

Who is Engaging Stakeholders Well?

William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund

Local liaisons help Connecticut grantmaker stay connected to communities involved in statewide grantmaking initiative.

Quick Grantmaker Stats

Type of funder	Family foundation
Geography/Issue Area	Connecticut/Education
When founded	1946
Total assets (as of FY 2013)	\$113 million
Annual giving (as of FY 2013)	\$3.9 million
Number of staff	10 full-time, 1 part-time
Website	http://www.wcgmf.org and www.discovery.wcgmf.org
Brief description of the program/ practice being discussed	Community liaisons support local collaboratives working to improve early education across Connecticut.

1. Describe the situation or practice.

In 2002, the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund launched a multiyear effort aimed at supporting the work of Connecticut communities as they set out to improve early learning opportunities for children. The grantmaker's Discovery initiative offers grants and capacity-building support to 53 communities across the state that are home to more than half of Connecticut's children from birth to age 17.

A key operating principle for the initiative is that solutions cannot be imposed on communities from outside; they have to emerge from a collaborative process involving parents, teachers, early-care and education providers, and others. But with more than 50 communities pursuing independent strategies for change, the grantmaker needed a way to stay connected to the collaboratives that were managing local Discovery initiatives. Community liaisons help the Memorial Fund understand what is happening in communities, build local capacity and facilitate communications without having to add to the grantmaker's staff.

2. What have you tried to do differently?

The Memorial Fund contracts with community liaisons charged with serving as an information link between the grantmaker and local collaboratives. The liaisons are responsible for building and maintaining relationships with community members, and are expected to hold up a mirror, ask the hard questions and offer the support communities need to reach their goals. They are typically independent consultants who are knowledgeable about education and community dynamics, committed to parent and community engagement, and who share the values of inclusion and equity the foundation cares about.

Carmen Siberon, community program officer, said the Memorial Fund works to ensure that the liaisons are not viewed as monitors or compliance police but as learning partners. “These are people the local collaboratives can turn to with questions and who can both reinforce and offer a variety of training opportunities on building collaboration, encouraging parent engagement and supporting inclusive and data-driven community planning,” she said.

“Our values at the foundation are clear. We really believe that the solutions and answers are in the local players’ hearts and minds, especially the families themselves. We foster that in how we talk about the work, how we offer support through the liaisons and our capacity building program, and even in how we frame our grant application.”
— Carmen Siberon, Community Program Officer

3. What has been the result?

Siberon said the most useful thing about having liaisons is the ability to stay current with community developments and to witness the victories and struggles in the community through the eyes of people on the ground. The liaisons’ reports on the communities’ experiences help shape the Memorial Fund’s capacity-building and technical assistance offerings, while also informing its program decisions. Thanks to the community liaisons, the grantmaker is better able to anticipate each community’s needs in order to achieve its early education goals.

Donna Labbe, who runs the local Discovery collaborative in Torrington, Connecticut, said the liaisons provide a vital link between the Memorial Fund and the communities. Even though the Memorial Fund is working simultaneously with 53 communities, Labbe said she feels its people are very closely connected to what is happening in her community.

“They are always interested in what’s happening here and they seem to be ahead of the curve in anticipating the kinds of technical assistance and other support we need as we do this work,” Labbe said.

Mary Broderick, a liaison working with nine communities in eastern Connecticut, said the Graustein Memorial Fund is deliberate in ensuring that she and her colleagues play an empowering role in the local communities. “There is a real respect that the fund brings to this work in terms of meeting the communities where they are and helping them reach their goals,” Broderick said.

About the Discovery Initiative

Discovery, an initiative of the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund, aims to create an early childhood system that ensures early learning success for all children. The grantmaker works collaboratively with communities, statewide partners and government agencies to analyze, reflect, organize and act on behalf of young children from birth to age eight. Discovery contributes to a common goal: Connecticut children of all races and income levels are ready for school by age five and are successful learners by age nine. For more information: <http://discovery.wcgmf.org/>.

4. What are your key insights from doing the work?

Siberon said that one of the challenges of working with the liaisons is ensuring that they remain in a neutral role. “The deeper the relationship gets between the liaisons and the community, the easier it is to miss important information about something that is not working, or for the community to view them as an external voice. This is an unintended consequence to the deeper engagement to which the fund aspires,” she said. The Memorial Fund’s staff coaches liaisons about when they need to step back and remain neutral. “There are cases where a liaison has become so wrapped up in the local conversation that they’ve had difficulty remaining neutral and asking the critical questions that they are expected to bring, even at times inadvertently taking sides on an issue,” Siberon added.

In addition to remaining neutral, effective liaisons are those who are able to listen deeply and reflect, support and coach community leaders, and know how to be engaged with the community without being directive.

All of the liaisons hired by the fund meet together every other month to share challenges, insights and best practices to help each other make connections

across communities. In addition, during regular one-on-one meetings with foundation staff, liaisons discuss key issues and approaches and help prepare for the next step or effort.

In preparation for the next strategic plan for the Discovery initiative, the grantmaker hired a researcher to take a closer look at the use of liaisons through the eyes of both the liaisons and the communities. The Memorial Fund intends to use this review to inform how the foundation will staff community work in the future.