

“My Values Are On My Sleeve”

How Jeff Yost and the Institute are changing rural America. By Missy Daniel

“I’m a data guy, a math guy, an economist,” confesses Jeff Yost, president and CEO of the Nebraska Community Foundation. But, ten years ago, as a participant in a small peer-learning group he was invited to join by Janet Topolsky, co-director of the Institute’s Community Strategies Group and head of its Rural Development Philanthropy Learning Network, Yost says he learned essential *human-relations* skills that transformed his work in the field of community development and taught him the importance of using data “to ask better questions.” He hasn’t stopped working with the Institute since.

Yost grew up milking cows and selling eggs from his family’s chickens in Red Cloud, Nebraska, a town of just over 1,000 people. “It was terrific experience for a social entrepreneur,” says Yost, adding that Red Cloud was also the home of American author Willa Cather, who wrote



Yost

Today, the Nebraska Community Foundation, headquartered in Lincoln, serves more than 200 community, organizational, and donor funds in 78 counties. It has become a national model for community-endowments. With 1,800 volunteer leaders, the Foundation inspires charitable giving and strategic investments across the state—all of which benefit Nebraska’s mostly rural communities.

Yost says his long involvement with the Institute’s Community Strategies Group has been critical to the Foundation’s success. It “has helped me move people to a much higher level of buy-in” when it comes to community philanthropy—whether talking with potential benefactors about reinvesting in their communities, inspiring volunteers, encouraging local residents to leave legacy gifts, or trying to fuel local economies by attracting young families back to their rural roots. The little town of Shickley, Nebraska, for example, has fewer than 400 people, but, with the help of the Foundation, local leaders have built a community fund of nearly \$2.5 million. Local philanthropy will provide steady revenue that will enhance quality of life for generations. The kind of giving that the Nebraska Community Foundation encourages, Yost says, “is a leap of faith for people who are used to giving their kids luggage for graduation.”

But Nebraskans aren’t the only ones taking a leap of faith with the Foundation: Three years ago, thanks to support from the Institute’s Community Strategies Group, the Nebraska Community Foundation was one of five organizations chosen by the Ford Foundation to receive a \$1 million challenge grant to support its work and to catalyze its endowment-building efforts. Yost says that, through his relationship with the Institute, he was introduced to key people in the field; Topolsky made him a lead partner in strategic-planning sessions; and her Community Strategies Group helped facilitate an important rural-philanthropy conference in Nebraska in 2008 that was attended by more than 200 people from 35 states. Meanwhile, the strategic lessons he took from Institute programs have taught him how to “move from high-minded aspirations to boots on the ground that continue to be boots on the ground.”

Yost also credits his participation on a national task force for community leadership facilitated by the Institute as a revelatory moment. It “brought out the best in others,” he says, and demonstrated the Institute was more than just “a neutral convener.” Now, he says, “when I show up for a meeting, my values are on my sleeve. I let people know the reason I am doing this work.” Leading with your values, he has concluded, is the only way to make change that sticks, and that, too, he says, is something he has taken away from the Institute.



The Nebraska Community Foundation helps rural communities become places where young people will choose to return to live, work, and raise families.

about Nebraska pioneers and homesteader life. Cather’s descriptions of the community’s relationship to the land, he says, “helped me frame the Nebraska Community Foundation’s work—the deep connection with family, the pride we have in building this place, and the connection to the prairie itself.” It also helped him understand, he says, that “charitable giving is all about motivation and inspiration. You can’t make anyone do anything.”

Through his work with the Institute’s Community Strategies Group, Yost says, he has learned to inspire and challenge his fellow Nebraskans to become philanthropic leaders and social entrepreneurs in their own right, to recognize the value of rural giving and rekindle their belief in a vibrant future for the American hometown.