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Back to school

Collaboration, leadership focus for fellows

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Most people don't appreciate college and the opportunity to learn while in the thick of it.

And once in the workforce, the prospect of investing time and money to go back to school can be daunting.

That's kind of how [Raymond Ganoe](#) felt when he considered signing up for the Health Leadership Fellows program, an initiative of the Health Foundation for Western and Central New York.

"The last thing any of us have is time, but it's an investment in yourself and makes you a better leader," he said. "We never really take time to hold a mirror up to ourselves and kind of see our strengths and weaknesses."

Ganoe, CEO of Evergreen Health Services, graduated from the program in the spring after spending 18 months learning about himself, how to work collaboratively with other health care leaders and how to tackle community problems.

"It gives you time to form networks and relationships with people," he said. "And in my opinion, the future of health care in Western New York is contingent upon all of us forming better relationships with each other, tearing down the walls and working together collaboratively."

Launched in 2005, the Health Leadership Fellows program links leaders across agencies who come away ready to tackle community problems collaboratively. Three cohorts of professionals went through the program one after the other beginning in 2005. The 18-month program restarted in 2013 with a fourth cohort, and a fifth group is underway.

[Ann Monroe](#), foundation president, said the idea is to build a community of leaders who will make a lasting impact in the health care and nonprofit community.

"Our goal in the long term was to create a cadre of collaborative leaders who would work together across organizations on programs of importance," she said. "We nurture these folks but we don't pamper them. Collaboration is not an easy job."

Virginia Purcell Oehler, who leads the program, said fellows come away with personal, organizational and collaborative learning skills.

"They're discovering things they didn't know they needed and practicing these new skills in a safe place," she said. "It tends to expand the leaders' thinking."

It doesn't come cheap: The foundation invests about \$15,000 in each fellow over the course of the program, covering the costs for executive coaches and advisers, weekend retreats and multiple personality assessments and tests.

Tara Ellis, president and CEO of Meals on Wheels for WNY, is one of 40 members participating in the fifth cohort. She said the program offered executive coaching that she might not otherwise treat herself to, as well as an opportunity for true collaboration with other executives in the field of health and human services.

"It's the kind of thing I would work to provide to my team but not necessarily invest in myself," she said. "I thought it would be a tremendous opportunity for me as an individual but also for Meals on Wheels."

The program brings in speakers and trainers to work with each class at one-day and weekend retreats while subgroups get together separately to work on larger community problems.

Joseph Cozzo, CEO of Buffalo Hearing & Speech, is a board member at the foundation and serves as an adviser to one of the subgroups. When he signed up to participate in the fellows program himself, he had already been a nonprofit executive for several years and wondered how useful it actually would be.

"It turned out to be one of the most transformative experiences of my career," he said. "That part was very pivotal for me. Talking about health care and collaboration and new ways of thinking to move health care forward was such a transformation for me at that stage."

Max Donatelli, a consultant for family engagement at Baker Victory Services, was a member of the second group to go through the program. Nearly a decade later, he's still involved with other fellows he met.

Though he's been through other leadership programs and continuing education, Donatelli said the health fellows program was deeper and has had a lasting impact on him and his work as a founder and board member with other groups, including the Parent Network of WNY and the Developmental Disabilities Alliance of WNY.

"It really helped me to be a better community collaborator and coordinator, and to be able to work with a variety of different groups," he said. "The people there are doers; they're people who help to make things happen. They're not just talkers."

The program doesn't end at graduation. Most fellows continue on in the Fellows Action Network (FAN), an alumni network that offers opportunities for collaboration through advocacy, action and professional development.

Cozzo said tracking the relationships between fellows has been especially interesting as individuals work on projects across disciplines and geography.

"It looks like a spider web," he said. "They're working together in unique ways. As fellows call on each other, it's created this whole secondary groundswell that was intended when the program was first envisioned."

Carol Kostyniak, secretary for education at the Catholic Diocese of Buffalo, was managing a medical practice when she went through the program. But the connections she gained carried over and she's worked with other fellows to bring health and human services into the schools, as well as dental clinics and social workers.

"The network has been huge for me to understand the barriers for academic achievement," she said. "Every year we learn something new: how to be a facilitator, put groups together. It was fabulous and continues to be."

Tracey Drury covers health/medical, nonprofits and insurance