

ADVENTURES IN  
PHILANTHROPY

GREAT LOCAL GRANTS

**S**UCCESS CREATES ITS OWN SET OF problems. During the 1990s, the Mackinac (pronounced “Mackinaw”) Center in Midland, Michigan, enjoyed plenty of both. A state think tank that has been under the direction of president Lawrence W. Reed since 1988, Mackinac enjoyed double-digit growth for much of the past decade. Today, it is among the largest state-based research centers in America.

This success did not go unnoticed. Joe Overton, senior vice president, still remembers the day an Ohio group called to ask if its staff could come visit in order to learn what made Mackinac successful. Calls from three other groups soon followed. Each time, the center allowed the groups to visit and talk with its staff.

It was obvious, Overton says, that “good leaders and managers in the public policy world were few and far between.” Though Overton and Reed recognized the problem, they could not afford to take staff time to run one-on-one tutoring sessions for a steady stream of interested people. “So,” Overton explains, “we decided to start our own program and see who comes.”

Reed contacted a donor friend who describes himself to Philanthropy as being at the time a “policy wonk.” This donor, a Roundtable Associate who wishes to remain anonymous, had spoken to Reed earlier about the need for a program to train leaders for research centers; he was happy to fund Reed’s proposed program when he heard think tanks were voluntarily coming to Mackinac for guidance.

Called the Leadership Conference, the program is designed for executives of market-oriented research institutes and their board

*Grantor:*  
Anonymous

*Grantee:*  
Mackinac Center for  
Public Policy

*Amount:*  
Low five figures

members. It covers three major areas: leadership and management principles, communications, and fundraising. Breakout sessions allow for more-individualized discussion and learning. There’s no magic formula to our success, says Overton. “We stress to conference attendees that we’re no different from similar organizations across the country. Success comes with learning to do the common things uncommonly well.”

For Forest Thigpen, president of the Mississippi Policy Institute, the “common things” to which Overton refers are the management principles that the Mackinac Center gives its conference attendees. “We’re one-tenth the size of Mackinac,” Thigpen says, “but the principles they taught us apply to any size organization.”

Using what he learned at Mackinac, Thigpen has launched a campaign to rewrite Mississippi’s charter school laws, which he calls “the worst in the nation.” The institute has helped write the bill now working its way through the state legislature. It has also developed good relations with the state’s media and through them is educating the state’s citizens, who are generally unaware of what charter schools can achieve. This two-front strategy would be difficult for a

large, well-financed organization, much less the Mississippi Policy Institute, whose 2001 budget was well under \$500,000.

Joshua Hull of the Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions in Columbus, Ohio, says that before coming to the conference, his group had “loose operating procedures,” but now they are more focused and efficient. The Buckeye Institute also learned how to develop more effective communications. Using a survey of newspaper editors Mackinac provides conference participants, Hall tells Philanthropy that his organization learned one reason some of their materials were rejected by newspapers: “Our articles were 700 words in length, the papers were running 500 word pieces.” By focusing on these types of details, the institute has greatly improved its media outreach.

The most popular session at the conference covers fundraising. Mackinac has pioneered an approach it calls “initiative-style” fundraising. Rather than seeking money for individual projects, participants are encouraged to develop a broader strategy for changing a public policy and then seek funds for that goal. The center itself has had success with this approach, as have such conference alumni as the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs.

Beyond technical pointers, Overton says what most people take away from the conference is inspiration. “When you’re new and have very little money,” he says, “it’s incredibly inspirational to be around a group of comrades-in-arms who have been there.”

Sometimes it’s the Mackinac staff that is inspired. Overton recalls James Shikwati, a participant from Kenya, whose stories of political violence,

government corruption, and killing made everyone “realize how good we have it here.” Since then, Reed has traveled to Kenya to meet with Shikwati and lecture, and Shikwati has talked in America about the struggle to establish liberty in his native country.

Since the first Leadership Conference in May 1998, there have been ten more, including one in Costa Rica. To date, 269 attendees from 43 different states, the District of Columbia, six provinces in Canada, and 24 different countries have benefited. And the numbers just keep growing. Many people who attend the conference will bring Overton and Reed back to their states to talk to their entire staffs. In recent years the duo has visited Kansas, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Texas, and Vermont, among others.

While Mackinac will not insist its Leadership Conference has played an important role in the rapid expansion of state think tanks that occurred in the 1990s, there’s little doubt the Leadership Conference has made a significant impact. (See the nearby sidebar on the State Policy Network.)

Success creates its own set of problems. But as Mackinac shows, problems can lead to new successes.