

Case 54

MacArthur Fellows Program

John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, 1981

Scott Kohler

Background. At one of the very first board meetings of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, William T. Kirby, a trustee of the young Foundation, brought up an article that would have a major influence on the Foundations' subsequent charitable grantmaking. The article, written by Kirby's doctor, George Burch, argued that philanthropic organizations should allocate funds to free creative people from constraints on their ability to be innovative. Burch insisted, "[t]here is a need for granting agencies to seek out investigators who are genuinely interested in research and exploration of the unknown to advance knowledge for the sake of knowledge." This article was the jumping off point that led the MacArthur trustees to establish, as one of the Foundation's first endeavors, the MacArthur Fellows Program, which has been giving five-year unrestricted grants to talented and promising individuals every year since 1981.

Strategy. The fellowships, dubbed "genius awards" by the press, are intended to give "maximum freedom and flexibility,"⁸²⁶ so that recipients can follow their own lights, free of virtually all outside constraints. The actual award is a five-year stipend, currently set at \$500,000. As the Foundation's website proclaims: "There are no restrictions on how the money can be spent, and we impose no reporting obligations." The grants are not intended as rewards for past accomplishment; one criterion for selection is "promise for important future advances based on a record of significant accomplishment."⁸²⁷ The other two prerequisites are "exceptional creativity" and "potential for the fellowship to facilitate subsequent creative work."⁸²⁸ Rather, the fellowships are seen, by the Foundation, as investments in people. MacArthur fellows are chosen through an extensive process of nomination, evaluation, and determination that is carried out under a strict veil of confidentiality.⁸²⁹ Those invited by the Foundation to serve as nominators are drawn from a wide range of fields, including business, the arts, academia, and the not-for-profit sector. They are asked to consider for nomination the most creative people they know of in their respective fields. Nominations proceed to a selection committee which, after a period of review, makes a recommendation to the president and board of the Foundation, which ultimately makes all final offers. The period of review can be as short as six or eight months, or as long as several years. Applications for support are not accepted,⁸³⁰ and quite often, fellows are astonished to discover they have been chosen.

Outcomes. Since 1981, the Foundation has given 682 fellowships. About twenty to thirty are usually given each year, although there are no limits on the maximum or minimum number of awards. MacArthur fellows have come from virtually all walks of life. Among their number are poets, musicians, scientists, community activists and educators.⁸³¹ Some have used the award to finance travel or research, and some have donated it to their favorite charities; still others have used it to put their children through school. The physicist Jon Schwarz, who received a fellowship in 1987, did pioneering work on the so-called "theory of everything." He put his grant toward the purchase of "a nice house."⁸³² Each is free to choose for him or herself, and need not report back to MacArthur on progress supported by the grant.

Impact. Not surprisingly, this makes the program's effectiveness difficult to judge. There are no control groups and no benchmarks. The fellowship's effect is different on each recipient. And it is nearly impossible to determine the role of a five-year grant in a person's life's work. Doubtless, many fellows would have gone on to great things regardless. Perhaps some who have received the grants would have been better off without them.⁸³³ There is no way to be sure. But there are plenty of stories attesting to the value of the grants. Video artist Bill Viola called his award "a tremendous

boost,” and said, “I’m like a sprinter who’s been tied at the ankles for a decade, and finally they’ve let me go.”⁸³⁴ And Richard Muller, a physics professor and 1982 fellow, believes that “every dollar received from MacArthur, unencumbered by grant requirements, was worth ten times as much as a dollar you would get by writing a proposal.”⁸³⁵ Certainly the accomplishments of the fellows as a group are tremendously impressive. The fellowships are “regarded as one of the country’s most prestigious honors.”⁸³⁶ Though each MacArthur fellowship is a risk, the return on which is impossible to determine, the enormous prestige of the awards, combined with the diverse achievements of hundreds of past recipients, suggests that in the aggregate, they are an investment well-made.

Notes

826. “The MacArthur Fellows Program: Frequently Asked Questions,” available from <http://www.macfound.org>.
827. Ibid.
828. Ibid.
829. The identities of the nominators and the selection committee members are kept secret, as are all inquiries (such as interviews with friends or colleagues) made as part of the process of review. There are several reasons for this. One is to free nominators and selectors from the burden of fielding the many requests for support that would inevitably flood in were their identities known. The other is to ensure candid, forthright evaluation of all nominees. People are far more likely to say what they really think if they are not concerned that it will get back to the person in question.
830. There are two reasons for this as well. One is that the very nature of the program is such that it seeks to identify innovators who work off the beaten path, escaping the notice of most funders. The second reason is more concrete: it was a condition imposed for IRS approval of the program.
831. A complete list of the MacArthur Fellows is available on the Foundation’s website, at <http://www.macfound.org>.
832. Elizabeth Venant, “MacArthur’s Award for Genius Fellowship: The Big Honor Bestowed on Scientists, Humanists, and Artists is Prestigious and Comes with No Strings Attached,” *Los Angeles Times*, 12/25/1989.
833. There have, for instance, been stories of MacArthur fellows facing resentment from their peers and having difficulty convincing other funders to support them after having received such a generous grant. But these are the exceptions, not the rule.
834. Ibid.
835. Liz McMillen, “MacArthur Foundation Is Expected to Review, and Perhaps Revise, Its Fellows Program,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 3/8/1989.
836. Venant, “MacArthur’s Award for Genius Fellowship.”