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Community Vibrancy and the Greater Grand Rapids Area:

A Study of Resource Intersection and Needs

A report prepared for the Community and Blandin Foundation,
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The **Improve** Group

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About Blandin Foundation

Located in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, Blandin Foundation is one of only a handful of foundations in the U.S. focused exclusively on rural communities, and is the largest rural-based private foundation in Minnesota. The Foundation supports vibrant rural Minnesota communities, especially the Grand Rapids and Itasca County areas.

About The Improve Group

The Improve Group conducts rigorous studies to help organizations make the most of information, navigate complexity, and ensure their investments of time and money lead to meaningful, sustained impact. The Improve Group is based in St. Paul, Minnesota, and provides research, evaluation, and strategic planning services to organizations locally, nationwide, and internationally.

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Introduction

Project Background, Purpose, and Goals

Blandin Foundation contracted with The Improve Group in 2015 to conduct case studies of two rural Minnesota communities, including its home community of Grand Rapids. Blandin Foundation wanted to learn how they could be the best possible partner for communities in rural Minnesota, and to increase their intentionality in how they interact with communities. In addition, Blandin wanted a study that was of value to the community itself. Therefore, community members were invited to provide input to help shape the study's guiding questions to reflect what they thought was important. As such, this case study is being shared with a broad audience including individuals who participated in creating the study, the broader Grand Rapids area community, as well as practitioners in the community development field, in the expectation that readers can build a better understanding of how communities work to strengthen themselves.

The case study's inquiry regarding change dynamics in communities centered on the question of how the Foundation could best layer its investments in communities in a coordinated fashion in order to optimize community impact. Blandin Foundation was also particularly interested in learning about community vibrancy: what makes rural communities (having populations under 35,000) healthy, resilient, and vibrant? To answer these questions, and to gain a deeper understanding of how to foster community change and vitality, Blandin Foundation decided to focus their inquiry specifically on communities, rather than individual programs.

The approach that Blandin Foundation chose for this learning was to conduct case studies. Case studies of individual communities allow for depth of understanding of a specific community within its broader context. Case studies are excellent for addressing complexity, providing holistic and contextual examination, allowing for a personal, emotional way of increasing understanding, and can illuminate questions that can be applied to exploring other cases. At the same time, there are some things that a case study will not provide. A case study does not aim to answer all possible questions. Nor can it be generalized to other communities. It focuses on a particular group's experiences within a particular context; in this case, the Grand Rapids area.

It is common for case studies to represent the perspectives of those on whom the case focuses through telling their stories, grounded in their personal experience. However, instead of taking a storytelling approach, this case study of the Grand Rapids area presents community members' opinions in a structure organized by a number of guiding questions established by Blandin Foundation, and supplemented by community member input. The reason for this structure is that, due to the large number of community initiatives in the Grand Rapids area, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to present community input through telling the story of each initiative, and we did not want to privilege a small number of initiatives over others by only including some stories in this report. Therefore, this report is organized by providing community opinions that directly answer the following guiding questions, supplemented by interspersed quotes and examples that ground the information within specific community initiatives.

Guiding Questions

Specific goals for the case study included learning from the following primary guiding questions:

What change would the Grand Rapids area community like to see in the future?

This question helped to illuminate what people hope their community will be like in the future. The answers to this question lay a groundwork for addressing specifically what community members feel they need in order to create desired change.

What is needed to make change happen in the Grand Rapids area community?

This question shed light on what, broadly speaking, community members need in order to make positive change in the Grand Rapids area community—to create a vibrant and healthy community. These needs may be monetary or non-monetary, and may include factors such as grants, trainings, equipment or facilities, infrastructure, connections or networks, and even specific types of motivating factors. This question is also intended to explore what motivates people to make change in their community, and what barriers they face to making change.

How do networks form and sustain themselves?

Responses to this question identified what role community members feel networks play in community change. Additionally, this question will provide insight into whether Blandin’s leadership program, Blandin grants, and/or any other Blandin-supported activities have impacted the ability of networks to create change in the community. Related sub-questions illuminate how networks affect change, what increases and decreases influential power of networks, and whether networks—as the sum of parts—are more influential in making change than individual actors.

How has Blandin Foundation affected change in the Grand Rapids area community?

This question shows how the Foundation’s various investments impact change in the community as individual investments, and through interaction with one another. Blandin investments examined include leadership training, grant making, broadband support, and community trainings and convening groups.¹

¹ The Blandin Community Broadband Program is comprised of various types of supports and activities, including convening, information support, technical assistance, and grants.

How do Blandin Foundation resources interact with other factors that influence and drive community change, such as other resources and work occurring?

This question highlights the non-Blandin resources that affect change in the community, and investigates how non-Blandin and Blandin resources and support intersect in change-making. Community input on this question led to specific inquiry into interaction of Blandin resources with city, county, and state policy.

Have different funding levels led to different results (e.g., have higher funding levels necessarily made more impact)?

This question provides insight into the types of outcomes that have been generated from grants of different sizes, and whether larger grants necessarily make more impact than smaller grants. Community members asked that this question also address different grant term lengths (single-year versus multi-year grants). In a related vein, the question addresses what non-monetary factors are combined with grants in order to create impact. For example, what non-monetary factors, like networking or receiving technical assistance, can make a small grant more effective? What types of factors, monetary or non-monetary, lead to the greatest impact in the community?

To what extent has Blandin Foundation been seen, understood, and responded to Grand Rapids area community priorities?

This question provides insight into how community members feel about Blandin's understanding of and response to community priorities, and if they have any wishes for Blandin to respond to community priorities differently in the future. Additionally, it illuminates how community members perceive Blandin's place in the community and role in change-making. Community input led to inquiring where along the continuum of driving, influencing, enabling, or empowering improvement the Grand Rapids area community sees the Foundation.

Selecting Grand Rapids

Blandin Foundation, based in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, was founded in 1941 by Charles K. Blandin. The Blandin Foundation established its primary geographic giving area as Itasca County and the greater Grand Rapids area, and is currently committed to providing at least 60 percent of grant funding to the Itasca County area.² In the six-year period between 2008 and 2014, the Foundation exceeded this 60 percent by devoting 71 percent of the Foundation's grant funding to the Itasca County area. In 2014, Blandin Foundation awarded over \$7.7 million in grant funding

² <http://blandinfoundation.org/itasca-area/our-commitment> , <http://blandinfoundation.org/who-we-are/accountability.php> , <http://blandinfoundation.org/itasca-area/grants-donations>

in the Itasca County area and nearly \$1 million in education grants (scholarships) to local students.³

With the mission “to strengthen rural Minnesota communities, especially the Grand Rapids area,” the Foundation has been committed to its home area by establishing the dedicated giving area, creating a rich history of grant-making, building local partnerships, facilitating complex community dialogues, and graduating more alumni from Blandin leadership programs than any other area. Blandin Foundation chose the Grand Rapids area community as the focus area for this study to further explore its commitment to its home area and the role that the Foundation plays in the community over time.

About Grand Rapids

Grand Rapids, Minnesota is a city with approximately 11,000 residents, located in north-central Minnesota, an approximately one-and-a-half hour drive northwest of Duluth, Minnesota. The city, which is located near the source of the Mississippi River, is the county seat for Itasca County. Grand Rapids was originally founded as a logging town, as its proximity to the river was ideal for transporting logs. The city was named for a three-and-a-half mile stretch of rapids on the river, which are now engulfed in a reservoir created by the paper mill’s dam.⁴



³ http://blandinfoundation.org/_uls/resources/Blandin_Fdn_Grants_December_2014_local.pdf

⁴ <http://www.cityofgrandrapidsmn.com/visitors/history>

Methodology

To begin planning for this study, The Improve Group facilitated Blandin Foundation's drafting of the study's seven guiding questions listed above, which were then further refined with input from members of the community. Specifically, Blandin Foundation wanted to learn two things: first, how the resources that they provide in communities intersect with other Blandin and non-Blandin supports. This knowledge would help the Foundation be able to more effectively layer the supports they provide. Second, Blandin wanted to learn what, overall, communities need in order to create healthy and vibrant community. This knowledge would help the Foundation better direct the resources it has in order to make the most impact in communities. At the same time, this knowledge would offer insights into community change dynamics to community leaders and other audiences.

To begin this process, Blandin Foundation provided a list of initial community contacts with past experience working with the Foundation on a variety of community efforts. As a consequence, this original group of community participants included a very high percentage of individuals with direct experience with the Foundation, which is not necessarily representative of community demographics at large. We invited these community members to participate in a meeting to plan and launch the project. At this meeting of approximately 25 community members, individuals provided input into the study design, especially regarding the study's guiding questions, topics that should be prioritized, and additional sub-questions that should be added. Meeting participants also recommended additional community members to be invited to interviews, focus groups, and to receive a survey.

From the list of contacts recommended through the initial community meeting, we categorized the contacts by sector of experience based on the information provided to us (social service, public health, education, public safety, business, environment, etc.). Then, we invited participants from a cross-section of sectors to interviews and focus groups. We conducted 15 one-hour long, semi-structured phone interviews with community members. The topics varied slightly, depending on the interviewees' areas of expertise and knowledge about particular topics. We also held three focus groups, with a total of 23 attendees. All focus groups included conversations on creating change in the community, as well as discussions on either a) grant characteristics and networking, or b) Blandin Foundation's responsiveness to community priorities. One focus group also included discussion of Blandin's Leadership Program.

Additionally, to accommodate for the large number of community members interested in providing feedback to the study, their various levels of availability to participate, and differences in areas of knowledge and experience, we created a survey with open-ended questions available in both online and paper formats. While working to maintain focus on the purpose and information needs of the study, we designed the survey to include some broad questions answerable by all community members, including a question about community strengths and improvements, as well as more specific questions on topics such as impacts of different grant sizes, that could be answered by respondents who self-identify as having experience with grants. We distributed this survey to the list of community contacts gathered from the initial community meeting who did not participate in a phone interview or focus group. Additionally, five

community organizations, Kootasca Community Action, the YMCA, ElderCircle, Northland Counseling Center, and Habitat for Humanity also agreed to share online and paper versions of the survey with their contacts, to help increase our reach and the diversity of respondents who participated. Survey participants were encouraged to share the survey with additional community contacts who may be interested in participating, to help expand the reach of the survey.

We analyzed all focus group, interview, and survey data using Dedoose software for qualitative analysis, coding data by emerging themes and sub-themes, as related to the study's guiding questions. Table 1 includes a full summary of the number of community members who provided input into the study. All data collection protocols are available in the appendix.

Table 1: Eighty-four community members participated in the study.

Method	# of participants
Interviews	15
Focus groups (3)	23
Survey	46
Total⁵	84

To learn more about the participants who contributed to the study, we created an optional demographic survey for interview and focus group participants that matched the demographic section of the survey. We analyzed demographic data completely separately from participants' input on the study's guiding questions. In total, 76 of the 84 total participants provided demographic data, which is reflected in Table 2, along with U.S. Census data for Grand Rapids and Itasca County for select characteristics.

⁵ While participants for interviews and focus groups were mutually exclusive, the survey was open to all community members. Survey instructions indicated that an individual should not take the survey if he or she had participated through an interview or focus group. However, it is possible that some individuals who participated in an interview or focus group may have also provided additional input through the survey.

Table 2: Participant demographics are similar to census data for ethnicity and age but not income.

Participant Data			Census Data		
		n	% ⁶	Grand Rapids ⁷	Itasca County
Gender	Female	46	61%	53%	50%
	Male	30	39%	47%	50%
Age	18 – 34	8	11%	21%	17%
	35 – 64	53	70%	36%	42%
	65+	15	20%	21%	21%
Annual household income	\$15,001 - \$30,000	3	4%		
	\$30,001 - \$45,000	8	11%	(Median \$41,000)	
	\$45,001 - \$60,000	7	9%		(Median \$47,000)
	\$60,001 or over	56	74%		
	No response	2	3%		
Household size	1 – 4 residents	67	88%	(Avg. 2 residents)	(Avg. 2 residents)
	5 – 8 residents	8	11%		
	No response	1	1%		
Race / Ethnicity	White	63	83%	95%	93%
	White and Native American	3	4%	2% (2+ races)	2% (2+ races)
	Native American	2	3%	2%	4%
	Black or African American	1	1%	0.6%	0.4%
	Other (Polish)	1	1%		
	No response	6	8%		

After the data collection phase of the study was completed, we examined demographic make-up of participants, and with direction from Blandin Foundation, re-opened the survey and continued targeted survey and interview outreach to groups underrepresented among participants. Ultimately, there was a comparatively low level of study participation among individuals in some demographic groups, most notably, those having low to moderate incomes and people of color. This, in itself, can be considered a finding of the study in that it suggests these groups are underrepresented in many types of community improvement work. As will be further discussed later in this report, community members have identified barriers to participation in community work that disproportionately affect underrepresented groups. One such barrier is that some individuals are prevented from participating in community meetings because they do not have access to the transportation and child care that would enable their attendance. Other barriers are a general shortage of acceptance of diversity in the community, and disparities in education and employment opportunities. These barriers, as well as community members’ ideas for addressing them, are discussed below.

When discussing this study with community members, the project was described as focusing on the “Grand Rapids area community.” Because communities are not bound by strict, geographic

⁶ Due to rounding, some percentages may be more than 100%.

⁷ Grand Rapids and Itasca County 2010 and 2014 figures from Census QuickFacts, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/27/2725118.html>; <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/27/27061.html> . Data for ages 18 – 64 derived from <http://www.census.gov/2010census/popmap/ipmtext.php?fl=27> and <http://www.census.gov/2010census/popmap/ipmtext.php?fl=27>

boundaries, participants and those referring participants to us were allowed to determine the boundaries of their own community. Focus group and interview participants were asked about where they spend most of their time (for example, if they work in Grand Rapids, but live in a neighboring community). Therefore, while the focus of the study is centered on Grand Rapids, the unit of analysis includes participants with perspectives that come from living, working and/or spending time in neighboring towns, as well.

Findings



Grand Rapids area residents envision future community improvements

One of the primary questions guiding this case study was “What change would the Grand Rapids area like to see in the future?” Respondents envisioned positive change in a number of general areas:

Economic development

Housing, health, and human services

More consistent broadband in the region

Continuing support and improvements to education

Increased support for diversity and inclusion

Environmental concerns

Downtown improvements

Transportation

Economic Development

Respondents indicated a desire for new industry growth, leading to increased numbers of high quality, high paying jobs. There is a push for future-oriented rather than past-oriented careers, not relying solely on forestry and mining, but rather, having a cross-section of industries that would balance economic development with environmental concerns. Bringing technology industry jobs was specifically mentioned as one possibility. With the area’s lakes, recreation opportunities, and good schools, people want to relocate to the Grand Rapids area, but the shortage of living wage and professional jobs makes it difficult to attract people in the 25-45 year old range. A more diverse employer base in the private sector, as well as more organizations employing unskilled labor, were described as needed. A related need would be more day-care services available to help working families. There was a call for more professional training, such as for healthcare careers, to help keep the area’s young people from moving away after graduation. Additionally, respondents would like to see more support for entrepreneurship and intellectual capital.

More consistent broadband

Although broadband in Grand Rapids was generally described as good, respondents noted that broadband accessibility is not consistent across the greater area, and called for improved and more consistent access.

Housing, health, and human services

Many respondents listed desired positive change as related to housing, health, and human services. Having adequate affordable housing was a frequently listed wish, and it was pointed out

that there is an income gap between those who qualify for housing assistance and those who can afford average rent. Respondents noted that, generally speaking, the healthcare services available were very good, but that improvements can always be made. One suggestion for improvement is to provide more intensive, earlier treatment for mental health and chemical dependency problems. Respondents would like to see a reduction in chemical dependency problems, fewer people in jail, fewer people relying on social supports, and more stable families. There is a desire for every child to have a stable, loving environment with her or his needs met, good education and health care, and good child care, if needed.

“I am pleased that I am able to get most medical services in or near Grand Rapids.”

Respondents made suggestions for linking universal access to healthy foods, which would address problems of food insecurity and public health, with environmental sustainability. For instance, the lawns of public buildings as well as churches could be used to grow food to increase local food sovereignty and reduce use of petrochemicals to transport food to the area. A community co-op could be a democratically owned center for bringing in local farmers and offering community classes, in addition to providing healthy, local foods. Local foods could also be incorporated into the school system by connecting farmers, students, and teachers in order to encourage culture change for young people around healthy eating and healthy community.

Continuing support and improvements to education

Community members described the area’s educational offerings—from K-12 through the community college—as high quality and a major community strength, but described education as an area that needs continual support and can always be improved. Numerous respondents mentioned the school bond that will be included in the upcoming election, and indicated that although the high school and middle school are either new or upgraded, the elementary schools need upgrades. Having upgraded elementary schools was listed as one factor that could contribute to attracting young families to the area. There was also a call for more continual community involvement with the schools, and a suggestion that the school board and administration make more effort to engage the community on an on-going basis, not only when schools need something.

“It adds a level of intellectual stimulation to the community to have a community college here. We have an outstanding public library and library system.”

Respondents would like to see the school system incorporate more environmental education beyond recycling and using sustainable materials. Several respondents noted that the schools are engaging current technology by using iPads. A suggestion was made that schools also move toward current learning methods by incorporating more collaborative-oriented tables and group seating as opposed to traditional row seating. There was also a call for more places for teens to spend time after school for recreation and/or to get tutoring, in addition to the YMCA.

“I would like to see more environmental education for young members of our community. We live in this majestic area of the state and it seems like we have limited education on how to respect our environment (No Trace Left Behind, etc.) outside of our typical hunting, fishing, etc.”

Diversity and inclusion

Community members would like to see more diversity and inclusion in the community—a greater diversity of people from different cultures, ethnicities, and life paths who are respected and not discriminated against—and describe that much work must be done before that can become a reality. Respondents described a great deal of racism and classism in the community, and that the community overall needs to be more accepting of differences, including differences of ethnicity and class. They pointed out that although there is much discussion of how to keep residents in the community, there is little discussion of bringing in new families, particularly non-Caucasian families, and that the community is currently not welcoming enough to support non-Caucasian families. It was suggested that the community engage in conversations about white privilege and bigotry. Respondents acknowledged that these would be difficult conversations, but noted that the Art of Hosting events provided by Blandin Foundation had taught community members specific techniques for facilitating difficult conversations.

A more inclusive community was described as one in which there was more interaction and respect between people from different backgrounds. For example, in stores, there would be more eye contact between people regardless of background or ethnicity. People from Native communities and other minorities would perceive that they were being treated the same way as other shoppers, and would feel welcomed, valued, and included. There would be participation in community work and decision-making from people from all backgrounds—not only from a range of ethnicities but also from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds—and everyone who wished to participate would be respected and be included in dialogue and interaction.

In terms of educational opportunities, there would be inclusive curriculum and engagement opportunities for Native students, reducing the standardized testing achievement gap for Native students in math and science proficiencies in K-12. Work would be done to reduce disparities among students of color for post-secondary persistence and success by addressing issues of preparedness, teaching styles, food deprivation, housing and poverty. Finally, the community college would provide proactive training opportunities and programming on how to create a tolerant, accepting, progressive, and inclusive community.

Environmental

Community members expressed appreciation for the area's natural resources and recreation opportunities. Many respondents spoke of recent work that has been done to expand nature trails, and desire continued support for these efforts. In fact, connectivity of the trail system was noted as one of the community's greatest strengths, and the suggestion was made that further investment in the trail system could potentially lead to job creation. Taking care of and maintaining clean trails, forests, and lakes was described as important to vibrant tourism and attracting families to the area. In a related vein, there was a concern about clean water and the impact of diesel and gasoline powered vehicles on the lakes. Respondents imagine that more regulation on environmental issues, such as a ban on plastic and Styrofoam bags, could be beneficial for the community, but also recognize that such changes would require an attitude shift for many because the most environmentally sound options are not always the most convenient. One idea for the future is to generate and store electricity through exercise machines at the area's

fitness centers, even having competitions for young people to compete to create energy. In sum, respondents wish for a green, clean community.

“I think one of the biggest community strengths is the amount of connectivity with our non-motorized and motorized trail systems. I believe that if the great trail amenities could be improved even more, they would create revenue and therefore more jobs in the community.”

Downtown improvements

Respondents indicated a desire for improvements to downtown Grand Rapids. Specifically, suggestions were to make downtown a more pedestrian friendly and attractive place, with more stores occupied, as well as more small businesses, retail stores including women’s clothing stores, restaurants, and a nice bar. There was also a desire to reduce the sense of downtown being fractured due to Highway 2 and the railroad.

Transportation

A shortage of public transportation options in the area was described as a consistent problem in need of solutions. With no regular bus service, the long distances of the rural environment, combined with harsh northern Minnesota winters, makes transportation difficult if not impossible for those without their own cars. This can be a major factor in lowering quality of life for people who struggle to get to medical appointments, jobs, or the community college, for example. Lack of transportation can also be a barrier to participation in community improvement work, especially for low-income community members, who are already underrepresented at such meetings. Respondents acknowledged that the community has been seeking ways to increase transportation options for some time, but wish for reliable bus service or other options for public transportation.

Intersection of areas for desired change

There is a high level of intersection between these areas in which community members would like to see change, which bodes well for collaborative community improvement efforts. Making positive change in many of these areas would likely have effects on others of these areas in which respondents would like to see change. For example, making strides in economic development could lead to the new retail stores and restaurants desired for downtown. Increases in high-paying jobs available could lead to a reduction in the numbers of people relying on social services for housing, food, and medical care. Having more consistent broadband throughout Itasca County would support educational as well as business needs. Finally, a growing local foods movement could support both food insecurity among lower-income residents, as well as efforts for increased environmental sustainability.



Grand Rapids area community members need collaboration, networks, strong leadership, and a shared mission to make community improvement.

Role of networks

Respondents described networks as vital for change-making. Although individuals occasionally work on their own to make community improvement (see example below), respondents expressed that most community work was done by groups and a strong leader. Individual work can be more streamlined and perhaps take less time and energy than the collaborations necessary for group work, but ultimately is not as successful or sustainable as work completed by a group. One reason cited was that a group's capacity to provide more diverse ideas, including "devil's advocate" and end-user perspectives, generally lead to more successful and sustainable outcomes than work conducted by individuals. Other reasons provided by respondents were that there were simply not enough resources for everyone to work on their own, and doing so duplicates efforts. One respondent noted that even if one person is highly visible in a project, there is almost always a group behind that person: "People may say 'so-and-so did that,' [but in actuality,] that's just a leader." This respondent went on to elaborate that successful community work is almost always completed by groups, and successful groups almost always have strong leaders. Respondents described that a necessary element for success in forming groups is connecting individuals with similar passions and who are doing similar work so that they can share ideas and resources.

"I can't think of examples of people working on their own, what I see is always in a group. I think if change is going to be, if we're making a change, there needs to be participation beyond one person. I'm sure there are individuals working behind the scenes, but I think it comes back to there is a group making it happen."

"What I learned is that process ends up being more important than product. If I just say 'give me the hammer and nails and I'll build the tree house myself,' then I will be the only one sitting in it! You need to involve people so that you get what everyone wants, not just what you want."

The following examples illustrate the less common individual-level contributions to community change, as well as the more common network-based contribution.

Individual contribution

"A year or so ago there was an issue at a school in which a Tribal member was facing discrimination. There was an individual who tried to intervene between the parties, and saw it as a chance to talk and be an impetus for change rather than seeing the issue only in the negative. This individual saw the potential for collaborative work to become undone because of this situation, and worked to help mediate the conflict. This is a perfect example of an individual doing something for positive community change."

Network-based contribution

“I see networks working in different combinations in our community: two recent examples are a big campaign for the YMCA expansion, and for the Reif Performing Arts Center expansion. For both of these projects, community members, individuals, Blandin Foundation, private sector, and leadership came together and accomplished the expansions.”

Formation of networks

Respondents described networks as forming in various ways. Commonly, a network is formed when an individual has an idea and brings others together to discuss it, often starting with a coffee date. It is helpful if this individual has the trust of others—in that they know she or he will not waste their time. If there is mutual interest, a network grows to address the discussed idea. Another way in which networks are formed in the community is when organizations create user input groups in order to gather opinions from those who will ultimately use a product or service. According to one respondent, there have been a number of these groups providing input to the city, county, and state on topics including roads and bridges. Regardless of how a network has formed, community members suggest that, because some individuals are more reserved in presenting new ideas, it is important to encourage people to participate in network formation by making them feel heard and supported, rather than immediately dismissing an idea if it doesn’t agree with one’s own.

“We build community one cup of coffee at a time. If I see an issue or something that needs to be done, I’ll look around the community for a handful of people who may be interested and call them and ask for a cup of coffee to talk about issue. Most people know me enough to trust that I won’t waste their time. We create an action plan and do something. If there is not an interest, we had a nice coffee and talked about it.”

Blandin Foundation impact on network formation

Blandin Foundation has impacted network formation in the community through the leadership program, trainings, and community meetings. Network formation was described as a major take-away from Blandin’s leadership program. One respondent indicated that “there are certain people who I went through the [leadership] program with, and when I see them I know that I can work on them with certain things, we have this history together.” Blandin’s Art of Hosting events also help form networks that are important to community members: “There were sixty people from the community in the room for four days—you can’t help but build networks. Now when I have something to get done I have people I met in trainings. There’s all these people at different locations I can draw on. That’s the goal of Art of Hosting: link people up.” When Blandin Foundation convenes community members to address issues, this also creates networks. One respondent described that Blandin “brought these pockets of people together who were being active and wanting to make change. The role of facilitating the convening [created a network].”

The following example highlights how networks form out of Blandin’s ad hoc meetings to address particular topics.

Parental interaction

“Blandin Foundation is very helpful at convening meetings of people doing work in various topics. Recently it was youth sports: they got a group convened and they

discussed parent interactions in youth sports. It can be an ad hoc group to start something, there were a lot of people coming together around a simple topic.”

Impact of networks on the community

Active networks in the Grand Rapids area community and their impacts

Community members described a number of networks creating positive impact on the area. As mentioned above, both the Reif Performing Arts Center expansion and the YMCA expansion, which brought ElderCircle, the City Senior Center, and the hospital clinic to the YMCA site, were achieved through the efforts of significant networks. Get Fit Itasca, which promotes both active living and healthy eating, the Itasca Water Legacy Partnership, and Second Harvest Food Bank, all use networks to achieve their goals.

“I’m most familiar with the built environment improvements (trails, designated bike lanes, pedestrian safety and access to safe parks and other outdoor activities) that have occurred through the Get Fit Itasca network. As with other organizations and causes, Get Fit Itasca uses solid community engagement strategies including deep listening and relationship building over the long-term to achieve positive change that benefits all community members.”

Another example of area networks is the helping professions of Itasca County, whose employees use networking to connect clients to a range of services. These community agencies work together to identify and address community needs, leading to a perceived increase in services for populations experiencing economic disadvantage, chemical dependency, and mental illness. In some cases, multiple agencies are deciding to be housed under one roof to reduce overhead while improving accessibility for community members. Similarly, the faith based community uses networks to support the homeless shelter and various charitable initiatives including school supplies drives for children, Thanksgiving meals, and Toys for Tots at Christmas.

As illustrated through the following examples, networks can impact the community through the formal level of interagency connections, as well as the informal level of a “kids’ network.”

Helping the person as a whole

“Networking in our community is crucial when working with people as we often need to look at a ‘Maslow’s Hierarchy’ approach to bettering one’s life. When working with a high school student who is getting low grades, you may also find he or she is chronically depressed. His or her grades are not likely to improve unless you address the depression, so this would be a great time to network with an outside source such as a North Homes in-school mental health practitioner. These valuable connections should all work together to help ‘whole persons’ achieve success within the community.”

Teaching children compassion

“I help teach my children about compassion, little things like we donate old toys or clothes because I want my kids to understand that some kids don’t have what we have. Then my kids tell their friends about it and they learn that not everyone has these things. It’s the kids’ network.”

Benefits of networks to the community

Respondents described that working through networks creates strong relationships and a strong sense of community. This leads to community pride and a helping attitude, and the ability to realize large goals through these relationships. Another benefit of networking is that it facilitates

sharing of information and ideas: it helps people learn what others are doing and learn from their work, and it allows for different perspectives to be heard and incorporated into projects. Sharing information and perspectives is also helpful for building bridges between people and increasing receptivity to diversity in the community.

The following examples show how information can flow through the community through networks by the simple act of individuals telling one or two others about something they see as important. Notably, preferences for how information is shared varies—some respondents called for more use of social media, and others favor traditional media forms such as newspapers.

Sharing information

“The recent school referendum was a perfect example of each one sharing with another one or two so that information was passed around with a sense of importance and urgency.”

“When one person shares something, then two people know, the more you share the more that know what is going on. Our newspaper is an okay source, but outdated, we need more technology sites to share these kinds of things. I have learned about so many events via email from friends sharing, and from Facebook - that’s when I know what is going on.”

What it takes to make change: motivators, needed resources, and supports for networks

Respondents discussed what it takes to make community change in terms of factors that motivate people to become involved in community work; and in terms of resources needed either for change in general, or to facilitate the desired changes that community members called for and are discussed above.

Motivators for engaging in community work

Respondents described a wide range of motivating factors for engaging in community improvement work:

Mission

Having a focused mission for a project helps people communicate what they are working toward, and motivates others to join the work.

Passion

Passion about an issue is a strong motivator for working to make positive change in that issue area. When people surround themselves with others who are passionate about the same issue, they get things done.

Personal connection

Having a personal connection to an issue, such as having a family member experiencing mental illness, or knowing someone experiencing homelessness, can make an issue very real to someone and be a strong motivator for working on that issue.

Sense of community ownership

People in the Grand Rapids area are proud of the community and feel a sense of ownership in the community, which gives people a sense of responsibility and motivates them to want to improve the community.

Benefit to children

Seeing a benefit for children can be a strong motivator for many people.

“I think one of the biggest strengths of the community is the give back to the children.”

Financial gain

Profit motivation is strong for many people, so showing that an initiative will have a positive impact on their bottom line can be a meaningful motivator.

Examples from other communities

Seeing examples of what other communities are doing, and looking at one's own community assets to see if a similar action can be carried out, can be a strong motivator for some.

Sharing information

“The school board and administration toured a number of different schools. I'm friends with an elementary school principal and he said it was inspirational and motivational to see what other communities have done with their schools—he wishes that could be shared with the whole community so everyone could see the possibilities.”

Honest effort

Seeing honest effort with no driving agenda other than to “do good” - regardless of the cause, whether art, environmental, or illness related - can be inspiring and motivate others to support a cause.

“When you find people who are a champion of an effort and they have honest intentions, which attracts people's attention, even when it's not their issue.”

Trust in being heard

One respondent expressed that “the typical answer of ‘why don't you do x?’ is ‘they won't listen anyway.’” Other respondents agreed that when people trust that their voice will be heard, they are more motivated to participate in a process. An important aspect of this is that people must feel that they will not face negative consequences for forwarding ideas with which others may disagree.

Linking to shared motivators

One way to motivate people to join a project is to make a connection to a shared motivating factor. For example, if recruiting people to work on an issue like food insecurity or homelessness, it can be helpful to approach groups that share the overarching motivator of helping those in need, such as church congregations.

Negative motivators

Sometimes negative factors motivate people to take action. For example, experiencing or witnessing discrimination can motivate people to work on the issue. In other cases, events such as a pollution spill or a business

announcing a policy that will hurt the community can be motivators for community engagement.

Resources and other factors to conduct community work

Respondents describe collaboration as important for community work, and perceive that collaboration among the private sector, local units of government, and Blandin Foundation is increasing in the community. Projects that have good leaders typically have strong collaboration involving multiple stakeholders (likely influenced, in many cases, by Blandin’s leadership program curriculum), and projects that are highly successful typically have strong leaders. Stakeholder collaboration can lead to broader support for a project, and can also lead to having a broader range of input into a project, which can shape a project such that the outcome may be more beneficial for a broader range of people. Respondents report a community strength as the generally high level of collaboration among service agencies. However, respondents report that in some instances, area organizations, agencies, or businesses become too focused on their own needs as opposed to the broader needs of the community. For these situations, respondents call for a shared vision of an end goal in terms of community needs in order to return the focus to community collaboration.

“I feel that there are many service agencies in our community, and those agencies have come to work well together and have partnered on projects to the better of the community. Multiple agencies have partnered to bring an idea of housing to a reality for low to moderate income individuals who may struggle with mental health issues.”

The following example is a respondent’s vision of “what could be” in terms of collaboration creating community benefit.

Intergenerational collaboration

“Example of what could be: Senior citizen inventors working with millennials to come up with incredible, cost-effective clean water technology. Old school knowledge with youth and enthusiasm.”

Closely related to collaboration is the concept of inclusion. In discussing inclusion, respondents quoted a primary teaching from Blandin-sponsored Art of Hosting training: “if it’s about us, include us.” This quote encapsulates the importance of having active and ongoing participation from program and project participants and recipients, in addition to other stakeholders. For example, low-income community members are not well-represented in many community initiatives. In some cases, providing transportation to meetings, and/or providing childcare during time spent in meetings, could help increase project participation among low-income community members. Overall, respondents described the need for people who currently hold power to be willing to give up some of that power in order to include a greater range of people at the table: young people, people of color, and people who are different in some way or who have some sort of challenge, whether a challenge in mental or physical health, or other capacity.

“‘If it’s about us, include us.’ So many things are about grants and programs to do something TO a group of people – we need to watch how we are gatekeepers to finances and information, and watch how we keep others from being heard.”

“Sometimes it’s the person at the table who’s in the oddest position who can figure it out because they’re a thread.”

The below examples illustrate the importance of including people of diverse backgrounds and perspectives “at the table”—and point to challenges in carrying this out.

Aim for broad inclusion

“Get ideas from students. Young people have ideas that we don’t tap enough. Also include people in trouble, in jail, on probation—get ideas from them about the path that their lives took and if there were things that could have changed things along the way. Think about the student success initiative: if students succeed, that’s community success. Now take the same concept and broaden it to the larger community: to think about community success, it’s about everyone.”

Respondents indicated that a number of issues related to diversity are necessary in order for the community to make progress. Individuals noted that overall demographics of the United States are changing and will continue to change in coming decades, and stated that it is important for the Grand Rapids area community to proactively prepare for a more diverse population, rather than simply reacting to change. Various strategies were suggested. First, the community could work toward a more positive, less blaming manner of encouraging openness to diversity. This could be done through more initiatives that celebrate, educate, and share: “do that with a positive twist, rather than ‘you better go and do some workshops.’ Another tactic other than shaming.” For instance, respondents noted the celebratory and educational activities including the Indigenous People’s Day activities, spearheaded by the Grand Rapids Human Rights Commission, and Treaties that Matter as strengths of the community. Another good example mentioned is exhibits featuring Tribal art.

Second, the more opportunities people from different backgrounds have to interact with one another, the more comfortable they will tend to feel. Building closer relationships helps people feel more comfortable asking questions, and exchanging perspectives and ideas. Providing opportunities for this type of relationship building is a good way to improve receptiveness to diversity and improve relations within the community. One initiative doing this work is the Circle of Healing, which is a group of Native and non-native people in the Itasca area working to address real-world needs through increased cultural competency and understanding for present and future generations.

An Itasca Community College initiative to bring students together is another example of creating opportunities for interaction and relationship-building across difference.

Courageous Conversations make connections across groups

“Look for activities in which there are natural ties so we don’t end up in little segregated communities because we want to be by people who are like us and who we’re comfortable with. It’s common. At the college we’ve been more intentional about mixing students: we have what’s called Courageous Conversations to make connections across ethnic groups, so that you meet a person not a stereotype. I have many Muslim friends and I get angry about ‘terrorist’ stereotypes. It comes back to education and dialogue. Educating all sides.”

Third, the community could pay attention to not only difference such as ethnicity, income, and ability, but also length of time in the community. Some respondents noted that people who have not lived in the Grand Rapids area their entire lives often bring new ideas that can be very helpful—but that are sometimes resisted by people who have always lived in the area and who are resistant to change. One respondent said, “When you don’t grow up here, it takes you a long time

to be part of the community. There's a mindset of 'we've done it this way for twenty years.' There's a stigma that 'if you didn't grow up here, how do you know?' We need to be more accepting of people who are new."

Processes needed for making community improvements include economic development, transportation, and awareness building

When discussing desired change for the community, respondents listed economic development and job creation as a desired goal. In addition to framing economic development and job creation as an end goal, respondents also discussed this as part of a *process* for making positive community change, and for solving *other* problems such as poverty and unaffordable housing. Respondents recognized that several organizations are already doing important work in this area, and called for more support of this work through community efforts to embrace business and workforce development, encourage a culture of employment in the area, and help businesses grow. Another idea for supporting these efforts is to create new legislation encouraging creation and expansion of businesses that use natural resources like wood fiber in manufacturing.

Another factor that respondents listed as both an end goal for improved community, as well as a process for *achieving* community improvement, is public transportation. As discussed above, having reliable and accessible transportation would improve quality of life for many people, and would also be a contributing factor to enabling broader civic participation, and thus, help solve community problems unrelated to transportation. Respondents noted that groups have been seeking solutions to the transportation barrier for many years, and suggest that, although ideas such as using school busses as city busses when not transporting children have been forwarded, there is a lack of cross-sector collaboration that is preventing this idea from being implemented.

A third process described as needed for improving the community was building increased awareness. One potential positive outcome of increasing awareness in the community is it could help connect people who want to contribute to the community with people doing work in their interest areas, and with people who could benefit. For example, several respondents mentioned knowing people who wanted to give back to the community, but did not know where or how to connect with opportunities. Similarly, it was noted that the elderly community has a wealth of skills and experiences, but is also at risk of becoming isolated as they age. Having a way to connect volunteers with people who could benefit from their skills could help both parties and the community as a whole. Although respondents acknowledged that types of community classifieds boards do already exist, they are not as interactive and user-friendly as would be beneficial.

"What if we do a want-ad type media forum: 'we need X expertise at Y hours, are you willing to help?' I've never seen it done but was talking to a guy I know and he blew me away, I never thought he'd want to mentor but he said 'I'm willing to do something but don't know where to go.'"

"There are things happening in town that we'd be interested in but we didn't hear about them until they were done. How do people get their information? We need a community board online that people could tap into to find others and what they're interested in."

A second way that increased awareness could help community improvement efforts is by educating people on problems that need to be addressed. Respondents described the community

as generally caring, but noted that if people are not aware of problems, they will not make efforts to solve them: “educating the public is the first hurdle.”

A third benefit of increased awareness for the community is that it would reduce duplication of effort. As illustrated by the below examples, respondents called for more sharing of information such as research reports that could help others in their work, which would maximize resources and prevent duplication of efforts.

Sharing a county needs study

“I happened to be on the United Way website and saw a 2008 Blandin Foundation report on Itasca County needs. I shared it with a director of an Itasca County agency and he’d never seen it. So sometimes Blandin Foundation funds something but it doesn’t get to all the people who can use it. So there are good things happening, but we’re lacking a coordinator who puts it together, so we get duplication of resources and lack of information sharing. If we could share information in a more cohesive way it would make a big difference.”

Sharing a transportation study

“Lots of things are duplicated, and there are only so many resources to go around. We were at Boys and Girls Club talking about transportation. Blandin Foundation did a 2009 study on transportation but we’re talking about same thing because not enough people read that study! There are lots of smart people working on same thing because there’s not enough knowledge of what others are doing. It needs collaboration.”

Financial and human resources are needed for community work

The third overarching area that respondents described as necessary for making improvements to the community is financial and human resources. Individuals agreed that money is necessary to support most, if not all, types of community work, and some types of projects, like capital improvements and infrastructure, require large amounts of funding. However, some respondents emphasized that, although it is needed, money is not the barrier that it is often made out to be. These respondents suggest that the barrier that some perceive to be a *financial* barrier is actually an *idea* barrier, or a lack of good solutions. If a good solution is found, then the money to support it will be attainable.

“People bring up money all the time. I tell people that money is not important—if you have a great idea, develop that and the money will follow. I believe that even as a former grant writer. People will say ‘we’re challenged by lack of funding’ but I disagree, I think we’re challenged by a shortage of great solutions. If you have a great solution, it will get funded.”

“I don’t want to focus on financial resources because I truly believe that money is not the barrier. We need players at the table who are determined to come up with a solution to solve [the problem], and not make money an excuse...Create a plan that makes sense, is doable, is sellable to the community and to funders, and [indicate the] price tag... We need to make the issue stand on its own: if there’s a cost, then find the money to fund it.”

In addition to financial resources, human resources were noted as vital to community work. Specifically, the importance of good meeting facilitators was frequently discussed. Benefits of

using skilled facilitators include having structured but open discussion, and normalizing input of participants who are both more as well as less vocal, so that it is not only the “squeaky wheel” who gets heard. Respondents described gaining these skills through Blandin’s leadership program, and also described using Blandin Foundation facilitators for community project meetings.

What networks need in order to sustain community improvement efforts and achieve their goals

As noted above, community members feel that networks are extremely important for doing community work. When asked what networks need in order to sustain themselves and achieve their goals, respondents listed numerous factors, including having a shared vision and passion, seeing positive outcomes, and leveraging human and financial resources:

Shared vision and passion

Shared vision and passion reflected through a mission statement, objectives, and realistic goals that are always visible to members of the network can help keep people motivated and focused.

Periodic positive outcomes

Outcomes from short-term, attainable goals established as building blocks to a larger outcome can keep people engaged. It also enables people to commit to smaller portions of a larger project, which encourages participation from more individuals.

“I think the biggest lesson I learned over the years is jobs I worked on were based on production: work and get a product. For most people that’s what they want to see at the end. When nothing changes, then you want to give up.”

“In the beginning there’s great participation, but sometimes if no progress is being made, people fall off. For any progress you need to get some small successes so people feel good about it. Set your agenda to have milestones, and break it down in how you can work and move forward. You have a piece of pie and everyone wants the pie, but focus on getting a slice at a time. Because each time you take a piece out of the pie it changes the dynamics, and you need to be sensitive to how it changes along the way.”

Prevent burnout

Divide projects and tasks to allow people to participate at different levels of responsibility and for different lengths of time.

Leverage resources

Leverage resources through communicating about project needs is important to finding people who want to contribute. Be creative and remember to seek participation from both organizations and individuals, in terms of giving time and skills, other non-monetary support, as well as financial support.

Share the workload

“For the fundraising drive we’ll need people to do something just one time, which will decrease burnout because people will have work they enjoy and will do it once, so the main committee doesn’t need to do everything.”

Diverse participation

Diverse participation on a project helps a group benefit from a broader range of ideas. Obtaining and incorporating end-user and community input is important, and remaining flexible, open-minded, and able to continually learn is necessary for success.

Involve youth at the table

“The premise of the Student Success initiative is every kid has an important adult in their life and has success. But there are no kids at the table. It was a good concept and has done some good things, but we need to ask the people we’re trying to help ‘what do you need?’ Not ‘let me tell you what you need.’ [The initiative] asked [youth for input], but that was a year ago. They need to consistently ask those questions, and have more involvement.”

Conduct broader, universal outreach

Outreach using a range of both internet and non-internet based communication methods to be fully inclusive, and reaching out beyond people already known for working in a particular area.

Provide ways for people to get to know each other

Learning about each other on an individual level, such as through retreat or social time, can help project participants overcome barriers of difference or intimidation, and lead to success.

Have good leadership and facilitation

This allows for a project to keep focused on its goals, organized and on-track in its work, and communicate effectively about its needs and successes.

Physical space, time, and funding

Adequate resources are also vital for networks to sustain themselves and achieve their goals.

“When time and energy are invested in the relationships that comprise the network and the key stakeholders in community activities, the outcomes are better and resources such as money can be found.”

What networks need to increase their influence

When asked what networks needed in order to increase their influence, respondents indicated:

Strong leadership and having a skilled spokesperson

Strong credibility such as knowing the subject well and work that aligns with the mission

“When people know what they’re talking about, whether through training or just good attention to research and detail and outreach, it really draws my attention and instills more trust for me to listen. That’s access to training and the experts.”

Broad participation throughout the community – not just those with authority

Face-to-face interaction, in addition to electronic communication

As illustrated in the following example and quote, some respondents spoke of the importance of face-to-face communication, and how easy it is for that to be lost with the increased use of electronic communications including social media.

Face-to-face communication

“We’re too quick to get on the iPhone or computer and email someone, rather than picking up the phone and talking. You miss the personal touch...Having face-to-face and personal communication is the best. I had a big customer...I was going to lose, I didn’t know how I was going to save it because he didn’t want to talk to anyone, so I...walked into his office unannounced and he was so impressed...that he signed a five year contract.”

“It’s all social media now days. There need to be more door-to-door and face-to-face networking. People are not as trusting anymore because of everything being done informally over social media.”

Barriers to community work

Respondents forwarded a number of ideas about areas in which they perceived barriers to community work and positive change, including lack of collaboration, generational differences, and resistance to change and diversity.

Lack of collaboration

Lack of collaboration was a commonly mentioned barrier to effective community work, and was also linked to lack of time. Because collaboration takes more time than working independently, time can be a barrier—but collaborating was described as more effective than independent work and as having longer-lasting results. Part of effective collaboration means taking the time to listen, valuing what everyone at the table brings, and being sure that everyone is heard. A negative outcome of groups and organizations working in “separate silos” is that it can lead to disjointed efforts and duplicated work.

“If you want to get something done quickly, do it yourself. If want get something done that’s long lasting with more impact, involve others. It takes an enormous amount of time to involve others and coordinate others in what you want to accomplish.”

Generational difference and aging population

Respondents described a shortage of intergenerational interaction: older people have been the leaders and have established the projects and institutions, and tend to be more involved in volunteer work. The community needs younger people to become more involved because eventually younger generations will need to take over. Respondents called for the community to address bridging generational gaps in areas including: communication methods; models of volunteering; values, mission, and how they are discussed; and more programs, such as through schools and the community college, that encourage volunteering.

Resistance to change and to diversity

Resistance to change was cited as a barrier to community improvement. For example, respondents noted that some decisions appear to be based on limited or outdated economic frameworks rather than considering forward-looking and change-oriented economic

opportunities. Other respondents spoke of perceiving resistance to change in terms of shifting demographics: as the area's minority populations grow and the number of new cultural practices and traditions being introduced to the community increase, there is a perception that newcomers are expected to completely assimilate. However, respondents suggest that it would be more productive to talk about difference and incorporate acceptance to new ideas and some level of change into the community.

"It comes back to compromise. It's the idea that if we have people coming into our area, we expect them to change to be like us. That won't work. We need to have conversations and talk about difference, come to mutual agreement on how we all will adjust so we can move forward together. Not expect them to change to us."

Self-interest and NIMBY (Not-In-My-Backyard)

Respondents perceive a growing attitude of "what's in it for me" and "what can you do for me" that they describe as a barrier to community work. In some cases, they perceive that community members do not support an initiative because they are considering only financial implications and not potential positive effects on the greater community. On the other hand, some argue that initiatives labeled "community improvements" are narrowly focused on one body of interest, and do not consider long-term costs and benefits for the community at-large. One respondent summarized the issue by stating that "any time you try to make community improvement, you upset a certain percentage of the population: a certain percentage will be happy and a certain percentage will not care until they see something they think is wrong. Bike trails, dog parks, better roads—different people and groups think different things are important. Some want to know why we spend money on this because I don't use it. It's hard to pin down."

Shortage of human and financial resources

Respondents listed as a barrier simply being able to engage enough people to participate in a project. Barriers to enlisting participation include: finding the same people doing most of the work and burning out (shortage of outreach to new volunteers), people opting out due to not trusting that their voices will be valued, people believing that they do not have anything to contribute, and having a limited number of people passionate about specific topic areas due to the area's small population. Other factors that are a barrier to gaining participation in projects are when potential volunteers lack the transportation and/or child care that are necessary to attend project meetings and activities. This is often a barrier for people who have low incomes and/or live a longer distance outside the city, and unfortunately, can prevent achieving the diverse participation that respondents describe as vital for project success, as discussed above. Finally, some respondents listed limited financial resources as a barrier.

Factors reducing influence of networks

As respondents indicated the importance of networks for productive community work, they listed a number of factors that they perceive as reducing the influence of networks:

Lack of broad support

Being self-serving, focusing on a limited agenda to the exclusion of attention to broader community benefit, not soliciting diverse

perspectives, and not obtaining buy-in from various businesses and organizations were all noted as reducing influence of networks.

Lack of communication

Not tailoring your message to people with varying interests and motivations, and not reaching out to new audiences can reduce influence.

Lack of a shared mission

A lack of a shared mission - and core values misaligned with it - are seen as reducing influence.

Lack of clear and realistic goals

Being influential is challenging without goals.



Community members see all grant sizes and grant term lengths as valuable, but appropriate in different circumstances

When discussing grant amounts and lengths of grant terms (single-year versus multi-year grants), respondents indicated that both small and large, both single-year and multi-year grants were useful, but in different ways and for different circumstances. What is important is that a grant is appropriate for the needs and goals of the project or organization.

Pros and cons of small and large, single-year and multi-year grants

Respondents discussed pros and cons of small and large, as well as single-year and multi-year grants. For most grant characteristics discussed, the positives of small and single-year grants were the same as the negatives of large and multi-year grants, and vice versa. To a large extent, characteristics of single-year grants coincided with those of small grants, and those of multi-year grants coincided with those of large grants.

A main consideration regarding grant type is the amount of staff resources required for obtaining and managing grants of different sizes and term lengths. Small and single-year grants may require fewer staff resources to obtain and manage than large and multi-year grants because their application and reporting processes are usually shorter and simpler. Large and multi-year grants usually require more staff resources due to more complex applications and fiscal managing and reporting requirements. However, the “small and short grants take fewer resources” rule does not always hold: if piecing together multiple small grants is necessary to meet funding needs, the staff resources required to apply for, manage, and report on the grants adds up, cancelling out the “ease of application and reporting” benefit of small grants. However, because small and single-year grants are usually less competitive than large and multi-year grants, piecing together multiple small grants may still have benefits for some projects. In a related vein, another benefit of a single-year grant is that, if it is a new relationship between a given funder and grantee, the one-year grant gives them the opportunity to get to know one another, and can potentially lead to a longer funding period afterward. One concern about single-year grants raised by a respondent is that applying for single-year grants could negatively impact larger or longer-term funding.

“A small grant can go a long way to building an important relationship, or providing meals at the food shelf. It’s easy to forget how small things can make big change.”

The below example illustrates how a small grant can help increase cross-entity communication for a group that would not qualify for some larger grants.

Cross-entity communication

“Trails Taskforce is a small grant [that] allows the community to host a monthly taskforce of various entities at one table to communicate openly—that wouldn’t happen without that grant... We wouldn’t qualify for a large DNR grant.”

Multi-year grants, however, have some benefits over single-year grants. First, they make outcome tracking easier, because a longer grant term gives more time for project outcomes to become apparent. Second, they enable longer-term planning and budgeting because budget data is known

for a multi-year, rather than single-year period. Third, this longer-term outlook provides more stability than knowing financial data for only the current or next year.

“Multi-year grants are nice because if developing a new program, it’s nice to know that you have a two-three year grant so you can complete planning and implementation, and make improvements and do your evaluation, and seek other sources of support for moving forward. One year grants don’t give you a lot of time for that.”

“The primary role of grant-funding for maximum positive (sustained) impact is to support the people that deliver the programs. Too many funders invest in a project in a three-year cycle and then expect the staff to find other funding to continue the work. In the nonprofit sector, who supports the people who deliver the programs for long enough to realize real culture change? How do you innovate and reach new heights when funders expect only the use of evidence-based programs? Invest in the people who deliver programs for a ten-year period (yes, still expect evaluation and results) so authentic community engagement can be achieved.”

An additional consideration is whether technical assistance or other expertise is provided with a grant. Several respondents indicated that Blandin Foundation, specifically, has a great deal of staff expertise to offer, and that a small grant, if coupled with Blandin Foundation technical assistance or introductions to other organizations that could benefit a project, can be very valuable.

“Gave Habitat for Humanity \$5,000 and also introduced us to another organization—and now we’re way better off.”

“Blandin Foundation’s expertise is valuable because they know everyone and I like the idea that that’s available.”

“In a lot of cases, it could be beneficial to go with a small grant, but it depends on what type of capacity you’re trying to build. I appreciate that Blandin Foundation has been hands-off, but it can go too far: if they say ‘we have something to say,’ we want to know. If the expertise can come with a smaller grant it’s more beneficial. With the big grant alone, a lot of small organizations don’t know what to do with it.”

“It’s about alignment of expertise. If your organization has a lot of expertise, then a big grant is okay, but if you need more technical assistance or input, then smaller is better.”

The various grant characteristics discussed by respondents are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Small grants are usually simpler to obtain yet less sustaining, and large grants are usually more difficult to obtain but more sustaining.

Grant Characteristic		Small and Single-Year	Large and Multi-Year
Obtaining the grant	Grant proposal requirements	Shorter, simpler	Longer, more complex
	Competitiveness of application process	Less competitive	More competitive
	Overall ease of obtaining grant	Easier to obtain	More difficult to obtain
	Needed processing and approval time	Short (2 months)	Long (Up to 18 months)
Management	Grant managing process	Easier	More difficult
	Budgeting	Short-term only	Longer-term possible
	Grant reporting process	Easier	More difficult
	Outcome tracking	More difficult	Easier
	Grant's ability to fund staff and infrastructure	Not usually sufficient	Sometimes sufficient
Sustainability	Number of grants needed to meet funding needs	Perhaps more	Perhaps fewer
	Frequency of applying	Each year	Every few years
	Stability of multi-year funding and planning	Less stable	More stable
Uses for the grant		Unexpected needs	Brick and mortar, capital improvements Equipment Operational costs (especially for organizations with limited or no income from services)
		Kick-starts	
		Facilitation or strategic planning	
		Relationship building	

Leveraging funding

Regardless of amount or length of grant term, leveraging funding was described by respondents as very useful. When a project or organization receives a funding commitment from one source, that commitment gives the project or organization credibility that makes it easier to obtain additional funding commitments. Community members indicated that a commitment from Blandin Foundation for a project provides especially strong credibility, and is used, in a sense, to communicate a project's worth in the community.

“In our projects when trying to raise funds, some of the other grant organizations asked ‘where’s Blandin Foundation in this? Are they supporting it?’ If so, it gives credence to the project. They would say: ‘If they [Blandin Foundation] are supporting at this level, then we’ll support it.’ Having a commitment of support helps leverage other funds. Blandin Foundation is looked at by other organizations, so if Blandin isn’t supporting it, it’s not a worthy project. It helps. I’ve had that as a direct question: ‘Is Blandin Foundation involved?’”

Non-monetary change factors

Respondents also discussed a number of factors that can play a part in community work that are non-monetary:

Human resources

People who serve as connectors to other organizations or resources, those with knowledge of a particular type of work, strong leaders, and those with political leverage.

Trainings

Trainings on topics such as fundraising and empowerment.

“Whether on fundraising or other topics, training helps nonprofits strengthen from within and gives them the tools to pursue things like fundraising on their own from sources other than Blandin Foundation.”

“We probably couldn’t afford to send our staff to all the trainings we’ve taken advantage of here because Blandin Foundation brought them in and made them no cost or low cost. Very helpful.”

Leadership skills

Leadership including doing outreach, listening, collaborating, facilitating, and connecting others.

“The board chair of an organization I worked for told me once, ‘You can have the greatest program plan and all the money to implement it. BUT—if the person running the program does not have the skills to do so, your program will fail. On the other hand, if you have the right person with all the skills and not much money, that program will succeed.’”

Information and communication

Information, including having and communicating data supporting program importance and rationale, and using communication for successful community engagement.

Passion

Passion, including being able to tap existing energy around an initiative to gather sufficient numbers to be engaged.

Vision

A vision that is supported throughout the different levels of the organization from board to staff.

Security of resources

Ensuring time and money to be able to experiment with ideas and to be creative.

Networking

This allows for success and new ideas.

Legislative connection

Connection to the legislature for local issues is important.

Factors leading to the greatest impact

Change factors with the capacity to lead to the greatest impact were listed as knowledge and information sharing. For example, when organizations share knowledge and information that can help others working on the same or related issues, it can help prevent duplication of resources and lead to greater impacts.



Blandin Foundation has major impact on the community

Blandin Foundation's impact on the community can be seen through its individual investments, such as through granting, leadership programs, and additional supports such as providing trainings and technical assistance, as well as through the ways in which Blandin supports intersect with other supports and change factors in the community.

Impact of individual Blandin Foundation investments

Community convening, technical assistance, training, and other initiatives

Many community members discussed their appreciation for the various trainings, community meetings, and forms of technical assistance provided by Blandin Foundation. It was noted that through sessions such as Art of Hosting as well as specific trainings, community members learn skills including facilitation, hosting “big view” conversations, social media marketing, and networking. Community members can then use these skills in a range of work and projects, which can lead to ongoing positive impacts in the community.

Blandin-hosted community meetings have also led to new collaborations and new initiatives being launched by attendees. For example, a Blandin-hosted multidisciplinary convening to address early childhood issues eventually led to the nationally recognized Invest Early collaborative, providing quality wrap-around services for young children. In this way, Blandin's investments in community convening have served as an impetus for initiatives having long-term positive community impact.

“Blandin Foundation has incredibly talented people, I just want them to do a workshop for a whole day and teach us things... Teach us and then we will do something with it. They undervalue that. They have so many contacts. Resources, training they receive, and knowledge that they share to help us put things together.”

Other individual initiatives to which Blandin contributes also lead to ongoing positive impacts. For example, the Circle of Healing, for which Blandin provides ongoing facilitation and project management, promotes cultural understanding among Native and non-Native area residents. Circle of Healing participants have collaborated to: install Leech Lake Tribal flags at the Itasca Courthouse and Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce; bring the Why Treaties Matter exhibit to Northern Minnesota; and to provide Anishinaabe Worldview Training for area residents.

Grants and donations

With a minimum of sixty percent of Blandin Foundation granting reserved for direct benefit of the Foundation's local giving area, the positive impact of Blandin Foundation granting and donations on the Grand Rapids area community is difficult to overstate.⁸ One community member expressed, “They made tremendous impact on the area, the community wouldn't be what it is today without Blandin Foundation.” From need-based education grants for students to operating funds for nonprofits, Blandin granting provides support for a wide range of community needs.

⁸ <http://blandinfoundation.org/itasca-area/grants-donations>

However, some respondents indicated a minor frustration associated with having dedicated funding for the local area. They noted that people outside the Grand Rapids area community sometimes assume that local organizations do not need to work to obtain funding due to Blandin Foundation's presence. Respondents indicated that this is an unfortunate fallacy that they work to correct in their interactions with non-local individuals and organizations.

Although giving financial support is a major function of Blandin Foundation, respondents report that Blandin's granting process is much more than giving money, as Blandin focuses on community-building as an important process within its grant-making. One respondent stated, "Their grant reporting is looking for more of an organic experience, bringing people together, asking what you learned, and about community building. They don't just give money, there's the creative aspect. They look at their grantees as resources for change, they pull that out then investigate further."

Other respondents support this idea through noting that a common practice for Blandin Foundation granting is to provide some funds, and encourage others in the community to also contribute. This process simultaneously builds community involvement by getting more funders involved, and enables Blandin to spread its resources across a broader span of grantees. One community member said of this process, "It's true that Blandin Foundation provides capital, but they challenge us by saying 'you step up and raise your own funding' – to the Reif Performing Arts Center, to the YMCA – it's an invitation and expectation that Blandin will be at the table with deep pockets and can help, but you need to do the work. They are cognizant of what the community can support, and of not overextending community resources." Another respondent emphasized how having multiple funders builds community by giving more parties an ownership in community improvement, "Enhances your community—by making a small donation, it allows other people to contribute to make the community better." Because such a large number of projects supported by Blandin grants are, therefore, also supported by other sources, discussion of these projects will be in the section below on intersection of multiple supports and change factors in the community.

Leadership programs

Approximately five hundred individuals in the local giving area have participated in Blandin Foundation's leadership programs. Respondents who are leadership program alumni, as well as individuals who had not been through the leadership program, spoke about the importance of strong leadership skills for community work, and the many benefits that Blandin leadership program alumni pass on to the community through applying their skills in the work that they do in the community. One respondent stated, "I don't think we can overstate the importance of the leadership program to the community's assets and attributes. The Grand Rapids and Itasca area are thriving and progressive in part because so many people learned to work together and honor differences through the program." Other respondents noted the large proportion of people who are actively engaged in the community who are leadership program alumni. Supporting this idea, one respondent said, "I don't think it's an accident that the people who step up [are leadership alumni], because they've been given the skills now to do that, to make it happen. I don't think there are any events, projects, anything that takes place where there aren't at least a few [leadership] people sprinkled in."

Specific gains from the leadership program

Respondents who had been through the leadership program listed specific skills and other gains from the program that they use in their community, personal, and professional lives:

Ability to communicate and frame issues

Helps Leadership Program alumni be more successful in working with others, and enables them to help stakeholders better understand broader contexts of initiatives.

Facilitation skills

Give alumni tools to make group work more efficient, effective, motivational, and to help ensure all voices at the table are heard.

Techniques to gain consensus

Help alumni bring together diverse ideas and lead groups toward agreement—which can be a very difficult task when opinions diverge.

“Working to gain consensus is an important lesson learned. It requires a lot of work to gain consensus in a diverse group of people and then allow them to be part of the process as you move along. The more diverse the group the better chance you have for success.”

Understanding stakeholder engagement

And ensuring diversity of representation, as well as opposition, among stakeholders are skills that alumni bring to their work.

Networks

Are vast for alumni of the Leadership Program—others who “speak the same language” can be easily called on.

“There’s something you notice in communities that have had a few leadership cohorts. There’s a shared language and understanding for working together – take International Falls - they’re going through some of the same things as Grand Rapids and it’s not so much of a feeling of “can-do.” Even when you’re not in that same network, there’s a lot more openness. It’s like you can skip the first few steps and hit the ground running.”

Better understanding of self and others

Is a skill that helps alumni increase sensitivity and skill in interacting, as well as better appreciate diverse perspectives.

Increased sense of self-agency

Helps alumni feel more capable, which spurs their involvement in the community.

Increased credibility with others

For having been through the program helps alumni in volunteer as well as professional work.

Working with intentionality and integrity

Helps alumni with focus, as well as helping with follow-through.

“The leadership program affected profound internal change for me and is embedded in my approach to work, community and personal

relationships. I've worked for several statewide agencies and have been continually surprised and impressed by how the leadership program prepared me to lead from all levels. I've been able to model and help others achieve goals through authentic stakeholder engagement and patience with the long-term processes of committee and community work. The most important skills/attributes I practice and have been recognized for are deep listening/authentic engagement and consideration for others' backgrounds and motivations.”

Impacts of leadership program on the community

Impacts of the leadership program on the community were listed in both general terms, as well as in relation to specific initiatives. Generally speaking, the trust that program participants build for one another is perceived to help community work progress more efficiently. One respondent explained, “There’s trust that you built with those folks, people are more trusting, which makes things happen faster than in other communities. The trust makes things happen.” Another way in which the program was stated to be impacting the community is in that there are simply more champions in the community for a range of issues who are prepared to lead initiatives.

Specific initiatives impacting the community that respondents listed as either directly related to the leadership program, or having a high percentage of alumni as participants, are:

Establishment of an arts commission, spearheaded by alumni;

Collaboration between YMCA, ElderCircle, and City of Grand Rapids to build a new multi-generational facility at the YMCA; and

Building an \$8 million, 50-unit supportive housing complex.

Intersection of Blandin Foundation and other change factors

Blandin Foundation support intersects with numerous other factors influencing community work and change in the area. Respondents listed the various non-Blandin factors that they perceived to impact community work as:

Other funders

Including foundations, businesses, government or quasi-governmental entities, and individuals.

Funders’ requirements

There are growing requirements for grantees to address diversity in project and grant proposals.

New ideas

New ideas introduced into the community through the diversity of new residents to the area—outside perspective.

Negative factors

Such as racism and classism hurt the community and drive individuals to work toward positive change.

Collaboration

Between multiple entities with a shared vision enables pooling of resources and expertise. This, in turn, leads to “multi-use,” through which one project serves multiple entities and functions.

Investment to improve services

Individual institutions and organizations invest in making improvements, such as the hospital proactively building medical staff, and the school district and community college investing in improving services.

Labor force

Economic development work by local organizations, and collaborations such as those between the community college and industries to prepare workers for employment, impacts change.

Education becoming more virtual

Increases in online learning create demand for consistent broadband service for all.

Trainings

Provided by non-Blandin sources help community members build skills that are applied in the community and lead to exponential change.

Amenities

Including the arts community, good education and health care, the YMCA, and the natural environment draw increasing numbers of residents to the area, especially retirees.

Outdated facilities

Prompt change due to necessity, and can lead to new collaborations and vastly improved facilities.

One of the primary ways in which respondents view Blandin Foundation support as intersecting with the above factors is through collaborative funding of initiatives, including matching grants. Community members discussed numerous projects in which Blandin Foundation funding was supplemented with funding from other entities. For example, the Reif Performing Arts Center and the YMCA recently underwent major expansions with broad community support and funding from numerous community sources, in addition to large capital grants from Blandin Foundation. Moreover, these major initiatives were also influenced by other Blandin and non-Blandin factors discussed above: the leadership program, collaboration between multiple entities, and outdated facilities.

“The Foundation has a great knack for finding well aligned and integrated projects that a little financial boost will help... The ability to reach in and pull those levers at right time pays huge dividends in

amount of mass you can move. The name itself is a lever. One of first questions in funding endeavors is ‘where’s the Foundation on this.’ If you don’t have an answer already, those projects will struggle. If the Foundation is behind it, the community will be behind it.”

Other ways in which Blandin resources intersect with non-Blandin resources are, as noted above, when Blandin Foundation connects grantees with nonprofits or other entities that may be able to be a resource for the grantee; and when Blandin provides funding for or connections to non-Blandin training opportunities, such as Blandin funding for police officers to attend the Anishinaabe Worldview Training.

Blandin Foundation supports also intersect with government policy in several ways:

Members of the Circle of Healing worked with the City of Grand Rapids and the Grand Rapids Human Rights Commission to plan the Indigenous People’s Day celebration;

Blandin Foundation staff has testified in the legislature on issues including early childhood funding;

Blandin Foundation supports organizations that work with city and county government, including economic development work;

Blandin’s leadership program supports leadership development in the city and county, in that some program alumni are city and county employees; and

Blandin’s broadband efforts may impact Itasca County efforts on broadband.

How having Blandin Foundation in the community has impacted the community overall

Respondents reported that the presence of Blandin Foundation in the community supports a strong quality of life that the area would not have were it not for Blandin’s support. The majority of what the Grand Rapids area has access to and lists as amenities that other towns of similar size do not have originate from Blandin support. For instance, Blandin support has led to a much stronger and more diverse arts community than towns of similar size, which respondents link to increased economic vitality and tourism, and the ability to draw new residents. Additionally, Blandin’s support of manufacturing and overall community support in areas from health care to libraries leads to relative ease in recruiting employees from outside the area for a wide range of occupations. For example, Blandin has made significant contributions to the Grand Itasca Clinic and Hospital, which is a major employer in the area. Blandin’s investment in leadership development has had a major effect on the community, and it is easier for projects to get started than in many other communities. Overall, having Blandin in the community provides stability, long-range vision, and has led to a high level of collaboration. One respondent explained, “It’s the attitude: rather than thinking of [Blandin] as a rich uncle and making assumptions, we’re all in it together and need to think of the common good rather than individual good. Partnering, pulling people together, and needing to work for the common good, that’s what makes us unique and Blandin Foundation fosters that.”

When asked about any potential drawbacks to having Blandin Foundation in the community, respondents listed two drawbacks. First, respondents perceive that sometimes non-Blandin

funders deny grant applications because “you have Blandin Foundation and you don’t need the grant.” Second, respondents perceive that some community members choose to not become involved in community work with the expectation that “Blandin will take care of it.”



Most, but not all, community members feel Blandin Foundation is responsive to community priorities

Blandin Foundation has changed over time

Respondents indicate two primary ways in which Blandin Foundation has changed over time. First, in the past, there was a sense that the Foundation was unapproachable. Multiple respondents described a high level of hierarchy between the Foundation and the community in the past, and a perception that the Foundation was unapproachable. In contrast, community members describe the Foundation currently as more open minded, and willing to meet people face-to-face in the community to learn about community needs and wishes.

The second way in which the present Foundation differs from perceptions of Blandin Foundation thirty years ago is that, in the past, the Foundation was thought of only as a funder. Now, with Blandin's strong commitment to leadership development, public policy, and community partnerships, the Foundation is perceived in a broad sense of community development rather than simply as a funder.

Perceptions of Blandin's level of understanding of community priorities

A great many respondents feel that Blandin Foundation has a very good understanding of community priorities. They report that:

Blandin staff and leadership are approachable

"That's what's cool is you can literally go in and speak with them. For the amount of money they handle and their prestige, you can pick up the phone and say 'Hey this is what I think.'"

Blandin staff and leadership are involved in the community

"I have worked with Blandin staff who know more about this community than anyone else, and they are involved from the top to bottom to make it a great place to live, work, and be a community."

Blandin staff and leadership incorporate diverse voices to some extent, including elderly, low income, and Native community members.

"They have gone to many communities to host conversations, listening sessions—to little towns, here, all over, just to listen."

Some respondents feel that Blandin Foundation is only moderately aware of community priorities. One reason given is that because some members of the board are outsiders to the local community, they are not aware of the community's wants and needs. Additionally, it was noted that although the Foundation is very aware of community-level needs, it is less aware of individual-level needs. Another critique is that marginalized community members who are unable to attend listening sessions are not yet part of the conversation.

Perceptions of Blandin's level of responsiveness to community priorities

Most respondents indicated, overall, feeling that Blandin Foundation shows a high level of responsiveness to community priorities. At the same time, some respondents feel that Blandin's responsiveness is not evenly balanced across various subsections of the community, such as those

with lower incomes, or who live in Deer River, for example. A few respondents had specific critiques and/or suggestions for how Blandin can increase community responsiveness, as discussed below.

High level of responsiveness

Numerous respondents reported a high level of responsiveness to community priorities. It was noted that the broad range of initiatives that Blandin supports—from arts to technology to police training—can be considered one indicator of community responsiveness. Blandin is known for pulling partners together to address community needs. Respondents acknowledge that it is unrealistic to expect the Foundation to be able to respond to every single need, but noted that as grant positioning has changed over the years, some projects are now being funded that would not have been in the past. The options for both quick turn-around support as well as the more traditional grants that are reviewed a few times per year were noted as a positive support. At the same time, respondents acknowledge that some community members complain that grant application review times are too long—but some feel these complaints are unfounded and display a lack of understanding of the structure and organizational processes of a foundation. Respondents note that Blandin is renovating their own facilities to better accommodate meeting styles of those who use the facilities—and find this to be very responsive. Finally, one respondent pointed out that Blandin’s support of studies as well as projects and other types of initiatives is very responsive—“And if you don’t know what you don’t know they’ll fund a study to help you learn what you need to do!”

“Blandin has multiple approaches to build and strengthen community. Big grants, small grants, training programs, talented staff, and an asset-based world view. In addition, they fund studies to more clearly understand the needs. They also ask what they can improve. They operate in a continuous improvement and engagement focused manner. These are keys to their ability to be responsive.”

Moderate level of responsiveness

Some respondents disagreed, however, and only perceive a moderate level of responsiveness to community priorities. One respondent wishes Blandin made more use of local expertise, “It would be great if Blandin really dug into school staff for things like student success because that’s who knows what works and what’s important.” It was noted that the Foundation is not very present in Deer River, other than in terms of scholarships. There was one complaint of large amounts of funds invested in companies that never materialized, and another critique that the Foundation primarily responds to priorities with which it agrees, but does not sufficiently recognize innovation.

“I think Blandin responds best to the community priorities it wants to see and agrees with. It’s a bit of a push-pull relationship; Blandin brings in models it finds across the nation and pushes us to be better. At the same time, innovations and cutting edge programs and initiatives that start here aren’t recognized as the innovations they are, so many times they are passed over.”

Low level of responsiveness

Some respondents are dissatisfied and perceive a low level of responsiveness to community priorities. One complaint is that the Foundation serves and answers to a fairly elite class in the

community, and only listens to some voices, resulting in giving disproportionate funding to initiatives such as the performing arts that only serve some parts of the community. Another concern is that the Foundation is putting more effort into “building its own legacy outside the Grand Rapids area” than supporting the community. Some respondents wish Blandin would “take more of a leadership role,” for example, if the Foundation gave a message that new elementary schools were worth funding, the expectation is that the community would respond and follow the example. As noted above, some community members feel the granting cycle is too slow, and that Blandin has “gotten stuck in its way of doing things,” calling for changes in how it directs funds, sets priorities, and provides assistance to organizations. Finally, one respondent perceives that although Blandin asks the community what is needed, “nothing happens” afterward.

Perceptions of Blandin’s place in the community and role in improvement-making

When discussing Blandin’s place in the community and role in improvement-making, many respondents described Blandin as community-driven and empowering, while being reluctant to lead. For example, one respondent stated, “They support a lot of different initiatives, one thing I like is that they want things to be organic, they don’t want to put themselves as a Blandin Foundation project, they want people in the community to take ownership, they want to plant seeds and have the community take it. So initiatives aren’t a Blandin Foundation thing, they’re community driven.”

In a similar vein, Blandin’s role was described as being oriented toward partnership and collaboration, and respondents noted that the Foundation is willing to listen. They offer a model for effective leadership, and in contrast to the above comment that they are reluctant to lead, one respondent noted that they are willing to provide their own leadership capabilities to help when needed. Blandin was described as being “ever-present” due to its ongoing commitment to its local giving area.

On a more critical note, white privilege comes up for one respondent when discussing Blandin’s place in the community. This comment points to other respondents’ calls for more inclusion of marginalized communities, as discussed above.

The Foundation was also described as being “between a rock and a hard place,” a descriptor that recognizes its efforts to listen to and respond to community wishes—which are often times multiple, contradictory wishes. For example, in contrast to other respondents’ appreciation of Blandin’s community-driven approach, some respondents wish the Foundation would take a more concrete advocate stance, or a clearer leadership role. The following quote encapsulates this critique, and although this call for Blandin to take a more self-driven role in community priorities was not widely forwarded among respondents in this study, at least one respondent indicated that this idea reflects a divide in the community between those who want to see Blandin empower change that is community-led, and those who would like to see Blandin more strongly lead change itself.

“I believe that the Blandin Foundation could better define what it would like to see happen that would improve the community. By simply convening people and providing community data there can be a bit of a wide divide on what could be accomplished. If Blandin funds are

important to the success of the community initiative it would be good for people to know what the foundation is advocating for. What is it that could or should change? What part of the Foundation's mission or vision guides your involvement? People want to know what guides your involvement. The Blandin Foundation is not a neutral party, but a key systems player in the community.”

Wishes for Blandin to interact with the community in a different way

When asked if they had any wishes for Blandin to interact with the community in a different way, many respondents stated that they could not think of any way Blandin could improve its interactions with the community. Other respondents noted desired changes in a number of areas:

Increase dialogue with underrepresented populations

To incorporate their needs within prioritization and decision-making.

Increase listening sessions

Especially in the smaller communities and those farther outside of Grand Rapids in order to gain more insight into and incorporate their opinions.

Increase outreach to younger demographics

Because the younger generations will be the future of the community. Help them increase their level of interest in engaging in community work.

Increase publicity

About smaller as well as larger Blandin initiatives through “quick blip” and social media messaging. Make sure that everyone knows all of the work Blandin is supporting—not just the major initiatives.

Reduce focus on process

And increase speed of actions taken, such as the grant review process.

Use national models as assistive devices

While incorporating input on community priorities, rather than imposing national models on the community.

Use informed decision-making

And consider return-on-investment for major investments. Focus on growth and support of economic engines, and results will trickle down to the entire region.

Convene regular meetings of top thought leaders

In the community, including organization and business leaders.

Do more to encourage collaboration

Especially among organizations receiving sustaining funds, who sometimes avoid collaboration due to not wanting to lose any of their “piece of the pie.”

Increase follow-up to maintain program results

Such as maintaining positive results of the DARE program for youth during the years after program completion.

Provide resources for small businesses to increase ADA accessibility

Such as automatic door openers, wheelchair accessibility, etc.

Reduce the Foundation Board's focus on economics

And listen more carefully to experiences of those in poverty.

Conclusion

This case study was carried out to provide insight into a set of questions for Blandin Foundation and the broader community. The perspectives and experiences relayed by community member respondents provided insight into these questions through the context of the Grand Rapids area community. Blandin Foundation's questions, and summary highlights of insight provided as pertaining to the Grand Rapids area, are as follows:

What is needed to make change happen in the community?

Factors of prime importance in creating change in the Grand Rapids area community are working collaboratively, having diversity of stakeholder involvement, and using networks. Community work is more easily inspired and sustained when people become involved with others sharing a similar passion, and when a common mission with associated goals and strategies remain in focus. Broad-level communication of community work opportunities in a range of interest areas is vital. Momentum is more easily built when people perceive tangible results from efforts made, even if results are on a small scale. This notion supports the value that small and incremental forms of support can have on creating community impact.

How do networks form and sustain themselves?

Networks in the area are formed when one or a small group of individuals champion a project and work to get others involved to build momentum, and when leadership program and community convening participants form connections. Networks sustain themselves by having a shared vision and passion, preventing burnout by ensuring that tasks are divided to allow multiple participants, and by building momentum through a series of small successes. Respondents described that networks can gain influence by having strong leadership, credibility, and diverse participation. Networks can lose influence by not having broad enough support, not having clear and realistic goals, having poor communication, and lacking a shared mission.

How has Blandin Foundation affected change in the community?

All of Blandin Foundation's methods of community support have affected positive change in the community, whether leadership training, community trainings and meetings, extensive granting, broadband support, or other initiatives like Circle of Healing. Blandin-sponsored trainings, whether the leadership program or general community trainings, teach community members important skills that fuel ongoing community improvement work in many organizations and initiatives. Inclusion-focused initiatives like Circle of Healing help the community increase responsiveness to diversity, which has impacts throughout all areas of community life. The extensive granting in the community not only provides small and large grants to a range of initiatives, but also incorporates processes to encourage community engagement and collaboration. Finally, Blandin's support of broadband was cited as a possible positive influence on Itasca County's broadband efforts.

How do Blandin Foundation resources interact with other factors that influence and drive community change, such as other resources and work occurring?

One of the primary ways in which Blandin Foundation resources interact with other community change factors is in the level of community collaboration encouraged by providing partial rather than full funding for initiatives, leading to a broader range of stakeholders supporting initiatives. Another important way Blandin and non-Blandin support intersects is when Blandin refers grantees to other organizations for collaboration or technical assistance. Leadership and other community training and capacity building is a third way in which resources interact: community members gain leadership and other important skills through Blandin initiatives, and use those skills to further community improvement work involving support from non-Blandin sources. Thus, Blandin leadership support is intersecting very successfully with non-Blandin sources of support and funding.

Have different funding levels led to different results (e.g., have higher funding levels necessarily made more impact)?

Community members perceive that both lower and higher funding levels have unique benefits. In some circumstances, smaller (or shorter-term) grants have benefits over larger (or longer-term) grants, such as requiring fewer staff resources to obtain and report on funding. In other cases, larger (or longer-term) grants are more beneficial, such as when project outcomes must be tracked, and when longer-term planning and budgeting is desired. Smaller grants are very useful for processes like strategic planning, meeting facilitation, and relationship building, which can have large impacts on community work. Larger grants, on the other hand, can provide different types of vital support, such as operating costs for organizations and funding for capital improvements. Overall, community members agreed that when applied for the appropriate purpose, all funding levels can be very impactful.

To what extent has Blandin Foundation seen, understood, and responded to community priorities?

Overall, respondents expressed that Blandin Foundation has seen, understood, and responded well to the community's priorities. Community members appreciate Blandin as a consistent source of support for the community, and highly value the approachability of Blandin staff and board members, as well as the high level of expertise that Blandin staff holds and makes available to the community. Although community members appreciate Blandin's efforts to gain community input through feedback meetings, they wish for more underrepresented individuals to have their voices heard and incorporated. Underrepresented communities include low-income residents, Native community members and people of color, people experiencing mental illness or having physical disabilities, and young people. Overall, most respondents perceive Blandin Foundation as empowering improvements that are led by the community, and only a few respondents wish for Blandin to move more toward leading change as opposed to enabling change.

What change would the community like to see in the future?

Community members, when asked about future change they would like for their community, expressed a desire for change in several interrelated areas: economic development and growth of high-quality, high-paying jobs; affordable housing and more people with stable housing; fewer people relying on social supports; continuing support and improvement to education and the environment; a more welcoming attitude toward diversity in the community; public transportation; and improvements to downtown Grand Rapids including more retail businesses, restaurants, and a pedestrian-friendly environment. Positive change in many of these factors would affect change in others. For example, economic development and job growth could also lead to more people with stable housing and fewer people relying on social supports, as well as more new retail businesses and restaurants downtown.

In summary, when we began conducting outreach to gather participants to inform this case study, there was no lack of excitement on the part of community members to talk about their experiences with Blandin Foundation, and their perspectives on the Grand Rapids area community in general. Throughout the conversations that informed this study, people continually pointed to the community's vast number of accomplishments and points of pride. In large part, many of the examples that people were eager to share involved strong leadership, networking, and collaborations. Blandin leadership alumni and non-alumni alike were quick to point of the benefits that the leadership program has had on the community.

Community members, too, were willing to provide candid feedback about what they feel can be improved. There is an ongoing opportunity to create more receptivity toward diversity in the community, whether in terms of Native and non-Native relations, inclusiveness of people of color, generational difference, or newcomers to the community. The persistent problem of a lack of public transportation requires solutions. Issues of NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) and conflicting interests lead to barriers in finding solutions.

Yet overall, community members shared a sense of optimism for the future. This may largely be drawn from the successes derived from the high level of collaboration in the community. Additionally, this sense of optimism may be from the exponential positive impacts of community members building skills through the leadership program and other training events.

Appendix: Data Collection Protocols

Survey protocol

About the survey

Blandin Foundation has asked The Improve Group to do a case study of the greater Grand Rapids area to explore how people improve communities. Blandin Foundation will use the case study to make continual improvements in their community partnerships. When complete, the case study will be made available to the public.

Who can take the survey?

Anyone age 18 or over who lives and/or works in Grand Rapids and/or surrounding communities, who is not already participating in the study through a focus group or interview, and who is not a current or former Blandin Foundation employee or board member. Feel free to forward the link! Please take the survey only once.

Instructions

Answer as few or as many questions as you like. To save your answers and return to complete the survey later, click “save” at the bottom of the survey, enter your email address, and you will be emailed a link to use to complete your survey. Click “submit” when finished.

How long will it take me to take the survey?

It’s up to you! You may answer one question or as many as you like.

How long will the survey be open for people to take?

The survey will be open until Sunday, October 18, 2015.

Confidentiality

Any personal information collected through this survey is limited to optional demographics questions (age, gender, ethnicity, etc.) and will be used only for the purposes of understanding reach of the survey. No individual information will be reported or retained.

For more information or technical assistance

Please contact Amy Cyr, Research Analyst with The Improve Group, amyc@theimprovegroup.com or 651-447-5543.

Thank you for taking the survey and forwarding it to others!

Survey Questions

1. Please select all of the following that apply to you:
 - I have participated in a Blandin Foundation leadership program.
 - I have worked on a grant funded project.
 - I am familiar with Blandin Foundation’s work in the Grand Rapids area.

2. Community improvement
 - a. What are the biggest strengths in your community? (open-ended)
 - b. How can those strengths be leveraged to make community improvements? (open-ended)
3. Networking
 - a. In what ways have networks or networking been used to improve the community? (open-ended)
 - b. What is needed for networks to achieve their goals? (open-ended)

4. Leadership

For those who answered Yes-participated in leadership program in question 1

- a. Are you using anything that you gained from the leadership program in your work, community, or personal life? If so, what gains/benefits are you using, and in what context(s)? (open-ended)
- b. What are some effects or outcomes of using these gains/benefits from the program? (open-ended)

5. Grants

For those who answered Yes-worked on grant funded project in question 1

- a. What non-monetary factors (such as human resources, infrastructure, or other factors) contribute to the success of a project? (open-ended)
- b. How can these non-monetary factors be combined with grant funding to maximize positive impact? (open-ended)

6. Blandin Foundation responsiveness to community priorities

For those who answered Yes-familiar with Blandin Foundation's work in question 1

- a. On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being not at all and 5 being entirely, to what extent is Blandin Foundation responsive to the priorities of the community?
 - 1 – Not at all
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5 - EntirelyWhy did you select that rating?
- c. In what ways can the Blandin Foundation improve how it responds to community priorities? (open-ended)

7. Demographics

- a. What is your gender?
 - Male
 - Female
 - Other
- b. What is your age?
 - 18-34
 - 35-64

- 65 or over
- c. What is your annual household income?
 - up to \$15,000
 - \$15,001 - \$30,000
 - \$30,001 - \$45,000
 - \$45,001 - \$60,000
 - \$60,001 or over
- d. How many people are in your household?
 - 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5
 - 6
 - 7
 - 8
 - 9
 - 10
- e. How would you describe yourself? (please select all that apply)
 - White
 - Native American
 - Hispanic or Latino
 - Black or African American
 - Asian
 - Other (please specify)

Thank you for taking the survey and forwarding it to others!

Interview Protocol

1 hour phone interviews

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. The interview should take about an hour. Do you still have that time available right now? [Great, thank you!] As a reminder, I am with The Improve Group, an independent research and evaluation company based in St. Paul, and we are working with Blandin Foundation to create a case study of the Grand Rapids area, which will explore how community improvement happens in the area, Blandin's involvement in the community, other factors and resources that have helped shaped the community over time, and how these factors have interacted. The case study will be used by Blandin Foundation to make continual improvements in the ways in which they partner with communities, and will be available to the public at the end of the project.

We understand that there is a varying level of familiarity with Blandin Foundation and the work that they have done, and that's fine. Because of this, please let me know as we move through the interview if you'd like to skip any of the questions that I ask you today for any reason.

Additionally, because some of the topics that we're going to be talking about – like community change – can be a little abstract at times, I have some questions that may sound strange, but asking them helps to get people thinking about these types of topics.

We will be collecting information through interviews, focus groups, and a survey with Grand Rapids area residents, and will combine all responses across major themes when we write the case study. However, if you share any examples that are particular to your work that are known to others, it is possible that unique information that you provide could be identifiable to you by others in your community.

We are also asking everyone who provides input to this study through interviews, focus groups, and the survey if they would care to fill out an optional demographics survey, indicating gender, age range, income range, and ethnicity. This information will not be linked to any input that participants provide, and will only be used to understand the demographic make-up of who we were able to reach for the study. I will send you a survey link after the interview and if you care to fill it out, please do.

Background and Community

1. How long have you been a member of the Grand Rapids area community?
 - a. What parts of the area do you spend most of your time in, such as Grand Rapids, Cohasset, or Deer River? This could be where you live, work, or spend other significant time.
 - b. What role(s) do you play in the community? (prompt if necessary: community projects, volunteer work, clubs/organizations, profession, etc.)
2. Have you had any involvement with Blandin Foundation, such as through the Leadership Program, any grant or broadband projects, or by participating in listening sessions or Blandin events?
[If yes] (*Probe for and note all applicable categories*)
[If no] In general, how familiar are you with Blandin Foundation?

- a. What comes to mind when you think about Blandin Foundation’s work in the Grand Rapids area?

Doing Community Improvement Work

The next couple of questions are about what goes into doing community improvement work. This next question is that unusual one I mentioned at the beginning:

3. Let’s pretend that you go to sleep tonight, and while you’re sleeping, you don’t know it, but a miracle happens. Because of this miracle, the Grand Rapids area transforms overnight into your ideal version of the community. Now remember, this all happened while you were sleeping, and you don’t know about it. When you wake up in the morning, you start going about your day as normal. What is the first thing that you notice that tips you off that you are now in your ideal Grand Rapids area?
 - a. As you go about your day, what else do you notice that is different? How is that different from the way things are now?
 - b. What would it take to make these changes into a reality?
4. In what other ways do you think the Grand Rapids area community could be improved?
 - a. What can community members do to address these areas for improvement?
Prompt: Are people working to make these changes already? If so, what is being done? If no, what would people need in order to make these improvements?
 - b. What motivates people in the Grand Rapids area to take action for community improvement?
Prompt: What does it take to get people involved in community work?
 - a. What barriers or challenges do people face in trying to make community improvements?
5. What are the biggest changes that happened in the community in the past 10 – 15 years?
 - a. What factors have influenced these changes? In what ways?
 - b. [If not already addressed] What Blandin and non-Blandin resources and support, such as other foundations, non-profits, or government bodies, have played a part in these changes (grants, leadership alumni)
 - b. How have these factors influenced community change individually, and in intersection with one another?
 - c. [If not already addressed] How does Blandin support interact with state, county, and/or city policy – how do these pieces fit together?
6. When you think about the improvements that have been made in the Grand Rapids area, to what extent do people tend to do this work in networks, or to what extent do they tend to work on their own? Which do you feel is more effective? Why? How can effectiveness of [working in networks or working on own] be leveraged?
 - a. Thinking of networks that have made improvements in the community, how have these networks formed (prompt for examples of specific networks)? How are they sustained? What gives networks more influence?
 - b. What do networks need to succeed in reaching their goals?
 - c. What are barriers to networks reaching their goals—what reduces their influence?
 - d. [If not already addressed]: Has Blandin Foundation support, such as leadership or grants, affected the ability of networks to make community improvement? If so, how? If not, why not?
 - e. What could be done to help people network more effectively?

Blandin Foundation – Community Relationship

The next set of questions is about the role that Blandin Foundation has in the community.

7. On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being not at all and 5 being entirely, to what extent is Blandin Foundation aware of the priorities of the community? Why?
8. On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being not at all and 5 being entirely, to what extent is Blandin Foundation responsive to the priorities of the community? Why?
 - a. In what ways can the Blandin Foundation improve how it responds to community priorities?
9. How would you describe Blandin’s place in the community (or role in improvement making)?
10. In your view, has the relationship between Blandin Foundation and the greater community changed over time, and if so, how?

Grants

Next, we are interested in getting your perspective about what people are able to accomplish with different sizes and durations of grant funding.

11. What types of things are people able to accomplish with smaller grants?
 - a. What types of things are people able to accomplish with larger grants?
 - b. What are pros and cons of small and large grants?
 - c. What are pros and cons of single-year versus multi-year grants?
 - d. In what ways can people use small grants to leverage other resources (such as other sources of funding, time, support of other organizations, etc.)? What about large grants?
Prompt: Can you share any examples where a grant was able to leverage other resources (especially those previously mentioned) in the Grand Rapids area? Was this related to the size of the grant?
 - e. What other resources or factors, beyond grant funding, help people in the Grand Rapids area accomplish goals?

Focus Group Protocol

Introduction (all groups)

- Thank participants for coming, please help yourself to food!
- Introduce ourselves and the Improve Group
- The Blandin Foundation has asked the Improve Group to help them learn more about the Grand Rapids area community. Blandin will use what they learn to explore how they can be the best partner possible for rural Minnesota communities. The results of this conversation will be available to the public when completed.
- You are experts on your community and we want to learn from you. We asked you to participate in this focus group because we want your insights on how you create a strong and vibrant community, but we don't expect you to know all the specifics of what projects Blandin has funded. We just want to hear about your perspectives on your community, and how the Grand Rapids area gets things done.
- This session will hopefully be fun, unusual, and creative. I will ask you to use your imagination, and be a dreamer. We will create a safe space for everyone to share their ideas. Everyone's ideas are equally important and we want to hear from everyone. So if you're giving a lot of input I may ask you to allow others to chime in, and if you're being especially quiet I may ask you for your thoughts. We will not indicate who said what when we write up the study. There are no right or wrong answers.
- We would like to audio record this session so that we can have a back-up copy for whatever we miss in our note taking, and to be sure that we reflect your ideas correctly. We will not share the recording with anyone.

Opening Question (all groups)

- Tell us:
 - Your name
 - Where in the Grand Rapids area you spend the most time (for example, I live in Cohasset and work in Deer River, etc.)
 - One sentence on your favorite thing about the Grand Rapids area

Future Community and Change Making (all groups)

The Ideal Grand Rapids area (Time Capsule into the Future)

I'm going to ask you to imagine that we are all stepping inside a magic time capsule. We are propelling forward in time—and we land--10 years into the future. The year is 2025, and we are stepping out of the time capsule. The magic part about this time capsule is it is bringing us to **your ideal** Grand Rapids area. As we exit the time capsule, we are stepping into the Grand Rapids area just as you want it to be (and that may be different for each of you). Look around. Notice where you are standing, what part of town you are in, who is around you.

- What do you notice that is different from how the Grand Rapids area is today?
- What would motivate you to make these improvements to the Grand Rapids area?
- What barriers would you find in doing this work?

Factors that Influence Work to Improve the Grand Rapids area (Magic Boxes)

Creating the Ideal Community

Now we're going to dig into the question of how the Grand Rapids area was made into this vision that you have for it. I have here a magic box (show the box), and in it is—whatever you want and need in order to make the Grand Rapids area into the ideal community that we've been discussing. That could be time, energy, people, connections, networks, other projects that you coordinate with, organizations like nonprofits or government offices—even ones that don't exist yet, infrastructure, trainings, seed grants, medium grants, huge grants, anything).

- What would you pull out of this box to make the Grand Rapids area into this ideal?
- What types of things would lead to the greatest impact in the community?

What's been done and has worked

I want you to think about work that **has already been done** in the Grand Rapids area to make the community a better place, and what types of things have gone into creating results from that work. This could be grants, but it could also be knowing the right people, or coordinating efforts with others, or having nonmonetary resources such as knowledge or physical assets like a building.

- What types of things influence results of work that people do in the community?
- What are some ways in which support from Blandin Foundation—leadership training, grants, and/or broadband grants—has affected positive change in the Grand Rapids area?
 - What types of non-Blandin support or other factors influenced these outcomes?
 - Do any of these sources of support help one another in influencing outcomes? (*Prompts: How? What does that look like? What are effects?*)
 - What resulted from this work, including both economic and non-economic outcomes? (*probe for diversity/inclusion outcomes*)
- What are things that can get in the way of working to make the community better? How can these challenges be overcome?
 - ➔ **If no**, they don't have an example including Blandin support:
 - Okay, let's talk about work that has affected positive change that did not involve Blandin Foundation support.
 - What types of support or input went into this work being done?
 - (*Prompt if needed: other grants? Networks? Trainings? Material support?*)
 - How did these types of support intersect, or work together?
 - (*Prompts if needed: Do any of these factors help one another in making change? How? What does that look like? What are effects?*)
 - What are things that can get in the way of working to make the community better? How can these challenges be overcome?
 - What resulted from this work, including both economic and non-economic outcomes? (*probe for diversity/inclusion outcomes*)

BF Responsiveness to Area Priorities (one community and one leadership group)

Blandin Foundation Responsiveness to Area Priorities

Now I'm going to shift the conversation to the priorities of the community, and Blandin Foundation's role in the community and level of responsiveness to those priorities.

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being not at all and 5 being entirely,

- To what extent is Blandin Foundation **aware of** the priorities of the community?
- To what extent is Blandin Foundation **responsive to** the priorities of the community?
- In what ways can Blandin Foundation improve how it responds to community priorities?
- In a short phrase or single sentence, how would you describe Blandin's place in the community?
- On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being not at all and 5 being entirely, to what extent do you feel that Blandin Foundation helps create sustainable improvement through helping people help themselves?
- In what ways does having Blandin Foundation and its consistent giving in the region make the Grand Rapids area different from other similar-size communities?
- In what ways is this a benefit?
- Does this have any drawbacks? If so, what?
- How would things be different for the community if Blandin Foundation did not provide consistent support to the area? (Prompts: Would support come from other sources or would the community receive less support overall? What would this look like?)

Grants: Large vs. small & short vs. long (One Community Group)

Pros and Cons of Types of Grants

Now we have two magic boxes! In the first box (display box) is a really huge grant, either a one year or a multi-year grant! In the second box (display second box) is a much more modestly sized grant (either one year or multi-year), *plus* three other non-monetary factors *of your choice*, such as time, energy, people, connections, networks, other projects that you coordinate with, organizations like nonprofits or government offices—even ones that don't exist yet, infrastructure, trainings, etc. Now think about which of these two boxes you want to have in order to reach your goals for improving the community. In a moment, I'm going to ask you which box you will choose, and why. If you choose the smaller grant with three other factors, I'll ask you what the other factors are. So I'll give you a moment to think on this. (Give a moment, then discuss):

- Which box are you choosing? (When applicable, ask what three factors they're adding to the box)
- Why did you decide the way you did?
 - Why would you choose smaller or larger grants?
 - Why would you choose single-year or longer grant terms?
 - Why would you choose non-monetary resources?
- When trying to make your community healthier and more vibrant, what helps you in best using the resources you have available to you?
 - Is there anything that can help you to make resources more effective, or more efficient?

Networking (One Community Group)

How networks in the Grand Rapids area work and improve the community

- Take a minute to think about what formal or informal networks you are or have been a part of. This could be Rotary Club or other club, a parenting or school group, a spiritual community or congregation, or even a group of people from different organizations that is working together on a common project or goal. Think about what you do within those networks, and what the networks as a whole do.
 - Let's throw out some names of networks that you belong to, or have belonged to in the past.
 - How did these networks get started in The Grand Rapids area?
 - How do people in these networks work together?
 - What kinds of things are needed to keep these networks going and achieve their goals?
 - What are some ways in which working in networks has created positive change for The Grand Rapids area?
 - Have any of these networks ever collaborated with Blandin Leadership Program alumni in order to achieve any goals? If so, what did that look like? What came out of it?
 - I'm going to ask you to think of a network you have been involved with, and in your mind, rate the level of influence that network has in the community on a scale from 0 to 5, with 0 being no influence, and 5 being a lot of influence. Have you got a rating? Now, if you wanted to increase that level of influence by one or two points, what would have to happen?
 - What would decrease the level of influence of your network?
 - If you wanted to improve something in The Grand Rapids area, would you try to do it by yourself, or from within a network? Why? How can networks be used to make more impactful improvements in The Grand Rapids area?

Ending Question (all groups)

- Summarize what we've talked about:
 - What is needed to create the ideal Grand Rapids area community and barriers that would be faced
 - Factors that influence community work
 - Community needs and priorities, and Blandin Foundation's role and responsiveness
- What else is important regarding work in the community that we haven't talked about?