

Partners Learning Together for Maximum Impact: Experience from
the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program
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Intentional learning —having goals to direct the process of knowledge or skills acquisition, and systems to help turn learning into action in a way consistent with organizational objectives (Mastercard Foundation Rural and Agricultural Finance Learning Lab, 2019) — can be a key ingredient in any Program or collective action that seeks to have a meaningful and lasting social impact. This paper describes how a philanthropic organization is connecting its scholarship program partners (often referred to as grantees or recipients by other funders) to learn together for maximum impact and offers reflections on the Foundation’s role as convenor within the context of a multi-site initiative.

Background

The Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program aims to foster a cohort of creative and ethical leaders who will drive the socio-economic transformation of their communities, particularly in Africa. The program allows students whose talent and promise exceed their financial resources to complete their education. In addition to offering them a scholarship that covers tuition fees, accommodation, books, and other scholastic materials, the program also provides wrap-around social and academic supports, training in transformative leadership, and experiential opportunities to build their networks and hone their skills. The Program is implemented by a global network of four non-governmental organizations and 23 universities who recruit Scholars and offer them the supports they need to complete their education, successfully transition to the world of work and develop their influence as transformative leaders.¹

¹ NGO Partners are: Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Campaign for Female Education (CAMFED), Equity Group Foundation (EGF), and Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE).

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The Program is anchored in a belief in the power of both individuals and institutions as catalysts for social and economic transformation. Much like the Scholars themselves, the implementing partners are expected to develop and exercise transformative leadership; they not only establish and administer activities and processes to facilitate the education and leadership development of Scholars but can also use that experience and lessons learned to scale equitable and effective practices and policies within their own institutions so as to reach and serve all students. Collaborating across institutions and with other stakeholders, they can also generate evidence and insight to inform broader systems change that will advance inclusion and equity (e.g., insights to inform public and private education policy and resource allocation and/or to influence other higher education institutions to change their admissions policies).

A Learning Partnership

The network of Scholars Program partners is conceived as a *Learning Partnership*, a collective learning enterprise that intends to improve the impact of the Program and influence change based on systematic knowledge creation and sharing. This partnership includes all implementing partners, Foundation staff, Scholars as well as a number of consultants whom we have invited in to support our learning. More recently we have also invited some employers to join into the conversation.

This approach is akin to [Collective Impact](#) through which a group of important actors from different sectors come together around a common agenda for solving a specific social problem ([Kania and Kramer, 2011](#)). Using that framework, the Foundation would be thought of as the ‘backbone organization’ (or convener) with staff acting as identifiable anchors to help inform and

As of 2019, university partners include: Arizona State University, Duke University, McGill University, Queen’s University, Stanford University, University of British Columbia, University of California, Berkeley, University of Toronto, Wellesley College, Sciences Po, University of Edinburgh, African Institute for Mathematical Sciences, African Leadership Academy, Ashesi University, Carnegie Mellon University, Rwanda, Gondar University, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Makerere University, University of Abomey-Calavi, University of Cape Town, University of Pretoria, American University of Beirut, and EARTH University.

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coordinate learning activities, as well as to facilitate use of findings. The Learning Partnership is united around a ‘common agenda’, which includes learning and influence goals. Members are engaged in ‘mutually reinforcing activities (e.g., webinars, convenings, working groups).’ ‘Shared measurement’ enables the aggregation of learning across Program sites and ‘continuous communication’ is encouraged so that trust and relationships are built among all participants. Rather than defining itself as a backbone organization, however, the Foundation tends to use the term ‘convenor’ to name the role that it plays.

Investing in learning and knowledge mobilization is a key part of the Foundation’s approach. Answering questions and addressing knowledge gaps around *what works* and *why* is critical for maximizing the impact of the Program. Given that we are working in complex environments, learning is critical for adapting, iterating, changing course as needed. It can support both partner decision-making (e.g., move an institution to take action to remove a barrier to university application for young women) and Foundation decisions concerning the Program (e.g., insights gained from the implementation of the Program being folded into the directives for the expansion of the Program). It can inform strategy development (e.g., experience from the Scholars Program teaching the Foundation the importance of strengthening ecosystems so as to facilitate transitions) and build an evidence base that will influence local, national and global discourse and catalyze broader change, in this case towards social and economic transformation on the African continent. For example, we would want to see new scholarship programs modeled after the Scholars Program, which provides not only financial assistance but enrichment activities and wrap-around supports for students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, be expanded or replicated in public universities in Africa.

Knowledge is being generated across the Learning Partnership on an on-going basis, whether it is through more formal monitoring, evaluation and research activities or simply through practice. An evaluation of the first five years of the Scholars Program (SP) indicated that the Learning Partnership needed to more effectively leverage the expertise and assets of its members (e.g., the research and evaluation expertise that is abundant in universities),

meaningfully engage Scholars in learning activities (not only as sources of data but as learning agents) and optimize learning through coordination, and communication of learning activities and results (Universal Management Group, 2016). Further exploration of these findings suggested there was a strong desire among partners to connect, share, and learn from one another (Mastercard Foundation, 2017). Though there are many examples where this is already happening, there was a sense that spaces had to be intentionally created for this purpose.

Facilitating Connections

Convinced that learning emerges in relationships, the Foundation has been seeking to create spaces for authentic conversations, trust building, and constructive collaboration that enable partners to reflect collectively on experience, leverage their respective strengths and generate actionable insights that can be used to improve the Program and catalyze institutional and system-level change. In this section, I describe five ways in which the Foundation has been intentionally creating connections:

- Bringing partners together in learning convenings;
- Facilitating working groups and other opportunities for group learning and exchange;
- Resourcing institutional partnerships for capacity-building;
- Providing funds for collaborative research; and
- Fostering a Scholar community and alumni network

The Foundation brings partners together regularly to share experience and learn from one another in what we call **learning convenings**. These events usually bring together Presidents and program administrators from all our partner institutions as well as select Scholars, Foundation staff and board members, learning partners (e.g., researchers and evaluators), and other stakeholders such as employers/entrepreneurs. They are an opportunity to share perspectives and highlight innovative components of the Program.

Our most recent learning convening took place in Ghana in October 2018 and gathered 170 participants. The objectives of the Convening were to:

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- inspire and influence new thinking and the development of concrete actions to facilitate successful transitions of young people from school to work, within and beyond the Scholars Program;
- discuss the expansion and evolution of the Scholars Program, and other opportunities for collaboration and engagement to advance *Young Africa Works*; and
- strengthen the Scholars Program Learning Partnership, by clarifying the Program's theory of change and learning agenda and advancing partner-led research ideas.

The agenda involved:

- visits to partner institutions
- powerful presentations by Scholars on their transition journeys into university and from university to work or entrepreneurship;
- breakout discussions led by Ghana-based employers and entrepreneurs on the realities of the labour market for young people in the context of Ghana;
- a breakout discussion on the role of education institutions and the Scholars Program in realizing the goals of YAW strategy;
- an update on the Scholars Program Learning Partnership and facilitated discussion regarding the institutional and systems-change dimensions of the Program's theory of change;
- reciprocity circles, in which partners shared emergent challenges, and sought input and advice from one another on the implementation of the Scholars Program;
- a facilitated exercise for partners to identify and advance potential research ideas in response to a call for expressions of interest

One of the favorite activities highlighted in the post-meeting evaluation was the use of reciprocity circles, which allowed partners to connect with each other and share some of their practical wisdom. Participants took turns candidly sharing challenges in their own site, inviting the rest of the circle to brainstorm potential strategies to address them. Overall, it was a

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tremendously inspiring and energizing event where relationships were deepened, and many new connections were created.

Another space where learning is facilitated is through **Working Groups**. These are thematic core groups of partners designated to reflect and develop clear guidance on how to strengthen the core components of the Scholars Program, such as Transformative Leadership, Scholars' Wellbeing, Transitions, etc. For example, the Transitions Working Group was created:

1. To facilitate sharing of good practices and ideas among Scholars Program partners to enable effective Scholars transition support across the partnership
2. To identify and disseminate strategies to improve Scholar transition to work, entrepreneurship or further studies
3. To expand thought leadership in school to work transitions

Conversations normally happen through Zoom for about 90 minutes, at a time of day that accommodates colleagues from the North American West Coast to Eastern Africa. Overtime members of that working group have taken more active roles in facilitating these meetings.

A third way the Foundation builds connections is by facilitating **partnerships between institutions**. For example, with the support of the Foundation, the University of Gondar in Ethiopia and Queen's University in Canada have partnered to harness their respective strengths and commitments to advance their shared vision of empowering young people with disabilities. 60 faculty members from Gondar will study at Queen's, enabling University of Gondar to make commendable strides towards becoming a center of excellence in rehabilitation education in East Africa. Queen's, on its part, will benefit from joint research projects as well as the internationalization of its rehabilitation services and Occupational Therapy curriculum, through shared empirical, culturally-situated knowledge on disability research and rehabilitation education (Abebe, 2019).

This type of reciprocal partnerships is something the Foundation hopes to do more of as the Scholars Program is expanded, enabling reciprocal global partnerships between universities that results in joint degree programs, mentoring of faculty, etc. The goal is to leverage the

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relative strengths and comparative advantages of partner institutions and support activities that strengthen, or scale policies, programs and practices aligned with the Scholars Program.

Fourth, in response to a desire expressed by partners to address short- and medium-term learning needs (in addition to learning about impact of the Program over time), the Foundation has established two **research funds**, one for implementing partners and one for Scholars to conduct research projects that will inform the Scholars Program. The funds were designed collaboratively with partners and Scholars. In both funds, collaborative research projects are prioritized. The first round encouraged the generation of evidence on Scholars Program practices that can be scaled for institutional and system-level change.

Fifth, the Foundation and its partners seek to **connect Scholars** to one another locally and globally with the hope that a vibrant, purpose- and values-driven **alumni network** will offer alumni moral and practical support, inspiration and accountability. The network may also help them to secure employment, create jobs for others and expand their transformative impact. This is done in several ways, including an online platform called Baobab where students can interact, access information and take training modules, alumni engagement activities, and an annual summit called Baobab that brings Scholars together with mentors, topic experts and innovators over three days and gives them the opportunity to network and build community.

As the Foundation continues to refine its learning approach, we recognize a need to share leadership for the learning partnership with stakeholders. To promote partner, alumni, and external audience voice as well as ownership across the Learning Partnership, a **Learning Partnership Advisory Group (LPAG)** was established in 2018 to provide strategic input and advice to guide the overall Scholars Program Learning Partnership. The LPAG is key in shaping all the key Learning Partnership components described above. It provides broad oversight and accountability and promotes the application of our learnings. Its membership is established through a nomination process and includes representatives of partner institutions, at least one current Scholar, one alumna, and two to three external members that bring relevant expertise (e.g., from a research or employer perspective) for a total of 12 to 15 people.

Taken together, the different components of our Learning Partnership are producing knowledge and nurturing relationships, which we hope will not only improve the Program but also transform our institutions and influence other important stakeholders over time.

Learning Facilitation Capacity

The above are examples of spaces that the Foundation has been able to create so far. Overtime, we hope to create more spaces for exchange and collaborative learning, both face-to-face and virtual.

As internal capacity is built up, the Foundation has brought on the Social Science Research Council and the African Population Health Research Council as a learning facilitation team to help do the following:

- Update and maintain the Scholars Program learning framework so that the Learning Partnership has a clear common agenda and shared measurement;
- Support Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning (MERL) capacity and a reflective culture within partner organizations, and across the Learning Partnership;
- Facilitate communication and cross-partner learning (whether it is convening partners face-to-face or through other tools); and
- Support the development and delivery of a knowledge mobilization plan.

To accomplish these objectives, the Learning Facilitation team is playing the role of ‘critical friend’ to the Learning Partnership. They have been establishing responsive relationships with partners, are offering technical assistance to partners, and are supporting successful approaches to mobilize data and available insights for both partners and external stakeholders.

Reflections on Outcomes and Challenges

When we bring smart and committed people together and create a space for authentic conversations, we are often awed by the outcomes. This section provides examples of positive

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outcomes emerging out of these connections as well as the challenges associated with a Foundation seeking to convene partners for learning within the context of a multi-site initiative.

Outcomes

Since its launch in 2012, the Scholars Program has grown into one of the largest scholarship and leadership development programs for African youth. While there is always room for improvement and refinement, the core Scholars Program model has been a success. An impact evaluation has shown that the Program leads to increased educational attainment for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and enables Scholars to access high-quality degree programs and different learning environments that would otherwise be out of reach. This success has been enhanced by partners' relationships to each other. The Scholars Program evaluators argue that "Formed on the basis of shared values, these relationships were solidified by mutual trust and respect and nurtured by a willingness to learn together through trial and error" (Cosentino et al., *forthcoming*).

One concrete example of how partners have collaborated is in the Scholar recruitment process. Some of our tertiary education partners, both in and outside of Africa, have leveraged the assistance of organizations like [CAMFED](#) and [FAWE](#), our secondary education partners, who are grounded in local communities and have contextual knowledge, to identify deserving young people and help them navigate the application process. With more than 20,000 Scholars enrolled in or graduated from the Program to date, these practices have enabled our partners to successfully recruit large numbers of youth who meet the qualifying criteria of socio-economic disadvantage, academic talent, and the potential and commitment to give back as a leader. Beyond recruitment, partner universities and NGOs also forged new, or strengthened existing, linkages with local organizations—NGOs, schools, universities, employers, and community-based organizations to facilitate mentorship, leadership development, give back, professional development opportunities such as internships and in some cases, psychosocial supports. Scholars are generally performing well academically, and attrition from the Program is very low,

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which suggest these supports have been helpful (note that an upcoming longitudinal study will provide more insights into what inputs have influenced outcomes).

Partners' attention is now turned towards facilitating transitions into the world of work. Some have established partnerships with each other to strengthen their guidance counselling offerings and share resources to connect Scholars with potential employers.

Challenges

While collaboration has enabled the building of a strong program that contributes to positive outcomes for Scholars, the Program now has an opportunity to more intentionally mobilize others to action and we can and must do more to systematically generate and share evidence and learning to catalyze institutional and broader systems change.

Realizing the learning culture to which we aspire requires commitment of time, space, and priority. This can be challenging in our fast-paced organizations where immediate needs often take precedence. Added challenges of global collaboration include issues with technology (e.g., limited connectivity), different time zones (it is not unusual to have meeting participants spread across 11 time zones), and cost of bringing people together face-to-face, which is often more conducive to reflection and exchange than technology. We are starting to experiment with ways to share resources and create spaces for online collaboration and are curious to see what will generate the most take up.

As a convenor, another challenge is to balance the diversity of interests within the network. This includes establishing opportunities (e.g., research funding) that are aligned with the strategic priorities of the Foundation while also being responsive to emerging needs and interests of partners.

Because of the power differentials inherent in the funder-funding recipient relationship, our role as funder sometimes gets in the way of our role as convenor and facilitator. Much trust is needed for partners to, as Javier Hernandez (2011) puts it "be able to be open and honest with

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their capacity and work but at the same time be able to maintain the funding they are receiving.”

Closing Insights

The trust, practical wisdom, relationships and collaboration that have been built over the years is one of the Program’s greatest assets. Their development has required intentional effort and investment of resources and time, both from the Foundation and partner institutions.

As illustrated in this paper, the Scholars Program does not simply involve a funder/recipient relationship but a learning partnership. The Foundation and institutions together are responsible for surfacing insights from implementation and using them to improve upon what we do and how we work together. To advance towards our shared vision of socio-economic transformation in Africa, there is a need to more actively mobilize this knowledge, not only for continuous improvement of the Scholars Program itself but also for influence and greater impact beyond the Program.

Ultimately, our hunch is that it is the relationships between partners and between Scholars that will catalyze the transformative impact we want to see. As such, we are keen to continue to explore how to create a fertile ground for this collective leadership to take root and grow.

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