Collective Funding with Intention: Lessons from America's Cultural Treasures Regional Grantmaking Initiative

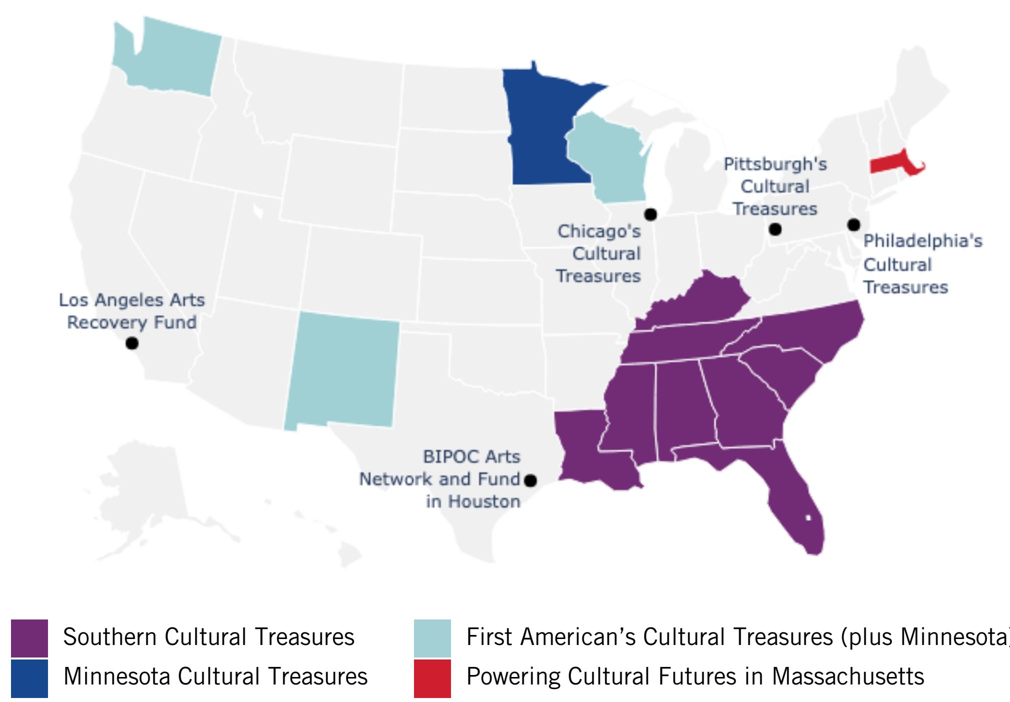
Executive Summary

In 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic threatened the survival of nonprofit organizations across the country and demands for racial justice, and systemic reforms were heightened after the death of George Floyd. As part of its response, The Ford Foundation created the America's Cultural Treasures Initiative to recognize and honor the diversity and excellence of artistic expression in American and to provide critical funding to organizations that have made a significant impact on the American Cultural landscape despite historically limited resources.

The initiative was two-pronged, a national partnership first followed by a set of nine regional partnerships, which collectively involved more than 40 funders and distributed $276 million to support Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian American-led and serving arts organizations.

This study focused on the regional partnerships with quantitative analysis of grant and community data alongside interviews with regional funding partners and intermediaries. The examination surfaced insights around how funding reached communities and identified evidence-based strategies to inform future crisis response and sustained investment in BIPOC-led arts organizations.

Figure 1: Participating ACT Regions



Regional Cultural Treasures Programs

BIPOC Arts Network and Fund in Houston
Chicago's Cultural Treasures
First Americans Cultural Treasures with First Nations
Los Angeles Arts Recovery Fund
Minnesota Cultural Treasures
Philadelphia's Cultural Treasures
Pittsburgh's Cultural Treasures
Powering Cultural Futures in Massachusetts
Southern Cultural Treasures with South Arts

ACT Funding Shifted Historical Patterns of Disinvestment

To better understand how regional ACT funding flowed into communities, we examined the demographic makeup of zip codes where grantees were located. This analysis showed that ACT funds flowed at high rates to BIPOC communities, with a greater portion of ACT grantees located in BIPOC-majority zip codes than the baseline percentage of BIPOC-majority zip codes in every region.

In cities, where historic patterns of neighborhood segregation are most pronounced, this analysis also showed changes in broader foundation funding patterns over time. In 2019, arts organizations in BIPOC-majority neighborhoods were receiving less *median* foundation funding than those in white-majority neighborhoods in all but one of the five cities in the program. By 2022 this pattern was reversed, with *median* foundation funding in BIPOC majority zip codes higher than in white-majority zip codes in all four cities where disbursement had begun, indicating real change in addressing historical funding inequities. ACT funding also expanded access to arts and culture—in four of the five cities grantees were located in zip codes with fewer arts organizations than the city average.

Table 1: Percentage Change in Funding Gap of BIPOC-Majority Neighborhoods Compared to White-Majority Neighborhoods from 2019 to 2024

Chicago: 24% lower → 60% higher
Los Angeles: 96% higher → 3% lower
Philadelphia: 5% lower → 17% higher
Pittsburgh: 16% lower → 289% higher

Note: Percentages are based on median arts funding to organizations in BIPOC-majority zip codes. Houston is omitted due to the region's ACT disbursements beginning in 2023.

Examining funding patterns in these same cities across a longer time horizon reveals more subtle long-term shifts in funding. From 2019 to 2024, the proportion of total foundation dollars supporting arts organizations in BIPOC majority zip codes increased in four of the five cities. While this demonstrates sustained progress, it's important to note that the percentage of funding flowing to these neighborhoods still remains lower than the prevalence of BIPOC-majority zip codes overall, so progress has not yet resulted in funding parity through this lens.

Figure 2: Share of Foundation Support for Arts and Culture Awarded to Organizations Located in BIPOC-Majority Neighborhoods from 2019 to 2024

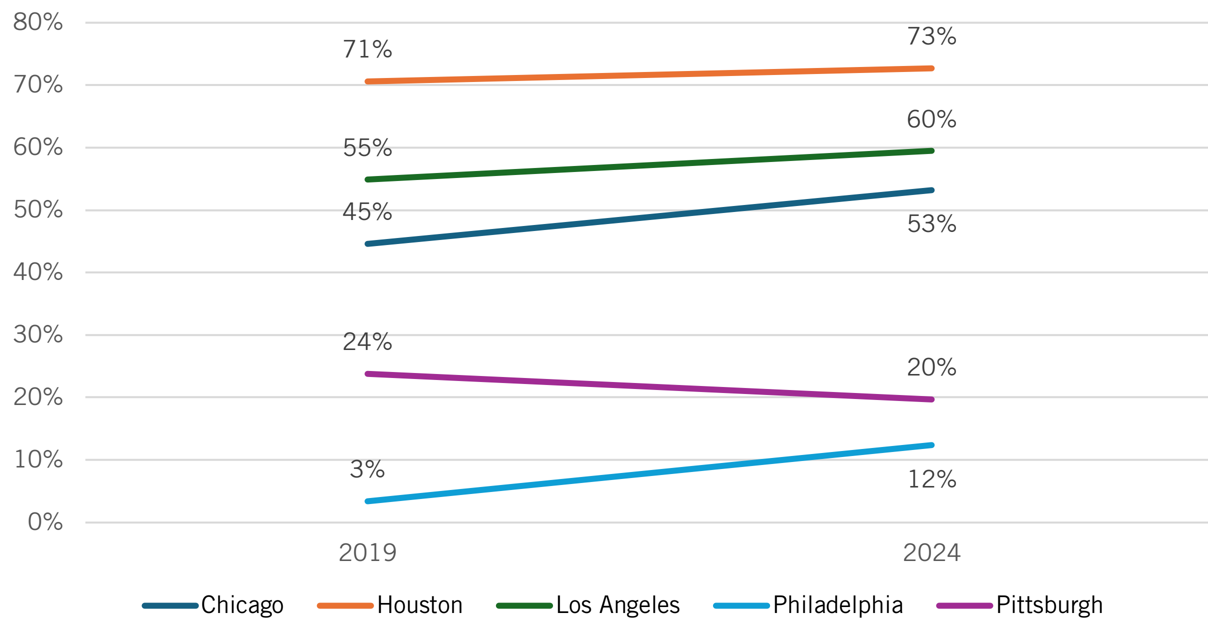


Table 2: Percentage Change of Foundation Support for Arts and Culture Awarded to Organizations Located in BIPOC-Majority Neighborhoods from 2019 to 2024

Chicago: 9% higher
Houston: 2% higher
Los Angeles: 5% higher
Philadelphia: 9% higher
Pittsburgh: 4% lower

The program’s design yielded lasting impacts for participating funders and intermediaries

ACT was a partnership effort with multiple contributors in most regions, including funding partners and organizations contracted to administer parts of the program (intermediaries). Collaboration was structured in different ways across the region with a variety of levels of shared authority, from a single lead funder with the First Americans’ Cultural Treasures to a community-led structure in Houston with the BIPOC Arts Network and Fund.

The report surfaced the intensive resources required to launch collaborations, with higher effort needed when there were more partners and/or greater shared authority. Funders also shared significant benefits to the collaborative funding approach, including:

- strengthened cross-funder relationships
- deepened expertise in trust-based philanthropy and crisis response
- new or strengthened relationships between local funders and BIPOC organizations

> "[This initiative] is helping to shift philanthropy from an outcomes-based model... It was exciting for organizations and organizational leaders to see themselves as more vision/mission driven instead of product oriented."

For future funder collaborations, participants suggested planning for the significant time investment and space to align around shared goals, roles, and processes—especially related to decision-making. They recommended building pathways for relationship-building between grantees and the funder cohort. Funders also suggested planning early and intentionally for mechanisms to gather and address feedback throughout the program.

The research surfaced four key learnings for supporting BIPOC organizations

Interviews with participating funders and intermediaries surfaced key learnings for supporting BIPOC organizations, including:

1. Provide flexible multi-year funding and invest in long-term benefits like skill building and network expansion.

2. Prioritize organizational sustainability over project outcomes and involve community members meaningfully in decision-making.

3. Raise the visibility of organizations' work through grant maker communication platforms.

4. Address persistent infrastructure gaps, including affordable and sustainable spaces, alongside funding.

We hope funders will take away evidence-based strategies to advocate for sustained philanthropic investment in BIPOC-led arts organizations in their regions.

"We wanted to recognize that we're building [this initiative] from the lived experiences of our arts leaders and workers. Yes, we're scaffolding and learning [as we go]. Now we have the data, the language, the histories to say 'We know this now'. [Treasures] have some space to dream."

Conclusion

The emergency nature of this funding initiative—spurred by the crisis of the pandemic—enabled funders to work outside typical partners and practices. Learnings from this research can inform future crisis response and funding collaboratives.

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