



Uniting Across Difference: A Blueprint for Philanthropy

December 2024



MINNESOTA COUNCIL
ON FOUNDATIONS

NOTE FROM THE MINNESOTA COUNCIL ON FOUNDATIONS

In the fall of 2022, MCF facilitated our annual CEO Retreat, which brings the leadership of Minnesota’s foundations together to connect and learn from each other. These leaders recognized a shared experience – many of their communities struggled to adapt to significant changes within their communities and across Minnesota’s diverse geographies. The leaders who had gathered saw a shared experience of rising anxiety and increasing divisiveness. At the same time, they saw that philanthropic dollars were not being equitably distributed, with a gap for Minnesota’s rural communities. A question began to take hold – what would it take to build stronger bridges and a sense of belonging across Minnesota, specifically between our urban and rural communities?

Minnesota Council on Foundations (MCF) members began exploring how philanthropy could play a leadership role in uniting Minnesotans across lines of difference. In 2023, our members recommended that MCF start Rural Urban Bridging for Impact (RUBI), a new project to support philanthropic knowledge and action that builds bridges within, and across, our state’s diverse communities.

As conveners and bridge builders, philanthropy is uniquely positioned to create an aspirational vision that unites Minnesotans across differences, especially rural and urban geography. When philanthropy comes together, good things happen – knowledge is shared, funding is aligned, practices are streamlined, and bridges are built. We’re proud that our members came together, and we developed “Uniting Across Difference: A Blueprint for Philanthropy” to share what we’ve learned and provide a starting point for funders interested in facilitating urban/rural interdependence.

This isn’t the work of any single philanthropy, nor is it the work of any single organization. Changing systems requires all of us. We’re excited to continue supporting our members in practicing what Minnesotans do best – working together to achieve common goals. Together, we can make Minnesota a place where every community thrives.

Susie Brown

PRESIDENT

MINNESOTA COUNCIL ON FOUNDATIONS

“The problem of ‘Othering’ is the problem of the 21st century.”

JOHN A. POWELL, DIRECTOR OF THE OTHERING & BELONGING INSTITUTE

Minnesota’s communities are experiencing the impacts of uncertainty and accelerated change.

Although change is not new – it may be the only constant – we haven’t previously experienced the interrelation, pace and depth of the changes occurring at this time. New technologies are changing what we view as possible in nearly every aspect of our lives, from healthcare, to our workplaces, to how we communicate with each other. Our climate has already changed and will continue to change, bringing increased temperatures, extreme storms, and intense floods. Our urban and rural communities are increasingly diverse, and more people of different racial, ethnic, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds are now living alongside each other. We are also witnessing the continuation, and sometimes acceleration of, globalization, geopolitical fragmentation and economic systems that perpetuate inequality.



In short: this is a lot of change, happening very quickly. Many of us are still building our skillsets in understanding, much less adapting, to change, and **the impacts of this uncertainty and accelerated change often increase the collective anxiety in our communities.** This, in turn, increases the conditions for “**breaking**” and “**othering**” experiences, in which people **fear the future, pull away from each other**, and in the worst cases, **view each other as threats.** “Breaking” experiences can lead to **dangerous outcomes** – when we deny the humanity of our neighbors, people get hurt.

MCF’s philanthropic members recognized that this was happening across Minnesota. We believed that different experiences – experiences of “**bridging**” and “**belonging**” were possible. In these experiences, we **create the space to hear each other**, even through difference, and **acknowledge our shared humanity** without requiring sameness. We also recognize that **our lives and livelihoods are deeply interconnected**, and we have the **resilience to view times of change as opportunities for possibility, renewal and innovation.**

This led to the creation of the **Rural Urban Bridging for Impact at MCF (RUBI)**, which equips philanthropy to strengthen Minnesota by promoting urban/rural interdependence and reducing urban/rural divides. As a philanthropic community, we believe that we're stronger together and can **Unite Across Difference**. We also believe that, with support, **Minnesotans will naturally connect and build bridges**, nurturing safety and inclusion in the face of marginalization and across differences in rural and urban perspectives.

Our members guided the creation of a “north star” – a vision for MCF’s membership, which could guide their work individually, as well as their work in collaboration with each other, to support a long term vision of Minnesotans across our broad geographies, differing identities, and rich cultural histories experiencing a sense of **belonging and interdependence**.

<p>If MCF members are...</p>	<p>Active, authentic, and engaged participants in funding, learning, connecting, and convening to encourage greater belonging...</p>
<p>That empowers MCF members to...</p>	<p>Use our diverse resources to support the self-determination, well-being, and collective good of our communities...</p>
<p>So that we'll start to see...</p>	<p>Minnesotans with the skills, knowledge, and experiences to connect and build bridges, nurturing safety and inclusion in the face of marginalization and across differences in rural and urban perspectives....</p>
<p>Ultimately contributing to our long-term vision of...</p>	<p>Minnesotans across our broad geographies, differing identities, and rich cultural histories experiencing a sense of belonging and interdependence.</p>

Through RUBI, we learned more about what it takes to bridge divides and create belonging. We need **stories, relationships, skillsets and structures** to effectively bridge and create experiences of belonging, particularly within and between urban and rural geographies.

STORIES

As humans, we learn through story. When we talk about changing narratives, that involves telling **powerful, compelling stories** that shatter preconceived understandings of urban and rural geographies. Through these stories, we can **build new understandings** of the people and places of Minnesota that celebrate our geographies, identities and cultural histories.

This can look like...

- Funding **media and storytelling** – documentaries, films, podcasts, etc. – that highlight diverse perspectives;
- Supporting **journalists and media outlets** committed to reporting on under-covered issues;
- Catalyzing the **creativity and power of Minnesota’s working artists and culture bearers**, supporting theater, music, dance, visual art and other creative projects produced by, and reflective of, diverse audiences;
- Supporting **community-based organizations** to develop and tell their own stories;
- Providing **capacity building**, which can include guaranteed income, training workshops and leadership development for cultural practitioners;
- Investing in **research and learning** to understand the impact of storytelling in promoting bridging and belonging.
- **Supporting culture brokers** who have the cross-cultural understanding to bridge gaps between different groups
- **Supporting museums and cultural centers** to promote a better understanding of the history and context of different communities



RELATIONSHIPS

We need to be in **relationship with each other**. This requires practice; it's not always easy to start, build and strengthen relationships across lines of difference. We need **lived experiences** in which we can practice listening and learning from each other, learning what it feels like to experience belonging.

We do our work in a large and diverse region, and to do it well requires strong relationships. What helps us connect in one place might not work in another, so we must push ourselves to listen, adapt and center the context of the people we serve in anything we do.

The work of bridging is really about connecting with and seeing one another. It's about being curious about others and how they see the world, and being open to learning from someone else's experiences.

ANITA PATEL, VICE PRESIDENT OF GRANTMAKING, BUSH FOUNDATION

This can look like...

- **Facilitating community dialogues and forums** to promote understanding and empathy across lines of difference;
- **Advancing cross-community exchanges**, in which urban residents spend time in rural communities (and vice versa) to listen and learn from each other;
- **Providing capacity-building investments** to key organizations, networks, and intermediaries focused on civic engagement, organizing, and participation;
- **Supporting collaborative approaches to problem-solving and conflict resolution** that build a sense of shared responsibility for community well-being, equipping people from diverse backgrounds to work together and take ownership of shared challenges within their community (e.g. voting, community funds, main street revitalization projects, community and economic development initiatives, etc.);
- **Hosting conferences and convenings**, making it possible for community leaders from across the state to listen and learn from each other;
- **Paying expenses for relaxed community gatherings** – covering the financial costs of gatherings, such as event venues, food, take-away items, etc.
- Supporting activities to **evaluate and strengthen internal organizational relationships**.

SKILLSETS

We need new skillsets, equipping ourselves to **exercise civic leadership** across lines of difference in our day-to-day lives, as well as in our positions of governance. **Leading** (and following!) in ways that support belonging **is a skillset**, and it likely requires new approaches to leadership development.

We get particularly excited about what happens when you physically bring people together. The pandemic, social media, confirmation bias, and ongoing intentionally divisive messages have pushed people into small clusters of cultural homogeneity. We are thrilled that some of our partner organizations intentionally bring people together from remarkably different backgrounds (racial, political, ideological, geographical) for deep and meaningful conversations. We revel in reports of strangers connecting and seeing the good in folks who are different from themselves.

JOHN LARSEN, JOHN LARSEN FOUNDATION

This can look like...

- **Equipping community leaders with bridging/belonging training**, strengthening their abilities to bring diverse groups of people together around challenging issues such as housing and child care shortages, support for new immigrants and refugees, and gaps in education and healthcare services;
- **Providing immersive resourcing, support, training and peer networking** for emerging community leaders, investing in their growth and leadership;
- **Funding civic education**, equipping communities with the knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors needed to participate in civic life.
- **Training on understanding and changing narratives.**
- **Promoting language and terminology** that promotes bridging and belonging.



STRUCTURES

Some of our **policies, practices and resource flows** support bridging and belonging, but many don't. We need to work together to create, advance and/or support **structural changes** that make it easier for Minnesotans to experience belonging and interdependence, while also shifting or dismantling structures that “other” and/or “break” in our communities.

This can look like...

- **Supporting advocacy and public policy strategies** that promote belonging and interdependence;
- **Developing pooled funds** that make it easier for diverse philanthropies and donors to resource community needs;
- **Gathering, interpreting, and sharing grantmaking “success stories”** for funders, supporting their learning and development on strategies to advance bridging and belonging;
- **Improving community-based financial infrastructure**, such as CDFIs, to increase access to capital for all of our state's communities;
- **Providing consistent resourcing for community institutions** engaged in shifting policies, practices and resource flows.
- **Creating and analyzing data** to identify areas for future attention and collaboration

“Bridging and belonging offer powerful ways to connect people and communities to each other. The language itself offers framing that includes everyone. As active verbs, the work of bridging and belonging is ongoing and implies that we will make mistakes but are committed to the result to see all of our communities thrive. We have seen many non-profits serve in this role due to their mission and work in their communities and have been proud to support them.”

**TERRI THAO, PROGRAM DIRECTOR, LOCAL INITIATIVES & OPPORTUNITIES
MARGARET A. CARGILL PHILANTHROPIES**

EACH AND EVERY ONE OF US HAS A ROLE TO PLAY IN FACILITATING URBAN/RURAL INTERDEPENDENCE.

We're hopeful that these ideas can guide your actions and strengthen your foundation's commitment to bridging and belonging. We also encourage you to join MCF's RUBI Network, which hosts member briefings and workshops, as well as opportunities for peer sharing and learning.

If you're interested in joining us:

- **Find out more about the work of RUBI** by connecting with Dave Anderson, danderson@mcf.org.
- **Read the [RUBI progress report](#)** from August 2024.
- Sign up to get notifications of ongoing work through the [RUBI listserv](#).



MINNESOTA COUNCIL
ON FOUNDATIONS

800 N WASHINGTON AVE

SUITE 703

MINNEAPOLIS, MN 55401

612.338.1989

INFO@MCF.ORG