

# FUNDING COHORTS

Microsoft Silicon Valley

2014 YouthSpark Cohort Program

## A Summary Report

This white paper reflects on Microsoft Silicon Valley's 2014 YouthSpark cohort grant program and provides recommendations for funders and nonprofits interested in engaging in cohort funding programs.

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# I. Executive Summary

In the rapidly evolving field of philanthropy, collaboration and collective impact are no longer just buzzwords: they're imperatives. Nonprofits and funders alike are therefore increasingly interested in the processes, challenges, and opportunities inherent in grantmaking programs focused on strengthening nonprofit collaboration. This paper addresses this interest by providing a case study and lessons learned on cohort-based grantmaking.

From 2013-2015, Microsoft Silicon Valley and Silicon Valley Community Foundation (SVCF) partnered on the design and implementation of a YouthSpark cohort funding program for Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties. This program aligned with Microsoft's global YouthSpark initiative to empower youth through technology, while adopting a distinct cohort funding model focused on supporting collective impact, encouraging nonprofit collaboration, and fostering peer learning opportunities among likeminded organizations. Through this program, Microsoft ultimately aimed to strengthen the local ecosystem of nonprofits working to empower youth through technology.

The 2014 YouthSpark grant round was the first time Microsoft and SVCF partnered on a cohort funding model, and this white paper seeks to describe and reflect on this experience. The first three sections of the white paper reflect on the program background, logistics, and opportunities and challenges of collaborative nonprofit partnerships. This overview of the program structure and key learning areas provide context for the program and inform the recommendations presented in section five.

The fifth and final section of this white paper proposes the following eight recommendations for developing and executing effective cohort funding models. These recommendations are offered in no particular order; different funders and grantees may find them applicable at different stages in the program process:

1. Foster organization-wide relationships between cohort partners
2. Develop and communicate clear program goals and purposeful meeting themes
3. Leverage multiple resources to support grantees
4. Build individual organizational capacity in addition to strengthening the cohort as a group
5. For modest grants, focus funding on opportunities to deepen existing nonprofit partnerships
6. Encourage nonprofit collaboration during the application process
7. Fund each recipient organization individually
8. Remain open to evolution and change throughout the process

Microsoft and SVCF hope that the reflections and recommendations presented in this white paper prove beneficial for nonprofits and donors interested in developing and participating in cohort funding programs.

## II. Program Background

In 2012, Microsoft launched YouthSpark, a global philanthropic initiative that aims to empower youth through technology. In line with this initiative, Microsoft's Silicon Valley team wanted to create a unique, YouthSpark-themed grant round that would maximize the finite pool of resources available to implement YouthSpark on a local level. Microsoft and SVCF were also committed to including best philanthropic practices whenever possible, including multi-year funding, operating support, and beyond-the-check partnerships.

In 2013, Microsoft and SVCF initiated conversations about a new funding model for the Silicon Valley YouthSpark initiative. Together, Microsoft and SVCF engineered a grant round that invited nonprofits to apply as a cohort of three to five organizations doing significant work in Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties. By asking nonprofits to apply together, the grant round aimed to encourage nonprofit collaboration on multiple levels, from simple information-sharing among like-minded organizations to joint program development. Organizations formed cohorts that focused on digital literacy, entrepreneurship, job readiness, STEM education, and other topics related to YouthSpark. Within the application, organizations were asked to describe how the individual organization would contribute to the cohort, reflect on the greater ecosystem of empowering youth through technology, and discuss how the individual organization could contribute to and collaborate with other organizations in this field. Individual nonprofits were allowed to apply with more than one cohort, and many did so.

While the cohort applied as a group, each nonprofit submitted an individual application that included information on their distinct work. Ultimately, the funding offered was not collective; each individual organization selected to participate in the 2014 YouthSpark cohort program received \$30,000 over two years in general operating support.

Microsoft did not tie the grant funding to a specific outcome or impact nor did it dictate how the funds needed to be utilized. The only requirement for receiving the funds was that organizations would participate in five Community of Learning sessions over a two year period starting in July 2014. The structure of these Community of Learning sessions was deliberately very fluid; the selected organizations identified their interest areas and made suggestions on how to best utilize these group learning opportunities.

## III. Program Logistics: Overview and Reflections

### Overview

SVCF and Microsoft Silicon Valley began brainstorming the structure and scope of the 2014 YouthSpark grant program in October 2013. After releasing the application in early February 2014, Microsoft hosted a Request for Engagement event on February 19, bringing nonprofits and stakeholders together to network, discuss opportunities for collaboration, and generate interest in the 2014 YouthSpark cohort program. Microsoft and SVCF had three goals for this event:

1. To explain the logistics of this non-traditional grant round in person and be available for questions
2. To offer nonprofits the opportunity to network with organizations with similar missions
3. To create a space in which nonprofits could begin to form the cohorts for the grant round

By early April 2014, SVCF received 24 completed cohort applications comprising of 61 unique nonprofit organizations. Two representatives from SVCF and one from Microsoft read all of the nonprofit applications with an eye for alignment, actionable goals for the cohort, target population served, focus area, and complementary nature of cohort programming as well as the strength of the individual cohort organizations. Together, Microsoft and SVCF agreed on the five strongest cohorts. SVCF then prepared more in-depth write-ups on these top cohorts, reviewing the applications for financial health and program feasibility.

The final funding decision was made in May 2014. The successful cohort consisted of four organizations working to promote the participation of girls in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM): Maker Education Initiative (Maker Ed), Technovation (a program of Iridescent), The Tech Museum of Innovation, and the YWCA's TechGYRLS. SVCF dispersed the first installment of grant funds (\$15,000 per organization) in June 2014 and the second installment (\$15,000 per organization) in January 2015.

For the first Community of Learning session in July 2014, SVCF and Microsoft asked the partners to identify what they wanted to achieve and discuss through their participation in the cohort. Rather than explaining how the group should structure the remaining four meetings, Microsoft and SVCF sought input from the organizations and asked them to set their preferred structure and focus to ensure maximum participation and impact on attendees.

The cohort defined the structure and focus of the Community of Learning sessions as follows:

Month	Topic	Structure
July 2014	Initial Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introductions</li> <li>• Discussion of nonprofits needs and brainstorming/planning for future meetings</li> </ul>
November 2014	Recruiting & Retaining Mentors & Long-Term Volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Case study and introduction (SVCF and Microsoft)</li> <li>• Leveraging LinkedIn to Identify Mentors &amp; Volunteers (Lauren Vesty, LinkedIn for Good)</li> <li>• How Corporate Infrastructure Impacts Volunteerism (Microsoft)</li> <li>• Common Retention Challenges and Strategies (SVCF)</li> <li>• Group discussion</li> </ul>
March 2015	Marketing & Social Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group discussion on NGO marketing challenges</li> <li>• Guest PowerPoint presentation on branding, storytelling, and using social media (SVCF Marketing and Communications Department)</li> <li>• SVCF and Microsoft's respective communications teams provided tips and specific feedback to each organization on their use of social media</li> <li>• Group discussion</li> </ul>
July 2015	Cohort Program Reflections & Learnings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitated group discussion on logistics of the 2014 YouthSpark grant program</li> <li>• Review of future collaboration/partnership opportunities</li> <li>• Open discussion about challenges and lessons learned</li> </ul>
September 2015	Cohort Program Reflections & Application Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group discussion on each organization's evolution</li> <li>• Continued group discussion on program reflections &amp; learnings</li> <li>• PowerPoint presentation on funders' grant application review process, including specific input on the YouthSpark application process</li> <li>• Review calendars for future collaboration (over a celebratory lunch)</li> <li>• SVCF and Microsoft provided individualized feedback on each organization's YouthSpark application</li> </ul>

In addition to these formal cohort meetings, Microsoft also highlighted the nonprofit members of the cohort through multiple channels over the two-year grant period. For example, while hosting a public event focused on nonprofit innovation, Microsoft invited the cohort participants

to speak on a panel about collaboration and women in technology. Microsoft also brought the partner nonprofits to its campus through nonprofit fairs and a social media training event.

## Reflections

### **1. Request for Engagement Networking Event**

About 150 individuals attended the Request for Engagement event in February 2014. Of these participants, 44 provided feedback on a post-event survey. Combined with the discussion and questions during the event, this survey feedback provided valuable insight on the nonprofit networking, program structure, application timeframe, and funding model for a cohort program.

#### **a) Value of Nonprofit Networking**

The Request for Engagement survey feedback demonstrated how the networking opportunity helped connect like-minded nonprofits:

- 80.8% of respondents built new relationships as a result of the information session.
- 76.9% of respondents reported that the grants program facilitated conversations with other Bay Area organizations that they would not normally work with.
- 73.1% of respondents reported that the grants program supported opportunities for collaboration with current partners.
- 88.5% of respondents planned on continuing conversations with the organizations in their cohort, regardless of funding outcome.

Because a primary goal of the cohort grant program was to facilitate and strengthen nonprofit collaboration and collective impact, this networking event can therefore be seen as a mechanism to encourage nonprofit collaboration, communication, and peer learning opportunities.

#### **b) Program Structure**

The post-event survey also provided valuable feedback on the structure of future cohort funding programs. Some nonprofits were confused and somewhat concerned about the unusual and flexible structure of the grant round. Microsoft and SVCF found themselves walking a tightrope: on one hand, they wanted to give nonprofits the opportunity to build and discover organic points of collaboration; on the other, some nonprofits wanted clear guidance about how a cohort should be formed and what it should accomplish.

#### **c) Application Timeframe**

Another valuable insight from the survey was that nonprofits felt they did not have enough time to fully prepare for the application and form a strong cohort group. While SVCF and Microsoft deliberately created a relatively short application (applicants were given just under two months to apply), some nonprofits needed time to build the partnerships necessary to apply as a cohort. Feedback about the grant round structure revealed something of a divide: some nonprofits in the space were already collaborating and were thus both comfortable and ready to move quickly on this grant round, while other nonprofits wanted additional weeks to form partnerships and apply.

## **d) Funding Model**

The concept of asking nonprofits to apply collectively but then making grants to individual organizations was, understandably, somewhat confusing as well. Given that this was an experimental grant round, Microsoft initially planned to only fund a single cohort to see how the model would work. However, several nonprofits at the Request for Engagement event expressed concern that the extra effort required to complete the unconventional application would not be warranted if chances of receiving funding were so slim. In the end, the application pool was strong enough that Microsoft funded two cohorts for a single year (at \$15,000 per organization) and one cohort for two years (at \$15,000 per organization per year). Only the two-year cohort received all the additional benefits discussed in the Program Logistics: Overview section above; this level of engagement would not have been possible for multiple cohorts. Funders considering a similar model may wish to incentivize nonprofit experimentation by funding multiple cohorts, but remain cognizant of the effort and resources needed to support multiple cohorts in ways other than direct funding.

## **2. Nonprofit Communication During the Application Process**

In the July and September 2015 Community of Learning sessions, the four cohort organizations provided feedback on the logistics of the program. In terms of the application process, the organizations highlighted how they convened online before submitting their individual applications. This meeting enabled them to identify how the cohort would complement each other and utilize their unique value add to support the other organizations in the group. They saw each other as collaborators, not competitors, and the cohort noted how the application was seen as “an excuse to get together” and to solidify relationships that had been put on the back burner.

In the September 2015 meeting, SVCF and Microsoft shared how this initial communication positively impacted the cohort’s successful application. SVCF shared how the cohort stood apart in its identification of how each organization uniquely contributed to girls in STEM programming, the complementary nature of their work, and how support for increased collaboration and capacity could augment their collective impact in the field.

## **3. Community of Learning Meeting Structure**

While SVCF consulted with the cohort at the onset of the program to identify key topics for the Community of Learning sessions, the format and progression of these topics remained flexible throughout the two year program. Overall, participants noted that they appreciated the fluid nature of the program and that there were no set expectations or outcomes for the funding, but rather a focus on creating an open space for collaboration and shared learning opportunities. However, the cohort participants and Microsoft and SVCF representatives noted that future programs could benefit from being more purposeful with the themes and structure of the cohort meetings, including a stronger focus on building authentic relationships and addressing specific organizational capacity needs. The teams also recognized that the cohort meetings usually engaged one or two specific individuals at each organization, rather than bringing the full organizations together. As discussed in more detail below, a challenge with this meeting structure is that these personal relationships did not always translate into organizational relationships and greater nonprofit collaboration.

## IV. Collaboration and Partnerships: Opportunities and Challenges

### Maintaining Relationships Amid Internal Organizational Change

The challenge of maintaining external relationships amid internal organizational staffing and programming changes emerged as a significant theme in both the July and September 2015 meetings. For example, a few organizations discussed how internal turnover and program growth prevented them from engaging deeper in conversations with the cohort partners. For example, one funder and two cohort partners experienced staff turnover within the two-year program, and invited new team members to participate in the cohort as the program progressed. All participants agreed that it was challenging to maintain relationships when high turnover rates caused both increased workloads for existing employees and sometimes required organizations to find new contact points with each other.

In the September 2015 meeting, participants highlighted how this challenge extends beyond the cohort structure and into organizational partnerships at large. For example, one cohort participant discussed the high turnover rates and contact points at the schools where they work (about 30% turnover) and the challenge of reestablishing partner relationships each year to scale their growth. In light of these challenges, the cohort therefore highlighted the need to focus more on connecting entire organizations to achieve greater collaboration within the nonprofit field, rather than connecting just a few individuals within each organization.

To address this challenge in the context of cohort program structures, the participants suggested that each cohort participant should educate their respective organizations on the progress and learnings of the cohort. They also agreed to share any events, meetings, and opportunities that arose in the cohort discussions with the appropriate departments at their organizations. The participants also suggested that other members of the organization could participate in specific training opportunities provided in the cohort meetings (NGO networking and volunteer retention, marketing strategy, grant review process, etc.). By creating avenues for greater organizational relationship building, the cohort could minimize the impact of internal staff turnover on the potential for increased organizational collaboration. Funders can also help address this challenge by providing general operating support funds to help build and maintain nonprofit operating capacity.

### Choosing Impactful Partners

One participant posed challenging questions to the cohort during the September 2015 meeting, including: How do you choose your partners? How can you say no to potential partners that want to work with your organization? Should we be focusing our partnership strategy on deepening our engagement in the community, or expanding our programs to new geographies and populations? After an internal strategic review, this cohort partner recently decided to focus its partnership efforts on like-minded organizations that are serving the same target populations, complement and augment its program offerings, and resonate with its mission. The participant credited this thinking to the YouthSpark cohort partnership, noting that mutually beneficial partnerships are worth the investment because they help all organizations involved achieve their missions and become more resilient.

Overall, all participants agreed with the importance of being selective and intentional with nonprofit partnership development, especially given the time and effort needed to foster these relationships.

## **Influence on Programming**

Ideally, cohort-based funding can promote different levels of partnership and collaboration. Two nonprofits that meet at a Request for Engagement event might casually share best practices. Several nonprofits that apply together but do not receive funding may continue to collaborate or refer those they serve to similar programs at other organizations. At the highest level, nonprofits can pool expertise and resources to co-create programs that no single organization could manage alone. While the survey feedback from the Request for Engagement event shows the power and relevance of nonprofit networking, in-person and written feedback from the 2014 YouthSpark cohort demonstrates how a more structured cohort program can facilitate deeper, higher-level collaboration within the nonprofit sector.

During the July 2015 meeting, the cohort participants shared how the YouthSpark funding strengthened their existing relationships and potential for increased collaboration. They stated that they had many follow-up conversations after the cohort meetings, including ideas for future collaborations outside of the specified meeting structure. They also highlighted how they now think of each other first when presented with a partnership opportunity for new projects. For example, prior collaboration and continued engagement through the cohort encouraged the YWCA/TechGYRLS to partner with Maker Ed on the Young Makers program, with YWCA/TechGYRLS even hosting a Young Makers event in the South Bay. The event provided an opportunity for young makers and mentors within both organizations' networks to connect and share their work before a Maker Faire, and the collaboration sparked conversations about potentially expanding the organizations' work together. The Tech also highlighted how they prototyped a new exhibit with TechGYRLS and adopted lessons from Technovation's brainstorming exhibit. As one participant mentioned in the group discussion, "It's really comforting to know I have community partners."

In addition to these collaborations, a cohort program can also influence nonprofit programming and service offerings in the community. For example, in the September 2015 meeting, The Tech shared how their experience in the 2014 YouthSpark cohort program exposed the importance of girls in STEM and inspired them to develop a specific "girls in tech" initiative at the museum.

In addition to these examples in the group discussion, post-program feedback forms from the participating organizations highlighted how the cohort program helped expand or enhance the organizations' views regarding strategic partnerships and collaboration within the nonprofit sector. One participant provided two specific examples of how it is working to leverage new partnerships with organizations based on their comparative strengths and needs, and using the partnerships to scale and improve each partner's programs. Another participant stated how the collaboration and open discussions in the cohort helped ensure that its programming would complement, rather than duplicate, what others in the field were doing to support girls in STEM.

## V. Recommendations:

After reflecting on the 2014 YouthSpark cohort program background, logistics, and influence on nonprofit collaboration, SCVF and Microsoft Silicon Valley arrived at the following eight recommendations to facilitate successful cohort funding programs in the future.

### ***1. Foster organization-wide relationships between cohort partners***

As discussed in the section above, one of the most prominent challenges discussed in this cohort involved the difficulty of maintaining relationships as organizations grow and evolve. Understanding this challenge, one lesson learned through the cohort is the importance of building organizational, rather than just individual, relationships across nonprofit organizations. Grantees and funders alike can address this challenge by engaging different team members throughout the cohort meetings and by following a more streamlined process for sharing news and events within the cohort's respective organizations.

While one individual at each nonprofit may be the primary contact and steward for the cohort program, inviting additional team members into the discussions and trainings will help bridge ties between the organizations at large. This process may deepen and broaden the extent of the organizational relationship and help prevent a lost relationship in case the primary relationship manager leaves the organization. Further, building this kind of cross-functional strength within nonprofits can help mitigate the effects of organizational change. One cohort participant suggested that funders can use the applications to assess the capacity of the organizations to participate in this more engaged manner.

The survey feedback from the Request for Engagement in February 2014 also suggests that focused networking opportunities can help build organizational connections. Post-program feedback also highlighted how the networking and face-to-face time in the five Community of Learning sessions were crucial to maintaining relationships amongst the cohort, problem solving together, and connecting around shared goals. In light of this feedback, increasing networking and collaboration opportunities for different members of the cohort organizations could therefore be an additional strategy to foster deeper organizational relationships.

### ***2. Develop and communicate clear program goals and purposeful meeting themes***

For a flexible funding opportunity like the 2014 YouthSpark cohort program, there is a crucial balance between allowing nonprofits to articulate the resources they need, allowing space for unexpected needs to surface, and building enough structure into a program so that every participant finds it worthwhile and manageable. While this particular cohort appreciated the open structure of the program, future cohort funding programs may benefit from a more clearly defined program goal and developing purposeful meeting themes at the onset of the program.

The purpose for the funding must be clear and actionable at the inception of the application period. Funders should communicate this program goal – even if that goal is as simple as encouraging nonprofit collaboration – as well as the funding levels, number of grantees to be selected, and total grant amount, before requesting proposals from nonprofits. This will help manage expectations for the program and ensure that interested nonprofits have the necessary information to decide if they want to apply to the program. A Request for Engagement event can be an effective way to communicate this program information, although funders should be sure to also notify prospective attendees of the program specifics in advance of the event.

Once a cohort is selected, funders and participating nonprofits should collaborate to identify meaningful meeting themes and a clear meeting structure that will best support nonprofit capacity and collaboration throughout the length of the program. To facilitate this process, coordinating bodies can conduct an initial survey assessment of the grantees' needs and participation goals before the first meeting, as SVCF did for the 2014 YouthSpark program. Topics to address in the survey could include the grantees' expectations for the cohort program, areas for nonprofit capacity building and training (social media, fundraising, etc.) and suggestions for the meeting format (focused group discussion, brainstorming sessions, training presentations, etc.). These results could then be discussed during the first Community of Learning session to map out the structure and scope for the remaining meetings that would most benefit the cohort's collaboration and shared learning experience. It is also worthwhile to revisit this survey mid-way through the program to make sure that initial concerns are being met and to surface additional topics.

By developing these meeting themes and structures early, grantees will be able to ensure that the right organizational representative is available to attend relevant meetings and have enough time to prepare any content or questions before the meeting.

### ***3. Leverage multiple resources to support grantees***

Given that the ultimate goal of the program was to encourage collaboration among local organizations working to empower youth through technology, both the funder and the recipient organizations recommend that future cohort programs provide general operating rather than program-specific funding. While these operating grants are important, operating grants coupled with more comprehensive support can be even more impactful. In addition to financial support, Microsoft and SVCF leveraged many other resources to foster the growth and strength of the nonprofits in the cohort, including:

- Offering Microsoft conference space for nonprofit events
- Highlighting the cohort participants at Microsoft-sponsored events, and introducing them to additional funders
- Offering free social media training to cohort participants
- Offering the professional services of both SVCF's and Microsoft's communications teams to help build capacity within the nonprofits
- Leveraging Microsoft's professional relationship with LinkedIn to offer training for volunteer recruitment to partners

- Helping to build the capacity of the development teams at the nonprofits by offering specific and individualized feedback on the initial grant applications

Funders involved in cohort funding programs are encouraged to reflect on their ability to provide diverse opportunities to support the organizations beyond the check itself, as these additional resources can help build capacity across the cohort group.

#### ***4. Build individual organizational capacity in addition to strengthening the cohort as a group***

The four organizations identified significant benefits from participating in the cohort program including expanded partnership opportunities, collective brainstorming sessions, capacity building, and peer learning on promoting girls in STEM. An additional advantage of the five Community of Learning sessions was the professional development the nonprofits received through the training components of these meetings (fundraising, social media, volunteer recruiting, etc.). Post-program feedback from the cohort participants noted how these training sessions were both relevant and an effective way to frame the meetings.

While these trainings were beneficial, the cohort also highlighted how they see additional potential for cohort funding programs to invest more in strengthening the individual participating organizations. Funding and coordinating bodies like Microsoft and SVCF can provide value in this area by engaging with each organization in specific, tailored capacity building opportunities and individualized feedback. To do so effectively, the funder should engage with each organization before the first cohort meeting to better understand their individual challenges and assess potential areas of growth or improvement; this could be accomplished through the initial survey assessment discussed in Recommendation #2.

#### ***5. For modest grants, focus funding on opportunities to deepen existing nonprofit partnerships***

During the application review process, it was difficult for SVCF and Microsoft to assess the extent to which the cohort funding of \$30,000 per organization over two years and the five Community of Learning sessions could enhance nonprofit partnerships and collaboration. SVCF and Microsoft therefore questioned whether a program of this scope would be more impactful if it worked to build new partnerships or strengthen existing partnerships. These considerations were also echoed in the Request for Engagement survey, as some individuals sought the opportunity to strengthen existing partnerships while others suggested that Microsoft create new partnerships based solely on the applications.

As discussed in the Influence on Programming section above, however, the July 2015 meeting highlighted how the existing relationships between the four cohort participants enabled them to get more out of the program than they would have if they were partnering for the first time. One participant added to this point by noting how partnerships need to be mutually beneficial to be meaningful and worth the investment. Organizations that are already working together have made this calculation; augmenting these relationships through cohort funding and programming can enhance the level of collaboration and the benefit each organization experiences through the partnership.

Rather than requiring nonprofits to develop new bonds, cohort programs providing a modest level of financial and programmatic support may therefore be more impactful if they focus on strengthening and deepening existing partnerships among nonprofits. Funders interested in providing much higher levels of financial and programmatic support, however, are of course encouraged to brainstorm opportunities to foster new nonprofit partnerships through a cohort funding program.

### ***6. Encourage nonprofit collaboration during the application process***

Discussing cohort applications in advance of the deadline helps nonprofits effectively articulate how their programs complement and enhance each other and how each organization will contribute to and benefit from the cohort. As evidenced by the success of the 2014 Girls in STEM cohort's application, this kind of collaboration in the application process not only supported a compelling and cohesive application, but also demonstrated a commitment to the goals of the 2014 YouthSpark program. To help foster this initial teamwork, funders should consider opportunities to encourage collaboration during the cohort application process. For example, funders could request a group narrative application that encourages the organizations to collectively describe their goals and expectations for participating in a cohort program. This group application could be supplemented by a short, tailored application from participating organizations to help the funder assess the strength of the individual applicants. Another consideration would be to develop a phased application process, whereby a funder first requests a letter of intent or group application from the prospective cohorts, and then only requests individual applications from the most competitive cohort groups to make the final funding decision.

One consideration in making this recommendation is that the collaboration required to submit a group application takes time. These sentiments were highlighted in the Request for Engagement survey in early 2014. Funders interested in requesting a group narrative application should therefore provide ample time (about three months) for nonprofits to respond to a collective proposal process. As always, funders should also be sure to calibrate the application requirements to the level of funding.

### ***7. Fund each recipient organization individually***

Microsoft and SVCF tried to think realistically about the ramifications of issuing joint funding. Amidst concerns that joint funding would not, ultimately, enhance collaboration (and might in fact foster competition), this cohort grant round was deliberately structured to grant equal amounts to each nonprofit, while requiring the organizations to think and learn collectively. This balance resulted in strong and positive bonds between the nonprofits.

### ***8. Remain open to evolution and change throughout the process***

The 2014 YouthSpark grant round was an experiment – for the funder, the applicants, and the grantees. Throughout the process, a commitment to clarity and candor built a strong foundation for genuine partnership and collaboration. Many things changed over the two years – staff, programing, leadership – but the bedrock dedication to the core mission of supporting girls in STEM remained constant. That focus, coupled with flexibility and trust, allowed all parties to learn and grow.

When funding a cohort program, funders must recognize that organizational change is a constant, and the probability of change is even greater when working with multiple organizations. By remaining open to evolution and change throughout the grant program, funders can better support the organizations as they work towards their missions and achieving the goals of the grant program.

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### About Silicon Valley Community Foundation

Silicon Valley Community Foundation advances innovative philanthropic solutions to challenging problems. As the largest community foundation in the world, we engage donors and corporations from Silicon Valley, across the country and around the globe to make our region and world better for all. Our passion for helping people and organizations achieve their philanthropic dreams has created a global philanthropic enterprise committed to the belief that **possibilities start here.**