



Pro Musica Youth Chorus is one of four arts organizations that joined together to increase their collective fundraising capacity.

Collaboration for Corporate Sponsorships

Four small performing arts organizations worked together to create new capacity for corporate partnerships. But the project took much longer than expected, in part because no organization took ownership of the initiative.



**Mission
Sustainability
Initiative**

Exploring & Supporting Collaboration

Sustained Collaboration Type

Shared Service & Joint Programming

MSI Grant Types

Pre-Exploration
Exploration
Implementation

Collaboration Process Timeline

2017 - 2023

Partners

Oak Park Festival Theater
Oriana Singers
Pro Musica Youth Chorus
Symphony of Oak Park River Forest

Outcome

Launch of joint campaign

Can small arts organizations

find ways to become more sustainable through collaboration? In Oak Park & River Forest, IL, four arts organizations have built the infrastructure for shared corporate partnerships.

This innovative collaboration is in its early implementation stages but hints at the potential of sustained collaboration for other small arts organizations.

Oak Park and River Forest have many arts organizations. Many of them are small. In 2018, the community foundation supported research and a presentation laying out the landscape of the arts organizations and the challenges they face. The presentation made the case for the potential for shared service for these organizations. There were about 25 nonprofits in attendance. Those interested in collaboration began to meet following that presentation to see if there was something interesting to pursue. Mainly, the group thought there was the potential to hire a shared development director. Initially, seven organizations said they were interested.

Most nonprofits wanted to grow their fundraising capacity, because they couldn't afford a fundraising consultant or to hire a development director

Seeding the Idea

The group applied for a seed grant from the Mission Sustainability Initiative, a member of the Sustained Collaboration Network. The group contracted with Mission + Strategy to conduct another survey and interviews, getting a sense of the resources and processes that each nonprofit was using. After a few months, they presented the result — most nonprofits wanted to grow their fundraising capacity, because they couldn't afford a fundraising consultant or to hire a development director. Over time, three of the seven organizations dropped out, but the remaining four decided to move forward to see if they could do something. The four organizations were: Oak Park Festival Theatre, The Oriana Singers, Pro Musica Youth Chorus, and The Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest.

Elizabeth Chadri of the Oak Park Community Foundation remembers her surprise that they chose to work on fundraising. “I wondered how it would work out because fundraising is a sensitive issue, and it's also very competitive. But that's what they want-

ed. Mary Anderson (then of Mission + Strategy) was great because she was able to give them examples of fundraising partnerships that have worked.”

Jean Butzen, founder of Mission + Strategy, described those early meetings. “We spent a lot of time analyzing their fundraising operations because they had said, ‘We want to strengthen our fundraising, but we don’t want to interfere with what we’re doing already around fundraising, and we don’t want anybody stealing each other’s revenue.’”

“Sometimes, the really small organizations have the most to gain from collaboration...”

Exploring an Operating Agreements

The group applied for another grant from the Mission Sustainability Initiative; this time, it was an exploratory grant. Again, the group used Mission + Strategy as the consultant. The goal of that grant was to develop their operating statement. It took a couple of years to get there. The exploration occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was a struggle for everyone.

Butzen was patient and stuck with them. She reflected,

“You just have to be really, really patient. I think there’s a tendency to think that if you don’t get a result in a year or two years, [you



Oriana Singers

should] give it up. Sometimes, the best results I’ve seen are when people just let it percolate. Don’t assume that something can’t happen; don’t assume that if you don’t get really big results right away, it can’t develop into something really significant. Collaboration is so much harder than doing mergers or asset transfers or something like that. It’s so much harder because if people have capacity, they’ll just be like, “Forget it. I’ll just go do this myself.” Sometimes, the really small organizations have the most to gain from collaboration, and the larger organizations are the ones that are least likely to do it. But the teeny, tiny organizations, that’s where we have to be so positive, spending time patting them on the back and telling them they’re great. ‘This is okay. Don’t get down on yourself. Just keep going. Take on just what you can handle. Don’t do more than that,’ because they’ve got so much that they’re dealing with.”

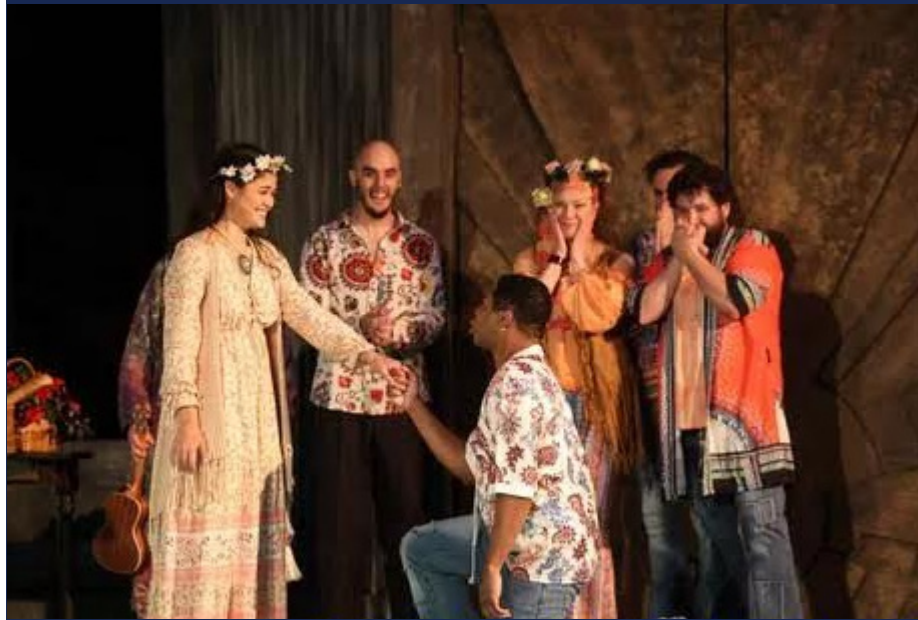
The patience, encouragement, and persistence paid off. Cheryl Flinn, representing the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest as a board member,

credits Jean’s persistence with helping them finally get to an operating agreement. “She pushed us to keep meeting and had some ideas when we struggled.” With the operating agreement in place, the group was ready to launch as One Voice officially.

Introducing One Voice for Arts after Five Years

One Voice is a fiscally sponsored project of The Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest. The four members have pooled their resources to extend their reach, boost their audiences, and increase their revenues. The agreement allows other Chicago area performing arts nonprofits with annual revenues under \$1 million to join. The operating agreement specifies a profit split between member organizations based on their joint fundraising. Each partner can request that specific donors be excluded from One Voice Fundraising. But partners can also receive more than the agreed-upon split if they introduce a donor to One Voice.

With an operating agreement in hand, the group again applied to the Mission Sustainability Initiative – for an implementation grant. Although their first application was turned down, they reapplied and were awarded a grant for branding and implementation. This time, they worked with consultants for graphic arts and a trademarking attorney. They launched a website and had their first event in



Oak Park Festival Theater

2023. It was well attended, with almost 100 people there.

Camille Wilson White of the Oak Park Community Foundation was in attendance. “It was pretty exciting to see them. They’ve been talking about this and working on it. So, to see this starting to come together and support each other. Who knows what the future holds for them in this collaboration.”

The operating agreement specifies a profit split between member organizations based on their joint fundraising.



Symphony of Oak Park River Forest

A strong champion can make a significant difference in the persistence of collaborations.

A collaboration five years in the making seems like a long time to reach an operating agreement, even considering a global pandemic. But according to Kate Piatt-Eckert, Director of the Mission Sustainability Initiative, it isn't as uncommon as one might think.

“I think the consistent thing is that often these projects, especially ones that involve multiple organizations, take a long time. In the five years, this group engaged in three different Mission Sustainability Initiative-related projects at three different phases of the development of their collaboration. That's not uncommon. It takes time because there isn't one obvious way to do it. There isn't a playbook for a lot of these nuanced collaborations. It takes a fair

amount of evolution, an iterative process . . . But I think the fact that they have kept working this long is impressive.”

Much of the endurance of the project has to do with the persistence of individuals, and especially, everyone acknowledged, Cheryl Flinn. A strong champion can make a significant difference in the persistence of collaborations. Persistence is needed for small organizations, especially to find new ways of working together.



To learn more about the Mission Sustainability Initiative, visit myforefront.org/msi or email msi@myforefront.org.

Sustained Collaboration Network

This case study was produced for the Sustained Collaboration Network by Michelle Shumate, Ph.D. of Social Impact Consulting.