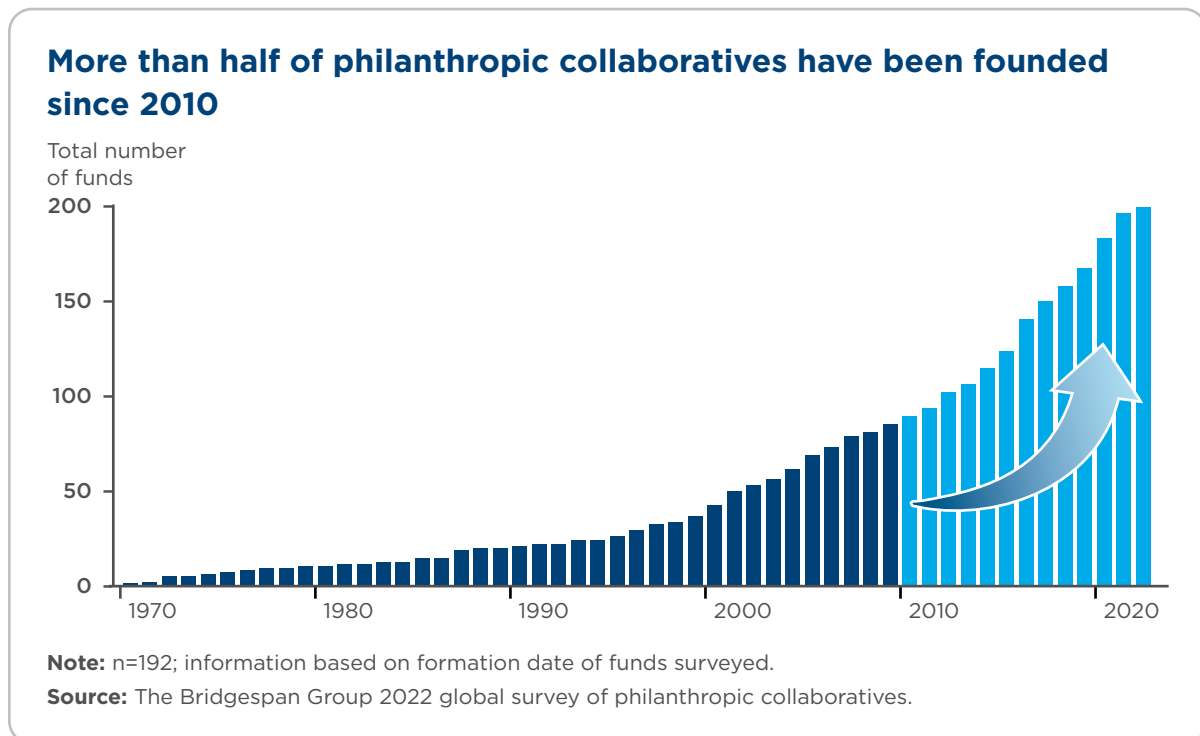
1 Survey responses were structured as ranges (i.e., with a lower and upper bound) that individuals could select to best describe the magnitude of resources they direct in a single year. Consequently, analyses summarizing information across all respondents are also presented as a range in this report.

Key Characteristics of Philanthropic Collaboratives

The philanthropic collaborative field is growing

Donor collaboratives are significant actors on the philanthropic landscape. The roughly 200 that responded to our survey collectively deployed between \$2 billion and \$3 billion in 2021. That's comparable to the \$2.6 billion that flowed from US private foundations to donor-advised funds in 2021, according to [the Institute for Policy Studies](#). But it's relatively small compared to the \$91 billion of US foundation giving in 2021, according to estimates from [Giving USA's 2022 Annual Report on Philanthropy](#).

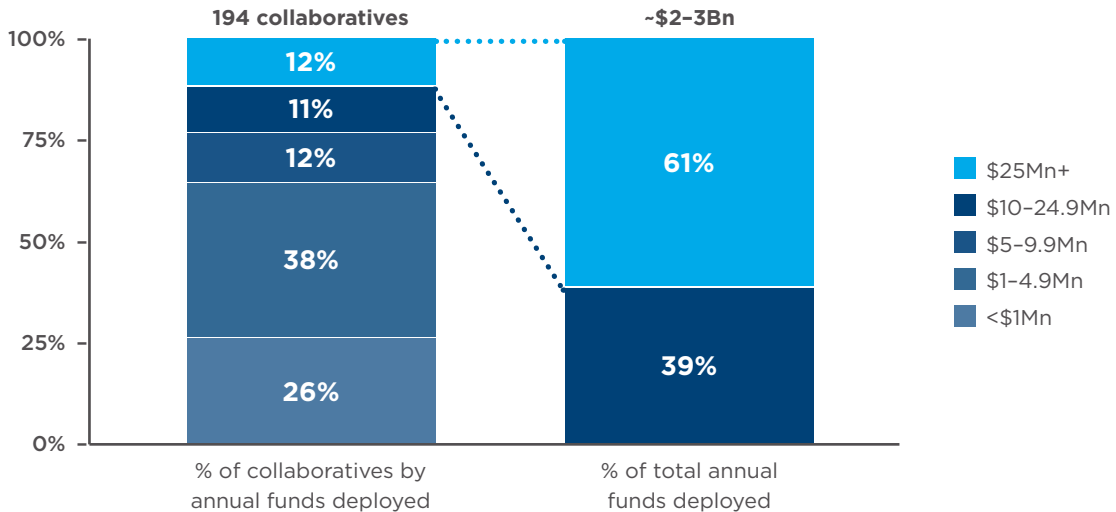
The number of funder collaboratives has been surging, with more than half having been founded since 2010.



Giving through these platforms is highly concentrated. The 23 collaboratives in our sample that each deployed more than \$25 million per year collectively accounted for over 60 percent of overall funding.

Giving through philanthropic collaboratives is highly concentrated

Survey question: How much funding did the philanthropic collaborative direct in 2021?



Note: n = 194.

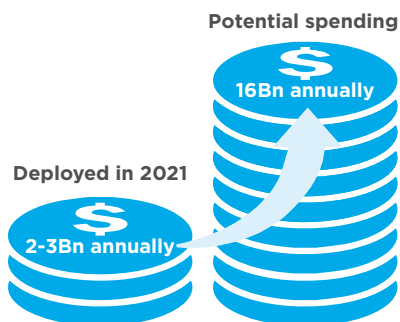
Source: The Bridgespan Group 2022 global survey of philanthropic collaboratives.

When asked which types of donors accounted for the majority of their funding, 42 percent of the funds in our survey cited institutional foundations, whereas only 15 percent indicated individual donors. Larger funds were more likely to rely on individual donors, with 30 percent of collaboratives that give over \$25 million annually reporting individual donors as their primary source versus only 13 percent for smaller funds.

Collaboratives report having the potential to deploy significantly more dollars than they currently do. Specifically, survey respondents noted they could grant upwards of

\$16 billion in the coming year if fundraising were not a constraint—a multiple of five to eight times the resources they directed in 2021.

Philanthropic collaboratives have the potential to deploy substantially more resources



Note: n = 179.

Source: The Bridgespan Group 2022 global survey of philanthropic collaboratives.

But fundraising *is* a constraint, according to the survey. Collaborative leaders cited insufficient awareness among donors about the value of collaboratives and donors' preferences for giving directly to organizations as barriers to growing their funds. As one fund leader shared, "Funders are hesitant to fund through an intermediary. They want to retain control over where money goes." Collaboratives also indicated that their own capacity to fundraise was a constraining factor, given the resources needed to cultivate and maintain a larger donor base.

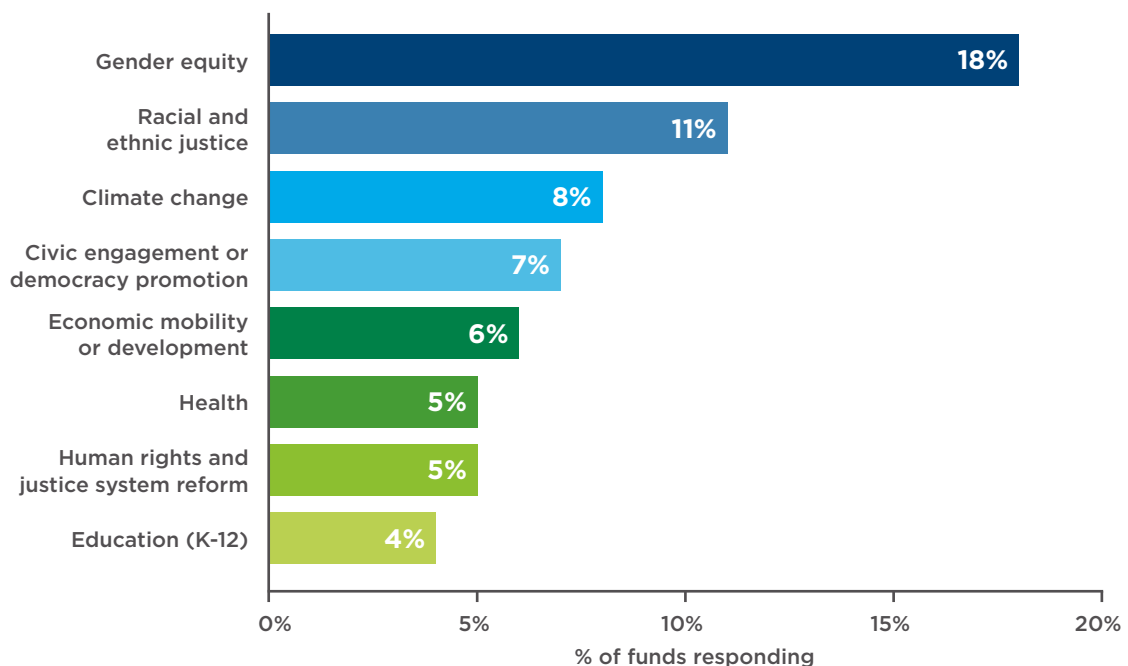
Philanthropic collaboratives are active around the world on a range of social-change efforts

Collaboratives are active around the globe. While there was a concentration of North America-based efforts among the funds we surveyed (in part because they were overrepresented in our sample), the collaboratives' work collectively spanned the world. We have existing and forthcoming research on [funder collaboration in India](#) as well as forthcoming research on giving to collaboratives in Africa and more broadly across the Global South.

Collectively, funds are advancing a wide array of impact goals. When asked to name their primary issue area, the respondents' answers spanned more than two dozen options. There were some notable concentrations. Eighteen percent cited gender equity as their primary issue area, and 11 percent named racial and ethnic justice.

Philanthropic collaboratives address a variety of issue areas

Survey question: What issue area does your philanthropic collaborative primarily address?



Note: n = 188; top eight primary issue areas selected.

Source: The Bridgespan Group 2022 global survey of philanthropic collaboratives.

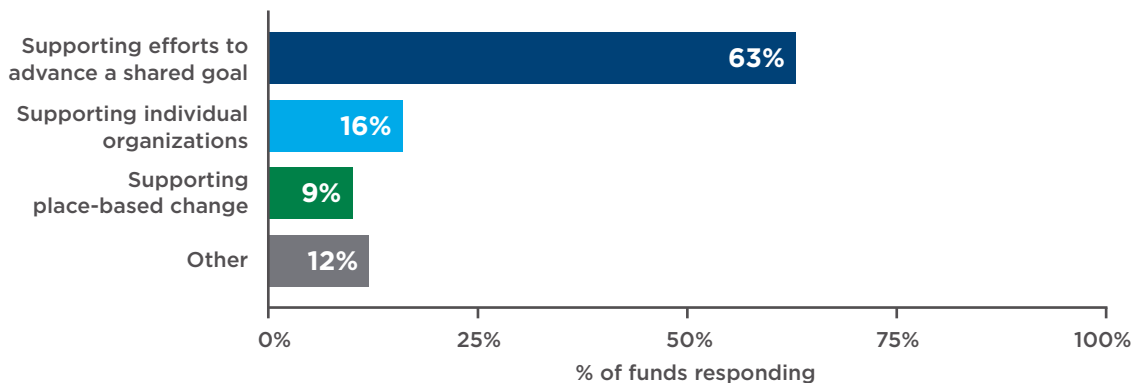
Note that collaboratives with an equity and justice orientation were less well represented among the larger funds, suggesting they face steeper barriers to fundraising than collaboratives with other primary issue areas. More specifically, among the 23 funds in our survey giving more than \$25 million annually, one named gender equity and one named racial and ethnic justice as their primary issue area.

Each respondent reported a median of six secondary issue areas, reflecting how these funds often work across programmatic siloes. Working in this cross-cutting way sometimes creates a barrier to funding, as many funds highlighted the challenge of not fitting cleanly into issue-focused funders’ strategies. Echoing a number of other responses, one fund leader shared that donors can at times “have very narrow agendas and want organizations to shift their work to meet [donor] needs.”

In our [past research](#), we’ve highlighted that *how* collaboratives go about achieving the change they seek (their “investment thesis”) is as critical to their operations as *what* issue they are working on. Funder collaboratives are much more likely to focus on multi-stakeholder efforts, instead of, say, primarily focusing on regrantsing dollars to individual organizations. Sixty-three percent of the collaboratives we surveyed reported supporting a range of efforts and organizations working on a shared goal (e.g., resourcing community-driven change, cross-sector coalitions, fields, and/or movements)—more than three times the number that prioritize supporting individual organizations.

Philanthropic collaboratives more often support efforts to advance a shared goal

Survey question: If you had to choose a “primary investment thesis” for your philanthropic collaborative, what would it be?



Note: n = 190; funds selecting “other” frequently described pursuing a combination of the other three investment theses. We define “investment thesis” as how the fund/platform/vehicle will achieve impact, what types of goals it will pursue, and how it will create value for funders and grantees.

Source: The Bridgespan Group 2022 global survey of philanthropic collaboratives.

Philanthropic collaboratives prioritize equity and diversity in their grantmaking and operations

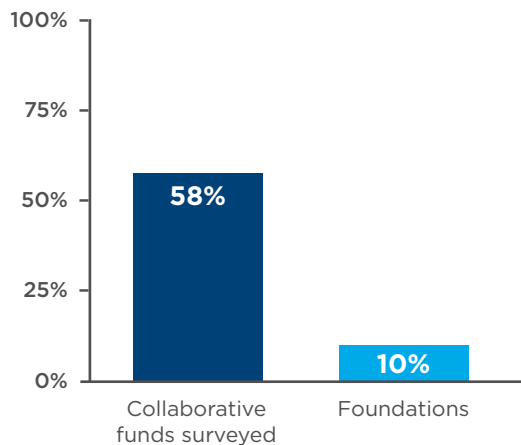
More than 70 percent of respondents describe racial and ethnic or gender equity as a “core” or “intentional” focus of their work. This focus manifests in a variety of ways, from the funds’ primary issue areas (the concentration of funds focusing on either gender equity or racial and ethnic justice noted above) to their leadership, their grantees’ leadership, and their grantmaking methods.

Collaboratives are far more likely to be led by people of color and/or women-led than traditional philanthropy. Nearly three-quarters of the funds in our survey indicated their leader was a woman (69 percent) or gender nonbinary individual (4 percent). Looking just at the US-based funds, nearly 60 percent reported that their senior-most leader identifies as a person of color.² In comparison, 62 percent of US foundation CEOs are women and 14 percent are people of color, according to 2022 [research by the Council on Foundations](#).

Philanthropic collaborative leadership is more diverse than in traditional philanthropy

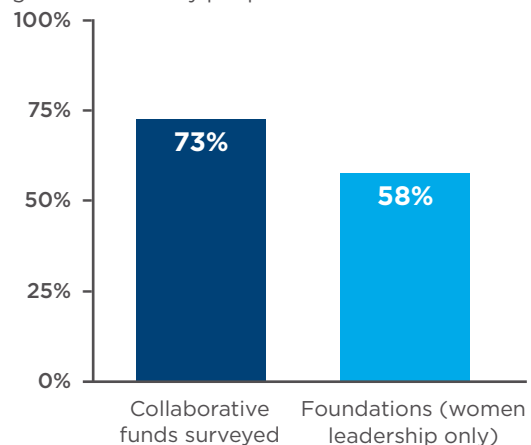
Racial and ethnic diversity

Percent led by people of color



Gender diversity

Percent led by women and gender nonbinary people



Note: Racial and ethnic diversity, n = 189; gender diversity, n = 190.

Source: The Bridgespan Group 2022 global survey of philanthropic collaboratives; Council on Foundations 2022 Grantmaker Salary and Benefits Report.

The emphasis on leadership diversity extends to collaboratives’ grantees. More than 60 percent of collaboratives we surveyed track data on the leadership demographics of their grantees. They reported that, on average, 71 percent of their grantees are led by women or nonbinary people and (looking at the US-based funds only) 74 percent are led by people of color.

Many philanthropic collaboratives share power and seek to strengthen grantees

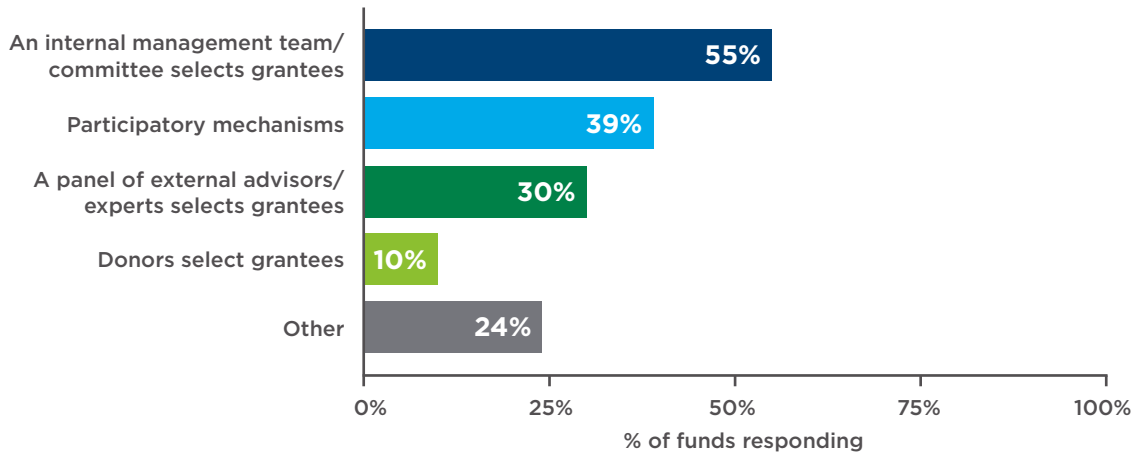
Nearly 40 percent of collaboratives reported using participatory processes for grantmaking decisions—handing decision-making power to nonprofit leaders and community groups on the receiving end of grantmaking. Such practices are less common among foundations:

2 We focused on US-based funds for our research on representation of people of color, given that such framing and language is more resonant in the United States than in other parts of the world.

a [2020 Inside Philanthropy survey of foundation staff](#) found that less than 20 percent employ “grantee or end beneficiary committees with decision-making authority for grants.”

Nearly 40% of philanthropic collaboratives use participatory grantmaking processes

Survey question: How are grantmaking decisions made?



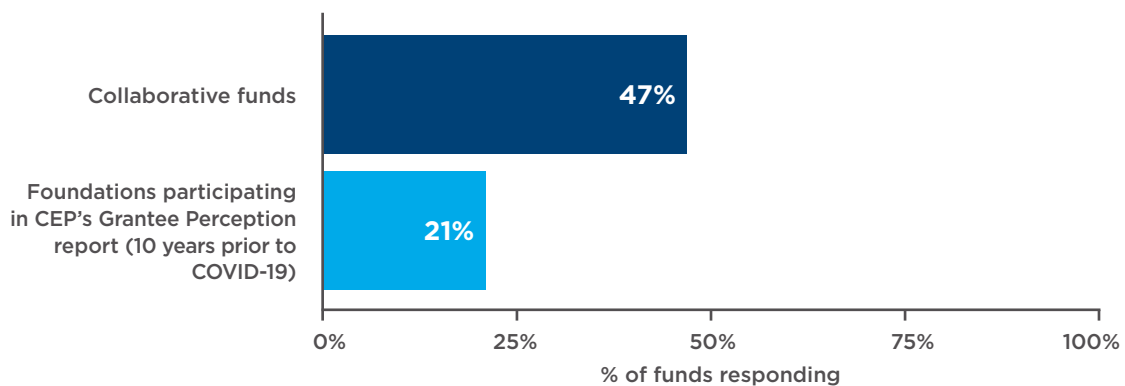
Note: n = 193; respondents were asked to select all that apply.

Source: The Bridgespan Group 2022 global survey of philanthropic collaboratives.

Nearly half of the collaboratives reported that they provide unrestricted support. By comparison, the [Center for Effective Philanthropy’s analysis of its Grantee Perception Reports](#) notes that for the decade prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, only 21 percent of all grants came in the form of general operating support.

Nearly half of the collaboratives provide unrestricted support, a higher proportion than is common in the sector

Survey question: What level of restrictions (if any) do you place on your grants?



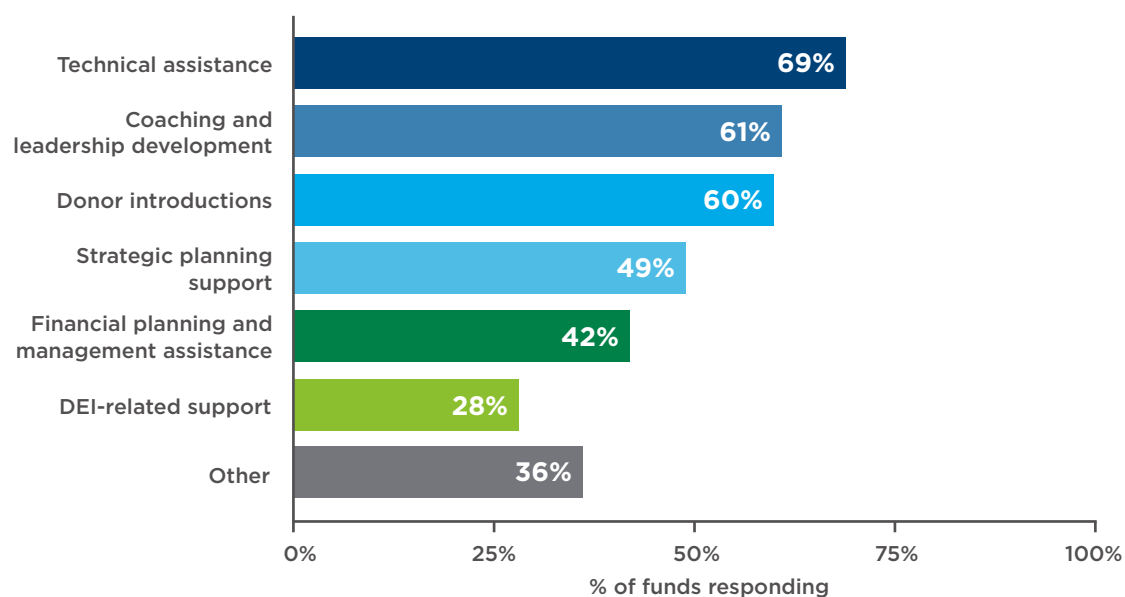
Note: n = 193.

Source: The Bridgespan Group 2022 global survey of philanthropic collaboratives.

Nearly all the collaboratives we surveyed (97 percent) indicated that they offer some form of non-financial support to grantees, with technical assistance, coaching and leadership development, and donor introductions being the most common.

Nearly all philanthropic collaboratives offer some form of non-financial support to grantees

Survey question: Beyond funding, what type of support does your philanthropic collaborative offer to grantees and/or applicants?



Note: n = 191; respondents asked to select all that apply.

Source: The Bridgespan Group 2022 global survey of philanthropic collaboratives.

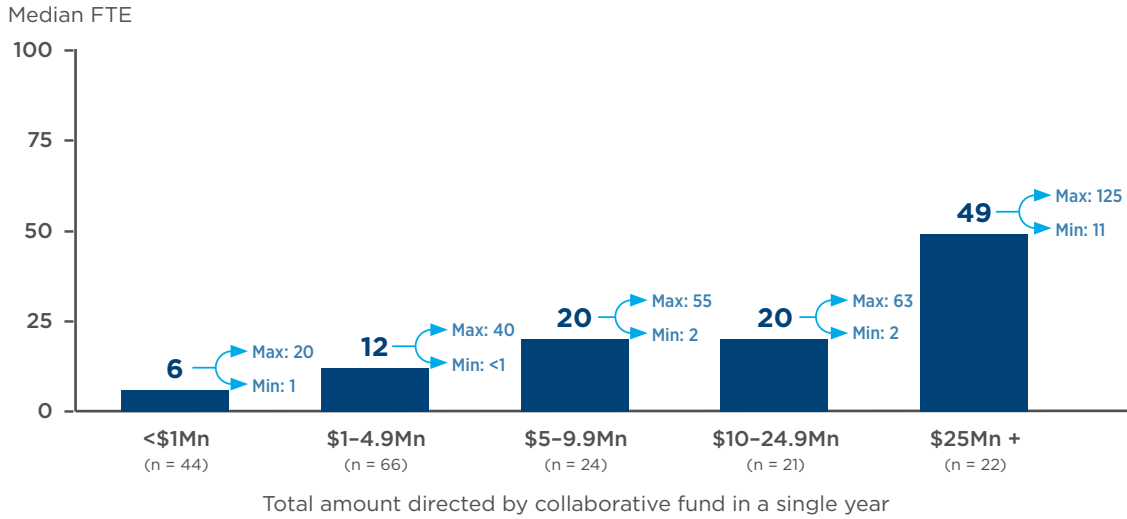
Philanthropic collaboratives have a wide variety of cost structures

Funder collaboratives invest varying resources in operations. Our survey respondents reported having a median staff size of 12 full-time equivalents (FTEs), with a median of 18 percent of their budgets going to internal operations. There is a large amount of variation in these figures, with a collaborative's scale of giving and grantmaking and programmatic approach (e.g., the depth and breadth of its sourcing and diligence, along with the non-financial supports it provides to grantees and the broader field) influencing both its staff size and cost structure.

Let's start with the amount of funds deployed. Comparing collaboratives that gave \$25 million or more with those that gave less than \$25 million, the larger collaboratives typically had more staff (median of 49 FTEs versus 11 FTEs) and allocated a lower proportion of their budgets to internal operations (13 percent median versus 20 percent). It's important to note, however, that there are wide ranges within these categories.

Larger collaborative funds have larger staffs—but there is a wide variation

Survey question: Please estimate the total number of FTEs at your organization, including staff and/or consultants.

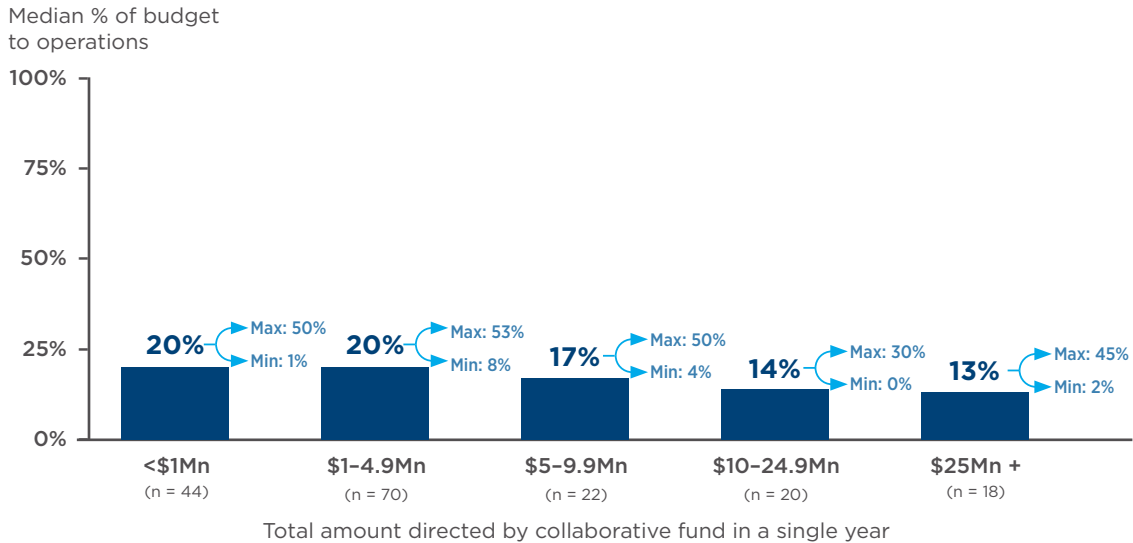


Note: n = 177; outliers not in the typical distribution of the data excluded from the range.

Source: The Bridgespan Group 2022 global survey of philanthropic collaboratives.

Larger collaborative funds achieve economies of scale on operating costs—but there is a wide variation

Survey question: What percentage of your budget goes to supporting internal operations?



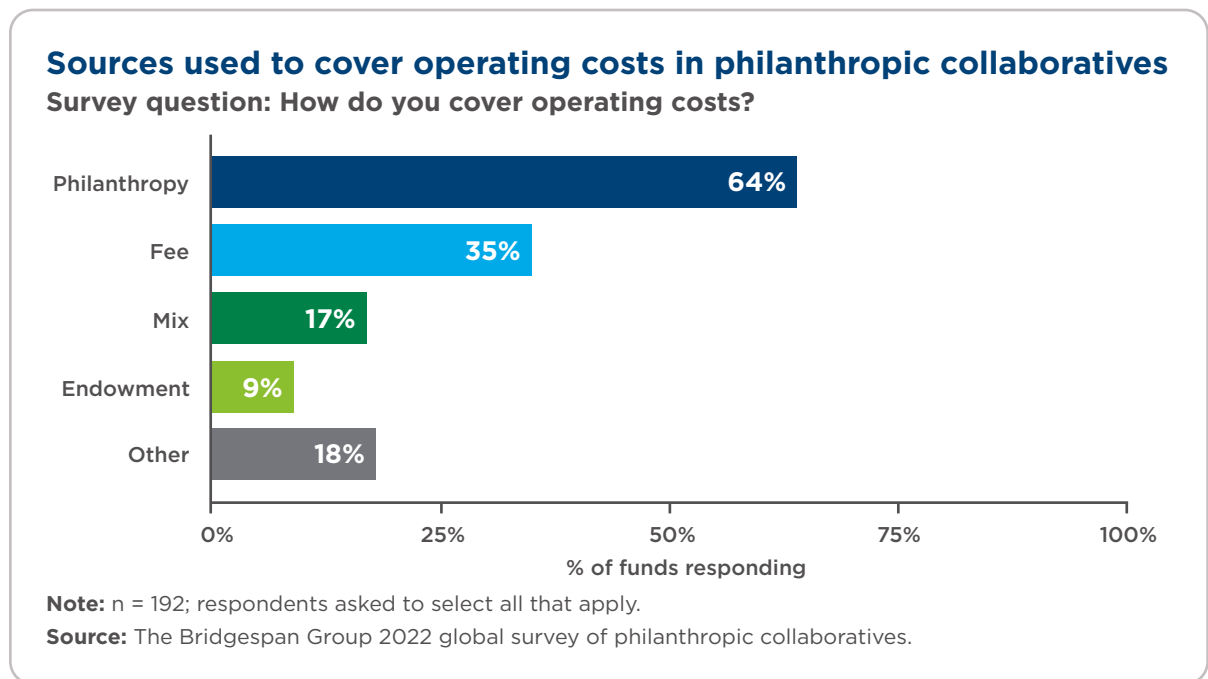
Note: n = 174; outliers not in the typical distribution of the data excluded from the range.

Source: The Bridgespan Group 2022 global survey of philanthropic collaboratives.

We also compared collaboratives that provided grantees with three or more forms of non-financial support (among the seven options listed in our survey) to those that offered fewer than three. The funds that offered more supports had higher staffing (15 FTEs versus 8 FTEs on median) and dedicated a higher proportion of their budget to internal operations (20 percent versus 15 percent on median).

The most common way collaboratives cover operating costs is through dedicated philanthropic support. Nearly two-thirds of our survey respondents cited philanthropy as their primary funding source for operations, almost twice as many as those who rely primarily on fees from donations. Nine percent have endowments that cover operating costs.

When asked what factors were critical to securing philanthropic support for operations, funds repeatedly cited the importance of relationships with donors, donor referrals and endorsements, and donor understanding of collaborative funds as a model of giving. One respondent illustrated this by saying, “We are a trusted partner of many private foundations, and they recommend us to other actors in the philanthropy field. These relationships are essential to our success.”



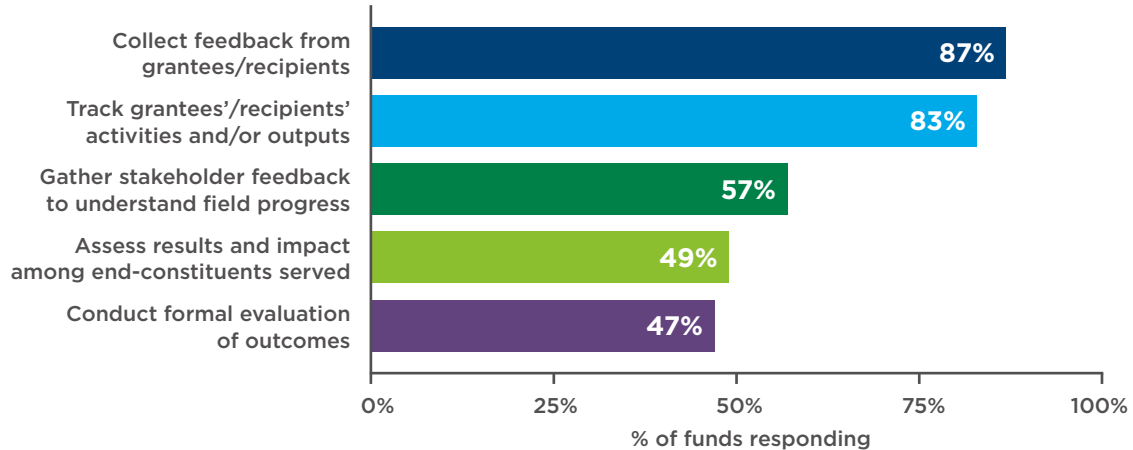
One note: It is quite possible that these cost levels for internal operations are suppressed given difficulties collaboratives face in raising funds for operations. One respondent shared that donor preference for paying “only [for] grantmaking and not operations is a key impediment to our success.”

Philanthropic collaboratives are focused on measurement and learning

The funds we surveyed allocate a median of 5 percent of their budgets to measurement, evaluation, and learning (MEL) efforts. Approximately half have dedicated employee capacity for MEL. Funds with dedicated employee capacity report a median equivalent to half an FTE staff member.

Philanthropic collaboratives heavily rely on grantee-level data collection to understand results and impact

Survey question: Which kinds of measurement and learning efforts do you currently undertake?



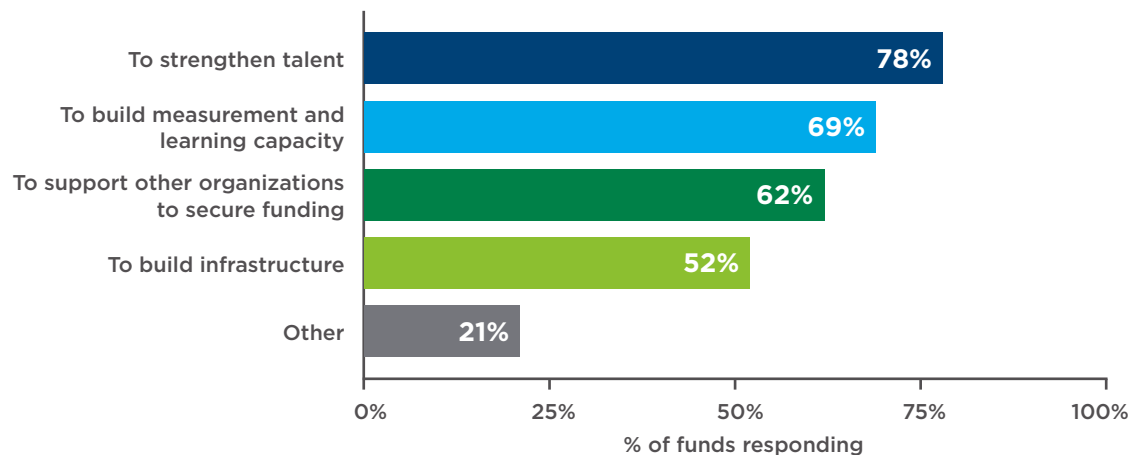
Note: n = 171; respondents asked to select all that apply.

Source: The Bridgespan Group 2022 global survey of philanthropic collaboratives.

Collaborative leaders regularly tell us that they need to invest more in MEL. Our survey data bore this out. When we asked survey respondents how they would use additional funding to improve their capacity, nearly 70 percent flagged measurement and learning as a critical area for investment—second only to strengthening their teams.

With additional capacity-building funding, collaboratives would invest in talent and measurement

Survey question: How would you use additional funding to improve the capacity of your philanthropic collaborative?



Note: n = 194; respondents asked to select all that apply.

Source: The Bridgespan Group 2022 global survey of philanthropic collaboratives.

Directions Forward

We discussed the survey results with over 100 sector leaders. As they spoke about priorities for the field going forward, a few themes surfaced consistently.

- 1. Increasing awareness and understanding of collaborative funds.** For collaboratives to realize their full giving potential, donors will need to be better able to identify them and understand them. This is especially true for smaller funds, given that individual donors account for a smaller share of their funder base than for larger funds. Leaders of funds consistently point to the need to better communicate the value of their work to current and prospective funders. Among the ideas offered for increasing awareness and understanding: developing more accessible lists of funds (such as this [philanthropic collaborations database on Bridgespan.org](#) and these [resources hosted by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#)), advancing donor norms around incorporating collaborative funds in sourcing and diligence processes, having more philanthropy convenings showcase collaborative funds, and conducting more applied studies to better understand these vehicles.
- 2. Breaking down identity-based barriers to capital.** Similar to the well-documented disparities in funding for [nonprofits led by people of color](#) and [African-led NGOs](#), funds led by people with marginalized identities (including racial, ethnic, gender, and other forms of identity) face additional barriers as they seek to get connected to funders, build rapport with them, and secure sustainable funding over time. Removing those barriers requires intentional effort by funders to identify ways to source a broad range of funds—incorporating an equity lens in defining the goals of their portfolios, counteracting biases at each stage of the process (including interpersonal dynamics), and seeking feedback from equity-oriented leaders to ensure they can learn and improve over time.
- 3. Strengthening collaboratives' capacity to learn from their work and measure their impact.** Funds that are focused on multi-stakeholder efforts are seeking measurement, evaluation, and learning approaches that extend beyond grantee-level data collection. One leader shared, “We’re eager to measure and learn how much our support contributed to systemic change.” Another noted, “Investing in advocacy and system change is not short-term work. Many of the methods for grant evaluation are misaligned for this type of funding and don’t allow grantees to demonstrate their ultimate value.” (The Bridgespan Group has a forthcoming publication on measurement, evaluation, and learning for philanthropic collaboratives.)
- 4. Increased understanding of funds' operating model choices.** In our research, conversations, and advisory work with collaborative leaders, we hear significant interest in understanding how funds are organizing their work and operating their teams. As one participant conveyed: “I’m curious to understand how funds evolve over time and the factors shaping this evolution.” Collaboratives would benefit from a better understanding of capabilities that are consistent across their peers, capabilities and operating models that vary according to strategic choices and types of work, and practices for communicating related costs to donors.

We hope these findings are valuable to the leaders of current collaboratives, the leaders of potential collaboratives, and donors who are interested in learning more about how collaboratives operate. We look forward to continuing this conversation and highlighting additional research from the field as it becomes available, all in service of unlocking greater capital for social change.

Research Methodology

We invited 441 philanthropic collaboratives to complete our 2022 survey and received responses from 196 (more than double the number of collaboratives who responded to our [2021 survey](#)). We expanded the previous year's outreach list with desk research, referrals from organizations and leaders in The Bridgespan Group's broader network, and recommendations directly from respondents. Our outreach approach (led out of Bridgespan's US-based offices) yielded an overall survey sample favoring funds based in North America. The respondents had six weeks to complete the online survey during the summer of 2022. Over 100 of the survey respondents attended follow-on group discussions in which they reviewed the survey data and provided further input. In addition, we spent a full day with leaders of 12 of the largest collaboratives to surface additional insights.

We defined philanthropic collaboratives broadly as entities that either pool or direct philanthropic giving from multiple donors to nonprofit organizations. Thus, our survey sample spans large capital aggregators like Blue Meridian; organizations that do not pool resources, but instead provide a "platform" for donors to source options (like Lever for Change or TED's The Audacious Project); and organizations, sometimes called public foundations, which depend on annual giving for their grants like the Hive Fund for Climate and Gender Justice. In our search for examples, we sought to include funds with a racial or gender equity focus.

We did not include community foundations, writ large, because it is hard to determine the proportion of their giving that is donor-directed through donor-advised funds, as opposed to funds pooled or influenced by the foundations. We did, however, include a small number of special-purpose community foundation funds. We did not include COVID-19 funds or other time-limited disaster-relief efforts.



Acknowledgments

Bridgespan is grateful to the staff of the many collaborative funds participating in the survey and sharing their information with us to help deepen the collective knowledge base about these philanthropic platforms.

We deeply appreciate the support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as well as the valuable input provided by Hanh Cao Yu (The California Endowment), Alex Garita (Prospera), Sarah Stachowiak (ORS Impact), Veena Pankaj (Eval4Learning), and Susan Wolf Ditkoff, who offered feedback on the survey design and findings. We also thank staff from the 12 collaborative funds who participated in a day-long working session exploring how to best understand and support the field of collaborative funds.

The Bridgespan team who developed this research and report included Wendy Castillo, Carole Matthews, Simon Morfit, Gail Perreault, and Alison Powell.

More on Philanthropic Collaboration

Bridgespan publications

- [Releasing the Potential of Philanthropic Collaborations](#) (results from our 2021 survey)
- [Philanthropic Collaboratives in India: The Power of Many](#) (2020)
- [How Philanthropic Collaborations Succeed, and Why they Fail](#) (SSIR.org, 2019)
- [Are Funder Collaboratives Valuable? A Research Study](#) (2019)
- [Value of Collaboration Research Study: Literature Review on Funder Collaboration](#) (2019)
- [Collaborating Towards Kindergarten Readiness at Scale: A Funder Group Case Study](#) (2018)
- [Four Pathways to Greater Giving](#) (discusses the potential for funder collaboration to unlock capital, 2018)

Additional resources

- [Philanthropic Collaborations Database](#) (non-exhaustive)
- Issue area briefs on [gender inequality](#) (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Shake the Table, and The Bridgespan Group, 2023) and the [climate crisis](#) (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Climate Leadership Initiative, 2022)
- [Frontline-Serving Intermediaries: An Underutilized Tool for Philanthropy](#) (Arabella Advisors, JPB Foundation, and Windward Fund, 2022)
- [“To Go Far, Go Together”: How Donor Collaboratives Are Changing the World](#) (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Philanthropic Partnerships)
- [Climate Leadership Initiative](#)
- [Funder Collaborative Toolkit](#) (Fund for Shared Insight, 2021)
- [Collective Impact](#) (SSIR.org, 2011)
- [Issue Funds and Intermediaries](#), Giving Compass

- [Funder Collaboratives: Why and How Funders Work Together](#) (GrantCraft, 2009)
- [Groundswell Fund](#)
- [The Libra Foundation](#)
- [Transforming Philanthropy event series](#), Resource Generation
- [Funder Collaboratives: A Topic Brief for Donors](#) (Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, 2021)

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