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Local network making a difference

Your Turn

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Guest columnist

In a community with many pathways and partners to help students succeed, one common story continues to be written: we deeply care about youth.

Data continues to show us that education after high school is critical to success in the workforce. But the financial means to afford college or vocational school is a real or perceived barrier for many, especially first-generation students.

As we get better at recognizing inequities that can stand in the way of opportunity, people in our region continue to seed new scholarships. With so many local providers of these coveted funds, the William G. and Marie Selby Foundation realized that we could all do better for our students if we spent time with each other, building our own supportive community.

In October 2022, we launched the Regional Scholarship Providers Network, inviting colleges and universities, local foundations, nonprofits, chambers of commerce, fraternities and sororities, and civic groups.

Each helps young people achieve their dreams of education after high school with scholarships. They join us quarterly to explore what we can do together, focused on sharing information, strengthening relationships, improving communications, and learning best practices.

The Selby Foundation's Senior Scholarship Manager Kiarra Womack has designed the network to address the pressing topics group members request. Through her thoughtful facilitation, Kiarra creates a space in which small organizations have the same agency as large providers.

It is a community of mutual respect and shared expertise.

As a comfortable space to ask questions, we also test new ideas and problem-solve common challenges. In many cases, the members themselves lead discussions based on their knowledge.

Through our time together, participants have made concrete gains, including better outreach to inform students about scholarships, access to trusted student resources outside of funds – and in some cases, a transition to multiyear scholarships that more fully invest in each student's graduation goal.

This has been a difficult year, a time when the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) changed dramatically, causing delays in financial aid acceptance, technical glitches and frustration that likely prevented some students from choosing to pursue college.

The investment in our relationships served us well, and we used our connections to navigate. We strategized the best ways to help struggling families traverse FAFSA challenges, sharing various workshops and opportunities with our own networks. We coordinated our scholarship timelines and aligned our communications for the ease of students.

Our successes for the past two years can be credited to the way participants engage. We think of ourselves as a system, instead of individual organizations and efforts.

Earlier in the year, the Selby Foundation invested in a half-day of respite for our group members at Resilient Retreat, addressing approaches to deal with stress in our work. Caring professionals take the challenges of students to heart. The financial, mental health, family and cultural barriers feel personal. The time we spent together provided techniques for staying present and healthy as we help others.

As you consider how to help students with post-secondary education, there are numerous ways you can volunteer or make gifts to current scholarship providers.

The appeal of creating a new scholarship fund can be exciting. We encourage anyone interested to meet the professionals at local community foundations, nonprofit organizations and colleges that already manage these funds. They are often the best vehicles for making a meaningful difference using existing tools. They can also share the complexities of administering scholarships.

To do it well, this work takes experience and understanding; above all, it takes an understanding of students and what they need. As we embark on Year Three of the Regional Scholarship Providers Network together, we thank those who continue to invest in our future through students.

It's incredible to think of what we can do together.

Susie Bowie is the CEO of the William G. and Marie Selby Foundation.

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