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## Grooming the Best and Brightest

### A new generation of programs seeks to cultivate charity leaders

By Heather Joslyn

Four years ago, Donele J. Wilkins was leading a brand-new nonprofit organization, Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice. The group was tiny -- just Ms. Wilkins and a part-time intern, with no money budgeted for programs -- but she had big plans for it. She wanted to find more funds and strengthen her group's ability to lobby against environmental policies that harm minorities.

Enter Eureka Communities, an 11-year-old program that offers two-year fellowships to nurture nonprofit leaders in five U.S. cities, including Detroit. In addition to requiring her to meet with other Eureka Detroit fellows once a month, the program paid for Ms. Wilkins to visit two nonprofit organizations in New York and Washington. At the West Harlem Environmental Action Team, she says, she learned how collaborating with universities on research projects can produce money for staffing and programs. At the Preamble Center, a Washington think tank, she got firsthand experience in leading meetings with grass-roots groups and sat in when the center's advocates testified at a Senate hearing.

Her experiences, she says, helped her set realistic goals and get more creative about gathering resources. Her group now has 12 employees, including four whose salaries are paid by the University of Michigan, the state, or the federal AmeriCorps program. The group has also begun to develop leaders itself, helping citizens prepare to appear at public hearings on transportation issues. "Eureka gave me an opportunity to think long term," she says, "to strategize about how we want to do our work."

Nonprofit leadership programs have proliferated over the past decade, an echo of the emphasis on leadership development in the for-profit field. Most of these programs can boast of their alumni's accomplishments and point to successful collaborations between program participants, but none claim to have the perfect formula for cultivating leaders -- or, for that matter, agree on what leadership is, or where leaders come from. What's more, while most evaluate participants' experience, none have figured out how to measure definitively whether their programs can turn potential into greatness. As a result, nonprofit leadership programs differ widely in structure, philosophy, and goals.

Cynthia A. Chavez, executive director of Eureka San Francisco, who formerly helped oversee the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's National Leadership Program, says she and her colleagues "often asked themselves, 'Leadership for what?'" she says. "The field of

nonprofit leadership is still in this stage -- 'Leadership for what?' Once that question is answered, there will be greater clarity about meeting the need."

Regardless, nonprofit leaders appear to be clamoring for leadership guidance, say those who operate these programs. "It's so clear that the demand far outstrips the supply," says Cheryl L. Dorsey, president of the Echoing Green Foundation, in New York, which gives fellowships to individuals who create public-service projects. Her organization, she says, receives 1,100 applications for only 10 slots per year. Other programs report similar ratios: The Ford Foundation's Leadership for a Changing World program, whose admission process is by nomination, received 3,000 nominations last year for 20 slots.

While hundreds of leadership programs operate across the country, some grant makers have only joined the field in the last few years -- and some longtime sponsors of such programs are rethinking them. Among the most prominent developments:

- The Ford Foundation started its \$4.5-million New Voices fellowship for emerging leaders three years ago and its \$3.8-million Leadership for a Changing World program for midcareer leaders two years ago.
- The Ford Motor Company two years ago began sponsoring a \$289,000 program for nonprofit leaders from abroad through New York's 92nd St. Y.
- Ashoka, a 22-year-old international organization that gives fellowships to "social entrepreneurs" -- creators of public-service projects -- started a fellowship program in the United States two years ago and one in Canada this past spring, the cost of the programs set at \$5 million.
- The Pew Partnership for Civic Change and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation both ended leadership programs last year and are replacing them this summer with new efforts, Pew's \$250,000 LeadershipPlenty and Kellogg's \$1.2-million Leadership for Community Change series.
- Eureka is considering expanding its \$3-million program to include a partnership with a leadership program in Seattle, along with similar arrangements in seven other American cities and in Wales, says Steve Vetter, the organization's executive director.

Some charities, such as Rebuilding Together, a national volunteer group in Washington that rehabilitates homes for needy homeowners, are starting to groom their own leaders through programs tailored to their needs. Rebuilding Together collaborated in June with the University of Pennsylvania's College of General Studies on its first five-day "boot camp," an intensive training program for staff members of the charity's affiliates that emphasized leadership skills.

Interest in nonprofit leadership programs among grant makers is growing because of expanding needs in the nonprofit field, says Philip Li, executive director of the Coro New York Leadership Center. "As government plays a diminishing role in providing services," he says, "there's a greater interest in making sure that the opportunities and creative juices of individuals who work in the nonprofit sector are able to be tapped and realized."

## **Differing Definitions**

Where leadership begins, ends, and overlaps with management skills can be difficult to define in the world of charities, where leaders often grapple with many roles at once. "There's a reason there are 2,700 different definitions of leadership -- leadership changes every day," says Rick Foster, vice president for programs at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, in Battle Creek, Mich.

Most leadership educators say that the key element of leadership is the ability to negotiate relationships -- with colleagues, constituents, and even oneself. "Leadership development, at its deepest essence, is addressing how do we relate to others," says Ms. Chavez.

How leadership is developed, and which leaders are being developed, however, depends upon the philosophy and means of those who are financing the programs. Some efforts focus on midcareer professionals, while others cultivate emerging leaders -- and many programs mix nonprofit workers with those from the for-profit field and government, or even those who have been excluded from the world of working professionals. Some programs focus on practical skill development, such as honing communication abilities, while others may provide money for travel and study, facilitate mentor relationships, or offer support to a particular organization or project.

The programs can vary widely too in the extent of the commitment they require from participants. At one end of the spectrum sits the Annie E. Casey Children and Family Fellowships, which take a very intensive and hands-on approach, requiring fellows to work and study full time for 11 months at the Casey Foundation's Baltimore headquarters and at other Casey-financed organizations nationwide.

By contrast, the Echoing Green Foundation guides nonprofit leaders with a lighter touch, and takes a venture-capital approach to supporting them. Although the foundation offers its fellows management support and opportunities to meet each other, its chief assistance is the money it awards for specific public-service projects.

Even those who sponsor leadership programs, however, question to what degree leadership can be taught. "Some people say great leaders are born not made -- the best you can do is find them and put them in the right slot," says Steven A. Schroeder, president of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, whose Community Health Leadership Program has operated for a decade. "The other side says that there's an awful lot of coaching that can transform people. I think the truth is somewhere in the middle: People who are genuinely motivated and altruistic -- it's awfully hard to teach that. On the other hand, there are leadership skills of how to communicate, how to use time wisely, how to engender trust, how to help your subordinates to do better. I think all of these are teachable skills and can help make a good leader great.

"The question is, how much did you help them, and how much did you just pick good people? It's an imponderable," he says.

Although she says that some of her program's participants have benefited from skills coaching, Catherine M. Dunham, director of the Community Health Leadership Program, adds, "I don't put much store in the 'development' stuff." Her program, which recognizes health-care providers and advocates, gives participants personal stipends of \$15,000 and program support totaling \$105,000, along with access to other resources, such as "mini-grants" to provide management or research assistance to the leader's organization, and opportunities to attend conferences and workshops for additional skills training. "We find people who are already quite developed as leaders," she says. "They have assumed or been given responsibility often out of crisis in their community, and they have risen to the challenge. And all we're doing is sort of buffin' 'em up."

Some leadership programs mistakenly set out to make over their participants, says Michael Lipsky, senior program officer at the Ford Foundation. Ford's Leadership for a Changing World, he says, emphasizes what its participants can teach the foundation about leadership, and what the fellows can teach themselves.

"We wanted to avoid the tone that, 'Now that we've chosen you, we're going to make you better,'" he says.

Denise Altvater, a current participant in Leadership for a Changing World and director of the American Friends Service Committee's Wabanaki Youth Program in Perry, Me., which serves Native Americans, says that she was initially wary of Ford's approach of studying leadership as well as facilitating it. "For someone like me, living on a reservation, we've been researched to death," she says. "So my guard was really up. But I'm very comfortable with it now. I can see the value of it." She says that as a result of the program, she's become aware of the need to identify and groom leaders in her own community. "It's something I never paid attention to before."

### **Striving for Inclusion**

Leadership programs grapple with many questions, but one way in which their proponents say they have contributed answers to the nonprofit field is in the way they provide new paths to power for minorities and others who may feel excluded from charities' upper echelons.

As survey after survey shows that nonprofit management overall includes a small percentage of minorities, and that women are less likely than men to lead large charities, leadership programs often reflect efforts to redress that imbalance. About 70 percent of all Eureka Communities fellows, for example, are members of minority groups.

Some programs are designed to focus on minorities or women, such as Women's Health Leadership, an eight-year-old California program that boasts 300 alumnae. The program has produced many alumnae of note in the nonprofit world: Seventy-five percent of program graduates go on to lead women's health projects or other charities, says a program director, Connie Chan Robison.

However, while its new alumni network has found support, the leadership program itself is on hiatus due to insufficient donations. Ms. Chan Robison says the program has fallen prey to a common problem in the nonprofit world: foundations losing enthusiasm for an aging program, however successful it might be. "Right now, we're challenged with creating the opportunity for people to come *into* the door," she says. "And the fact of the matter is, I don't think we're done yet."

Leadership programs that recruit ethnically diverse participants can help those participants try out different styles of communication and resolving conflict, says Chet P. Hewitt, director of the Alameda County Social Service Agency, in California. Mr. Hewitt, who is black, says his experience as a Casey Foundation Children and Family fellow helped him learn to calibrate his communication skills when working with people from other backgrounds: "Being a leader in a diverse, urban environment requires that you understand how cultural attributes, cultural norms, work or don't work in environments that are diverse."

### **'The Fellowship Syndrome'**

Ethnicity and gender aren't the only obstacles to attaining leadership in the nonprofit field, and some programs look to cultivate nontraditional leaders who may lack access to coaching and support from peers. Echoing Green's Ms. Dorsey says programs like hers, which recognize emerging leaders, can combat what she calls "the fellowship syndrome - - where the same people are recognized over and over."

Some programs concentrate on breaking down other barriers imposed by leaders' educational or socioeconomic backgrounds. In Jersey City, the recently ended Pew Civic Entrepreneur Initiative -- financed by the Pew Partnership for Civic Change, and run by a coalition of local nonprofit organizations -- nurtured leaders ranging in age from their 20s to their 60s, and drew many who might fall through the cracks of other leadership programs, such as those who don't speak much English, or who lack high-school diplomas. "Some are unemployed," says Jill Lewis, director of the Henry J. Raimondo Institute for Urban Research and Public Policy at New Jersey City University, who coordinated the program locally. "They might spend all their time doing community work or helping to raise their grandchildren."

Despite the obstacles so many participants face, Pew's Jersey City effort has borne fruit: Some participants have started their own nonprofit organizations, Ms. Lewis says, with one group of alumnae creating the city's first shelter for women with the virus that causes AIDS.

### **Measuring Results**

The nonprofit-leadership education field is relatively young and its programs varied. But all of the attempts to cultivate leadership must eventually seek to answer the ultimate question: Do they make a difference?

Several programs can point to the results from surveys of their alumni as evidence that their programs have impact: A 1999 survey of Eureka fellows, for example, found that 98 percent of respondents reported that they had enhanced their leadership and management skills during their participation in Eureka, that 75 percent of their charities now serve more people, and that 83 percent of them reported that they had joined in new collaborations with other organizations since starting their fellowships.

But some data suggest that leadership programs' significance may fade as their participants' careers continue: A longitudinal study of the Kellogg National Fellowship Program, released last year, found that while 71 percent of alumni who had been out of the program for no more than five years reported that it had been "one of the most significant positive experiences" of their lives, only 27 percent of alumni who had been out at least 12 years said the same.

Some grant makers have built evaluation components into their leadership programs. Leadership for a Changing World, for example, is working with the OMG Center for Collaborative Learning, in Philadelphia, to evaluate the program as it goes along. Program participants and administrators will be studied by OMG researchers to determine not only whether the components of Ford's program are working -- whether it is meeting its goal of selecting a diverse group of leaders, and what those leaders do with the \$30,000 made available to each for individual-development needs -- but also how the concept of leadership is discussed among the public, a key interest of the program, says Mr. Lipsky.

Measuring the results of a leadership program is a long-term process, and one that eludes clear-cut statistical analysis, says Lorraine R. Matusak, who ran the Kellogg National Leadership Program from 1982 to 1991 and now is a consultant to foundations on leadership programs. "It is going to be anecdotal, because how else can you measure the internal development of a person?" she asks.

To measure results, says Ms. Dunham, leadership programs must "see what happens beyond the blush of the award years," the period during and right after participation in a leadership program. "If you went and did a survey and asked people whether the award benefited them, well, *duh*," she says, laughing. "This isn't a lie, but it doesn't exactly help you know strategically whether how you did the award, how you offered the support, was really key."

And there's no guarantee that participation in any leadership program -- an investment in a participant's potential -- will ultimately help either a charity or its leader, says Mr. Hewitt. "It's hit and miss," he says. "How do you choose somebody from out of the community and say, 'You're going to be a leader of something in five to seven years?' What are the chances that things actually play themselves out that way? It's a huge risk, but it's really a risk that's worth taking."