

MACARTHUR FELLOWS PROGRAM

Leader of “Genius Grant” Program Spreads the Word to Inspire Creativity

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A few weeks ago, Cecilia Conrad called 21 strangers to surprise them with the news that they were each getting \$625,000, national media attention, and the chance to pursue creative projects that appealed to them.

Ms. Conrad has what she called “the coolest job”: leading the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation’s Fellows Program, an annual set of awards commonly dubbed the “genius grants.”

The round of phone calls capped the first time she had overseen the selection process from start to finish since landing the job last year. She follows Daniel Socolow, who retired after 15 years leading the program.

Now Ms. Conrad, a former economics professor and college administrator, is spearheading the foundation’s efforts to shine a brighter spotlight on the fellows’ work as well as on the importance of creativity in all parts of society.

MacArthur has begun collecting and mining data on the fellows’ backgrounds to gain insight into the origins of creativity and how to cultivate it, which Ms. Conrad calls “something incredibly important for individuals in terms of mental health, in terms of economic well-being, and also for our society writ large.”

WIDE AWARENESS

A survey MacArthur conducted last year found that 43 percent of Americans knew about the “genius” program and 10 percent of people surveyed reported that the program inspired them to pursue their own creative activities.

Ms. Conrad hopes to increase those numbers by talking up the program at more conferences, events, and diverse news outlets. She and her staff members hope to meet with school districts to discuss how teachers can use videos about the fellows’ work.

All those efforts are designed to help meet the foundation’s ultimate goal: to inspire other creative work, and not just by the lucky few named as fellows. “We want to show that creativity happens everywhere, in all different fields and spaces, and in between fields and spaces, representing different geographies, racial, and ethnic groups,” says Ms. Conrad. “We want people to look at it and think, ‘See? That person is kind of like me.’”

Since 1981, when the program began, 918 people have been chosen as fellows. They represent a kaleidoscope of experts: charity founders, humanities scholars, medical researchers, human-rights activists, artists, novelists, and musicians. People can’t apply for the award and the chosen fellows almost never find out who nominated them to receive it.

The award is not intended to reward past achievement but recognizes projects and talents with the potential for the betterment of society, says Ms. Conrad. “We are always looking for something just beyond accomplishment,” she says.

To that end, there is no age requirement: Previous fellows have ranged in age from 19 to 83. However, in a speech earlier this year, Ms. Conrad said the foundation pays particular attention to people under age 40.

While the foundation plans to better publicize its fellows, it will continue to limit disclosure of how the winners are selected.

General information is posted on MacArthur’s website about how the fellows are chosen, but the process remains shrouded in secrecy, with almost everyone involved sworn to silence. More transparency would hamper the program, says Ms. Conrad.

“People want to know who is involved; we are not going to share that,” she says. “It’s very important to our process to protect the anonymity of participants. It encourages frankness and it encourages people to take some risks when they suggest candidates.”

Even watchdogs who usually urge grant makers to be more open don’t argue with that philosophy.

“I understand the need for anonymity in this process given the fact it is not a competitive grants process,” says Aaron

Dorfman, head of the Committee of Responsive Philanthropy. "If the foundation believes it needs this amount of anonymity to protect the program's integrity, I side with them on that."

JUDGING THE GENIUSES

Ms. Conrad came to her current job knowing firsthand about how the selection process works.

Twelve years ago she herself got a surprise phone call from Mr. Socolow, when she was on the economics faculty at Pomona College.

Alas, the call was not offering congratulations about becoming a fellow. Instead, Mr. Socolow invited her to join the program's selection committee, a dozen people from a range of disciplines who give MacArthur's board final recommendations for each year's crop of 20 to 25 fellows.

For the next five years, Ms. Conrad received a large box every few months full of reams of information—videotapes of performances, newspaper articles, CDs, research papers, letters of evaluation, and more—about the work of potential nominees.

The committee later met to discuss each person and how the award might further their work, giving them freedom and flexibility as well as financial backing and name recognition to pursue their projects.

The committee is aided by a rotating network of several hundred volunteers—experts in their fields—who serve for several months as nominators.

They can nominate any number of potential fellows by submitting a one- or two-page letter for each, describing their work's merits.

Eventually the selection committee whittles down the hundreds of annual nominations to the small cohort of fellows. If a nominee doesn't get selected one year, he or she is still eligible indefinitely.

Getting picked for the selection committee is nearly as mysterious a process as getting picked for a fellowship. Ms. Conrad says she once asked why she was chosen, and she received a broad answer about how the foundation relies on a large network of informants who have their eyes peeled for potential nominees, nominators, and committee members.

Now that she's in charge of selecting committee members, she says, she looks for "people who we believe in some ways have a good eye, and they have some breadth of experience or interest they bring to the table. More important, they themselves are creative in some way—creative problem-solvers—who have a strong sense of what is important to society."

PROGRAM CHANGES

In addition to Ms. Conrad's push to raise the program's profile, other small changes are percolating.

A survey of fellows conducted last year found that many would like more help from the foundation in adjusting to their notoriety after the award is announced.

The foundation used to place a single phone call to recipients—who were often disbelieving they had been selected—before the press announcement. Now the foundation follows up with a second call to answer questions that might arise after the initial shock wears off.

In addition, fellows reported they would welcome more opportunities to interact with one another. A chance meeting between two previous fellows resulted in their collaboration on a dance piece about the human genome.

Next month, for the first time in several years, the foundation will host a large gathering of fellows. MacArthur is also exploring connections among fellows through social media.

But the program's goal, she says, will continue to be encouraging a group of people to stay focused on what is possible, with no strings attached.

"We are making an investment in a creative person," says Ms. Conrad. "We don't have a specific notion of what the outcomes are going to be."