

Untapped Potential: Focusing Philanthropic Investment to Leverage the Reach and Social Mission of Public Institutions to Test and Scale Innovative Ideas

Brian Bannon 24 April 2017

Public institutions may not be likely incubators of innovation, but they have incredible potential to become flywheels for it under the right conditions. At Chicago Public Library (CPL), we have learned that reshaping public institutions into nimble, social innovation leaders requires thoughtful collaboration and support from the public and private sectors. An example of this collaboration is our teen program YOUmedia, initially funded by the Chicago-based MacArthur Foundation through the Chicago Public Library Foundation.

Long before I moved to Chicago to lead CPL in 2012, I knew YOUmedia was groundbreaking. After a few months in my role, I realized how transformative the project could be – not only because of its unique brand of deep teen engagement, but because it also positioned the Library to creatively tackle service innovation opportunities across

the age spectrum. Our challenge was to move the program from its experimental stage – where it had proven itself as a viable model – to scale. But as a large city department, the complexity and bureaucracy of our organizational structure can limit our ability to rapidly pivot to address ever-evolving patron needs. Could a 140-year old organization in a constrained financial environment truly integrate an innovative service into its operations?

In late 2009, YOUmedia launched as a laboratory aimed at providing teens the opportunity to discover and pursue their interests through activities such as writing and sharing poetry, playing and blogging about video games, producing music, and creating videos, all with guidance from adult mentors. The team designed the program to harness teens' natural interest in accessing and using media to engage them in learning and connect their talents with real world opportunities.

More than eight years later, YOUmedia is thriving, and the model has expanded and evolved within Chicago and nationally. Its innovative approach integrates responsive programming, creative space design, and collaborative leadership, allowing the YOUmedia team to continuously iterate on the original model to ensure it stays current with changing teen interests and opportunities for new partnerships. What's remarkable is that all of this has happened within CPL, a large public institution that, prior to 2009, had very little targeted programming for teens,

much less expertise using digital media and mentorship to engage youth.

This did not happen by accident. The YOUmedia story highlights how smart philanthropy can position public institutions to create meaningful change and offers great potential for scale.

Execution of a bold vision requires the right mix of collaborators. In the early 2000's, Chicago-based MacArthur Foundation funded research that has now become the standard in defining how teens learn. They launched Digital Media and Learning as a new grant making area in 2006.

MacArthur selected content expert Digital Youth Network (DYN) as a design partner to engage teens through digital media-based learning. Next, they needed a launching pad for the program to come to life—a place where that type of exploration-based learning could be supported. They decided to seek partnership with an existing institution, rather than creating a new organization, both for sustainability and to leverage existing bases of community trust. Prioritizing mission-alignment around community-based learning, MacArthur and DYN approached the Chicago Public Library and the Chicago Public Library Foundation with the concept.

Collaborative innovation harnesses individual and collective strengths and requires extreme flexibility.

When MacArthur invited CPL to assist in developing YOUmedia, the Library jumped at the opportunity—the collaboration offered definite benefits. While CPL possessed a vast number of resources to support lifelong learning, engaging learners through digital media was new terrain for libraries. The Library had no staff dedicated to serving teens. On-the-ground programming was delivered by children’s librarians and was, essentially, a modified version of CPL’s traditional programming organized around teen-focused content and materials. Not surprisingly, teen engagement at libraries across Chicago was low; programming did not reflect teens’ interests or tap into the way they learned best.

This collaboration offered CPL a set of solutions for working with youth, broadening the vision of what a library could be. The strategic relationship among these three initial partners combined knowledge of public service, teen engagement, learning, and design to create an innovative space at Chicago’s main library – the Harold Washington Library Center – and to launch YOUmedia with DYN staff providing the majority of on-site programming. As these ideas began to take shape, all partners needed to depart from existing organizational paradigms and redefine their prior boundaries. This meant that CPL leadership had to examine several previously unquestioned policies about how teens use the library and to consider programming operations that were radically different from what libraries have traditionally done.

The path to success is rarely a straight line and requires comfort in ambiguity. Right out of the gate, YOUmedia was a success. Usage by teens was very high, and it attracted positive attention from libraries, museums and learning researchers across the country and internationally. The original YOUmedia staffing model was funded 100 percent with private dollars, which meant that the experiment could flourish, even in a time of constrained public resources. Despite this initial success, CPL, as a public institution, was in a tricky spot. With a significant investment from MacArthur, CPL had built a well-resourced and inviting space to house the YOUmedia program. Although considerable efforts were made to connect YOUmedia programming to Library-wide initiatives, in many ways, YOUmedia remained an appendage to CPL, not integrated into the fabric of the Library. While the model was intended to - and did - push the boundaries of what was possible for teen learning and aligned with the Library's mission to provide free and open access to knowledge and information, the program lacked connection with existing CPL organizational design and culture. YOUmedia was sound in design, and the experiment was working, but it was not sustainable if it could not be fully adopted by CPL.

We needed to fold the program into the core operations of the Library. We decided to tackle this on two fronts: (1) reduce CPL's reliance on external funding and staff to fuel YOUmedia and (2) attend to the organizational dynamics

within CPL to allow for innovative programs like YOUmedia to flourish.

We knew CPL needed to diversify its funding to support YOUmedia beyond the terms of the MacArthur grant. By making the case that investment in YOUmedia would help Mayor Rahm Emanuel realize increased youth engagement city-wide, we secured an initial commitment of public dollars from the City which allowed us to add dedicated staff and create a distinct teen services department at CPL. For three consecutive years, we've been able to add city-funded positions and capital investments so that YOUmedia now runs at 12 locations throughout Chicago, and CPL boasts robust and developmentally appropriate teen programming city-wide with 47 city-funded teen-serving positions. CPL could not have developed such a robust pilot on our own – but MacArthur saw the potential in CPL to nurture this vision. We leveraged that investment to learn how to deliver teen services well and to demonstrate strong ROI to the City. YOUmedia is now funded 75 percent with public dollars, with remaining programming support for its 12 sites coming from private support through the Chicago Public Library Foundation.

In the first three years of the YOUmedia program, CPL encountered several challenges around staff and organizational culture, operational expectations, and internal branding because the program operated so differently from the rest of the organization. When CPL

decided to take YOUmedia on as a core library program, the process felt like a merger of two organizations, rather than taking an innovation seeded and nurtured internally to scale. As we continued to integrate YOUmedia into CPL, we wanted to retain all of the unique elements that made YOUmedia appeal to teens while creating clear alignment with CPL operational structures. Fortunately, at the same time, we were working on a library-wide adoption of a human-centered design approach to service, and we began to orient the rest of our organization along the very principles that drive YOUmedia's successful approach – letting patrons' interests guide our service design, resulting in better outcomes and higher staff and patron satisfaction.

Today, CPL continues to be a national thought leader in how to engage teens in learning through mentorship and creative activities. The Library's successful model has not only enabled us to increase city funding but has also allowed us to demonstrate the impact of this program with the Chicago Public Library Foundation and the philanthropic community. YOUmedia's success was never a given, and we still have work to do, but we have demonstrated that, with a strong, shared vision, philanthropic support to provide proof of concept, and a well-managed framework for program delivery, innovation can take root within a large, bureaucratic organization.

Brian Bannon Bio:

Brian Bannon serves as Commissioner & CEO of Chicago Public Library. Appointed by Mayor Rahm Emanuel in 2012, Bannon is charged with the oversight of the \$130 million urban public library system that serves more than 10 million visitors annually through a network of 80 libraries. CPL is the largest and most visited civic institution in Chicago and is among the largest urban public library systems in the world. Under his leadership, CPL has been recognized as a top U.S. urban library and has won numerous awards and accolades including the National Medal for Museum and Library Service and being named the best urban public library in the United States. Brian also has received numerous accolades for this work that include Fast Company's "100 Most Creative People in Business," Blue Sky Innovation's 100 innovators, and Crain's Chicago Business Tech 50. His board service includes READ Global, Illinois Humanities, Donors Forum and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Global Libraries. Prior to this role, Bannon held a variety of leadership positions within the San Francisco Public Library, Seattle Public Library, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. He received his Master of Library and Information Science from the University of Washington Information School and is a 2017 Henry Crown Fellow.