

MACARTHUR FELLOWS PROGRAM

Frequently Asked Questions

The MacArthur Fellows Program awards unrestricted fellowships to talented individuals who have shown extraordinary originality and dedication in their creative pursuits and a marked capacity for self-direction.

What is the MacArthur Fellowship?

The MacArthur Fellowship is a five-year grant to individuals who show exceptional creativity in their work and the prospect for still more in the future. The fellowship is designed to provide recipients with the flexibility to pursue their creative activities in the absence of specific obligations or reporting requirements. There are no limits on age or area of activity. Individuals cannot apply for this award; they must be nominated.

What are the selection criteria?

The selection decisions focus primarily on exceptional creativity, as demonstrated through a track record of significant achievement, and manifest promise for important future advances. Emphasis is placed on nominees for whom our support would relieve limitations that inhibit them from pursuing their most innovative ideas. Recipients must also be citizens or residents of the United States and must not hold elective office or advanced positions in government as defined by statute.

What do the recipients receive?

The stipend for the MacArthur Fellowship is currently set at \$500,000, paid in quarterly installments over five years.

Why are no strings attached?

The MacArthur Fellowship is designed to provide seed money for intellectual, social, and artistic endeavors. We believe that highly motivated, self-directed, and talented people are in the best position to decide how to allocate their time and resources. By adopting a “no strings attached” policy, we provide the maximum freedom for the recipients to follow their creative vision, whether it is moving forward with their current activities, expanding the scope of their work, or embarking in entirely new directions. There are no restrictions on how the money can be spent, and we impose no reporting obligations.

What fields are generally represented among the recipients?

We consider creative people applying their talents across the widest possible

range of activities, rather than a pre-determined set of fields. Some expand traditional disciplines in unexpected ways, others synthesize ideas from apparently disparate fields, still others undertake endeavors that defy easy classification. Our recipients have included scientists, historians, poets and novelists, artists and composers, and people working in public service, but many work outside of conventional disciplinary categories.

How does the program define “creativity”?

Creativity, like humor, can get lost in definition — not because it cannot be described, but because it can be expressed in limitless variations. In this program, we have found it useful to regard creativity as the expression of human endeavor as individuals actively make or find something new, or connect the seemingly unconnected in significant ways. The Fellows Program places its emphasis on individual creativity because the discoveries, actions, and ideas that shape our society often result from the

path-breaking efforts of individuals. The MacArthur Fellowship is designed to support people, often unrecognized, who are expanding the boundaries of knowledge and human interaction. The visibility that comes with a fellowship can also draw attention to the efforts of others working in similar areas or fields. By highlighting the remarkable breadth and diversity of creativity exhibited by some people, the MacArthur Fellows Program indirectly acknowledges the value and efforts of many others who apply their creative energies to the common benefit.

Is this the same thing as the “genius grant”? Why does the program not use the term “genius” regarding its Fellows?

Journalists and others sometimes use “genius grant” as a shorthand reference for the MacArthur Fellowship. We avoid using the term “genius” to describe MacArthur Fellows because it connotes a singular characteristic of intellectual prowess. The people we seek to support express many other important qualities: ability to transcend traditional boundaries, willingness to take risks, persistence in the face of personal and conceptual obstacles, capacity to synthesize disparate ideas and approaches.

THE NOMINATION PROCESS

How are candidates brought to our attention?

So that we can expand our search for creative people as widely as possible while keeping the number of nominations manageable, we limit our consideration only to those who have been nominated by someone from our constantly changing pool of invited external nominators. Applications or unsolicited nominations are not accepted.

Who are the nominators?

In order to gather fresh perspectives, we invite throughout the year new nominators across the spectrum of human activity; they serve confidentially for terms of several months. Nominators are identified for their expertise and familiarity with exceptionally creative people in their respective areas of focus. We maintain a large and ever-growing list of potential nominators who have been recommended to us from many sources: Foundation board members, selection committee members, past nominators, and various experts across the country. We also identify people who are recognized leaders in their fields and whose work naturally exposes them to a wide variety of interesting and creative people.

How do nominators nominate?

Nominators write a letter to the program director, usually a page or two, describing the person they are nominating and their reasons for doing so. These letters focus on the quality and creativity of the nominees and their work, and on the likely benefits of the award to the recipient. We ask them to suggest the names of others who can provide independent evaluations of their nominees. Nominators may submit any number of nominations they please.

How many nominations are received during the course of a year? How long does it take for a nomination to move through the selection process?

We receive several hundred nominations per year, but not all of them are considered that same year. The shortest possible interval from nomination to award is about nine months, but it normally takes more than a year, sometimes several.

Do some people know that they have been nominated?

Occasionally nominees do find out, but not from us. We specifically ask nominators and evaluators not to contact the nominee or others regarding the nomination. Since individuals can't apply for the fellowship or promote themselves as candidates, and because many more are nominated than will receive a fellowship, it is best for individuals to remain unaware of their nomination.

THE SELECTION PROCESS

What is the Selection Committee?

The Selection Committee consists of approximately 12 people who serve confidentially and are chosen for their breadth of experience, excellent judgment, and curiosity. In identifying members for the committee, we look for depth of interest in at least one major field, broad familiarity with other major fields, and, above all, an enthusiasm for creative ideas and important issues within and outside of their areas of expertise. Committee members bring experiences from many different perspectives — the arts, humanities, social sciences, biological and physical sciences, the professions, business, and public service — but individual members do not speak on behalf of a particular discipline. Because the committee works as a group, the decision on each nomination represents a collective judgment drawn from a wide range of insightful and discerning perspectives. At the end of each review cycle, some members rotate off the committee, and individual selectors generally serve for three years.

What information does the Selection Committee use to make its recommendations?

Prior to review, each nomination is

assigned to one of the program's senior staff. Staff members draw from the nominator's letter, experience with nominations in similar areas, and independent investigation to prepare a file for the Selection Committee. The file is generally composed of letters of evaluation from experts in the nominee's field and samples of the nominee's work that exemplify their creativity, such as articles, books, slides, films, and audio or video recordings. It may also contain reviews of those works and reports about the nominee published by others.

What is the selection process?

Having reviewed the background materials collected, the Selection Committee meets to discuss the nominations against the selection criteria. If the nomination appears promising, selectors will work with staff to develop a strategy for further investigation. Other nominations are deferred pending additional work forthcoming from the nominee. For still other nominations, a consensus develops that further consideration is not warranted. At the final meeting for each review cycle, the Selection Committee identifies the most outstanding nominations, representing a spectrum of creative activity, for recommendation to the Board of Directors for that year's MacArthur Fellowships. Nominations that do not advance within a particular review cycle are retained for possible subsequent reconsideration.

Why all the confidentiality?

All of the participants in the selection process — nominators, evaluators, and selectors — serve anonymously, and we keep their communications confidential. Anonymity protects them from being inundated with unsolicited requests. In addition, our experience shows that people readily provide frank impressions if they have an assurance that their

responses will not be disseminated beyond the program staff and Selection Committee.

THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

What role does the Board of Directors play in the MacArthur Fellows Program?

The Board of Directors established the MacArthur Fellows Program and is ultimately responsible for its overall policies and procedures. Throughout the selection cycle, the Board is kept apprised of Selection Committee progress. At the end of the cycle, the Board receives for its consideration and approval the committee's formal recommendations for MacArthur Fellowships. In addition, the Board of Directors authorizes the invitation of members of the Selection Committee who have been recommended by the program's staff.

THE ANNOUNCEMENT

How are recipients notified of the fellowship, and what are their responses?

Generally, the director of the program calls the new Fellows just prior to the announcement each year, and we confirm the award with a letter. Fellows' responses are just what one might imagine — amazement, gratitude, and sometimes incredulity.

How many people receive the fellowship and when are they announced?

Typically, between 20 and 25 recipients are selected each year, and a public announcement is made in early Fall. Names, photos and biographies of the Fellows are posted on MacArthur's

website at www.macfound.org. Neither the number of recipients nor the timing of the announcement is fixed.

PROGRAM HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

Who were John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur?

John MacArthur was a businessman whose funds created the Foundation; Catherine was his second wife and a member of the boards of many of the firms he owned. John MacArthur was the sole owner of Bankers Life & Casualty Company, a Chicago-based firm he purchased in the 1930s. He had numerous real estate holdings in New York and Florida, and other businesses and real estate all over the country. He created the Foundation in 1970. It began operations upon his death in 1978. He selected Board members to run the Foundation but did not provide guidelines for them to follow.

Why is the Foundation interested in issues relating to individuals and creativity? Whose idea was the Fellows Program?

The late William T. Kirby, a member of the Board from its beginning, brought to the Board's attention at one of its first meetings, in August 1978, an article entitled "Of Venture Research" by Dr. George Burch [American Heart Journal, December 1976]. Dr. Burch argued that money should be set aside to allow truly creative individuals the free time to be alone and think. He wrote, "There 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." He argued, "Recipients should be left alone without the annoyances and distractions imposed

by grant applications, reviewing committees, and pressure to publish.” This article became the focal point of early discussions about the program. The Burch article, and others like it, prompted John MacArthur’s son, J. Roderick MacArthur, who was also a member of the Foundation’s Board, to propose the formation of the MacArthur Fellows Program. He, along with other Board members, met with representatives of other foundations and with scientists, humanists, and others to test this innovative idea. There were meetings held in Chicago, New York, and elsewhere, all devoted to exploring the idea, shaping it, testing it, and seeing how it might develop into a program.

The Board envisioned a program that would: (a) identify creative individuals with extraordinary promise for significant accomplishment; (b) select these individuals from across a broad range of fields and professions; (c) give them enough money to live decently, so that they would not be required to take other work; (d) pay out this money over a long

enough time period to allow them the freedom to set their own agenda; and (e) leave them alone to work on whatever they might choose, without any strings attached to the use of the funds or any reporting requirements.

What other kinds of activities does the Foundation support?

The MacArthur Foundation supports creative people and effective institutions committed to building a more just, verdant, and peaceful world. In addition to selecting the MacArthur Fellows, the Foundation works to defend human rights, advance global conservation and security, make cities better places, and understand how technology is affecting children and society. This work is done through three programs.

The Program on Global Security and Sustainability focuses on international issues, including human rights and international justice, peace and security, conservation and sustainable development, higher education in Nigeria and Russia,

migration and human mobility, and population and reproductive health. MacArthur grantees work in about 60 countries; the Foundation has offices in India, Mexico, Nigeria, and Russia.

The Program on Human and Community Development addresses issues in the United States, including community and economic development; housing, with a focus on the preservation of affordable rental housing; juvenile justice reform; education, with an emerging interest in digital media and learning; and policy research and analysis.

The General Program supports public interest media, including public radio, documentary programming, and work to explore the use of digital technologies to reach and engage the public. Grants are also made to arts and cultural institutions in the Chicago area and for special initiatives.

For More Information

About the MacArthur Fellows Program

Daniel J. Socolow

Director
MacArthur Fellows Program
(312) 726-8000

About the MacArthur Foundation

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For more information or to sign up for our free electronic newsletter, please visit www.macfound.org.

John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
140 South Dearborn St., Suite 1200, Chicago, Illinois 60603-5285
Telephone: (312) 726-8000
www.macfound.org
TDD: (312) 920-6285