

GEO Member Story



Flexible and adaptive, The Patterson Foundation has worked for the past four years to build connections and strengthen networks, using its resources to capitalize on the power of relationships to grow impact.

Debra Jacobs, the foundation's president and CEO, uses the analogy of a mosaic when describing the foundation's work, with the financial and intellectual capital of the foundation serving as the grout that helps partners join together and thrive.

"Rather than supporting existing programs that are already in place, we focus on helping others connect to additional resources – including strategic facilitation, communications and financial consultants – to create stronger impact," Jacobs said.

The foundation was set up with an unfettered charter, and rather than devoting time and resources to particular issues, it focuses on opportunities for collaboration. The foundation is able to be more responsive and nimble than it would be if it had to concentrate on maintaining a programmatic course. To maintain a proper bearing while navigating through complex collaborations, the foundation is closely guided by its core values, [which are listed on its website here](#).

"We try to find collaborative networks that align with our work and values and build upon what we've already learned, so there is continuity," Jacobs said. She added that the foundation specifically looks to contribute to areas that other funders aren't supporting and where there is a void.

Partnerships range from supporting the Arthritis Foundation Florida Chapter to increase its statewide fundraising more than 300 percent through strategic communications and sponsorship consulting, to working nationally with independent online community news publishers to create a virtual association called LION Publishers, which supports strategies to expand thriving, readership and community impact of its members.

As the foundation interacts with its numerous partners (currently, the number stands at 20), it works to collect and share lessons learned among partners and with others who might find them useful — across organizations of varying sizes, issues and geographical areas.

Honesty and humility can go a long way in this process, since learning means sharing not only what has gone well, but also what could have gone better.

"We welcome the opportunity to share what has not worked," Jacobs said. "We believe we learn as much from our failures as from our successes."

The foundation works to embed continuous learning, reflection and adaptation throughout its partnerships, referring to these as *strategy refreshes* – a practice borrowed from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The Patterson Foundation also reduces unnecessary reporting from grantees and instead focuses on learning through regular and open communication.

This means monthly calls with partners and meetings with partners' staff and boards to understand the depth and breadth of what is being learned.

“Engaging with multiple organizational levels provides an opportunity to truly understand our partners and to build trust throughout the organization,” Jacobs said.

When evaluating the possibility for a partnership, Jacobs said that the foundation looks for alignment between the foundation and the potential partner on all five of the following areas:

- Leadership
- Willingness
- Readiness
- Capacity
- Culture

All of these, Jacobs said, must be undergirded by trust, and The Patterson Foundation works to minimize the power dynamic that exists in its relationships.

“We appreciate the influence money has in the traditional funder-fundee relationship,” she said. “But we work intentionally to create a trusting environment so people will speak candidly, share successes and failures, and give us constructive feedback about our involvement.”

Just as the process for entering a healthy partnership is important, Jacobs said The Patterson Foundation emphasizes exiting the partner relationships when they are in a healthy financial position — or as the foundation likes to phrase it, financially thrivable.

Jacobs shared how she recently asked a partner what they valued from their relationship with The Patterson Foundation. The partner shared that they were appreciative of the ability to be honest — to be able to share the frustrations and things that weren't working.

Jacobs will be the first to tell you that these kinds of relationships take a significant amount of time and effort to establish.

Grantmakers who are working as collaborators — particularly on under-supported issues — need to be thoughtful regarding the type of leadership role they're playing. Being a connective leader requires skillful balance.

Foundations exploring collaborative approaches that support grantees may be leading by example for other foundations, but they have to be careful not to overpower the actual collaborative process.

“The leadership element of our partnerships is where we demonstrate our values,” Jacobs said. “We always sit at the table with others. ... For us foundations, it's often the case that we don't need to lead anybody anywhere; people are already doing really good work.”

Instead of working to direct collaboration, The Patterson Foundation looks for opportunities to strengthen the connections among the collaborators.

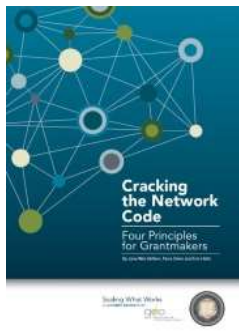
With all the work supported by foundations, Jacobs said it's important for grantmakers not to lose sight of the delight that comes from doing work that is making the world a better place. Among the

foundation's values are the words "joyful stewardship," and Jacobs said it's important to keep checking for that joy.

Among the benefits of being a member of the GEO community, Jacobs said she appreciates opportunities to connect with other funders who are also exploring what's possible in philanthropy. If you'd like to connect with her about the work of The Patterson Foundation, [you can click here to email her](#).

GEO resources that relate to the topics covered in this member spotlight

[Cracking the Network Code](#)



[Working Better Together: Building Nonprofit Collaborative Capacity](#)



[Pathways to Grow Impact](#)

