

Who is Successfully Building Nonprofit Capacity?

Lumpkin Family Foundation

Illinois grantmaker embraces capacity building as a priority and supports a new networking initiative for nonprofits in the region.

Quick Grantmaker Stats

Type of funder	Family foundation
Geography/Issue Area	Rural Eastern/Central Illinois
When founded	1953
Total assets (as of FY 2013)	\$40 million
Annual giving (as of FY 2013)	\$2 million
Number of staff	3
Website	www.lumpkinfoundation.org
Brief description of the program/practice being discussed	A nonprofit network and online community for collaboration, sharing and capacity-building support.

1. Describe the situation or practice.

The Lumpkin Family Foundation is dedicated to supporting people pursuing innovation and long-lasting improvements in the environment, health, education and community access to the arts, with a special focus on East Central Illinois. In 2007, the grantmaker initiated an effort to build stronger networks of nonprofit organizations in the region. It created Good Works CONNECT as a nonprofit network and online community to promote communication, collaboration and the sharing of ideas among nonprofit leaders.

The grantmaker also has been administering a pilot project, Digging Deeper to Enhance Performance, aimed at providing local nonprofits with grants to conduct comprehensive organizational capacity assessments.

2. What have you tried to do differently?

Program Officer Amanda Standerfer described the online component of Good Works CONNECT as “Facebook with a nonprofit twist.” It began as an email list of 150 nonprofit grantees in East Central Illinois and now has almost 1,200

members. The foundation operated Good Works CONNECT for three years before turning over daily operations to the University of Illinois Springfield in 2013 with continued support from the grantmaker. In January 2014, the Donors Forum of Illinois became the new owner of the network and began the process of merging it with the Building a Stronger Illinois initiative, which is funded by the Wallace Foundation.

The grantmaker's other signature capacity-building initiative, Digging Deeper to Enhance Performance, was modeled after the BEST (Building Excellence Sustainability Trust) project in Genesee County, Michigan. The program supports organizational assessments using various assessment tools and then provides funding for projects on the basis of those assessments. A pilot program, DDEP wrapped up in 2013 and the foundation is assessing future opportunities for implementing the program.

3. What has been the result?

In 2011, the Good Works CONNECT Steering Committee, comprised of a diverse group of local nonprofit and community foundation leaders, engaged a research team from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to evaluate the website and network and make recommendations about the future of the program. Among the key findings: members valued the network and especially the in-person opportunities it created, such as monthly community convenings, and there was strong support to sustain Good Works CONNECT and interest in expanding its reach statewide. The Donors Forum of Illinois, which took over the network in early 2014, is currently exploring plans for scaling the network.

According to self-reports pilot DDEP grantees valued the assessment process. They said it helped them get all of their documents organized and ensured that smaller organizations experiencing a lot of turnover could achieve some continuity in their understanding of how the organization was managed. The organizational assessment process also helped surface difficult conversations to have in the boardroom. "It gave the organizations permission to have conversations they knew they needed to have but didn't have a vehicle for having them," Standerfer said.

"Our participation in the DDEP process helped the board narrow their focus on the key activities that staff and board must be engaged in to be successful," said Joedy Hightower, president and CEO of the Southeastern Illinois Community Foundation. "A simple method was designed to track those activities and provide regular feedback on individual and organizational performance. It sounds simple, but it has made a profound impact in how we deploy the resources we have to achieve our mission."

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

Standerfer said grantmakers embracing capacity building as a priority should be prepared for a different relationship with grantees. “Capacity building can be messy, time-consuming and involve work over the long term,” she said. “Truly supporting organizational change means having hard conversations, making time even when time is tight and adjusting timelines and expectations in partnership with grantees.” She added that the success of Good Works CONNECT was a direct result of intensive outreach early on. “Reaching out to participants and building relationships were key to increasing communication and collaboration in the nonprofit network,” she said.

“When we were just doing responsive grantmaking, if we didn’t think an organization was ready for our funding we would turn it down and sometimes offer advice regarding external resources or future requests. Digging Deeper has given us a chance to be more involved in the relationship with the grantee. We are able to move the organizations we care about to a different place.”

— Amanda Standerfer, Program Officer

Spider or Starfish?

The Lumpkin Family Foundation started the Good Works CONNECT nonprofit network after foundation leaders read the book, [The Spider and the Starfish](#), which portrays the unstoppable power of leaderless organizations. One of the core tenets of Good Works CONNECT is that historically, nonprofit resource centers have been reliant on their host(s) — a very spider-like approach. In order to adopt a more starfish-like approach, the grantmaker convened a group of nonprofit leaders in September 2007 to discuss how to use a virtual center to build and grow nonprofit networks. For more information visit:

www.goodworksconnect.org.