

Partner Spotlight: Jama Campbell, Executive Director State Employees' Credit Union Foundation

June 2024

In a conversation with Philanthropy Liaison Juli Kim, Jama Campbell, executive director of the State Employees' Credit Union (SECU) Foundation, shared insights on the SECU Foundation's efforts to help address challenges facing North Carolina communities statewide and her perspectives on the significance of cross-sector partnerships in this work. Following are Juli's questions and Jama's replies.



Jama Campbell
State Employees' Credit Union Foundation

1. What is your role? What do you want people to know about your role?

My role focuses on highlighting the work of the Foundation throughout North Carolina. We try to be out in the community understanding the needs of communities across the state and getting the word out about the work we are doing in our focus areas of housing, education, healthcare, and human services to make the lives of our members and the communities they live in better. It is important to understand that when the [SECU Foundation](#) was created 20 years ago, we wanted to make sure that we were staying true to the roots of the [State Employees' Credit Union \(SECU\)](#). It was formed in 1937 to serve the state employees of North Carolina and their family members. SECU members fund the Foundation through the reallocation of their \$1 monthly checking fee – we call this The Power of a Dollar.



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With their dollars in mind, everything we do at SECU Foundation focuses on our public sector employees and their needs as residents of North Carolina communities. One in four North Carolinians, or 2.8 million people, is a member of the State Employees' Credit Union, so we realize that overwhelmingly the issues that all North Carolinians face are issues our members are dealing with. One thing I always try to explain about the SECU Foundation is that we may be headquartered in Raleigh, but we're really community funders and we utilize our network of branches throughout North Carolina. Every county in North Carolina has a SECU branch and the Foundation funds in all 100 counties. Each SECU branch has an Advisory Board whose members are voices for communities across the entire state. So, part of my role is connecting with these representatives to figure out: What are the issues and the organizations you would like us to fund? Where would you like us to invest your dollars? All of our decision making ultimately is done by our phenomenal SECU Foundation board, so another part of my role is to connect with the board and make sure they're hearing the voices from around the state.

It's really an honor to be able to do this work on behalf of SECU members and to align the business and the focus of SECU corporate in serving our membership to the work that we're doing with the Foundation. It makes us stronger as a foundation.

2. What are examples of how the SECU Foundation demonstrates how philanthropy can align its grantmaking with state government interests and priorities?

I'll give you three:

First, our education grantmaking demonstrates how we look to our public education partners to assist SECU members and other North Carolinians with their education and career development goals and to build the state's future. We operate four education programs that reflect a continuum of investments in the future of students in the state's public education institutions. Our first education funding program was a four-year, [\\$10,000, scholarship program](#) for public high school students to attend a public North Carolina university. We also operate a two-year, [\\$5,000, community college scholarship program](#) for students attending one of the state's 58 community colleges, and the [Bridge to Career Program](#) focused on supporting adult learners who are going back to school at any North Carolina community college to gain credentials that will help improve their wages. This program reflects our interest in workforce development and helping our members and other North Carolinians to be positioned for jobs that pay them wages sufficient to support themselves and their families. In addition, nearly ten years ago, we started the [SECU Public Fellows Intern Program](#), which is now offered at all 16 UNC university campuses, and funds \$5,000 paid internships for undergraduates to work during the summer with organizations in rural North Carolina. A few years later we were an inaugural funder of [Lead for North Carolina](#) at the UNC School of Government, which recruits students from North Carolina universities and colleges to serve in paid fellowships in local governments statewide. *[Note: In 2020, Lead for NC and OSP partnered to launch the NC COVID-19 Student Response Corps that matched students with internships in local government and nonprofit organizations across North Carolina.]*

Second, we fund program and capital projects related to state properties. For example, the Foundation has long supported the state’s museums in Raleigh, including the Daily Planet project at the NC Museum of Natural Sciences and expansion projects at the NC Museum of History and the NC Museum of Art. Most recently we worked with the NC Museum of Natural Sciences on the [Dueling Dinosaurs](#) exhibition. We also provide capital support for publicly funded hospice, mental health, and developmental disability clinics throughout the state.

Third, all of our grantmaking is to nonprofits. We are fortunate to work with many incredible nonprofits, whose successes are a big part of what makes us successful. As a foundation we’re interested in finding nonprofit partners that we call the “spark plugs” in their community - who are really getting the job done. More often than not, these organizations are collaborating with a state agency to serve North Carolina communities and make the lives of our members better.



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3. What other aspects of cross-sector partnership are important to the SECU Foundation?

We are interested in collaborating with organizations that have inventive ideas and plans for implementing programs that government could consider funding once there is a proof of concept. For example, recognizing the need among children and youth for behavioral health support, we talked with the UNC Health Foundation and the UNC Chapel Hill Department of Psychiatry about how we might partner to [pilot telemedicine services in schools](#) to provide children and their families access to behavioral health supports, especially in rural communities. That project aligns with work that the NC Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) is doing to increase access to behavioral supports for young people, meaning that NCDHHS is a partner in the work, as well as the NC Department of Public Instruction.

When I think about our grant making process and the types of projects that our board approves, the priority projects are those with cross-sector support because we realize that will help get a project off the ground pretty quickly while also supporting the long-term sustainability of those projects. Our board is also always looking at whether a project or organization has a healthy coalition of partners supporting the work, which is important to the long-term sustainability of that project or organization.

We developed our [Mission Development Grant Program](#) about seven years ago for smaller, mid-sized nonprofits that are trying to expand programs or facilities, meet other future growth needs, or ensure sustainability in part because we recognized that many nonprofits submitting grant requests to us did not have diverse sources of funding support. Having one source of funding for operations, capital, and programmatic needs is not sustainable for many organizations. They need to develop a larger network of funders. The Mission Development Grant Program is designed to help build participants' capacity to tell their story, identify potential partners, learn and use best practices, and lift their work up to state and local government entities. As a foundation, we want to be good stewards of our member dollars; for every dollar that we spend, we want to make sure that that dollar continues to multiply over time. Making sure that the organizations we're working with have strong networks and partners is really important.



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4. How do the nonprofits you fund leverage your grants to maximize what state government provides with funding or other resources?

Our capital funding projects are good examples of how we can help fill gaps in projects where public funds can't be used or aren't sufficient. With most of our capital projects, we try to give “transformational gifts,” in other words, the last dollars needed for the project to happen. That's where our larger six-and seven-figure dollar grants make a difference.

As an example, when One Place, an organization in Onslow County that serves children and families who are victims of violence and domestic abuse, was planning to expand, they received a \$40,000 capacity building grant and the services of a consultant through the Mission Development Grant Program to help them develop a larger capital campaign for a new campus. They needed to raise \$10M. One Place received a directed grant of \$8M in state funds appropriated by the legislature in 2023 and we were able to provide them with a \$2M grant to help them fill that gap in funding.

This project is a great example of where the SECU Foundation considered key questions related to public partnership, such as, Is state government on board with this project? Do they see the need? Do they see the importance? If the answer is “yes,” then we want to be a part of that effort. Across all our grantmaking, we want

to make sure that we're aligned with the priorities of the state of North Carolina and try to work together to ensure that a project gets off the ground. Sometimes we might be the last dollar in, which allows the project to happen.

We also provide challenge grants, especially with larger dollar capital projects, where an upfront investment and our strong track record can help give an organization an opportunity and time to raise additional funding, whether that be from government, other foundations, individual donors, or public campaigns. That can be really powerful as well.

5. In 20 words or less, what do you want people in other sectors to know about the power and impact of cross-sector partnerships?

Cross-sector partnerships are critical for organizations to expand, deepen, and sustain their services in their community and/or statewide.

SECU Foundation

PEOPLE HELPING PEOPLE



The North Carolina Office of Strategic Partnerships (OSP) develops, launches, and enhances partnerships between state government and North Carolina's research and philanthropic sectors.

OSP works with state government and non-governmental partners on priority issues, develops and convenes networks of public sector and research experts, and provides learning and engagement opportunities. These efforts help to deepen connections between North Carolina state government and external research experts and to increase state government's internal capacity to generate and use evidence to improve policy and programmatic functions.



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