

Positioning Collaboratives to Generate Impact

An Evaluation of the Catalyst Fund and Collaborative Capacity Investments

Amy E. Mickel, PhD

January 2026

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply grateful to Jon Peterson, Director of the Network for Landscape Conservation (NLC), for his thoughtful guidance and unwavering commitment to collaboration as an impactful way to conserve and steward our landscapes at scale. A special note of appreciation to Zac Hummel for his invaluable administrative support and Alexis Gibson for her graphic design talents. I would also like to thank the 129 anonymous survey respondents and 45 focus group participants (Appendix A) for their time and insights.

A heartfelt word of gratitude goes to all funded collaboratives and their extended networks. Your dedication to stewarding, conserving, and restoring your respective lands and communities is remarkable.

Since 2019, the Network for Landscape Conservation has been grateful to be in partnership with the Doris Duke Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, whose support has made the Catalyst Fund possible. Additionally, NLC would like to acknowledge the partners who contributed to shaping the Catalyst Fund since its inception, including everyone who contributed to the grant-cycle review process and those who supported the development and implementation of the peer learning program. In particular, NLC is grateful to Jaimie Baxter, Sharon Farrell, Claudia Mengelt, Melissa Ocana, and Tracy Stanton—an advisory team that provided high-level, strategic guidance in supporting the initiation of this evaluation.

This evaluation was made possible through funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Additional support was provided by Parks California and the California Landscape Stewardship Network, partners who share our commitment to strengthening collaborative capacity and exploring insights around the evolving needs for capacity-building in landscape conservation and stewardship.

Cover photo: As part of a two-day workshop on best practices around aspen restoration, **High Divide Collaborative** partners tour a 350-acre aspen treatment project on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest outside of Dillon, MT, in September 2020. Credit: Emily Harkness, Heart of the Rockies Initiative.

Suggested citation: Mickel, A. E. (2026). Positioning collaboratives to generate impact: An evaluation of the Catalyst Fund and collaborative capacity investments. Prepared for the Network for Landscape Conservation. https://landscapeconservation.org/catalyst-fund-impact-evaluation_2025_final-report/

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Administered by the Network for Landscape Conservation (NLC), the [Catalyst Fund](#) is a national regranting program designed to deliver collaborative capacity investments to place-based, community-grounded landscape collaboratives. A portion of the Catalyst Fund is dedicated to supporting Indigenous leadership in conservation and stewardship work.

The Catalyst Fund program seeks to address a disconnect between what is generally understood about landscape conservation and stewardship (i.e., collaboration is essential when working across jurisdictions) and what is funded (i.e., project implementation is frequently funded with limited funding dedicated to the collaborative process). The program directly addresses this “collaboration disconnect.”

The Catalyst Fund is based on the premise that strategic investments in collaborative infrastructure and coordination capacity strengthen a collaborative’s processes and functioning, thereby better positioning it to meet its landscape goals over the long term. By making such investments, the Catalyst Fund strives to accelerate the pace and practice of collaborative landscape conservation and stewardship across the United States and transboundary geographies, addressing systems-level challenges such as the interconnected crises of biodiversity, climate, and environmental injustice.

The Catalyst Fund supports capacity building in two ways: collaboratives’ capacity with \$25,000 grant awards and coordination leads’ individual capacity through participation in a two-year peer learning program. Over six annual funding rounds between 2019 and 2024, the Catalyst Fund granted 85 awards to collaboratives, with one-third awarded to Indigenous-led collaboratives.

This evaluation is focused on addressing four questions:

1. Did the Catalyst Fund help collaboratives invest in relevant capacity-building elements, and did these investments strengthen a collaborative’s processes and functioning?
2. Did strengthening collaborative processes and functioning better position collaboratives to achieve on-the-ground conservation and stewardship outcomes and other impacts?
3. Is there an understanding of *how* enhanced capacity strengthens a collaborative’s ability to function and better position it to achieve on-the-ground outcomes and other impacts?
4. What are key insights or takeaways to consider for the broader field of practice?

An integrative mixed-methods approach was used to collect and analyze data. Evaluation findings are informed by quantitative and qualitative data from a range of sources. These include 129 online surveys collected from individuals with direct knowledge about a funded collaborative (i.e., grantee), ten focus groups with a total of 45 participants serving in coordination roles, grant proposals and interim/final reports from 85 grantees, and 20 supplemental documents internal to NLC.

FINDING 1: The Catalyst Fund’s capacity-building investments strengthened collaborative processes and functioning of funded landscape collaboratives.

THE CATALYST FUND ENABLED COLLABORATIVES TO INVEST IN TWO TYPES OF CAPACITIES: COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY AND INDIVIDUAL CAPACITY. Financial awards were used by funded collaboratives to invest in collaborative capacity-building elements such as coordination capacity and shared strategies and priorities. To build individual capacity, individuals serving in coordination roles were invited to participate in a two-year peer learning program.

CAPACITY INVESTMENTS STRENGTHENED PROCESSES AND FUNCTIONING FOR THE OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF FUNDED COLLABORATIVES. Collaborative coordination leads and partners reported their collaboratives being more effective in setting priorities, making decisions, coordinating communication among partners, implementing practices to sustain the collaborative, planning ways to sustain collaborative efforts, and running meetings.

FUNDED COLLABORATIVES’ DEVELOPMENT ADVANCED, MOVING THEM FURTHER ALONG IN THEIR LIFE CYCLES. Prior to receiving a grant award, 30% of funded collaboratives identified as being in start-up, 53% in building, and 18% in sustaining stages of their life cycles. After the Catalyst Fund grant period, 41% reported being in building and 59% in sustaining stages—marking a clear shift forward in collaborative development.

FINDING 2: Strengthened collaborative processes and functioning better positioned collaboratives to achieve on-the-ground conservation, stewardship, and other desired outcomes.

FOLLOWING THE CATALYST FUND GRANT PERIODS, POST-GRANT COLLABORATIVES WERE BETTER POSITIONED TO GENERATE ON-THE-GROUND IMPACTS. 73% of survey respondents observed increases in the pace at which their collaboratives were reaching conservation and stewardship goals, while 71% observed increases in the scale of on-the-ground outcomes.

POST-GRANT COLLABORATIVES WERE BETTER EQUIPPED TO ACHIEVE OTHER DESIRED OUTCOMES. For example, 82% of survey respondents observed increased implementation of outreach, education, and other engagement programs by their collaboratives.

FINDING 3: The Collaborative Capacity Impact Model™ illustrates how enhanced capacity strengthens a collaborative’s ability to function and better positions it to achieve on-the-ground conservation and stewardship goals.

The *Collaborative Capacity Impact Model* (Mickel & Farrell, 2025) is a data-driven framework used to illustrate how enhanced collaborative capacity enables collaborative activities and outcomes which generate collaborative impacts. For this evaluation, this cutting-edge model is applied to illustrate how Catalyst Fund investments in collaborative infrastructure and human capacity needs enabled essential functions that made on-the-ground conservation and stewardship outcomes possible.

Figure ES-1. Generating Collaborative Impacts™



DURING THE TWO-YEAR GRANT PERIODS, CATALYST FUND CAPACITY INVESTMENTS ENABLED FUNDED COLLABORATIVES TO CARRY OUT TWO INTERCONNECTED CATEGORIES OF ACTIVITIES.

Collaborative development and functioning activities include coordination and convening, collective planning and strategy setting, partner relationship building, and communication strategies that make effective collaboration possible. *Project and program activities* include targeted outreach, project priority identification and planning, and public awareness and engagement that reflect shared priorities and collective action.

THROUGH THESE ACTIVITIES, FUNDED COLLABORATIVES GENERATED IMPACTS RELATED TO RELATIONSHIP BUILDING AND COLLABORATIVE AND PARTNER FUNCTIONING.

During the Catalyst Fund grant periods, many funded collaboratives produced *foundational impacts* of enhanced connectivity and trust among collaborative members, partners, and communities. They also generated *operational impacts* of boosted creativity and innovation, increased resource sharing, added capacity, and enhanced cultural awareness and respect among collaborative partners.

FOLLOWING THE CATALYST FUND GRANT PERIODS, A NUMBER OF POST-GRANT COLLABORATIVES CONTINUED TO PRODUCE SIGNIFICANT AND VALUABLE IMPACTS.

A subset of post-grant collaboratives achieved *outcome impacts* that advanced their core purposes and *integrated impacts* resulting from institutionalized approaches—with a subset scaling up, accelerating, and sustaining collaborative impact processes.

THE COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY IMPACT MODEL SHOWS HOW THE QUALITY OF COLLABORATIVE FUNCTIONING AND COLLABORATIVE PERFORMANCE ARE INEXTRICABLY INTERTWINED. Delivery of on-the-ground conservation and stewardship work is directly linked to how effectively and efficiently a collaborative operates. Collaborative capacity investments are critical to scaling up, accelerating, and sustaining both function and performance.

FINDING 4: The field of practice can learn and benefit from key evaluation insights and general takeaways.

COLLABORATIVES ARE A SPECIAL TYPE OF ORGANIZATIONAL MODEL WITH CAPACITY NEEDS.

Bringing together a suite of organizations and partners to work towards shared goals, collaboratives are marked by a high degree of adaptability. This allows them to respond to perceived needs and/or opportunities that span physical, political, institutional, and cultural boundaries. Like any for-profit, nonprofit, or governmental entity, collaboratives experience life cycles and have capacity needs. To optimize performance and maximize their potential, collaboratives' capacity needs must be met.

INVESTING IN COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY AT PIVOTAL STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT IS

WORTHWHILE. Catalyst Fund grant support was indeed catalytic. It helped fulfill grantees' capacity needs, better positioning them to achieve long-term conservation and stewardship success. This suggests that strategic capacity investments in collaboratives' early life-cycle stages can produce desired outcomes and lasting impact.

COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY INVESTMENT WORKS, BUT IT TAKES TIME. It takes time to start and build collaboratives for long-term success. And, it takes time for investments in this kind of relationship- and trust-based work to yield their full potential. Those that take the time to build trusting relationships, agree on a collective purpose, develop a shared strategy, and establish governance and decision-making structures are better able to implement, scale up, and accelerate conservation and stewardship work on the ground.

INVESTMENTS IN COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY ARE NEEDED THROUGHOUT COLLABORATIVES' LIFE

CYCLES. One of the continual challenges that landscape collaboratives face is how to sustain themselves over time to achieve outcomes that shift the trajectory of their landscapes. Building collaborative capacity is not a one-time investment, but instead is an ongoing need.

PEER LEARNING IS A VALUABLE WAY TO ENHANCE INDIVIDUALS' ABILITY TO COORDINATE AND MANAGE COLLABORATIVES.

For many, this aspect of the Catalyst Fund stood out as invaluable. It equipped participants with a set of skills, competencies, and practical knowledge, enabling them to better support their collaboratives. This suggests peer learning programs can better position those in coordination roles to serve their respective collaboratives in reaching their goals.

TRUST-BASED PHILANTHROPY IS EMPOWERING AND PROMOTES EQUITY. This approach allows the flexibility that collaboratives are seeking to best position them to advance on-the-ground outcomes and build just, sustainable futures for landscapes and communities. It also shifts power dynamics, creating a more equitable relationship between funders and grantees.

COLLABORATIVE IMPACTS EXPAND BEYOND QUANTITATIVE MEASURES. What is clear from the experiences of Catalyst Fund grantees is that relying solely on quantitative measures—such as acres restored or miles protected—fails to capture the full value and impact of collaborative efforts. In addition to the more quantifiable impacts, the field of practice would benefit from assessing extremely valuable impacts such as relationship building, effective collaborative functioning, and other socio-environmental impacts. These less-tangible impacts are essential to delivering on-the-ground conservation and stewardship outcomes.



Photo credit: The Kali'uokapa'akai Collective

ABOUT THE NETWORK FOR LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION

[The Network for Landscape Conservation \(NLC\)](#) is a national umbrella group and leading voice for advancing collaborative conservation and stewardship at the landscape scale. As a practitioners' network, NLC works to connect practitioners to ideas and innovation—and to each other—in order to accelerate the pace and practice of landscape conservation and stewardship across the United States and transboundary geographies.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Amy Mickel has 30 years of experience conducting applied social science research using integrative mixed-methods approaches. Through numerous peer-reviewed articles and practitioner publications, she has helped build a shared language and understanding to improve the effectiveness of landscape and seascape-scale stewardship and conservation initiatives. Examples of some of her work include [Collaborative Capacity Impact Model](#), [Partnership Impact Model](#), [Partnership Impact Evaluation Guide](#), [Cutting Green Tape Case Study](#), and [Four Cornerstones to Effective Collaboration](#). Dr. Mickel is a full professor in the College of Business at California State University, Sacramento where she has taught undergraduate and graduate students since 2000. She is the Applied Research Lead for [The Stewardship Network](#).



Photo credit: Yuba Forest Network

Prepared for



Network for Landscape

CONSERVATION

Advancing the Practice of Conservation at the Landscape Scale