

# Who is Building Nonprofit Capacity?

## Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust

*Place-based funder invests in range of organizational effectiveness programs, including deep, cohort-based capacity building for core grantees.*

### Quick Grantmaker Stats

Type of funder	Private Foundation
Geography/Issue Area	Phoenix, Arizona
When founded	1995
Investment Assets as of 03/31/14	\$549 Million
Grant Awards to Date (since 2000)	\$323.5 Million
Number of staff	17
Website	<a href="http://www.pipertrust.org">www.pipertrust.org</a>
Brief description of the program/ practice being discussed	Organizational effectiveness initiatives offer support for organizations at range of levels.

### 1. Describe the situation or practice.

The Great Recession was a major turning point for the work of the Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust, which focuses its grantmaking in Maricopa County, Arizona. Program Officer Ellen Solowey said the trust’s board and staff were disheartened by the degree to which the economic downturn affected the nonprofit community.

“We saw many nonprofits reducing staff, scaling back programs and hunkering down,” Solowey recalls. As a result, the trust decided to increase its work in the area of nonprofit resilience.

Because the trust is a place-based funder, its leaders believe that it is essential to invest in strengthening the ability of nonprofits to succeed over the long haul. Today, the trust operates a variety of organizational effectiveness programs ranging from one-time trainings and workshops to long-term capacity-building support for a cohort of core grantees.

## 2. What have you tried to do differently?

Piper Trust has developed a unique, tiered approach to providing capacity building assistance to nonprofits. At the first level, the trust offers a continuing series of training sessions and workshops on key management and capacity topics. These Piper Academies bring national experts in fundraising and board development, among other topics, to Maricopa County for training sessions open to grantees, and occasionally other nonprofits in the area.

While Piper Trust offered the Academies for a number of years, it increased their frequency following the Great Recession and refined the focus of the sessions to cover core issues of nonprofit resilience.

In addition to the Academies, Piper Trust provides follow-on support for grantees to put into practice some of the content of the sessions. “A one-time training will only get you so far,” Solowey explained. Through the follow-on support, grantees have access to coaching and consulting from Academy presenters, as well as up to \$20,000 in funding to implement changes in their organizations. For example, through a partnership between Piper Trust and BoardSource, more than 40 grantees have benefited from board assessments and retreats facilitated by BoardSource consultants, as well as one-on-one coaching with local consultants trained by BoardSource as they set out to address their governance needs.

The top tier of Piper Trust’s organizational effectiveness assistance is the ATLAS project. ATLAS is a partnership between Piper Trust and organizational development expert Susan Kenny Stevens, author of *Nonprofit Lifecycles*. Through ATLAS, the Trust provides expert assessment and long-term support to selected group of grantees. Piper Trust staff nominate grantees that are on the verge of or have recently experienced significant growth, and are large enough to field a team of board and staff for the two-year project.

Participating organizations commit to enrolling their executive director and three other people, including two board members, in a project that starts with a four-month, facilitated organizational assessment. Based on the assessment, the organizations then receive a \$50,000 grant to implement changes that will support them in becoming more effective and resilient. ATLAS organizations work closely with local consultants trained by Dr. Stevens, and the project includes peer-learning opportunities for the organizations.

“ATLAS helps organizations identify what is holding them back and allows them do the high-level work that’s needed to change,” Solowey explained.

*“We are investing in nonprofit resilience as a way to protect our investments in the community and build strong nonprofit partners for long-term projects.”*

*– Ellen Solowey, program officer*

### 3. What has been the result?

The trustees and staff of Piper Trust view ATLAS as an experiment in how best to provide deep support to nonprofits as they set off on the path to resilience. Judging from participants’ responses, the experiment has been a success. Linda Lyman of New Pathways for Youth said the organizational assessment process alone was an important advance for her Phoenix-based organization, which focuses on mentoring young people who are at risk.

“The assessment period helped break down our preconceived notions about ourselves,” Lyman said. “It held up that stark mirror and forced us to look into areas we hadn’t examined before.” One result, she noted, is that New Pathways is working on plans for a capital campaign to build a new headquarters.

Another ATLAS participant is ICAN, which provides afterschool programs and an alternative high school for young people in the East Valley area of Metro Phoenix. Becky Jackson, president and CEO of ICAN, is a former banker who has been in the nonprofit world for 10 years. She said that participating in ATLAS has enabled her and her colleagues to build a “good to great” culture based on the work of management theorist and author Jim Collins. Among the results: six years ago ICAN relied on government funding for 86 percent of its budget, today it has broadened its base of support so government dollars are just 36 percent of the budget. ICAN also has added a dedicated line item to its budget for staff development as it seeks to implement Collins’s ideas about investing in people as the core to building higher-performing organizations.

“We’ve decided people are what makes us grow and what makes us successful, so we’re increasing employee engagement and focusing on building our culture,” Jackson said.

Based on the success of the first ATLAS cohort, Piper Trust’s Board of Trustees recently approved a second cohort that will engage seven organizations in the work of organizational change.

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

Place-based funders can find it hard to do deep work to strengthen grantees’ capacity in areas like governance and fundraising without a strong base of

local consultants. Piper Trust has designed its organizational effectiveness work in part to help grow and support the consultant pool in Maricopa County.

For example, the lead designer of the trust's ATLAS project, Susan Kenny Stevens, trains local consultants as part of her work with the trust, and the trust also has brought national consultants from BoardSource to the area to train local consultants in how to work on governance issues. In addition, Piper Trust creates peer learning opportunities for the local consultants it works with in its organizational effectiveness programming.