



The [Transformational Partnerships Fund](#) (“TPF” or the “Fund”) launched in March 2021 to **support colleges and universities interested in exploring partnerships that could fundamentally improve how they operate and serve students—especially students of color, students from low-income families, and other underserved populations.** The Fund was established by **ECMC Foundation** and **SeaChange**, with additional founding support from **Ascendium Education Group**, **The Kresge Foundation** and the **Michael and Susan Dell Foundation**. Below is a summary of the highlights from the first year and the lessons we’ve learned.

### Outreach and Grants

The demand and interest for funding to support partnership explorations is clear. TPF has received inquiries and proposals regarding **over 60 partnerships**. To date, TPF has made **six grants involving 15 institutions**. Based on the current pipeline, we expect several more grants during the first quarter of 2022.

Although “deal flow” is not a primary measure of TPF’s success, we can only find opportunities to add value to institutions seeking to explore partnerships if we are in the flow of conversations. Early positive media coverage when the Fund launched played an important role in building awareness among institutions. The launch of the Fund was covered in [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#), [Inside Higher Ed](#), [the National](#)

[Observer](#), [Inside Philanthropy](#), and [Forbes](#), among others.

Although the universe of higher education institutions (about 4,000 in total) is relatively small compared to the much larger universe of all nonprofits, getting the word out and maintaining awareness requires ongoing effort. In 2021, our outreach was through education associations, accrediting agencies and others, including the WASC Senior College & University Commission ([WSCUC](#)) Annual ARC Conference, the [Grantmakers For Education Annual Conference](#), [the Association for Collaborative Leadership](#) and the [New England Commission of Higher Education’s Annual Meeting](#).

We expect to engage in more convenings in 2022, particularly if in-person events resume again. It is

also important for us to continue to highlight that the Fund is a purely philanthropic effort—a surprising and distinguishing feature to many institutions and other stakeholders deeply concerned about students.

Our experience in the first year also confirms that TPF has a role to play in fostering a nuanced discussion about relevant aspects of higher education partnerships. We were pleased to host a webinar together with the [Offices of the Attorneys General of New York and Massachusetts](#) and to provide a space on our website for [insights](#) from thoughtful leaders with real-world partnership experience. We also contributed comments and opinion pieces in partnership-related areas including [For Economic Recovery, Invest in Higher Education Transformation](#), [The Road Not Taken](#), and [Without Financial Help, Bloomfield College Risks Closure](#).

Our wonderful [Advisors](#) have been very helpful in making introductions and bolstering TPF's reputation. TPF has also been well received by thought leaders in the industry. For example, **Dr Nathan Grawe**, author of *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education* and *the Agile College*, calls it “one of the most interesting and important initiatives out there.”

## Initial Observations

What have we learned in the first year? Here are some initial observations.

1. There is a large amount of activity and discussion involving emergent arrangements or those poised to begin. There appears to be a growing recognition of the role for partnership as a proactive strategy for growth or as a necessary response to the environment. The idea may have been somewhat destigmatized by the attention of **thought leaders** like **Nathan Grawe** (“*The Agile College*”), **Arthur Levine** (“*The Great Upheaval*”) and **Mary Marcy** (“*The Small College Imperative*”), as the number of transactions grows, and as institutions recognize that they will not be able to return to a pre-COVID “normal”, as other demographic, economic, social and technological factors were already placing significant burdens upon institutions of higher education.
2. **Institutions—at present—seem most interested in academic partnerships.** Thirty-five percent of the inquiries TPF received in 2021 were from

institutions interested in partnerships that might improve their academic, curricular, and student offerings. Others (23%) were interested in shared administration and/or infrastructure (inc. facilities), mergers and/or acquisitions (20%), or partnerships with non-higher education institutions (4%). Approximately 20% of the institutions reached out before they had determined what type of partnership to explore.

3. TPF grants can help **motivate action and generate enthusiasm.** In several cases, a grant from TPF—while not large in absolute terms—has been able to spur action, bolster credibility, and generate enthusiasm within the institutions.
4. TPF has demonstrated value by providing a **confidential space** for discussion and referrals. While the higher education sector has a robust set of “connective” organizations (state associations, accreditors, membership organizations, and affinity groups of one form or another), many university presidents, particularly of smaller nonprofit institutions, feel largely on their own and overwhelmed when determining what help they need and how to approach a partnership exploration process. In several instances, TPF has been able to help these leaders get organized, which may or may not ultimately lead to a grant but can be an important way for TPF to add value. In fact, the best grantmaking opportunities are likely to come from these early calls rather than when the TPF is approached later in the exploration process. We have also seen first-hand that the process of looking carefully at a potential partnership can be an efficient form of strategic planning that leaves an institution with a better understanding of its strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities.
5. **The gestation period for meaningful partnerships is long** and has many phases, twists, and turns. Colleges and universities are under-staffed (and distracted by COVID) and their governance is complex, so even beginning a partnership discussion can take many months. Once discussions begin, they can have many phases and components extending not simply over months but even years. The leadership of one of the institutions may also change during the exploration, which can further add to the time and complexity of the process.

## TPF In Action – Ripon College and Marian University

Although most of the TPF grants remain confidential, we can offer Ripon College and Marian University as an example. In March, the institutions [announced](#) that they were exploring a partnership and (later) that they had received a [grant from TPF](#). Ripon and Marian are small, independent institutions located 20 miles from one another near Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. Ripon offers a traditional liberal arts curriculum. Marian offers a combination of general education and

professional programs (e.g., nursing and education). Both have demonstrated commitment to and success in recruiting, retaining, and graduating Pell-eligible students and those who are often the first in their families to attend college. TPF made a two-part grant: the first to support faculty-led discussions about an academic partnership and the second to explore creating a shared services center to centralize certain back-office functions. We have been impressed by the leadership at both institutions and the two exploratory tracks are proceeding well so far.

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Overall, we are pleased with TPF's first year and look forward to 2022 and beyond. Higher Education is going through an exciting but challenging phase and we are confident that TPF can play a small part in helping institutions navigate these tumultuous waters wisely. However, we can only do that with your help. **We welcome your ideas, your referrals and even your criticisms.** Please don't hesitate to **call (844)-869-7842 Ext 1** or email [info@higheredpartnerships.org](mailto:info@higheredpartnerships.org) us at any time.

Best wishes for 2022,

**John MacIntosh**

SeaChange on behalf of **TRANSFORMATIONAL  
PARTNERSHIPS FUND**

