



WHAT I'VE LEARNED

Janice Bradley

More than just a money manager, our foundation centers on learning

Looking back over my past year as a board member for the Learning Forward Foundation, I realize that I am more than a member of a foundation, I am part of a learning culture.

When I joined the foundation, I thought that I would be a member of a traditional funding organization, a non-profit that raised money and awarded grants and scholarships for educators interested in professional learning. We would help educators through fundraising and by providing resources to advance their learning. We would meet as an organization yearly to manage work, ensure financial viability, and feel positive about our contributions to others. However, I've realized that the foundation has transformed from more than "just a foundation" that raises and awards money, to a dynamic learning culture guided by a vision to educate, innovate, and transform professional learning, first advancing our organizational learning internally, then supporting learning in collaboration with others.

HOW DID THE LEARNING FORWARD FOUNDATION ADOPT A CULTURE OF LEARNING?

We've taken five paths this year to promote dynamic learning within the foundation.

1 The foundation looks inside to develop shared meaning and visioning and creates coherence with the Learning Forward vision and

ABOUT THE LEARNING FORWARD FOUNDATION

The foundation offers grants and scholarships to support learning leaders. Just as important, foundation board members accompany that financial support with coaching, assisting grantees with setting clear goals and ensuring their work has an impact on the educators and students they serve.

Contribute to the foundation throughout the year at www.learningforward.org/foundation. Read about past grantees and preview the scholarship and grant opportunities that will be available early in 2018.

mission. As part of Learning Forward, the foundation designs intentional connections to align our vision and mission — "Educate, Innovate, and Transform Professional Learning" by "supporting the development of educators' capacity to improve student learning through innovation and improvement that transforms professional learning," with the Learning Forward vision, "Excellent teaching and learning every day," and its mission "to build the capacity of leaders to establish and sustain highly effective professional learning." Deliberately aligned visions and missions strengthen the ability of both Learning Forward and the foundation to act interdependently as a

system moving toward impact on raising student performance through highly effective professional learning for adults.

2 The foundation cultivates continual commitment to improvement and reflection. When the foundation meets twice yearly for two-day retreats and monthly for committee work, we engage in essential management and business tasks and we also learn together. I'm always reading articles, sharing conversations with thought leaders, participating in shared conversations through touchpoint conversations with awardees, and engaging in structured conversations during meetings. The foundation intentionally uses a process for creating desired results. We have a goal in mind, we are committed to work together to attain it, and then we think deeply about the results. What happened? What is the evidence? What needs to change to advance the mission and vision?

3 The foundation environment maintains effective leadership through collaboration that encourages different people to influence decisions and change, rather than a traditional hierarchy. Our current leadership structure encourages behaviors that facilitate learning – risk taking, learning with others, and individual reflection. We value collaborative learning experiences, as exemplified by the norms and ways we converse that allow each foundation member to question key assumptions

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critical to shared work. For example, we collaborate using the “Graduate School of Norms” and during each meeting, the foundation’s current chair, Audrey Hobbs-Johnson, begins and sometimes ends each meeting inviting every member to thoughtfully consider which norm was used to support effective information transfer during the meeting. It is clear that each foundation member has an important role in contributing to leading change within the foundation.

4 **The foundation environment practices attentive listening, meaning thinking and acting in ways that connect each other fully without multitasking.** One of the norms is, “listen with full attention” that allows us insight into each other’s thinking, and an opportunity for richer engagement in the content and intent of the speaker’s

message. Through attentive listening, we have the ability to analyze the thoughts and passions of others, which strengthens our collaboration for shared vision and professional relationships.

5 **The foundation moves from knowing from research and knowledge of professional learning, to living the experience with others.** After awarding grants and scholarships to educators, our task turns to supporting awardees on their journeys using the Standards for Professional Learning to guide change and improvement in their contexts. We needed to shift from “talking about the standards from afar” to understanding how the standards are experienced, in order to for us to better serve as authentic guides for awardees. Through the touchpoint process, a community space for awardees to reflect

on implementation of their change project, we learned in partnership through the awardees’ lived experience how standards are enacted and used to create impact.

As a result of participating in the foundation as a member of a culture of learning, not only am I contributing in collaboration to educating, innovating, and transforming professional learning for other educators and students, I have made my own transformation as a leader of professional learning, and am looking forward to the next year with hope, opportunity, and possibility.

Janice Bradley is a member of the Learning Forward Foundation, vice-chair of the Research and Support Committee. ■