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James M. Ferris  
*University of Southern California*

Nicholas P. O. Williams  
*University of Southern California*

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## RESULTS

# Offices of Strategic Partnerships: Helping Philanthropy and Government Work Better Together

James M. Ferris, Ph.D., and Nicholas P. O. Williams, M.P.P., University of Southern California

*Keywords:* Cross-sectoral partnerships, foundation strategy, government-philanthropic relations, public-private partnerships

### Key Points

- There is a growing interest on the part of philanthropy and government in working together to address problems of common interest. But cross-sectoral collaborations are not easy. In response, a new organizational structure – the office of strategic partnerships – is emerging that catalyzes, fosters, and accelerates such partnerships.
- These offices help to overcome the barriers of working across sectors by sharing knowledge and information about the sectors, identifying and convening stakeholders to discuss shared solutions, and leveraging resources to support public-problem solving.
- Based on interviews and a convening of principals of six of these offices at the city, state, and federal levels, this article<sup>1</sup> examines the lessons for making these offices successful in facilitating government-philanthropic partnerships.
- In particular, it focuses on the need to determine appropriate roles and expectations, match philanthropic and government interests, find and field the right leadership, and build a record of success that encourages the sustainability of these offices.

<sup>1</sup> This article is drawn from the report *Philanthropy and Government Working Together: The Role of Offices of Strategic Partnerships in Public Problem-Solving* (Ferris & Williams, 2012).

### Introduction

While philanthropy and government have a history of joining forces to address issues that range from education and public health to economic development, such efforts have often been informal and episodic with a good dose of happenstance. In recent years, there is growing evidence that foundations of various types and scale are taking steps to engage with government on a more formalized and continuous basis and contemplating new models of how they can partner to achieve greater impact (GrantCraft, 2010). At the same time, government at the local, state, and national levels is beginning to view public-private partnerships as a strategy for more effective public-problem solving. In effect, both sectors are becoming more intentional about their desire to collaborate across sectors to address a wide array of public problems.

A number of forces are compelling these new approaches. Government at all levels is fiscally constrained, severely limiting the ability to mount new programs and even sustain existing ones. Thus, while governments have vast resources relative to foundations, they understand that partnerships with foundations may give them added flexibility to pursue new initiatives or find innovative solutions to critical public problems (Goldsmith & Eggers, 2004; Salamon, 2002; Goldsmith, Georges, & Burke, 2010). At the same time, the growth of foundation assets has slowed

in recent years, leading philanthropists to look to new strategies to achieve greater impact in pursuit of their missions, including partnerships with government.

The idea of working across sectors is increasingly prevalent at the state and local levels, where there is a greater familiarity between policymakers and foundation leaders and where a larger number of foundations have a greater sense that their resources can make an impact.<sup>1</sup> But it has also taken hold at the federal level with a number of initiatives, including the Social Innovation Fund, Investing in Innovation, and Promise and Choice Neighborhoods programs, that have sought to leverage the sustained involvement of philanthropy in public-problem solving (Abramson, Soskis, & Toepler, 2012a, 2012b).

Yet, the desire on the part of foundations to partner with government and government to partner with philanthropy is not enough. The costs of partnering – even within the same sector – are high. Identifying issues of common interest and bringing parties together in the hopes of developing a partnership entails costs and carries risks. The conflicting rationales and institutional logics that guide the behavior of philanthropy on the one hand and government on the other make collaboration across the sectors even more difficult. Due to these challenges, many potential partnerships are not even contemplated or those that are tried fail to get off the ground. Even in cases where partnerships across sectors develop, more often than not partners are working together for the first time. These partnerships tend to be ad hoc, time-limited, and episodic, making their potential to achieve impact more tenuous. This translates into fewer partnerships across the sectors than might otherwise be possible.

One potential solution to address the challenges of philanthropy and government working

<sup>1</sup> For instance, more than 1,500 individuals who either were involved or had previously been involved in collaboration with government responded to a recent survey by Grant-Craft (2010): 42 percent were collaborating with government at the local level, 21.7 percent at the state level, 21.7 percent at the federal level and 8.3 percent at the international level.

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together is a new institutional innovation – the office of strategic partnerships (OSP).<sup>2</sup> These offices are designed to catalyze and foster partnerships between government and philanthropy (and sometimes business) by bridging differences between sectors. They are emerging at the local, state, and federal levels of government and focus on stimulating and accelerating partnerships between sectors. While they are formally referred to by different names and have different origins, rationales, and organizational structures, they represent an effort to create an infrastructure to help the sectors work together better by lowering the transaction costs of partnering.

While the conditions that create the imperative for government and philanthropy to work together are ripe, OSPs are an effort to reduce the barriers to actually mount partnerships by providing an infrastructure to navigate differences and accumulate experiences of what it takes to work together. A key impetus for their creation

<sup>2</sup> These offices seek to move beyond joint funding of programs – such as those manifested in the Fund for the City of New York and the Social Innovation Fund – to focus on active partnerships that mobilize a wider variety of assets.

**Table 1** The Different Worlds of Philanthropy and Government

	View From Philanthropy	View From Government
Flexibility	We have a certain amount of flexibility about timing.	We have to adhere to annual budget cycles.
Time Horizon	We see this work as a long-term commitment.	An election can change everything.
Focus	This initiative is a top priority.	This initiative is one of hundreds of responsibilities.
Discretion	We can be selective about what we focus on.	We do not have a lot of flexibility in setting priorities.
Funding Priorities	We don't pick up the tab for defunded services.	An important program got cut; let's get philanthropy to fund it.
Accountability	We value our independence.	We are accountable to the public.

This table was adapted from *Working With Government* (GrantCraft, 2010).

is a champion who believes that working across sectors – whether on the government or foundation side, and sometimes both – can accomplish more than working alone. These offices have been created because there was a leader who, based on his or her experiences, understood the potential advantages of philanthropic-government partnerships and encouraged that approach. To them, public-private partnerships are not an abstract idea, but rather a tangible strategy for public-problem solving. These offices are a way of incubating that mindset in government. This is particularly the case among the champions who have experience working with philanthropy and eventually end up working in government. But there are also instances where leaders from philanthropy initiate the conversations with receptive public officials that, in turn, lead to the office's creation.

**OSPs and Their Roles**

We define an office of strategic partnerships as an office or structure usually inside of government that is designed to catalyze, accelerate, and foster partnerships between government and philanthropy (and perhaps other sectors). The offices that are our focus in this article catalyze partnerships that represent a shared commitment between philanthropy and government to work together to solve public problems, recognizing their common interests, their respective assets –

money, expertise, and networks, and their own institutional logics. The precise nature of these partnerships can manifest in a variety of ways, from loose agreements between the parties to highly structured initiatives. They can involve sharing information, coordinating resources, co-funding and, in some cases, joint decision-making.

These offices are important because they help to bridge differences between the sectors. While increasingly philanthropy and government realize they have shared interests and bring different resources to the table, they each have their own institutional imperatives – rationales, incentives, and formal and informal rules – that shape their behavior. The differences illustrate some of the contrasts in the worlds of philanthropy and government. (See Table 1.)

Several differences make partnerships between philanthropy and government particularly difficult. First, the issues, approaches, and priorities of government frequently change with election cycles and are often viewed through the lens of electoral politics. Foundations tend to view problems over a longer time horizon and invest their limited resources accordingly. Second, governments – regardless of level – are responsible for a wide range of issues. Foundations have greater flexibility in how they operate, make decisions,

and focus their resources. As a result, the priorities and issues that are important to a particular foundation or set of foundations at a given time may not be what are important to a government, and vice versa. Third, those who operate in the world of government or of philanthropy tend not to fully understand how the other operates and often have a range of misconceptions about the other. For example, many in government often view philanthropy as a resource to fill funding gaps rather than as an equal partner. Philanthropy often views government as too slow or bureaucratic to accomplish its objectives. Finally, while governments are accountable to the public, private foundations greatly value their independence. Neither is inclined to share authority. Foundations are accustomed to making decisions on their own without the involvement of outside actors. Governments are conscious of being transparent and publicly accountable and are frequently prohibited from delegating decision-making authority.

To navigate these differences entails costs and risks. Partnerships in general are more complex and costly than working alone. And because of the sectoral differences, partnerships between government and philanthropy require even more time and resources. There is a need to identify potential partners, to develop relationships and trust between them, to gain a greater understanding of how each works, and to establish and manage the processes and procedures for effectively sharing information, making decisions, and taking action. This is a difficult and costly process to initiate, and to repeat each time there is the potential for a partnership can be daunting and therefore inhibit the sectors from working together.

Bridging the institutional differences between philanthropy and government are at the heart of the work of OSPs. By learning from experience, they help to lower the costs of exploring and initiating partnerships as well working around the institutional barriers between government and philanthropy. They create an infrastructure in which partnerships between philanthropy and government can be more easily catalyzed and accelerated. Offices of strategic partnerships do this

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by (1) sharing sector knowledge and information, (2) identifying areas of potential partnerships, and (3) leveraging the resources to support them. Each of these dimensions of their core work helps to lower the transaction costs of partnerships by creating an infrastructure for new and ongoing engagement across sectors.

#### *Sharing Sector Knowledge and Information*

Understanding how the other works and having reasonable expectations about what each is able to do is critical to enabling partnerships between the sectors. The OSPs help educate government about philanthropy and philanthropy about government. They coach each side about how to work with the other, encourage cultural exchanges for working across boundaries, and share practical knowledge with leaders on what it takes to work together effectively.

One federal OSP, for example, regularly hosts workshops with different government offices to explain how philanthropy works and how other government departments can work with them. The office explains how government officials can avoid pitfalls such as asking foundations to simply fill gaps in government-administered programs. Another OSP regularly meets with nonprofit and foundation leaders to explain the policymaking process, the different roles and functions of

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government agencies, and where to find different types of information from within government. Moreover, they often describe to the foundation community the political context in which government is operating. By demystifying the sectors, the cultural and institutional barriers to partner are lowered.

#### *Identifying Areas of Possible Partnership*

The OSPs not only provide a framework to explain how each sector operates, but they stimulate conversations among government agencies and foundations as well as nonprofits and other critical constituencies with the purpose of having these diverse stakeholders understand their mutual interests, exchange information, and recognize where opportunities for partnership may exist.

For example, OSPs alert the foundation community when new policy windows open, especially those with the potential for a partnership to develop. They explain to foundation leaders how government is likely to approach the issue. At the same time, OSPs make government agencies aware of the priorities of the funding community. They also bring in practical expertise about what successful partnerships have looked like, drawing on experiences working with particular funders or government agencies. The offices focus on stimulating conversations and brokering relationships to spark partnerships. They typically do not

devise, implement, or manage partnerships. In this way, the OSPs provide a point of entry for philanthropy to work with government and vice versa.

#### *Leveraging Resources*

With their knowledge of both sectors, the OSPs help to identify resources in both government and philanthropy that might catalyze or support a particular project or initiative. This includes both financial resources, such as philanthropic grantmaking efforts that align with government priorities, and human resources, such as issue experts whose involvement might add value. All of the OSPs point to their successful efforts to identify and then secure funding for issues of joint concern.

Many of the state and local OSPs, for example, provide a venue to bring foundations, nonprofits, and government together in preparation for significant federal grant applications, such as the Department of Education's Promise Neighborhood and Investing in Innovation programs. In so doing, the OSPs help to create the conditions under which such resources can be identified, matched, and leveraged more easily.

Offices of strategic partnerships, while varying in missions, strategies, and settings, collectively demonstrate the potential of an institutional infrastructure for philanthropic-public partnerships. The offices, though relatively new and still evolving, have achieved a number of important accomplishments. (See Table 2.)

#### **Making OSPs Work**

To understand better how OSPs work, we interviewed the principals of six offices – the cities of Denver, Los Angeles, and Newark, N.J.; the state of Michigan; and the federal departments of Education and Housing and Urban Development. We then convened a group of these principals along with leaders from philanthropy and government to discuss the role that these OSPs play and to gain an understanding of what it takes to make them work. Those who have been building these offices and achieving some early successes reflected on their experiences to identify some

**Table 2** Examples of the Work of OSPs

Office	Examples of Their Work
<p><i>Los Angeles Office of Strategic Partnerships</i>, a local office founded in 2009 after conversations between the mayor and local foundations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• guided the formation of the Neighborhood Revitalization Work Group, a collection of city, county, nonprofit, and philanthropic organizations working to make Los Angeles more competitive for federal funding.</li> <li>• brokered a joint grant application with The California Endowment between the city and the county to bring new resources to the region.</li> <li>• spearheaded the expansion of the Summer Night Lights program, a private-public partnership that keeps Los Angeles parks open later during summer months and provides community-engagement activities for family and youth.</li> <li>• streamlined the city’s grants and contracting processes for nonprofits.</li> <li>• helped coordinate census outreach efforts with nonprofit partners and to organize the city’s first “Nonprofit Day.”</li> </ul>
<p><i>Michigan Office of Foundation Liaison</i>, a state office founded in 2003 with impetus from the Michigan Council of Foundations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• brokered more foundation investments for economic and workforce development, K-16 education, and health, early childhood, and land use programs and initiatives.</li> <li>• brought together government and philanthropic stakeholders to reform state and federal benefits systems for low-income families.</li> <li>• brokered more foundation investments for economic and workforce development, K-16 education, and health, early childhood, and land use programs and initiatives.</li> <li>• brought together government and philanthropic stakeholders to reform state and federal benefits systems for low-income families.</li> <li>• increased government-philanthropic partnerships in the state, “evolved into an important networking agent for government and philanthropy,” and helped to increase government effectiveness, according to 87 percent of government and foundation leaders responding to a 2010 evaluation of the office (Johnson Center for Philanthropy, Community Research Institute, 2010).</li> </ul>
<p><i>HUD’s Office for International and Philanthropic Innovation</i>, a federal office founded in 2010 and initiated by HUD leaders</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• developed an open-source web platform that provides information about funding sources and potential partnerships for local urban development efforts.</li> <li>• developed an open online platform to collect and disseminate best practices and innovations in housing, community development, and the built environment.</li> <li>• partnered with the business and philanthropic community on research initiatives related to program-related investments and impact investing.</li> <li>• created an award in partnership with the Council on Foundations for community foundations whose work through a public/private partnerships lead to meaningful and measurable results.</li> </ul>

*The roles and expectations of philanthropy and government in partnership – who does what, how, and when – are often unclear or misunderstood. This can make holding partners accountable difficult. For example, the notions that foundations are an “ATM machine” or that OSPs are merely fundraising entities of government are common misconceptions that can be difficult to overcome.*

common challenges: determining appropriate roles and expectations for partnering, matching philanthropic and government interests, finding and fielding the right leadership, and sustaining offices across administrations. We feature quoted remarks from these principals and discuss those common challenges along with some strategies that the six OSPs have found useful to address them.

#### *Determining Roles and Expectations of the OSP*

One of our early challenges was that government said, “Yes, we want to partner with foundations,” and foundations said, “Yes, we want to partner with government,” but nobody wanted to change. No one wanted to do it any differently.

Philanthropy and government have different institutional structures and, in turn, have different expectations and roles for doing their work. Often what is needed for a partnership to be initiated and to succeed is for sector partners to operate in ways that are different than when working alone. Because the institutional logics of the sectors are ingrained, however, government and foundation

actors may be unwilling or unable to change their behaviors. For example, government officials are prone to act in response to immediate circumstances or the politics of the moment. They do not have time to study and contemplate their actions in the same way as foundations. At the same time, foundations are accustomed to making decisions on their own without public oversight. Moreover, the roles and expectations of philanthropy and government in partnership – who does what, how, and when – are often unclear or misunderstood. This can make holding partners accountable difficult. For example, the notions that foundations are an “ATM machine” or that OSPs are merely fundraising entities of government are common misconceptions that can be difficult to overcome.

Offices of strategic partnerships have developed a range of approaches to help clarify the roles and expectations of both government and philanthropy:

- Emphasize the value of partnering. Offices often highlight the tangible benefits that will be gained through philanthropic-government partnerships. They focus on what can be learned by working together and how the partnership can make the work of both government and philanthropy more effective and meaningful. They also emphasize what the partnership infrastructure will do for the communities they serve, such as gathering new or better information about an issue or approach, improving the alignment of new or existing programs and services, and leveraging human and financial resources to address difficult or entrenched problems.
- Clearly define roles and responsibilities of each sector. Offices suggest developing written documents that detail the nature of the venture and the relative roles and responsibilities of each sector: the OSP’s mission, its strategy and operations, and the expected outcomes. Such documents also clarify who will be responsible for which aspects of the work. Boundaries, reporting relationships, and conditions of funding should be clearly articulated, particularly in



cases where philanthropy is providing general operating support for the offices.

- Develop trust among sector leaders. All partnerships require a trusting environment in order to be successful. Because OSPs focus on catalyzing partnerships across sectors, relationships need to be built between the philanthropic community and government. Offices help to identify and cultivate relationships by seizing opportunities and working with individuals who “understand the struggles their partners face.” As one OSP states: “We need to ensure [government] that they can trust us with their intimate issues and get them to believe that their partners in the foundation community should be trusted.”
- Look beyond leveraging philanthropic or government dollars. Offices do more than just leverage funding. One OSP notes that “knowledge and financial resources are equally important.” Another says, “We are not a development office in any way and we don’t lead with the aligning of funds. ... We lead with innovation. We are about coming to the philanthropic sector and to others and just trying to figure out where the ideas are: what’s working and what’s not working.” Such a strategy is particularly important to gain and maintain the support of the philanthropic community, which is often weary of being viewed as a piggy bank.
- Distinguish appropriate sector boundaries. Offices need to be clear about what they are able to do and what they are not able to do. They can also help to broker where different lines should be drawn between the sectors regarding their roles, responsibilities, and decision-making authority. This process frequently includes working with legal counsel to ensure compliance with government and foundation rules and regulations.
- Maintain clear lines of communication. Sharing information with relevant stakeholders before, during, and after a decision is made increases transparency and fosters trust across the sectors. Establishing how information can and

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should be shared and the process that the OSP will use to make decisions and advance project goals is critical to manage expectations.

#### *Matching Philanthropic and Government Interests*

We had to decide right at the beginning what was going to be the focus of this philanthropic liaison office, and we wanted to determine how to match what the foundations are looking at with what government is prioritizing.

Central to the work of OSPs is identifying the areas where government and philanthropy can come together. Each sector has a range of different and often competing interests that makes matchmaking difficult. One OSP notes that the values of the nonprofit and philanthropic community are sometimes at odds with the political realities of government. Even in cases where interests align, the timing of the two sectors may not be in sync. In addition, each public agency or individual foundation has its own values, missions, resources, strategies, and programs. Offices of strategic partnerships act as a resource to identify a possible match between individual foundations and agencies. Such matchmaking is often easier at the local and state levels, where there tends to be a larger pool of interested philanthropic partners

*Beyond finding a leader with cross-sectoral understanding, it is also important to have entrepreneurial individuals in these positions who can build and leverage their networks. The ideal leader is “creative, courageous, and tenacious” and relishes acting as a relationship broker and catalyst, especially in difficult circumstances.*

and greater flexibility on the part of government to work with funders. And since it can be a challenge to identify who has the authority and skills to work together across sectors, OSPs also act as a resource or access point to match key actors and decision-makers within government and philanthropy together.

Offices described several strategies to identify and make the “right match”:

- Understand the options for partnership. Offices are in a position to find potential areas for collaboration that may not currently exist and to initiate and nurture those in early stages of development. One OSP notes, “You have to explain to both government and philanthropy that it is not necessary to come to the table with a full-fledged collaboration.” They emphasize that there can be “many different levels of involvement of government and philanthropy working together,” from information sharing and coordination to joint funding and full-fledged collaboration.
- Recognize that timetables differ. Government and philanthropy operate on different timelines. Governments tend to be dictated by budgetary and electoral cycles, while foundations

tend to implement their strategies over longer time periods. Offices must frequently remind the parties of these differences. As one OSP put it, foundations need to understand that sometimes “if you’re going to play, now is the time to play,” while also explaining to government that “you can’t wait until today to ask for money for something you want next week.”

- Provide opportunities for the sectors to learn about each other. The strategies, processes, and procedures used by philanthropy are frequently unknown to government, and vice versa. Therefore, OSPs must continually educate stakeholders in both sectors on how each operates or might be motivated. “We educate not just government cabinet members and staff about philanthropy, but also foundations about how public agencies operate and work.” Foundations need to emphasize to government their own values and what is most important to them if the partnership is going to work. Learning opportunities can be provided through an array of venues, including workshops, formal and informal meetings and convenings, presentations and webinars, and in-person meetings.
- Be flexible and adaptable. Offices of strategic partnerships must straddle two dynamic sectors. This requires an ability to be adaptable to changing circumstances, stakeholders, and priorities. Moreover, the complex problems that many of these partnerships are grappling with require creative thinking that may fall outside the comfort zones of either sector. Offices note that a cookie-cutter approach does not work. Each foundation or set of foundations and each government agency is different, and the OSPs help to figure out case-by-case how a partnership might work.

#### *Finding and Fielding the Right Leadership*

What we found time and time again is: If you don’t have this extremely highly energized go-getter, eyes-on-fire – “wow, this is the coolest thing ever” – person, stuff doesn’t seem to really go anywhere. It’s not enough to sort of broker the interest in this at the very highest level, but you really need ... the social entrepreneur inside government who really wants to

make this happen. And if not, there's a real challenge to ... keep this alive.

Finding the right individual to lead the OSP is critical. Nearly all of the leaders from the OSPs we talked with have had experience working in or alongside both government and the nonprofit sector. Such experience is imperative given the need to understand how each sector functions and how to translate that understanding between sectors. As one sector leader states, however, "We do not have a deep bench of people who really understand government [in foundations] and understand foundations" in government, which limits the pool of new potential leaders for these OSPs. Beyond finding a leader with cross-sectoral understanding, it is also important to have entrepreneurial individuals in these positions who can build and leverage their networks. The ideal leader is "creative, courageous, and tenacious" and relishes acting as a relationship broker and catalyst, especially in difficult circumstances.

Offices suggest several ways to work to field the right team:

- Identify a leader whose skills and experiences fit. Finding a leader who has the right skills to lead the OSP is viewed as critical to making it work. This includes not just knowledge of how philanthropy, nonprofits, and government operate in general, but also the ability and experience to navigate the different systems effectively.
- Facilitate, don't "project manage." Offices of strategic partnerships broker relationships and frequently have many efforts happening at once. As a result, they do not try to "project manage" all of the ongoing partnerships. "We're happiest when we can step away and leave the work to someone else. ... Our goal is not to stay in and run things." They do, however, step in at strategic points to move partnerships forward. This often means that foundations that are partnering with government on a specific initiative will have more than one point of contact. Foundations should use leaders in the OSP as a resource to help them more easily navigate
- Learn how to "say no." Offices must represent the interests of two different sectors, whose ideas, opinions, processes, and approaches frequently differ. Not surprisingly, OSPs suggest that perseverance, tenacity, and the ability to "say no" are all important leadership characteristics. They help leaders to establish the founding priorities, advance the agenda when circumstances change, and overcome obstacles as they arise. They are also important when one partner makes a request that may threaten to derail a partnership or is clearly against the best interest of the other.

#### *Sustaining Offices*

We realized that if we were going to survive, we really needed to create an infrastructure for the office that would withstand term limits and changes in administration.

There are no assurances that OSPs will become institutionalized. Offices in some cities and states that were highlighted as recently as a few years

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through the government bureaucracy and talk to the "right" people in government when things go wrong.

ago by Wolk and Ebinger (2010) do not exist today. The idea behind the creation of the Office of Foundation Liaison for the state of Michigan, for example, was spurred by an effort in Detroit in the early 1990s, which had faded even before the Michigan office was established in 2003 (O’Gara, 1997). Thus, the promise of the offices will only succeed to the extent that they are both fiscally and politically sustainable.

Many government agencies and executive offices at the local and state levels have launched OSPs with the financial support of the foundation community. Such a strategy provides a short-term financial solution, but not one that is necessarily sustainable in the longer term. Foundation interests and priorities change, and there are no OSPs with long-term guarantees of funding. And while the structure of the federal offices currently entails public funding, few have yet faced the challenges of transitioning from one political administration to the next. As a result, ensuring the political support of OSPs in the transfer of power from one administration to another is critical. They must win the support of political and nonpolitical appointees prior to their establishment, maintain that support through the administration’s tenure, and be savvy enough to gain the support of new leaders when they turn over.

A number of ideas for sustaining OSPs have been advanced:

- Seek out champions. Just as champions are important to the initial development of OSPs, they are also central to their sustainability. Champions in both government and philanthropy can advocate on behalf of OSPs. One of the offices that successfully managed a political transition first established relationships with many different departments through various projects. It then systematically coached them to say: “When your new directors and managers get here, you need to have this project on your list to talk with them about as a priority.” The same OSP leverages its relationships with philanthropic leaders and associations to promote the office to government officials as well as aspiring candidates for office.
- Find support in the community. Offices of strategic partnerships seek to develop a broad community of support for the offices that extend beyond just the foundation sector or government. As the principal of one OSP says: “We had some amazing advocates rise up out of the community to really talk in very strong terms about what our office had meant for them, for their work, and for the way they thought things could work to enable them to do their jobs better.”
- Use evidence to demonstrate value. All of the offices collect and share information regarding their key projects, programs, and related accomplishments. They can use this as evidence of their value to enlist and maintain the support of government and philanthropy. This information can also be used to memorialize the office’s mission and strategies, and how it functions so as to foster learning. In addition, knowledge can be disseminated to help those interested in creating similar offices elsewhere.
- Avoid hot-button issues. Offices of strategic partnerships emphasize the importance of remaining nonpartisan and attacking problems that transcend partisan politics. Becoming “too close” to an administration raises the specter of a new administration pushing them out. Instead, OSPs tend to focus on issues that cut across party lines, including veterans’ affairs, economic development, and children’s health. Such an approach also helps OSPs to galvanize the support of foundations with a range of ideological leanings and funding interests.
- Demonstrate what you’re doing. Offices of strategic partnerships frequently record what they are doing. This helps to ensure accountability to their superiors in government, their foundation partners, and the public. Such documentation emphasizes both their actions and their achievements.

## Conclusion

There are a variety of ways in which philanthropy seeks to solve public problems. The forces that are

driving foundations to work in partnership with government are not likely to abate, and the value of developing a new model of philanthropic-government engagement is increasingly clear. While there are a variety of ways in which philanthropy can have a greater impact on solving public problems, such as by influencing public policy or working to make democratic processes more effective, working directly with cities, states, or federal agencies has an increasing attraction. Offices of strategic partnerships represent an innovation that holds considerable promise for advancing this model of government-foundation relations. OSPs provide an infrastructure to catalyze and accelerate partnerships by developing an expertise on what it takes to make cross-sectoral partnerships work and lowering the transaction costs of partnering across sectors. This is possible since the OSPs allow for the knowledge and connections from past partnerships to accumulate so they can be leveraged for subsequent partnerships.

As with all new institutional arrangements, there is a need to experiment and learn what is necessary for their success. Not all efforts to create OSPs have succeeded; those that have exhibit a variety of forms and functions, though they face a common set of challenges. Changing entrenched institutional behaviors and meeting the high expectations for what these offices can accomplish, as well as matching foundation interests with ever-shifting government priorities, is difficult. So too is shedding the belief that foundations will automatically be co-opted by government if the two sectors work together. Finding entrepreneurial leaders who are capable of straddling the two sectors is challenging. Beyond making OSPs operate effectively, those interested in starting or supporting their work also face the difficulty of sustaining them, particularly in the context of the ebb and flow of electoral politics.

Consequently, we offer three important recommendations for foundations that are interested in supporting and working with these offices. First, foundations need to cultivate champions in both sectors – their colleagues in the foundation community as well as like-minded policymakers and

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public officials. Either one is necessary, but only both are sufficient. Second, foundations need to be patient and flexible to allow the office to get established and build a record of achievement. There is no single right way for these offices to be structured. They will tend to reflect the institutional context in which they are embedded and will evolve as they learn how to do their work. Third, foundations need to understand the institutional logics and power dynamics in working with government and how dramatically different they are than what they are accustomed to with nonprofit organizations. While the offices can provide a strategic entry point for foundations to influence government action, align policy and programmatic goals, and scale solutions to make a bigger impact, foundations should realize that OSPs will not create wholesale changes in how government operates. After all, the offices are embedded in politics – both electoral and bureaucratic.

In this article we have recounted the strategies that a number of offices have identified to address the challenges that they have encountered. As more OSPs are created and develop track records, there is a need to learn and share what

works and what doesn't, and under what conditions. Without a well-developed set of best practices given the recent development of these OSPs, there is great value in building a community of practice so that there is learning across offices both horizontally (across a particular level of government) and vertically (across levels of government). While there is considerable variation in how these OSPs operate and function, there is much to be learned from these new efforts to develop an infrastructure for cross-sectoral partnerships. Only through the sharing of experiences and developing the lessons learned will best practices emerge. A community of practice will provide a venue for these offices to better understand how to navigate the array of challenges they face, what is required to succeed in sustaining them, and the value be created through the partnerships they make possible. This knowledge is likely to spur the creation of more OSPs and build the momentum for this institutional innovation for public-problem solving.

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**James M. Ferris, Ph.D.**, is director of the Center on Philanthropy and Public Policy at the Sol Price School of Public Policy at University of Southern California.

**Nicholas P. O. Williams, M.P.P.**, is associate director of the Center on Philanthropy and Public Policy at the Sol Price School of Public Policy at the University of Southern California. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Nicholas Peter Owen Williams, Center on Philanthropy and Public Policy, Sol Price School of Public Policy, University of Southern California, VKC Room 379C, Los Angeles, CA 90089 (email: npwillia@price.usc.edu).