

# GEO Member Story



***Read how United Way of Greenville County laid the groundwork for a successful collaborative effort by intentionally fostering an open environment for communication and engaging with a variety of stakeholders as it works to serve the Greenville Community.***

The scale and complexity of the problems that communities seek to address require collaborative approaches. Pooling the knowledge and resources of many actors toward a common goal can sometimes enable faster and greater impact. For instance, in order to address the challenges its community is facing, United Way of Greenville County has brought together a diverse group of people, businesses and organizations. By acting as a facilitator, convener and participant of and in collaborative efforts, the organization has made significant progress on its goal to provide people with the tools and support they need to thrive at every stage of life.

United Way of Greenville County takes a community-focused approach to collaboration, looking for ways to design strategies and solutions by engaging its partners and members of the community in honest dialogue. Fueled by a 2014 federal Social Innovation Fund grant but growing out of more than two years of focused research and planning, United Way of Greenville County, the Greenville Partnership for Philanthropy (including GEO members The Hollingsworth Funds and the Community Foundation of Greenville County), the Riley Institute at Furman University, and nonprofit partners have teamed up with Greenville County Schools to form the OnTrack Greenville Middle Grades Success Initiative. OnTrack Greenville intends to transform the community's ability to help middle school students stay on track, graduate and build a successful, thriving future. Students who are struggling often begin disengaging from school during the middle school years. By intervening in these critical middle grade years, the collaborative seeks to stop disengagement before it happens and help those students stay on track to a bright and productive future.

Organizations that have success with collaboration are explicit about what they want to achieve and how collaborative efforts can help advance those goals. Frequent communication — internally and externally — is critical to ensuring that all partners and stakeholders are aligned on the vision of the collaboration and what's happening. Tish McCutchen, vice president for impact strategies and results at United Way of Greenville County, underlines the significance of learning from previously unsuccessful collaborative attempts and having trust, humility and a strong foundation to create a lasting and productive collaborative: "If we are to accomplish our vision, we need to be really clear about what we as an organization and we as individuals within the organization bring to the community table, and then constantly figure out what our place is at that table. Sometimes we set the table and invite others to join. Sometimes we pull up a chair along with everybody else and figure out collectively what assets need to be brought to the table to bear against some of the real intractable problems."

To set a strong foundation for OnTrack Greenville, the core stakeholders developed a partnership agreement to serve as a guide to working effectively and collaboratively toward shared goals. This type of document that explicitly lays out what the collaborative wants to achieve and how it will reach those goals is critical to the success of the endeavors. It is a "living document" that reflects

agreed upon roles and responsibilities for governance, project implementation, community engagement and innovation. It is an evolving document for a reason: as the initiative's needs change, so too will the organization for the collaborative. The agreement serves as a touchstone, to remind those actively engaged and responsible for achieving desired results of the values they want to honor as they work together.

OnTrack Greenville, in its first year of implementation, has seen benefits from thoughtfully formalizing its partnership and clearly defining roles, responsibilities, working relationships and accountability. According to McCutchen, "Do the due diligence at the beginning to make sure people are clear about what their organization is best prepared to do in the collaborative, and develop some shared accountability and clarity about roles and responsibilities." Collaborations can fail when partners jump in together without first spending the time to establish a shared understanding of roles, responsibilities and goals. There must be a shared agenda, goal, and measurement. Having a developed sense of long term commitment from the beginning helps offset the inevitable pressures of changed priorities. For United Way of Greenville County, setting a strong foundation for OnTrack Greenville also meant making sure the right people were at the table. Because it approaches collaboration from a community-minded perspective, this meant partnering with people outside the usual suspects to make sure affected stakeholders were engaged. OnTrack Greenville, like many other collaboratives, has been an opportunity to see firsthand the quality of work that can occur when you integrate people's passions, talents, experiences and brainpower. When these elements are present during the inevitably tough discussions and often dry planning conversations, it is easier to build consensus and continue moving forward. McCutchen shared an example from the evolution of their work:

"At one point when we said collaboration, what we were really talking about was people coming to the same meeting. That is a step in the right direction, but working together is a very different thing from meeting together. Individuals and organizations being willing to bring their different agendas and missions, put them on the table and figure out where the commonality or convergence is and not worrying so much about the divergences is a critical part of this. Let's figure out what we have in common what we can agree to work on, and let the things that make each of us unique in our focus take care of themselves."

The activities required for collaboration can sometimes get lost in the press of day-to-day demands, so many grantmakers use formal mechanisms to keep the work on track. Something transformational can happen when people and organizations come together in a spirit of collaboration, learning and willingness to be persistent through challenges and resilient in the face of resistance.

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To find out more information on United Way of Greenville County, please visit <http://www.unitedwaygc.org>

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

[Building Collaboration From the Inside Out](#)

[Lessons Learned From The Social Innovation Fund Guides](#)

[Many Hands, More Impact: Philanthropy's Role In Supporting Movements](#)