



5 Insights for Accelerating Social Change:

A Report by ImpactED



2017

First Social Impact Collaborative Cohort Kicks Off

We've equipped 450 leaders across 84 organizations with the information, skills, and tools they need to use data to increase their impact.

2018

First DiverseForce On Boards Cohort Graduates

We've trained over 200 leaders who are now serving on the boards of nearly 150 organizations across the Philadelphia region.

2019

Drink Philly Tap Campaign Launches

Over 10,000 Philadelphians have signed the pledge to Drink Philly Tap and help make our city cleaner, greener, healthier, and more prosperous.

2020

Partners Pivoted Services During the Pandemic

We helped dozens of organizations adapt their service delivery to respond to shifting community needs during the pandemic.

2021

Barra Foundation Nonprofit Leaders' Circle Begins

We began engaging leaders from over 100 organizations to foster community and engage in collective problem-solving.

Reflecting on 5 Years of Impact at ImpactED...

Looking Forward and Backward at ImpactED's 5th Anniversary
Letter from Claire Robertson-Kraft, ImpactED Founder & Executive Director

Five years ago, we founded ImpactED to support social and public sector organizations looking to accelerate social change. Recognizing that mission-driven organizations rarely have access to meaningful and actionable data to expand their impact, we set out to provide high quality evaluation support.

While we have continued to equip organizations with data, we've realized that our work is about much more than facts and figures—it's about learning. Over the past five years, we have all learned a great deal. We've witnessed the devastating impact of racism and systemic oppression. We've seen the profound and disproportionate impact of the pandemic exacerbate existing inequalities in health care, employment, housing, and education. And we've lost far too many lives to gun violence.

And yet, in the midst of this uncertainty and crisis, we've also watched social change agents take courageous steps to respond to the needs of the communities they serve. Organizations have pivoted again and again to meet the immediate needs of their community while also launching new innovations to address deep-seated challenges and inequities. From the tremendous struggle of the last five years has come progress, growth, and even some hope.

Ultimately, we've learned that creating sustainable change requires setting a clear vision of who you serve and the impact you are working to achieve. It means using insights to inform continuous improvement across every aspect of your work. And it requires developing an organizational culture that supports learning and growth.

As we reflect on five years of partnership with 100+ social change organizations, we're taking a moment to look both backward and forward. We recently sat down with several of our partners to hear their reflections on their work and how they're thinking about the future of social change. Five common insights emerged.

Accelerating social change requires:



Expanding the focus



Cultivating connections



Generating actionable insights



Centering community



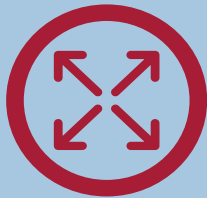
Trusting the process

Our thanks to those social change agents who shared their experience and insights for this report, and to all our valued partners who have shared their passion with us over these last five years.

Claire Robertson-Kraft
Founder and Executive Director, ImpactED



INSIGHT 1: EXPAND THE FOCUS



Social change agents are expanding their focus beyond direct service to work towards systemic change.

Over the past few years, organizations responding to basic needs, particularly those that support food access, education, healthcare, and other critical functions, have experienced surging need. In response, we’ve seen many extend their reach to serve new populations. For example, Philabundance worked in partnership with local organizations, health care, schools, and community groups to distribute 55 million pounds of food in 2020, which was 60% more than the prior year. This allowed them to serve thousands of people, many of whom were first-time visitors, across the nine-county region they serve.

In addition to extending their reach, many organizations we work with are responding to shifting community needs by focusing on systemic issues—whether that’s providing more holistic types of support or exploring the structural inequities leading to differential outcomes. Ensuring the physical safety, economic security, and mental health of community members and staff has become entwined with many organizations’ missions. And others are wrestling with deeper questions about how their work can influence systemic change.

We heard from our partners that accelerating social change requires expanding the focus beyond direct service to work towards change at the systems level. Organizations plan to continue expanding their current programming and services to respond to intensified needs. But unless—and until—we address the root causes of social problems, they worry that basic needs will continue to grow in ways that outpace available resources.

Expanding the focus to work towards systemic change requires organizational reflection, and likely, reprioritization. There is no one right answer for how to approach this type of strategic thinking—instead, it’s about asking the right (and hard!) questions.



“Philabundance is focused not only on relieving the hunger we see today, but also on striving to end hunger for good. The support provided with ImpactED has helped us to lay the groundwork for how we approach and measure this work, ensuring we are working in partnership with the communities we serve.”

— Loree Jones, Chief Executive Officer, Philabundance



ECBI Cohort 2 Theory of Change Session



KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR EXPANDING THE FOCUS



Consider your purpose. What impact will your organization hold itself accountable to over the long term and why does this matter?



Identify the individuals and communities who are at the center of your work. Is your approach informed by their needs and voices?



Explore the scope, nature, and extent of the problem. What part(s) of the problem are you working to address? How does your approach account for the structural issues that have shaped the experiences of different groups and led to differential outcomes?

CASE STUDY

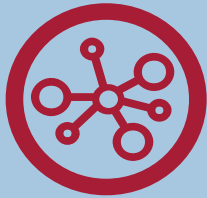
Supporting Systems Change Theory of Change (TOC) Process

Over the last five years, ImpactED has helped dozens of organizations develop or refine an existing organizational theory of change. A TOC is a strategic blueprint that outlines the ultimate change an organization is seeking to achieve and all the conditions that are needed to bring about that desired change. Developing an organizational TOC requires deepening your understanding of the problem you’re trying to solve, clarifying the intended impact you seek, and ensuring your programs and services are responsive to the needs and goals of those you serve.

For example, as part of their participation in the Pew Fund Evaluation Capacity Building Initiative (ECBI), which we run in collaboration with [McClanahan Associates](#), Philabundance developed a bold new strategy: [Ending Hunger For Good](#). This strategy allowed the organization, through collaboration, to focus on the cycle of no-win decisions too many are faced with daily: Do I buy food or medicine? Heat or eat? Pay for lunch or a bus pass? They developed a TOC to disrupt the cycle of spending tradeoffs between food and other necessities that perpetuate food insecurity.

For more information on our theory of change process, please see our [Theory of Change Overview Guide](#).

INSIGHT 2: CULTIVATING CONNECTIONS



Social change agents are cultivating connections to achieve greater impact.

The last five years have reinforced the scale and complexity of social problems. No single organization, however effective or resourced, can fully address community needs. In response, organizations like the Maternity Care Coalition have developed strategic partnerships to connect their clients to resources and services that address their holistic goals. Other organizations in the region have joined forces. At the beginning of the pandemic, the United Way teamed up with the City of Philadelphia to launch The Promise, a coalition-based effort to reduce the poverty rate in Philadelphia. More recently, two landmark education nonprofits—Philadelphia Futures and Steppingstone Scholars—merged so they could leverage their respective strengths to better serve students.

In addition to collaborative work, we’ve also seen increased interest in peer networks. In summer 2020, we surveyed a subset of local nonprofit leaders who shared that of a range of possible supports, what they needed most was a learning community of peers. Across our programs, leaders have been eager for opportunities to connect with, learn from, and share experiences with their peers. If the past few years of isolation have reinforced anything, it’s the value of social connection and learning.

The partners we spoke with believe that accelerating social change requires sustaining—and expanding—these cross-organizational learning and collaborative efforts. They saw the value of building meaningful connections and working towards a common goal. But they also reflected on the challenges of cultivating cooperation across the social sector. Given the [Nonprofit Hunger Games](#) scarcity mentality, funders have an important role to play in incentivizing and supporting collaborative efforts. Ultimately, cultivating connections starts with building authentic and trusting relationships.



“I actually think that the word ‘coalition’ is key to how we’re going to accomplish anything. No one organization is going to move this needle in a way that we all really can. This is the message I give within our organization and to the donor community: we need for us all to be working together.”

— Marianne Fray, CEO, Maternity Care Coalition



ImpactED & DiverseForce team at the P4 Hub launch



KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR CULTIVATING CONNECTIONS

- ✓ **Target partnerships that maximize strengths and fill gaps.** What is your organization’s unique value, as well as the limitations of your perspective? How can you partner with other organizations who bring different expertise?
- ✓ **Develop a shared set of goals, language, and measures of success.** How do you define the problem you are working to address and what role do different organizations play in solving it? How can you create a common language and shared measures of success (both across organizations and among your organization’s staff, constituents, boards, and funders)?
- ✓ **Co-create community agreements.** What do individuals participating in the network need from their peers? What norms and expectations would contribute to the group’s success and what does the group want to be held accountable to?

CASE STUDY

Cultivating Connections Learning Networks for Leaders

ImpactED runs several learning networks for leaders in the region. Each of our networks is run in collaboration with one of our long-standing partners: [DiverseForce](#), [Witty Gritty](#), and [Connect the Dots](#).

In 2017, we launched the DiverseForce On Boards program in partnership with DiverseForce to address the lack of racial diversity on boards. The program equips alumni with key board governance skills and resources while also building a growing and dynamic network of connected leaders of color who are committed to creating positive societal change. The relationships built during the program last well beyond the final session, providing alumni with a critical source of friendships, mentorships and social capital. Over the past five years, we’ve trained over 200 leaders who are now serving on the boards of nearly 150 organizations across the region.

More recently, in collaboration with partners Connect the Dots and Witty Gritty, we launched the Nonprofit Leaders Circle, funded by The Barra Foundation, to respond to the shifting needs of the nonprofit community amidst the pandemic. To inform the design of this program, we surveyed and brought leaders together to better understand their needs and goals. Building on these insights, we hosted a series of convenings and peer community sessions to elevate promising practices from the group and provide a space for nonprofit leaders to share and learn together. Over the course of the first year, we built a resource toolkit with concrete tools and strategies aligned to the issues surfaced by leaders.

Click on the following links to learn more about [DiverseForce On Boards](#) and [The Nonprofit Leaders Circle](#).

INSIGHT 3: GENERATING ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS



Social change agents are generating actionable insights to respond to their communities' shifting needs and goals.

While organizations have always recognized the value of nimbly responding to community needs, this has recently taken on a whole new sense of urgency. At the beginning of the pandemic, organizations had to immediately adapt their services to be delivered in new ways, sometimes overnight. For example, Opera Philadelphia shifted their youth programming to be virtual and launched the Opera Philadelphia Channel, which brought a full season of performances into people's homes through digital platforms. And they were certainly not alone in implementing these types of shifts. Indeed, deciding how to "pivot" was every organization's focus in 2020.

This challenge isn't actually a new one. There's never been a shortage of needs, and it's always been a challenge for our partner organizations to decide how best to expend limited resources to achieve the greatest impact. However, there has been an increased desire for solutions that can be put into practice in real time, not at the end of a lengthy process or in a document that sits on a shelf. We've seen many organizations ask how their strategy and evaluation practices can be revised to generate more meaningful—and actionable—data.

Successfully transforming insights into action is an essential component of a learning organization. But it's also easier said than done. Our partners talked about the importance of building a culture and a set of practices that prioritize learning first and foremost. While data can be a means of demonstrating impact to funders, the priority should be more deeply understanding the needs of the individuals and communities being served.

"I bring a different lens when talking about data that I didn't have before: an understanding of what story is actually being told. We get the student voice into our work in a way that we've just never had. We've created a dashboard that is so beautiful! Anyone can understand our thought process and know exactly what we are driving to."

— **Veronica Chapman-Smith, Vice President of Community Initiatives, Opera Philadelphia**



CASE STUDY

Generating Actionable Insights *Opera Philadelphia Community Initiatives*

At ImpactED, we believe evaluation should be used to inform decisions in an ongoing, timely way. Our approach focuses not only on data collection and analysis but also on helping our partners develop a customized evaluation strategy and plan for using data to inform learning and action.

The Community Initiatives department of Opera Philadelphia has partnered with ImpactED since 2020 to formalize their theory of change, establish key evaluation questions, and design and implement a data collection and reporting strategy that centers feasibility, usefulness, and participant voice. Central to this strategy is the use of program-level dashboards that summarize findings including satisfaction, change in participant knowledge and skills over time, program strengths, and opportunities for improvement. The ImpactED team updates program-level dashboards shortly after participants complete post-program surveys, then shares dashboards in advance of meaning-making sessions held with key program stakeholders.

Meaning-making sessions encourage stakeholders to reflect on what findings stand out most, what questions emerge, and how these findings inform program adjustments. This timely, learning-focused approach ensures the Opera Philadelphia team is equipped to use results in real time and modify their approach prior to the launch of the next program cohort. Starting in the fall of 2022, the ImpactED team will be working closely with the Opera Philadelphia team to transition survey data collection, analysis, reporting, and meaning-making to their internal staff, which will further support their internal capacity to use data to inform learning and action beyond their work with ImpactED.



KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR GENERATING ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS



Identify the data that will be most meaningful to key stakeholders. What data matters most and how will stakeholders be able to use that data to advance equitable outcomes?



Ensure you have the capacity to collect quality data. Is there useful data available on a timely basis and if not, can you develop ways to collect it that are not burdensome to staff? Can the data be disaggregated by subgroups to identify disparities?



Consider how the data will resonate with a broad range of stakeholders. Will the data be accessible and understandable to your stakeholders, and in particular, the individuals and communities you serve?

INSIGHT 4: CENTERING COMMUNITY



Social change agents are centering community perspectives in decision-making and planning processes.

Many of our partners, including our DiverseForce On Boards (DFOB) alumni, have shared that the voices of communities most impacted by programs and policies are oftentimes not heard or reflected in the decision-making processes of organizations. In addition, individuals in leadership roles frequently do not represent the communities they serve, which can perpetuate this disconnect. Historically, philanthropy has made the situation worse by viewing data and evidence collected from outside experts as more legitimate than community perspectives.

Over the past few years, we’ve seen this paradigm shifting, as the number of social sector organizations and foundations taking an equity stance has continued to grow. Many organizations are focused on building authentic relationships and more meaningfully engaging with the individuals and communities they serve. Going beyond just understanding needs, they are also thinking about ways to share—and shift—power.

Ultimately, accelerating social change requires centering the individuals who have unique insights into the challenges their communities face at each stage of the process—from design to implementation to evaluation. This type of impactful engagement is not temporary or quick. To be sure, building trusting relationships takes time, empathy, and intentionality.



“From a big picture standpoint, conducting strategy and evaluation processes through an equity lens requires us to think about flipping some traditional power structures and considering how to really, meaningfully engage.”

— Michael O’Bryan, Founder, Humanature and DiverseForce On Boards Cohort 3 Alumnus



Drink Philly Tap Ambassadors



KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR CENTERING COMMUNITY



Deepen your understanding of the communities you serve.

What do they value? What are their motivations for their current involvement?



Layer your outreach and engagement tactics to meet the needs of different communities.

How can you tailor your engagement strategies to meet the communities you serve where they are? Can you offer a range of different ways to engage that respond to varying needs and preferences?



Clarify your decision-making processes and consider how you can shift power.

How might you democratize decision-making and involve the individuals and communities you serve in your planning and evaluation processes? What power will they have to inform, influence, or make decisions?

CASE STUDY

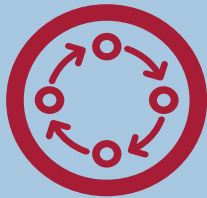
Centering Community Drink Philly Tap Campaign

Starting in 2016, ImpactED partnered with the Philadelphia Water Department (PWD) to survey Philadelphians about the Water Department and our water in general. Over the last six years, more than 20,000 Philadelphians have participated in this research and shared their opinions about PWD and our water in general. From 2016–2019, the survey consistently found that approximately 40% of city residents drank bottled water at home instead of tap. Black and Brown Philadelphians, lower income residents, and Philadelphians with lower levels of education drank bottled water at even higher rates than other groups.

In response, the Drink Philly Tap (DPT) initiative launched in 2019 to empower residents of Philadelphia with information and knowledge to choose drinking tap water over bottled water. At the core of this project was the DPT ambassador program. Ambassadors from neighborhoods with high rates of drinking bottled water at home were recruited and educated about Philadelphia’s drinking water treatment, delivery, and safety. By having ambassadors speak directly to their neighbors and peers, the skepticism around messaging was reduced. To date, over 10,000 Philadelphians have signed the pledge to Drink Philly Tap and help make our city cleaner, greener, healthier, and more prosperous.

For more information on the project and a toolkit we developed on how to create successful ambassador programs, please visit the project website [linked here](#).

INSIGHT 5: TRUSTING THE PROCESS



Social change agents are staying focused on their purpose while trusting the dynamic and sometimes uncertain process of change.

At the beginning of every collaboration, we ask our clients to “trust the process,” which is more than a classic Philadelphia sports reference. Particularly over the last few years, organizations have had to navigate a “VUCA” environment—one that is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. We’ve found that the way for organizations to continually improve is to start small and remember that change takes time. This requires trusting the work you put in and staying committed to a sometimes messy and iterative process.

Ultimately, the process is as important as the outcome. Organizational leaders need to create safe spaces for staff to admit when things don’t go as planned and authorize them to try new approaches. This requires building more human and inclusive processes. Our partners discussed how they are putting authentic relationships at the center of change efforts.

They also spoke about the importance of staying connected to their organization’s purpose. This clear vision for impact can serve as an anchor as organizations find their way through the dynamic and uncertain process of change. However, accelerating social change also requires continually updating your strategic roadmap based on new data and information. While the vision can serve as a “North Star,” it’s important to remain curious and flexible.

Indeed, leaning in to trust the process doesn’t start with answers—it starts with questions.

“One of the lessons that we really took home was to not let the perfect be the enemy of the good. My recommendation for other organizations would be to just get started with one iteration of the work and really allow yourself to learn from your mistakes. What’s most important is to dig in and make a real commitment towards the work.”

— **Andy Viren, Performance Manager, Philadelphia Parks and Recreation**



CASE STUDY

Trusting the Process Piloting the Process of Change

In 2017, we launched our first evaluation-capacity building program with support from the William Penn Foundation (WPF). Since then, we have equipped 450 leaders across 84 organizations with the information, skills, and tools they need to use data to increase their impact. As part of the process, each participating organization selects a program or project to be the focus of their engagement in the initiative. This piloting process allows them to start small and focus on the process of change.

For example, a team at the Philadelphia Department of Parks & Recreation wanted to learn more about their summer camp programming. They’d been doing things the same way for over 50 years and while they knew intuitively the impact their programs had on kids and communities, they didn’t have data to support those beliefs. They wanted to better understand—and communicate—their “Why?” to further invest field staff in the work. What they learned is that many staff had negative past experiences with evaluation and viewed data as being about compliance and judgment, rather than learning and growth. Ultimately, they realized that building a culture of learning would require intentional commitment to the process well beyond their participation in the Social Impact Collaborative program.

For more information on the Philadelphia Parks & Recreation experience trusting the process, please [click here](#).



KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR TRUSTING THE PROCESS



Create time and space to have critical conversations about your work. How can you carve out space and time for reflection, feedback, and adjustment?



Allow for flexibility and “failure.” How can you encourage staff to experiment with new ways of doing things to increase impact? How can you frame “failure” as an opportunity for learning?



Center humanity in the process. How can you create the space and conditions for the types of candid and honest conversations necessary to challenge assumptions and drive change?



Toward the Future of Accelerating Social Change

At ImpactED, we've learned to trust the process as well. Over our five years of supporting nonprofit and public sector organizations, we have worked to become a learning organization ourselves.

Like many organizations in the region, we've adapted our programs to offer training and support online and built our skill in virtual data collection methods. We've reflected on how our efforts to incorporate equity into our work have fallen short and committed to investing in both individual and organizational learning and action. And we've brought our whole selves to work by developing new practices for connecting as a team.

Through it all, we've found energy in our relationships with our partners, whose tremendous adaptability and resilience continue to inspire us each day. We've learned from them that social change agents are:

- Expanding their focus beyond direct service to work towards systemic change.
- Cultivating connections to achieve greater impact.
- Generating actionable insights to respond to their communities' shifting needs and goals.
- Centering community perspectives in decision-making and planning processes.
- Staying focused on their purpose while trusting the dynamic and sometimes uncertain process of change.

Above all else, we've learned that continuous improvement requires wrestling with big questions and being comfortable with not having all the answers. As we move into the next five years, we're committed to asking the right questions and continuing to trust the process.

We invite you to join us.



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