

Who is Engaging Stakeholders Well?

Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation

Arkansas grantmaker supports nonprofit networks to promote field wide learning.

Quick Grantmaker Stats

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| Type of funder | Private Foundation |
| Geography/Issue Area | Little Rock, Arkansas |
| When founded | 1974 |
| Total assets (as of FY 2013) | \$143,731,261 |
| Annual giving (as of FY 2013) | \$4,005,832 ¹ |
| Number of staff | 9 |
| Website | www.wrfoundation.org |
| Brief description of the program/ practice being discussed | Foundation’s support for learning communities and nonprofit networks strengthens grantees’ understanding of how to reduce poverty, improve education and achieve other shared goals. |

1. Describe the situation or practice.

The Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, based in Little Rock, Arkansas, works to “build and sustain the organizations that serve and strengthen Arkansas.” It focuses its grantmaking on three areas: education, economic development and economic, racial and social justice. Through its Moving the Needle strategic plan, the foundation strives to achieve a significant reduction in the poverty rate in Arkansas and to elevate the state to the top ranks in major measures of child and family well-being.

Over the last five years, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation has supported its grantees through the creation of networks and learning communities. The purpose, according to Regan Gruber Moffitt, senior associate for public policy with the foundation, is to create forums for nonprofits that are working on similar issues so they can coordinate their activities toward common goals and build their collective understanding of what it takes to succeed in their work.

¹ Annual giving is grants awarded in 2013. Grant payments and other qualifying distributions are higher.

“At the foundation, we see commonalities among grantees and what they are working on, and we have always made a point of trying to connect grantees that have similar objectives and interests,” she said. By supporting networks and learning communities, Moffitt said the foundation is “taking itself out of the center” of those relationships and enabling nonprofits to create “genuine and lasting connections” that support their effectiveness.

2. What have you tried to do differently?

The following are three of the networks and learning communities that the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation has been supporting in recent years:

Moving the Needle Working Group

The Moving the Needle Working Group is a collaborative of nonprofit leaders from around Arkansas that meet for the dual purposes of building capacity for their organizations and the nonprofit sector and bringing stakeholder voices to the foundation’s work. The group includes 15 to 20 of the foundation’s grantees and non-grantee partners who share the foundation’s goals to increase prosperity and educational attainment in Arkansas. Participants represent advocacy groups, community development corporations, direct service agencies and other nonprofits from all regions of the state. Through monthly webinars and biannual in-person meetings, the group previews the work of the foundation and shares experiences from their own work, providing valuable input to the foundation’s board and staff.

Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Learning Community

Since 2009, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation has supported VITA sites across Arkansas as part of an asset-development strategy for poverty reduction. Moffitt said the VITA Learning Community brings together grantees for three main purposes: approaching common challenges they are facing related to outreach, volunteer recruitment and fundraising; encouraging information sharing and coordination among the sites; and helping the organizations consider how VITA connects with a broader asset-development strategy. Currently, the VITA learning community has around 10 grantee members, but the foundation anticipates expanding the membership of the group to include non-grantee partners who are interested and engaged in VITA and asset development.

Marginalized Males Workforce and Education Consortium

MMWEC is a group of nonprofit and higher education organizations committed to improving educational outcomes for African American, Latino and poor rural males. It includes nearly 30 foundation grantees and institutional and governmental partners who meet approximately twice a year to discuss best practices, coordination, policy and other relevant topics.

The Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation also supports education-related nonprofit networks and learning communities around reading proficiency and reducing student absences from school. Its support for all of these networks includes funding for convenings, webinars, consulting, facilitation and other activities.

Report Lauds Foundation's Support for Grantee Collaboration

A December 2013 report by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy assessed the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation's Moving the Needle agenda, aimed at reducing poverty and inequality in Arkansas. One of the report's main conclusions was that the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation's commitment to inclusiveness and stakeholder engagement has resulted in strong support for the agenda throughout the state. "Grantees and stakeholders frequently praised the foundation staff for creating the conditions that enabled nonprofits to want to work together, rather than feeling a pressure to do so," according to the report. For the full report, go to: http://www.ncrp.org/files/publications/WRF_Assessment_Report.pdf.

3. What has been the result?

Moffitt said she regularly hears from nonprofits about how their participation in the learning communities and networks supported by the foundation has helped them make new connections and learn about new and different approaches that have benefited their work. She said the biggest impact of the groups is that they create a space for nonprofits to have a continuing dialogue about shared challenges and how to address them, and to align their work toward common goals.

Another result, she noted, is that the learning communities have provided the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation with important insights into the capacity and funding needs of nonprofits across the state. "We view ourselves as a learning partner with organizations in many of these groups," she said. "Through the conversations and the relationships these groups support, we find we have a much better understanding of what kinds of support organizations need to achieve their goals."

The Moving the Needle Working Group in particular has become an important resource for the foundation, Moffitt said. "We often go to that group to float ideas or to preview reports and other work, and they always provide great insights and perspectives to help guide what we are doing," she said.

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

The Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation has regularly used consultants to oversee the administrative aspects of many of its learning groups and networks it supports, and to provide facilitation and other services. That way, Moffitt said, program staff are able to be a part of the conversation, rather than directing the conversation. “We are at the table but we don’t control the table,” Moffitt said of the foundation’s role.

“As a foundation, we are very interested in how we can help meet grantees’ capacity needs, so these networks provide a space where we can engage with groups of nonprofits about the challenges they are seeing in their work and what kind of support will help them most.”
– Regan Gruber Moffitt, Senior Associate for Public Policy