

The [Transformational Partnerships Fund](#) (“TPF” or the “Fund”) was launched in March 2021 to support colleges and universities interested in exploring partnerships that could fundamentally improve how they operate and serve students—especially students of color, students from low-income families, and other underserved populations. The Fund provides institutions with a safe space for discussions, referrals, and grants of up to \$100,000. TPF was established by [ECMC Foundation](#) and [SeaChange](#), with additional founding support from [Ascendium Education Group](#), [The Kresge Foundation](#), and the [Michael & Susan Dell Foundation](#). Below are the highlights from TPF’s second year.

Outreach and Grants

The demand and interest for funding to support partnership explorations is clear. TPF has engaged more than **200 institutions** in some capacity and has made **22 grants** totaling \$1.4 million and involving **50+ institutions**. We believe that roughly 80% of these grants have been successful, though a third-party assessment is planned for later in 2023 when the grants portfolio is more mature. Based on the current pipeline, we expect a similar level of activity in 2023.

Positive media coverage played a vital role in building initial awareness for the Fund but most deal flow now comes through referrals from institutions and individuals in TPF’s ecosystem. Although it is still early days, we hope to have earned a reputation as a trustworthy, constructive, philanthropic

resource for institutions at various stages of considering partnerships.

Last year much of our outreach was in conjunction with third-party organizations including the [Higher Education Leadership Foundation](#), the [Council of Independent Colleges](#), [Middle States Commission of Higher Education](#), [FutureU](#), the [American Association of Community Colleges](#), [Yes We Must Coalition](#), the [National Association of System Heads](#), [Grantmakers for Education](#), the [Education Writers Association](#), and others. Our wonderful [Advisors](#) have been very helpful in making introductions and bolstering TPF’s reputation in the higher education community.

TPF seeks to help foster a nuanced discussion about relevant aspects of higher education partnerships and to normalize what can be a fraught and

sensitive topic. We provide a space on our website for [insights](#) from thoughtful leaders with real-world partnership experience. We also contribute comments and opinion pieces in partnership-related areas, including [How merger-curious colleges can find mission-aligned dance partners](#).

Some Observations

What have we learned in the second year?

1. **Exploring partnerships in higher education is very (very) hard.** Many university leaders, particularly of smaller nonprofit institutions, feel alone, confused and overwhelmed when determining what help they need and how to approach a partnership exploration process. We have come to believe that the single most important thing that TPF provides is a safe, confidential, expectation-free “space” where presidents and trustees can share their thoughts, brainstorm, and get organized.
2. **TPF grants can help motivate action and generate enthusiasm.** While not large in absolute terms, TPF grants—fast, flexible, and risk-tolerant—can spur action, bolster credibility, and generate enthusiasm within the institutions. The catalytic potential of the grants has been greatest when we have been involved in the exploratory process from close to the start and have developed trusting relationships with the decision-makers from both institutions.
3. **Most institutions need outside help.** In most situations, institutions need third-party help, including legal, facilitation, communications, etc. But before they engage this assistance, they often need help figuring out exactly what kind of help they need, when, and why.

4. **Many partnerships have been stalled by staffing.** In several situations, TPF has supported partnership explorations that have been stalled for months (or even years) because of staff turnover or leadership changes at one or both institutions.
5. **There will be more closures.** More institutions will close over the next 12-24 months given enrollment pressures and the end of COVID-related support. While most of these closures are inevitable, *how* these institutions close very much depends on the choices made by leaders. [Recent research](#) suggests that abrupt closures with little notice are far more damaging to students.

TPF In Action

Although most TPF grants remain confidential, we can offer a few more examples to illustrate our range of activity: in rural Kansas, we supported three public institutions – [Fort Hays State University](#), [North Central Kansas Technical College](#), and [Northwest Kansas Technical College](#) – in a deep affiliation; in Boston, we supported an innovative, strategic partnership between [Urban College and Impact.org](#), an affiliate of [Southern New Hampshire University](#); in Buffalo, New York we supported a cooperative agreement between [Trocaire College and Medaille University](#); and in South Dakota, we supported a program to provide coaching by [College Possible for students of Presentation College](#) in conjunction with its announced closure. In every case, we have been impressed by the courageous, student-centric leadership at the institutions and feel privileged to have supported their exploratory process.

Overall, we are pleased with TPF’s progress. Higher education is going through a tumultuous phase, but we are confident that TPF can play a part in helping some institutions make wise and timely decisions for the benefit of students. **We welcome your ideas, your referrals, and even your criticisms.** Please don’t hesitate to call **(844) 869-7842 Ext. 1** or email us (info@higheredpartnerships.org) at any time.

Best wishes for 2023,

John MacIntosh & Lindsay Kijewski

SeaChange Capital Partners

On behalf of the Transformational Partnerships Fund

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