

Champions of change

Women seek ways to reshape foundation philanthropy

A new study by the national research and advocacy group Women and Philanthropy shows that while female foundation trustees see themselves as advocates for women's issues, they still are searching for common strategies to improve the lives of women and girls.



Valeria Lee



Jane Kendall



Mary Semans

By BARBARA SOLOW

During the many years she has spent as a trustee of North Carolina foundations, Mary D.B.T. Semans has seen increasing numbers of women in leadership roles in philanthropy.

"There are a lot of trustees, chairmen and also [foundation] directors who are women in our state," she says.

Despite their growing power in the board room, women have not reached agreement on a common set of funding priorities.

"I think there are women that take special note of things that affect women and are very careful about that," says Semans, who serves as chairman of the board of trustees of the Duke Endowment and is a trustee of the Mary Duke Biddle Foundation. "But there is not a common agenda."

A new report by the national research and advocacy group, Women and Philanthropy in New York, contains similar findings.

"The Trustee Connection" - the sixth in a series of reports on the role of women in organized philanthropy - found that while most female trustees surveyed believe foundations could do more for women and girls, few have chosen to be advocates for grantmaking programs specifically aimed in that direction.

The reasons for this include a reluctance to confront the status quo; support for "universal funding" strategies aimed at a general population, and a lack of consensus about women's most pressing needs, the report states.

Where women have had a more visible impact is in making U.S. foundation boards more representative. The report found that more than two-thirds of female foundation trustees surveyed have taken some action to further the goal of greater "diversity" on their boards.

Valeria Lee, program officer for the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation in Winston-Salem and a member of the board of Women and Philanthropy, is a long-time advocate of greater diversity in organized philanthropy.

But she cautions against defining that goal too narrowly.

"Just by bringing women and minorities on a [foundation] board is no guarantee that you will get that much of a different voice," Lee says. "I think organizations need to talk about what it means to be representative and inclusive. You can have x number of women and x number of minorities and that still might not represent real diversity, depending on what your community is like."

Robbie Irvin, one of two women on the nine-member board of the Winston-Salem Foundation, agrees.

"I think it's unfortunate when any member who is a minority is looked to, to be the spokesperson for that whole class of people," she says.

In an effort to create a more representative pool of trustees, the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation has established a statewide advisory panel that has input into grantmaking programs.

"People rotate on that panel every three years so there is a lot of turnover," says Mary Mountcastle, president of the Reynolds board and a trustee of the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation. "That begins to create a pool of people that's very diverse in terms of region, gender and the sectors they come from."

Jane Kendall, executive director of the N.C. Center for Nonprofits, is a trustee of the Kathleen Price and Joseph M. Bryan Family Foundation - one of the few Tar Heel foundations with a majority of women on the board.

"Strategies for being an effective female trustee are not really that different from being an effective trustee, period," she says. "For me that means doing my homework, keeping up with the sector and being a strategic thinker for the foundation as a whole, not just on grant decisions."

United Way leadership programs, nonprofit certificate programs such as those offered by Duke University and training offered by the N.C. Center and the National Center for Nonprofit Boards in Washington are all models for developing more effective foundation trustees, Kendall says.

The Women and Philanthropy report found that an "invisible bond" has begun to form between female foundation trustees, program officers and other foundation staff members.

While they are hopeful that such links will lead to a greater voice for women in philanthropy, North Carolina foundation staff members caution that the connection is still tenuous.

As for the development of a women's funding agenda, several foundation trustees pointed to the existence of N.C. Equity - a Raleigh nonprofit advocacy group for women and girls - as a sign that a consensus is in the making.

N.C. Equity recently concluded a series of public meetings and is now compiling a women's legislative agenda to submit to the General Assembly (story, page 3).

Lee of the Reynolds foundation welcomes efforts to move the debate about women's funding priorities from the theoretical to the practical plane.

"We've talked a lot about the status of women in philanthropy and now we have to take on a new campaign," she says. "If we're really serious about equity and inclusion, we will have to take on new strategies."

For a copy of the Women and Philanthropy report, call (212) 463-9934.

UNITED WAY

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we're taking results in more systemic change. It's a more thoughtful approach."

Consultants working on the evaluation say a common theme that has emerged from the surveys and discussion sessions is a desire for member agencies to work together.

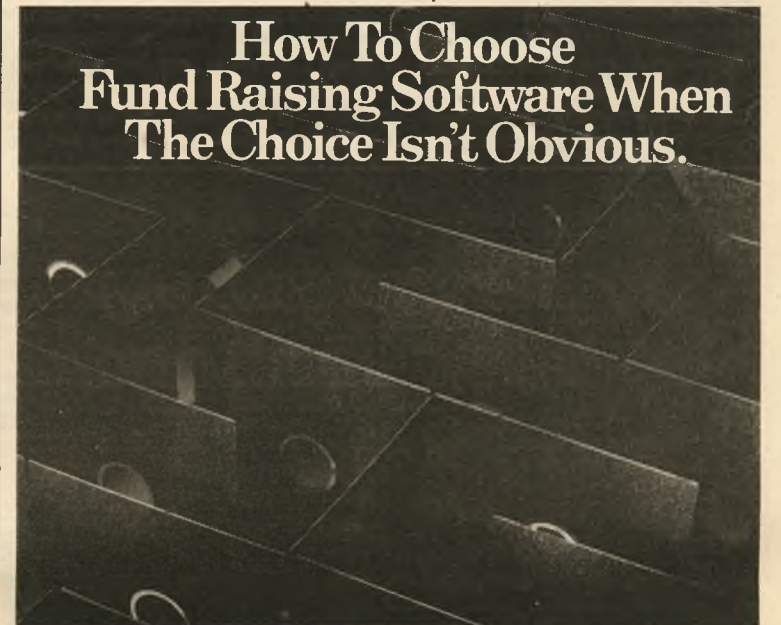
"At each of the sessions, agencies have asked the United Way to help them get over turf issues," says Phillip Reed, president of the Michigan Nonprofit Management Institute, which is coordinating the Forsyth County evaluation process. "I find it interesting they would ask the United Way to do that."

Participants in the forum on public safety suggested, for example, that the United Way fund more community-based programs and programs that stress crime prevention.

Participants also called for more partnerships between United Way agencies, neighborhood groups and community leaders working on crime.

Davis says members of the United Way's Funding Priorities Committee will make a report to the board of directors on Jan. 17. Final decisions on 1995-96 fund allocations will be made at a board meeting in May.

For information about the United Way's evaluation process, call (910) 723-3601.



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Report explores women's "trustee connection"

A new report by Women and Philanthropy, a national research and advocacy group based in New York, shows female trustees will continue to have a significant impact on U.S. foundations.

The report, "The Trustee Connection: Making a Difference," is based on interviews with female trustees of community, corporate and independent foundations.

Among the highlights:

- Female trustees are "champions of diversity" on foundation boards and a majority have taken some action to enhance their foundation's responsiveness to the needs of women and girls.
- Trustees make little use of data available on the extent of foundation funding for women and girls, and there is no consensus on women's funding priorities.
- A racial divide exists over what might constitute a women's funding agenda. Forty-one percent of trustees surveyed felt that white women and women of color did not always have the same agenda.
- Women view men and other women on foundation boards as allies on behalf of women's issues. Female trustees speak in terms of "teamwork" and see themselves working in partnership with foundation staff to challenge the status quo.
- Nearly one-quarter of the most powerful and prestigious U.S. foundations lack even one female trustee.