

LUMINA FOUNDATION FOR EDUCATION
CAN A CHAMPION
FOR COLLEGE ATTAINMENT
UP ITS GAME?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Established in 2000, Lumina Foundation for Education's mission is defined by a specific goal: to increase the proportion of Americans with high-quality college degrees, certificates and credentials to 60 percent by 2025. The foundation's 2013–2016 strategic plan, called Goal 2025, has two main imperatives: Mobilizing to Reach Goal 2025 and Designing and Building a 21st Century Higher Education System. In 2012, the foundation had \$1,137,783,686 in assets and made grant payments of \$48,388,149.

NCRP's review found that Lumina Foundation meets and exceeds many of the criteria for exemplary philanthropy in its goals and strategies, but some areas have room for improvement as the foundation continues to grow and evolve. Overall, the extensive information and data gathered through this review process paint a picture of a highly focused, effective foundation with extremely savvy policy advocacy strategies, staff that are well respected and initiatives that are making early progress toward the foundation's ambitious goal of college completion.

Stakeholders view the foundation's singular purpose of higher education improvement and articulation of a concrete, measurable goal of 60 percent high quality degree, certificate or credential attainment for all Americans by 2025 as a starting point for success. Some aspects of its 2013–2016 Goal 2025 strategic plan are seen as more grounded in evidence or best practice than others. Its agenda is a long-term and comprehensive one.

Feedback from grantees and other stakeholders and NCRP's analysis of the data raise specific issues that warrant further examination. In particular, refinement of the Com-

munity Partnerships for Attainment, an initiative involving 20 metropolitan areas from across the country, and deeper engagement of community stakeholders in strategy development were highlighted by key informants during this review. As Lumina Foundation board and staff continue to refine and implement their 2013–2016 strategic plan, NCRP offers several recommendations that it believes will strengthen the plan, enhance partnerships with local communities and ultimately lead to greater impact.

KEY FINDINGS

Below are the key findings from NCRP's assessment:

- 1. Lumina Foundation's goals and strategies have an explicit focus on systemic change, benefitting affected communities and addressing root causes of inequity.** Policy and program experts described the foundation's strategic plan as aimed forcefully and directly at addressing systemic inequities. The Achieving the Dream initiative was explicitly identified as a key investment in community colleges where significant proportions of low-income, first-generation and minority students pursue postsecondary education. The foundation's stance on balancing strategic and responsive approaches to philanthropy is unclear, and some expressed concern regarding the extent to which underserved communities are determining and leading their own strategies.
- 2. The foundation's varied strategies exhibited mixed levels of evidence or best practice.** The foundation's 2013–2016 strategic plan cites authoritative data and research. Some of the plan's strategies are well-

grounded in evidence or best practice, such as the academic, social and financial supports needed to aid students to complete degrees. However, strategies to mobilize metropolitan areas and the higher education sector and to develop new systems of quality credentials were identified as needing clarification, research and development.

3. Lumina Foundation has been very effective in asserting its role among funders and policymakers to advance its postsecondary education agenda.

Recognizing its niche in a broader ecosystem, the foundation has used its singular purpose of college completion and its national presence to influence a postsecondary policy agenda at federal and state levels. Supporters and critics alike described the foundation as very effective in advancing policy goals.

4. Strategy development is perceived as having insufficient involvement of underrepresented communities and as occurring mostly through internal deliberations.

The foundation has not emphasized engaging affected communities in developing strategy. It is better known for its policy advocacy approach and for engaging policy communities in developing and refining strategies and tactics. About two-thirds of grantees surveyed reported that the foundation had not asked them for feedback about grantmaking strategies or practices in the last three years.

5. The newly launched, 20-metropolitan area Community Partnerships for Attainment (CPA) build on prior place-based work, but stakeholders expressed concern about the foundation's approach.

Stakeholders noted that as a national funder, the foundation may not be best positioned for wide-

spread place-based work, that deeper more deliberate engagement is needed with local partners, and that greater financial resources are needed in the long term to ensure sustainability. Local partners working with Lumina expressed concern that national funders often struggle with fulfilling commitments; coordinating multiple, local efforts; and possessing the requisite staff with experience and credibility to successfully implement local reforms.

6. The foundation is praised for making strong early progress in raising awareness of the need for postsecondary completion, but beneficiary outcomes remain modest.

The most frequently cited success of the foundation was bringing attention to the need for higher levels of college attainment. The foundation has been effective in its thought leadership, use of policy networks, context setting and research dissemination. Program outcomes remain modest, and third party evaluations of major initiatives have yet to conclude that hallmark funded initiatives have significantly increased grades, college retention, credits earned or college completion.

7. Foundation staff periodically consider data in strategy discussions; however, external partners lacked awareness of the foundation's use of data or grantee feedback for strategy adjustments.

Lumina Foundation is recognized for having a strong learning and evaluation culture, and foundation staff value structured learning opportunities as well as the use of metrics to inform strategy conversations. Despite internal consideration of data by staff, interviewed experts and most surveyed grantees could not cite instances or express knowledge of the foundation modifying strategies based on feedback.

8. Grantees overwhelmingly view Lumina Foundation as a highly effective partner, primarily because of high-quality relationships with staff and collaborative activities with partners.

The foundation is praised for its relationships with grantees and for its nonmonetary support. On the whole, staff quality is highly rated, and program staff is perceived as well-liked and respected, open to dialogue, self-aware and humble, and supportive. The quality of the foundation's collective approaches with other philanthropic organizations and policy entities was perceived as very effective. Partnership quality with nonprofit, business and media sectors varied. Evaluation practices and multi-year funding are relevant, appropriate and valued.

9. Lumina Foundation governance and internal processes support effectiveness, yet the foundation's ambitious goals may warrant greater allocation of resources.

The foundation paid out grants at a rate higher than required to ensure that grantees' capacity and the foundation's mission were not adversely affected by the recession. Yet, given observers' concerns about the level of investment in place-based efforts, and the gradual progress to date in raising completion rates, greater payout amounts of grants dollars over the next decade may be needed to achieve a 60 percent degree attainment by 2025.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Below are NCRP's recommendations to Lumina Foundation that we believe will help further boost the foundation's effectiveness and impact:

1. Continue strategies and practices the foundation is doing well.

Maintain focus on clear, measurable goals. Continue momentum at state and national policy levels to draw policymakers' attention to college completion and equity. Continuing to serve as a thought leader will aid in realigning system actors toward Goal 2025.

2. Heed stakeholders' concerns, retool the foundation's role and bolster its funding and capacity to effectively support community-based work.

Distinguish levels of readiness and maturity for collective impact among metropolitan communities. Determine needs and provide resources to ensure approaches are culturally appropriate. Provide customized levels of technical assistance and funding, especially to ensure that intended beneficiary populations can meaningfully participate in shaping and implementing sustainable strategies. Build continuity among foundation staff and coordinate staff working on overlapping strategies in the same geographies. Recognize the foundation's limits as a national funder and prioritize deep site engagement over breadth. Building the foundation's knowledge, networks and capacity for fostering community partnerships in metropolitan areas will ensure that its place-based efforts add value to existing local initiatives.

3. Strengthen strategies that will effectively engage targeted beneficiary populations in achieving Goal 2025.

Partner with community organizing leaders as well as national advocacy organizations to ensure that community perspectives are invited and heard, and

identify ways that grassroots beneficiary engagement can accelerate progress toward Goal 2025.

- 4. Enlist credible voices to explain to external audiences the foundation's focus on both equitable access and quality educational outcomes.** Enlisting credible postsecondary institution actors to explain the issue of ensuring high-quality degrees, certificates and credentials while also boosting attainment numbers will facilitate alignment among partners. Applying effective communications strategies, including among equity-focused and targeted constituencies, will ensure that stakeholders see the foundation as a trusted partner committed to similar goals and, thus, are willing to align efforts accordingly.

- 5. Create structured and targeted opportunities for stakeholders' input to inform strategy adjustments.** Communicate to partners how the input was used and what changes were considered or made. Involving partners in revising strategies will contribute to understanding how strategies relate to one another, what strategies provide opportunities for innovation and learning, and provide better coordination among program staff who lead specific strategies and reinforce attention to long-term goals.

- 6. Implement effective grantmaking practices such as increasing grants payout to achieve a bold agenda.** Lumina Foundation should significantly increase grant payout dollars to achieve its highly ambitious 2025 postsecondary attainment goals. NCRP recommends that foundations pay out at least 6 percent in grants only, but a higher rate may be needed to achieve such bold aims. Additional funding over longer periods of time to metropolitan and community partnership sites

can support capacity and leadership development among partner organizations and targeted beneficiaries, increase impact and build partners' confidence in a sustainable strategy. Develop and implement guidelines for general operating support; provide core support to organizations of appropriate scale and at early stages of growth to ensure foundation funding has impact.

ABOUT PHILAMPLIFY

Philamplify is an initiative of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy that aims to maximize the impact of our country's grantmakers. At the center of Philamplify is a series of comprehensive reports conducted by highly regarded researchers assessing foundation grantmaking and operations. Assessments include key findings and recommendations, along with in-depth analysis of foundations' funding strategies and feedback from peer funders, nonprofit leaders, issue experts, community members and more. By making these assessments public, Philamplify seeks to build a culture of transparency, mutual accountability and knowledge sharing.

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