

Building Capacity Within National Character Initiative Grantees



The National Character Initiative (NCI) sought to bolster youth-serving organizations in supporting character development in youth and to advance the practices of adults who work with young people. The Foundation did so by investing in the organizational capacity of youth-serving organizations, with a focus on improving program quality and organizational infrastructure. Following, we describe how three organizations used funds and support from the NCI to develop capacity in supporting the workforce, improving program quality, and expanding research capacity.

Supporting the Workforce

The Foundation recognized that the youth development workforce plays an integral role in developing character in youth. They supported grantees in advancing knowledge about effective adult practices and transferring that knowledge to practitioners through professional development and training opportunities.

COACHING CORPS

Coaching Corps recruits, trains, and supports coaches who work in afterschool programs in underserved communities across the country. They used the NCI grant to develop a multi-tiered coach training system that improves adult practice in afterschool sports programs to foster youth character development.

Developing Coaching for Character

The Coaching for Character training prepares coaches to build social and emotional skills in youth and focuses on four character attributes—persistence, optimism, self-regulation, and empathy. Initially, Coaching for Character was developed to be implemented in-person but an online version was created, which was pivotal to expanding their reach to more regions nationally.

Coaching Corps piloted the training and solicited feedback from the pilot coaches. In response to that feedback, they developed the Coaching with Empathy training, which teaches coaches about how to create an empathetic environment and develop strong relationships with youth. Recognizing that successfully implementing a training system requires support beyond the initial training, Coaching Corps also built a virtual platform that allows coaches to get ongoing support, including more advanced resources and the opportunity to connect with other coaches.

What's Next?

Because Coaching Corps' strategic plan emphasizes scaling, they continue to work toward developing resources that can be used virtually. They plan to develop an online version of the Coaching with Empathy training and offer a wide range of services to regions beyond where they have staff. They plan to use the platform that they developed with the NCI grant as a springboard to develop another platform where coaches can independently access trainings and resources to strengthen their youth development skills.

Improving Program Quality

The Foundation sought to boost program quality by enhancing grantees' ability to collect and use data and then translate findings from data into practice. Grantees used the grants to develop continuous quality improvement processes that have been sustained in their organizations today.

BOYS & GIRLS CLUB OF AMERICA

Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) operates more than 4,000 clubs across the country that aim to provide youth with a high-quality club experience, in which they feel safe, make connections with adults, enjoy new experiences, have fun, and feel a sense of belonging. BGCA began the National Youth Outcomes Initiative survey in 2011—a measure that captures youth outcomes and perceptions of the club experience. Data from this measure indicated that youth who have high-quality experiences achieve better academic, character, and health outcomes. Therefore, BGCA used their NCI grant to enhance their continuous quality improvement (CQI) system—using research and evaluation to inform the development of professional development opportunities that improve adult practices.

Developing and Implementing the Continuous Quality Improvement Process

First, BGCA raised awareness to create a culture of CQI amongst clubs—they held town hall meetings with clubs, conducted data walks with clubs about how to use and interpret data, and released research briefs.

BGCA then used the grant to build a suite of professional developments and trainings that target program quality, including:

- *Program Basics Guidebook*—a suite of resources, including tools to help clubs be outcome-driven and planners that allow clubs to develop program plans and schedules.¹
- *Youth Development Toolbox*—an app with tips and activities that clubs can use to promote quality programming, including training opportunities.
- *Quality Networks*—a selection of clubs went through a CQI cycle—assess, plan, improve—with intensive coaching and technical assistance from BGCA.

BGCA staff saw increases in the percentage of youth who reported a high-quality club experience for the first time in 2019 and they attributed those gains, in part, to the work that they accomplished with their NCI grant.

What's Next?

BGCA plans to continue the CQI work in several areas. First, in response to the pandemic, they plan to establish a quality improvement process that can be implemented within a virtual setting. Second, they plan to focus on how to incorporate equity into the quality improvement process. Third, they plan to move toward a trauma-informed approach in their programming and will need to incorporate that into their quality improvement process.

Expanding Research Capacity

The Foundation understood that research and evaluation is integral to improving quality and supporting character development in youth. They aimed to help grantees establish a culture of learning that is grounded in data-driven improvement and bridges the gap between research and practice.

NATIONAL 4-H COUNCIL

The 4-H Council implements programs in more than 100 land-grant universities (LGUs), which requires a universal evaluation system that produces meaningful data to drive change. Common Measures is a system that LGUs can use to assess and report upon their outcomes, and to provide resources to stakeholders that can be used to plan for and conduct evaluations.

Developing and Implementing Common Measures

With support from the multiyear grant, the 4-H Council was able to expand upon the Common Measures by developing:

- *Survey tools*—six evaluation survey tools (Citizenship, Healthy Living, College-Career Readiness, Science, Universal Positive Youth Development, overall 4-H Experience) were developed in collaboration with staff at the 4-H Council, experts in the field, and staff from the LGUs and underwent rigorous psychometric testing.
- *Reporting process*—allows LGUs to enter data into a system and generate survey summaries and reports that LGUs share with donors and other key stakeholders and that LGUs can use to improve the development and implementation of programming.
- *Training system*—supports staff with implementation of Common Measures. A Lesson Study, a professional development peer-to-peer learning tool, allows staff to learn from each other's experiences in implementing the Common Measures.

The 4-H Council also used the grant to implement Common Measures in historically black colleges and universities and provide targeted coaching about how to implement Common Measures and use the data to inform program implementation.

As of August 2020, 60 of 76 LGUs within the 4-H Council are using the Common Measures to support their evaluation efforts. The Common Measures allows the 4-H Council to describe the impact of 4-H and write impact statements that garner buy-in from the universities they partner with and helps them expand fundraising into new donors.

What's Next?

The 4-H Council will push out a National Call for Data to inform continuous improvement of the Common Measures system. They also plan to develop additional survey tools, including measures of social and emotional learning, equity, and positive youth development. Lastly, the 4-H Council will develop an online learning system for the Common Measures.

Reflections

Grantees noted that the grantmaking approach that the Foundation used was unique in that the Foundation was interested in contributing to organizations' overall growth in terms of capacity, whereas other funders tend to think of growth in terms of reach. Grantees explained that this approach allowed their organizations to "learn, shift, and adapt based on what [they] learned," and the growth they made throughout the NCI could be sustained after the funding period ended.