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BRAINSTORMS

A New Professional Network Gives Young Foundation Employees a Voice

By Darlene M. Siska

Two years ago, Alejandro S. Amezcua, then 23, was a program assistant at the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation in Flint, Mich. He came to the position with a strong background, having been a Jane Addams-Andrew Carnegie Fellow in Philanthropy at Indiana University, in Indianapolis, an honor that requires months of study and volunteer work and is intended to help nurture the next generation of nonprofit leaders. But despite this preparation, he says, he was having a hard time fitting in

at his first grant-making job.

"At Mott, I felt isolated," he says. "Most people there were 10, 20, or 30 years older than I was. I felt the foundation environment was rather intimidating for young people."

At the same time, at the Ford Foundation in New York, program associate Rusty Stahl, then 25 and also a former Jane Addams-Andrew Carnegie Fellow in Philanthropy, thought some grant makers' attitudes needed adjusting to accommodate the needs of younger employees. "In the foundation world, part of the conflict is that philanthropy is increasingly being regarded by young people as a profession," he says. "Yet in foundations, 'professionalism' is a tainted word. Many older people feel that foundation work should only come at the end of a career focused on a social issue, so the staffer has a lot of experience in that area."

A desire to meet other young foundation staff members spurred Mr. Amezcua and Mr. Stahl (who knew each other from Indiana) to plan an informal restaurant dinner last year in Philadelphia during the annual conference of the Council on Foundations. Mr. Stahl circulated a flier and sent out an e-mail message inviting "philanthropists under 30" to attend. Though he expected only a handful of people to come, 40 attended, he says. A year and a half later, that dinner meeting has evolved into a 300-member national network called Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy.

The organization's membership includes foundation employees, trustees, donors, students, and others who are interested in connecting with peers within philanthropy, as well as in promoting a social-change agenda within the grant-making field, which the group defines as focusing on the causes of social and economic inequalities. Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy helps provide its members with opportunities to meet and share ideas, to develop professionally, and to work with other organizations to encourage grant making to social-justice organizations. The group maintains a national

steering committee and two local committees in New York and Boston, with a third local committee being proposed for the San Francisco Bay Area. In August, Mr. Stahl became the first full-time director of Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy.

Young people are being drawn to careers in philanthropy because of the increasing numbers of community-service programs, such as AmeriCorps and school-sponsored volunteerism, created over the past two decades, says Kath Connolly, senior assistant director of Brown University's Howard R. Swearer Center for Public Service, in Providence, R.I. As a result of these programs, today's young adults not only leave college more familiar with nonprofit work than their counterparts did in previous generations, says Ms. Connolly, but they also have a more sophisticated view of charities than did their predecessors. But finding an appropriate foundation job can be a challenge, she adds, because no established pipeline exists for young people who want to get into grant making.

Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy, says Mr. Stahl, can help both its members and their organizations. The group intends to help bring more young people into foundations, he says -- and those young employees often have more ties to grass-roots charities than do their older colleagues. Emerging Practitioners doesn't promote the idea that entire careers be spent in foundations, he says, but rather that educational job opportunities in the grant-making field should be available to a larger and more diverse group of young adults.

Foundations can benefit greatly from the perspective brought by younger employees, says Mr. Amezcua, now associate director of communications and outreach at the National Council of Nonprofit Associations, in Washington. "Many young people in the field, for example, are more comfortable with diversity issues than older foundation staff are, and have worked with progressive nonprofit organizations, which are often the vanguards of new programs and ideas," he says.

Toward Greater Inclusion

The new organization is casting a wide net and aims to have a diverse group of members, including members not just from a variety of ethnic groups, but also from a variety of jobs, geographic regions, and types of foundations. The group's emphasis on social-change grant making resulted from the concerns expressed by its constituents, Mr. Stahl says. "Young people in philanthropy talk about professional development and finding mentors," he says, "but when they get into the juice of their discussions, they come to the values and models of social-change grant making."

However, Mr. Stahl says, in keeping with Emerging Practitioners' goal of maintaining a diverse membership, it also welcomes young grant makers who are not inclined toward social-change philanthropy. "We have a bottom line of values," he says. "However, people who believe in the 'bricks and mortar' type of giving, instead of grant making for systemic change, are always welcome to come to our meetings to disagree and debate. That makes things more lively and interesting."

To help Emerging Practitioners meet its goals, two New York grant makers have contributed substantially: the Ford Foundation, which offered a one-year \$125,000

planning grant, and the New World Foundation, which provided office space and equipment. In addition, the Mertz Gilmore Foundation, in New York, the Boston Women's Fund, and several other foundations have made small gifts to support specific programs.

Linetta Gilbert, a program officer at the Ford Foundation, says the grant maker supports Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy "because we're interested in the next generation of foundation leaders, particularly those that are more reflective of the communities they'll serve. We're looking to support groups that are really focused on what individuals, including young people, can bring to the field. Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy is a tool for redefining philanthropy."

Making Connections

To help its young members learn more about their chosen field and become more effective grant makers, Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy is turning to elders in the field to gain mentors and resources. One of its goals is to build a curriculum on the history and role of philanthropy in society: its ethics, tenets, and the nuts and bolts of grant making, gathering writings from those in the field who have had long careers or are retired. "We're looking to create 'philanthropolgy'" says Sanda Balaban, 30, a member of the national steering group and program associate at the Goldman Sachs Foundation, in New York. "That means codifying and having older grant makers articulate what they've learned."

The group also seeks to create continuing relationships with other professionals in philanthropy, such as charity fund raisers, in order to strengthen the grant-making profession and improve the lives of the disadvantaged, says Mr. Stahl. Further, the organization is building networks through established groups in the philanthropic world. Thus far, it has held meetings in conjunction with the National Network of Grantmakers and the Environmental Grantmakers Association. Hispanics in Philanthropy and Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy sponsored Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy's session on intergenerational issues at the Council on Foundations' annual conference in Chicago this past spring, a discussion that drew about 110 people.

With support from such established organizations, Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy is finding its voice in the field, says member Bodi Luse, 28, communications manager at the New York Regional Association of Grantmakers. In April, she helped her organization co-sponsor an Emerging Practitioner panel on social-justice grant making at the Open Society Institute, in New York. Having a network of peers has helped decrease her sense of isolation in her field, she says, because the group helps facilitate not only professional but also personal bonds between its members. Recently, she says, Emerging Practitioners' New York chapter held a strictly social gathering for young grant makers at a bar in the city's Hell's Kitchen neighborhood.

International Outreach

As part of its efforts to discern its members' interests and needs, Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy aggressively canvasses its constituency, not only in the United States but also abroad. The results can vary widely, the group has discovered. Mr. Stahl attended a focus group -- sponsored by the Warner Foundation, a new family foundation in Durham,

N.C. -- that was composed of young blacks who work in philanthropy. Emerging Practitioners sought to learn about the roles that grant makers play in the South. "Foundations play a variety of roles, from relationship broker to funder, but the young staffers said that philanthropy is creating dependency for communities," Mr. Stahl says. "Young African-American grant makers want the concept of philanthropy to be expanded, so that grant recipients would be empowered to have more control in their communities."

Overseas, it's a different story. When Mr. Stahl and Mr. Amezcua went to the European Foundation Centre's annual meeting in Brussels this past year, a focus group with young grant makers there seemed most interested in career issues. "People there are frustrated by the glass ceiling," says Mr. Stahl. "They have graduate degrees, but few places to go. They're trying to come to the U.S., but their efforts aren't working. There's not as much organization of the philanthropy field in Europe." In addition, he says, affinity groups -- associations of grant makers that form according to common interests -- are staffed by the European Foundation Centre and aren't as numerous and organized as their American counterparts.

At this early stage, says Mr. Stahl, Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy is still exploring the needs of young grant makers in various geographic regions, and intends to use the information it gathers to tailor its programming. The group plans to conduct additional focus groups in the San Francisco Bay Area and the Midwest next year, he says, and may eventually start a network of young grant makers in Europe.

One member who is looking toward the group's future optimistically is Molly Schultz, 28, acting deputy director of the North Star Fund, in New York, which supports social, economic, and political change in that city. Like other members, she appreciates the way the group has helped break down her feelings of isolation. She is also excited, she says, about its mission to promote social-change philanthropy. The first Emerging Practitioners meeting Ms. Schultz attended was about a year ago at the Ford Foundation. "It was a blast," she says. "Everyone in the group was under 30 and talking openly about what values young people bring to the table and how to bring along the next generation of social-change grant makers."

The group could not have arrived at a more appropriate time, she says. "An organization like Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy is needed, now that there is growing interest among young people to seek a career in nonprofits," Ms. Schultz says. "It's a young idea and a young organization that will grow as the sector does."

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