

## MACARTHUR FELLOWS PROGRAM: SUMMARY OF 2012–2013 REVIEW

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### INTRODUCTION

In 2012, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation (the Foundation) engaged in a review of its Fellows Program. This paper was written by the Foundation's Director of Evaluation based upon data collected by her as well as two outside consulting firms.

### THE FELLOWS PROGRAM

The Foundation established the MacArthur Fellowship (Fellows Program) as its first targeted initiative. The founding Board of Directors sought to identify a new niche in American philanthropy, and developed a program that focused on rewarding creativity, with the goal of freeing those awarded from the constraints of existing systems of tenure and publication or the demands of the commercial market. Though a few aspects of the Program's processes have evolved over the years, the central aim of the MacArthur Fellows Program has remained:

- To identify creative individuals who have demonstrated past accomplishments that suggest the potential to shape the future in significant, beneficial, and unexpected ways.

From the outset, the founders of the Program saw the potential for broader impact, beyond the recipient Fellows, including:

- Providing inspiration for those who aspire to contribute something new and valuable to the larger society
- Capturing the public's imagination by shining the spotlight on exemplars who collectively demonstrate that creativity can be found everywhere among us, often in unexpected or unrecognized places

In its first 31 years (1981–2012), the Program awarded 873 Fellowships. Throughout the Program's history and evolution it has balanced the goal of impacting individual Fellows with one of simultaneously inspiring a larger, more public audience.

The defining characteristic of the process has always been the delegation of the selection responsibility to experts outside the Foundation. The credibility of the Program rests on demonstrating that awards are based on merit and determined through extensive consultation and review by experts in a range of domains. No staff, Board member, Selection Committee member, or anyone associated with the MacArthur Foundation, any other institution, or any political or social persuasion can orchestrate a Fellowship for an individual.

### OVERVIEW OF THIS REVIEW

Over the years, the Foundation has engaged in several efforts to examine the Program, including a survey of Fellows (1995), qualitative profiling of Fellows (2001), and ongoing internal feedback mechanisms to inform internal processes; however, never before had it engaged in a comprehensive review of the Program, its components, and its outcomes. As the Fellows Program passed its 30th anniversary, the Foundation decided it was time to comprehensively examine the Program.

The purpose of this review was to examine the Program's goals and processes to explore the extent to which there was evidence to suggest the Program was achieving what it was designed to achieve. The Foundation expected to garner insights and feedback that could be used to refine the Program going forward. This review, while more comprehensive than past reviews, was regarded as part of the Foundation's philosophy and approach to reflection and ongoing program improvement.

The Foundation determined that a review with the following three priority approaches would be most useful:

- A survey of Fellows to assess the impact of the Fellows Program, as measured by its outcomes on Fellows (conducted by Icosystem)
- Polling to explore the results of the Fellows Program, in terms of benefits and broader impact for society or the general public (conducted by Harris Interactive)
- Internal interviews with past and current Presidents, Foundation Board members, Fellows Program Selection Committee members, Fellows Program staff, other Foundation staff, and Fellows Program nominators (conducted by the Foundation’s director of evaluation)

## DATA COLLECTION AND RESPONSE RATES

Beginning in January 2012, internal interviews were conducted by the Foundation’s Director of Evaluation. Two consulting firms were engaged to lead the survey of Fellows and the polling data collection components. All data were collected in Spring/Summer of 2012.

Several approaches to evaluating the Program were considered.<sup>1</sup> Through a process of internal discussions with the Board, Foundation leadership, and Fellows Program leadership, we determined that a comprehensive review using mixed methods and input from a range of perspectives would be most helpful.

Below is a brief summary of the response rates to the various data collection methods used in this review.

	Total Sample	Response	Response Rate
<b>Survey of Fellows</b>	704	300	43 percent
<b>Polling: Engaged Public</b>	3,633	2,002 <sup>2</sup>	55 percent
<b>Fellows’ Peers<sup>3</sup> (online)</b>	183	80	44 percent
<b>Fellows’ peers (by phone)</b>	38	25	66 percent
<b>Internal Interviews</b>	81 <sup>4</sup>	62 <sup>5</sup>	77 percent

What follows is a summary of the results from this review.

1 Assessing the impact of the Fellows Program in a quasi-experimental design was not possible in that there is no suitable control or comparison group against which to measure the Fellows. In addition, assessing the impact of the Fellows Program relative to other awards programs is challenging in that there are no “like” programs against which to benchmark the Fellows Program or assess its comparative impact.

2 To qualify to participate in the poll, respondents were required to meet the following criteria: 1. U.S. resident, age 18 or older; 2. follows at least two of the following closely: a. politics/public policy, b. cultural/social issues (for example, poverty or discrimination), c. science/technology, and d. fine arts/literature, 3. voted in the past four years or, if under age 23, intends to vote in the next national election; and, 4. does not work in the media or philanthropy. A total of 3,633 general public respondents entered the survey, out of which 2,002 (55 percent) met the qualifying criteria for inclusion in the survey.

3 Fellows’ peers bring to the assessment a central perspective of those who are active in the domains where Fellows work and engage. Because of their role it is critical to understand their perceptions (and possible misperceptions) of the Fellows Program. The utilization of the professional lives of Fellows as a roadmap from which to identify their peers was undertaken to assure that those included in the review have been at least one degree of separation from a Fellow. Two five-year timeframes were selected (1994-1998 and 2005-2009) from which to draw the sample of respondents. A total of 239 MacArthur Fellowships were awarded during these years. Through the MacArthur website and other information provided by the MacArthur Foundation – as well as through third party sources – the professional path of each of these Fellows was documented and a sample of 702 peers were identified as prospective candidates for the interview process. Small batches of peers were invited to participate until 80 responses were achieved.

4 This sample of 81 individuals included all current Board members, all former Board members, the Foundation’s current and past Presidents, a sample of half of the current and past Selection Committee members, all Fellows Program staff, the Foundation’s Senior Group, a small sample of Foundation staff, and a small sample of nominators.

5 Internal interviews included 6 current and 11 former Board members, 2 former Foundation Presidents and current President, 4 current and 10 former Selection Committee members, 10 Fellows staff members, 13 current Foundation staff members, and 5 nominators.

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## PROGRAM REVIEW AT A GLANCE

Overall, the Fellows Program is regarded as a highly functional and successful program of the Foundation. It is valued by Fellows. It has the *potential* to influence a field or discipline. And it is inspiring to many.

### The Fellows Program...

- Results in more positive impacts on Fellows than negative:
  - ~ 93 percent of Fellows report improved financial stability
  - ~ 88 percent of Fellows report increased opportunity to express creativity
  - ~ 88 percent of Fellows report advancement toward personal goals
  - ~ 85 percent of Fellows report improved sense of independence and motivation
- Is structured in a way that Fellows appreciate (no strings attached or reporting required for what is considered a sufficient monetary award and a public relations opportunity)
- Results in a negative impact for some Fellows (8 percent) in terms of time spent on personal activities or leisure time with their family
- Is familiar to the engaged public (43 percent)
- Generates feelings among the engaged public of:
  - ~ Admiration for the accomplishments of Fellows (24 percent of the engaged public)
  - ~ Inspiration, causing individuals pause, consider their work and contributions to society and to take action in the pursuit of new, more creative activities and ideas
- Is regarded as surrounded by secrecy
- Is based upon criteria that evoke the creative tension of the Program (i.e., is the Program about individual Fellows or broader societal impact?)
- Engages thousands of individuals and relies on a confidential, multistage selection process, making it difficult if not impossible to orchestrate a Fellowship for an individual
- Is lacking opportunities for Fellows to gather, to connect with one another or with the Foundation to develop a broader, stronger sense of community around the Fellowship Program

With this review completed and a new vice president directing the Program, refinements to the Program are being considered.

## FINDINGS

### Results on Fellows

Financial stability, opportunity to express creativity, advancement toward professional and personal goals, and a sense of independence were among the most recognized impacts of the Fellowship on Fellows. Further, Fellows and others credit the Fellowship with increasing the visibility and credibility of the Fellow and his/her work. Few negative impacts were reported and were minimal compared to the positive impacts. While the positive impact of the Fellowship is most tangible immediately after the award, Fellows report that the benefits persist well beyond the five-year term of the Fellowship.

FIGURE 1. FELLOWS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPACT OF THE FELLOWSHIP



The assessment did not attempt to catalogue the post-award accomplishments of individual Fellows or to measure directly the impact of the Fellowship on a specific discipline. Fellows perceive the Fellowship as having the potential to draw attention to a Fellow's area of work, especially in smaller and nascent fields.

### Impact on the Public

Roughly half of the engaged public know of the Fellows Program. Among some of the engaged public, the Program generates feelings of admiration, causing individuals to pause and consider their work and contributions to society and inspiring a nontrivial segment of the population to take action in the pursuit of new, more creative activities and ideas. Specifically,

- 24 percent of the engaged public (representing 31 million people) say that they feel admiration for the accomplishments of the recipients.
- 15 percent of the engaged public (representing 19.4 million people) say that hearing about the accomplishments of a MacArthur Fellow has prompted them to search for more information about the Fellow and his or her accomplishments.

- 10 percent of the engaged public (representing 12.9 million people) say it “inspires” them and that it makes them pause “and think about my work or contribution to society”.
- And finally—reflecting the Program’s impact at the most personal level—10 percent of the engaged public (representing 12.9 million people) say that hearing about a MacArthur Fellow has inspired them to pursue their own personal creative activities and ideas.

Fellows’ peers regard Fellows first and foremost as creative and innovative. They see the Fellowship as distinctive because it prioritizes potential over achievement, compared with other prestigious awards. Simultaneously, they report admiration toward Fellows and their work; however, they are less likely than the engaged public to suggest that the Fellowship has inspired their own pursuit of creative ideas. Figure 2 illustrates the words most associated with Fellows by their peers (words displayed with larger images were more frequently noted).

**FIGURE 2. PEERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF FELLOWS**



### **Program Governance**

One finding of the review is that a notable proportion of internal stakeholders including Board members see the selection process as lacking transparency, in spite of the fact that information about the Program is publicly available on the website and represents a fairly straight-forward process.

The criteria for being awarded a Fellowship is difficult to describe and inclusive of a range of intangible variables. The award decision is the result of a layered review process, including both staff filtering of valid nominations and the Selection Committee deliberating over individual nominees. Among the considerations are: past achievement, future potential, ability to inspire, ability of the award to “enable” the Fellows, and the “uniqueness” of the Fellow’s work.

Each year, Fellows are selected through a multi-stage, confidential process that relies on the expertise and judgment of external participants (nominators, evaluators and selectors). Nominators annually produce about 2,000 nominations for consideration. Fellows staff assess the timeliness and plausibility of each nomination, engage in due diligence research, and solicit external input from evaluators on the most promising. The Selection Committee, consisting of distinguished experts from a range of domains, reviews the dossiers of the strongest nominees and narrows the sample to the 22–25 individuals recommended for the Fellowship. The Foundation Board approves the final bouquet of Fellows. Once nominated, a nominee is never fully removed from consideration.

The process aims for extensive reach through external nominations, includes many checks and balances in its decision making before advancing a nominee (i.e., evaluators, staff due diligence, Selection Committee and Board review), and is based upon criteria that evoke the creative tensions of the Program (i.e., is the Program about individual Fellows or broader societal impact?).

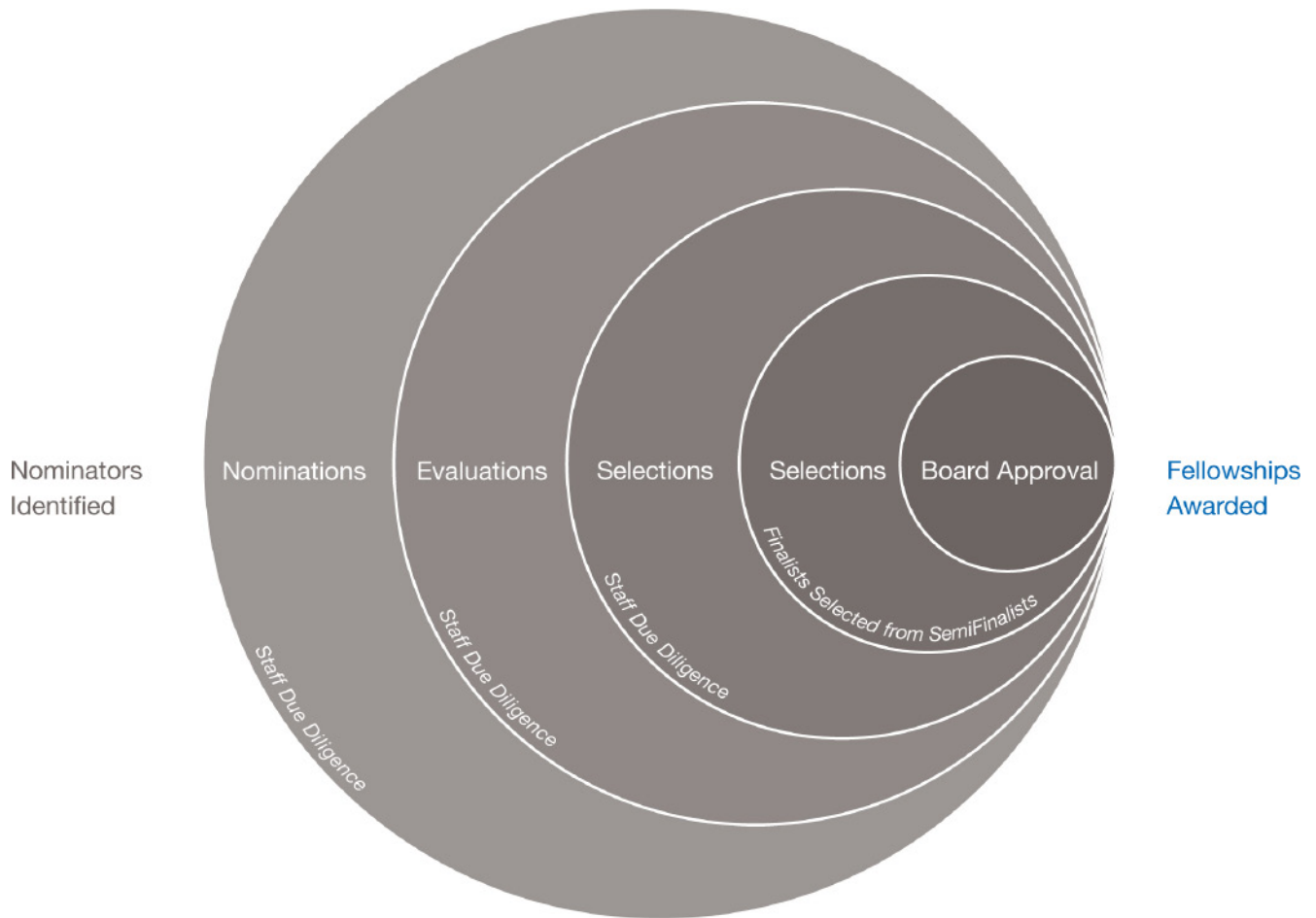
That said, award decisions cannot be defined by, nor reduced to, these criteria. There are myriad intangible variables that come into play in the layered review process. The specific nomination, evaluation, and Selection Committee processes are

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all regarded as vital. Looking for the best persons to play these roles is a critical and labor-intensive task—one that is continuously examined, tested, and improved upon iteratively and incrementally as part of the Program’s operations. Fellows staff frequently innovate in their practices in identifying nominators, refining the process to continuously yield a large number of nominees who are diverse, interesting, and promising. Continuing to successfully award Fellows that are well regarded but often unexpected and emerging is the Program’s challenge.

The evaluation process is effective and serves the Selection Committee well. And the Selection Committee is well conceived, generally well composed and equipped with the necessary information to be highly functional in their roles.

**FIGURE 3. THE FELLOWS’ SELECTION PROCESS**



### **Support for Fellows**

Fellows view the stipend as the element of the Fellowship with the most significant impact and benefit. A majority of Fellows report that the monetary size of the award is sufficient or more than sufficient. Fellows appreciate the no strings attached quality (e.g., no reporting requirements) of the Fellowship as unique to this award and another way in which the Fellowship provides freedom and supports creativity.

Fellows appreciate the public outreach efforts with regard to the Fellowship, but would like additional support and preparation to cope with the increased media attention.

The most notable critique of the Program by Fellows is that it no longer affords Fellows an opportunity to gather and interact (reunions of Fellows were a signature of the Program for a number of years). Coupled with the Foundation’s and some

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Fellows' mutual desire for a relationship, these findings suggest there may be opportunities for the Program to explore ways to connect Fellows with one another and to connect Fellows with the Foundation to develop a broader, stronger sense of community around the Fellowship Program.

## SUMMARY

The Fellows Program is achieving its goals. It is well designed and high functioning, and it yields intended results. While no single finding suggests need for an overhaul of the Fellows program, the review revealed considerations for the future of the Program (e.g., gatherings of Fellows, increased interactions among the Foundation and Fellows, and improved orientation for the Foundation Board regarding the process). This review is designed as input into a process by which the new vice president of the Fellows Program, Fellows staff and leadership of the Foundation can determine how best to use this information going forward.

More information about the MacArthur Fellows Program is available at [www.macfound.org/fellows](http://www.macfound.org/fellows).

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## About The MacArthur Foundation

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.

**For more information or to sign-up for news and event updates, please visit [www.macfound.org](http://www.macfound.org).**

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