An Alternative Model of Philanthropy
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Abstract:

The past twenty years have seen a new approach to grantmaking, which entails more targeted foci for funding, greater precision in the grantees’ goals and measurements of accomplishments, and more overt and unapologetic policy advocacy. This “strategic grantmaking” differs from the approach of the traditional or “learned” foundations, which focus more on institutional-level, faculty-led change.

Enter the Teagle Foundation, a small foundation that has taken a hybrid approach to grantmaking, combining strategic philanthropy with a learned or knowledge-based approach. As such, it offers an alternative model. In the spirit of a learned foundation, Teagle works collegially with its grantees as they try different approaches to advancing student learning in the arts and sciences, while insisting that they set clear goals and measure progress and anticipating that not every approach will be equally successful. These grants put the spotlight on student learning, help develop a cadre of faculty leaders, and help change policies and practices on campuses.

Of course the mission and grantmaking of any single foundation is determined by an unscientific mixture of its history, changing external realities, and leaders. The Teagle Foundation is no exception. But changing the nature of the campus conversation about curriculum and faculty roles is essential for lasting change.

The past twenty years have seen remarkable growth in the number of philanthropic foundations, and with them a new approach to grantmaking. This approach, embraced especially by the mega-foundations, is “strategic grantmaking,” which Stanley Katz likens to venture capital investing. Strategic grantmaking entails more targeted foci for funding, greater precision in the grantees’ goals and measurements of accomplishments, and more overt and unapologetic policy advocacy.

Some worry about this new strategy. Robert Zemsky, in Checklist for Change (2013), remarks that they “tell us what we need to accomplish, but cannot tell us how, having never themselves walked the path they now want us to travel.” Richard Ekman, president of the
Council of Independent Colleges and a former foundation executive, also sees a “fine line between being focused and overly prescriptive” (Gose, 2013).

Ekman laments these foundations’ lack of trust in institutions to come up with good solutions to the problems higher education faces. Katz, while acknowledging that working with scholars or institutions interested in a particular approach or issue can frustrate foundation officials, maintains that the pendulum has swung too far from the traditional approach to philanthropy.

Katz distinguishes between the newer “strategic foundations” such as The Bill and Melinda Gates or Lumina Foundations and the classic 20th century ones such as Mellon, Rockefeller, Carnegie, or the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) in its early years. These “learned foundations,” according to Katz, displayed “more reflective, more patient, and generally less aggressive behaviors than the new type of foundation.” He sees them as having “a longer-term agenda and sightline” and a willingness to support independent research, which they considered an important means of understanding the large societal problems they sought to address.

The learned-foundation model was preeminent in the 1950’s and 60’s, although a few, such as the Mellon and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundations, have retained their historic approach. They have been a vital source of support for innovation and experimentation and have sometimes ignited important reform movements—like FIPSE did, for instance, in advancing the writing-across-the-curriculum movement. Katz notes that the mega-foundations, with their focus on access, completion, and transition to work, “are not much interested in the content of undergraduate education—except insofar as curriculum relates to the paradigm of ‘school to work.’”

Not all observers are nostalgic for the traditional model of philanthropy. Gose (2013) notes that the mega-foundations are addressing crucial national issues such as degree completion, college costs, and student indebtedness and are focusing on broad solutions and policy changes rather than fostering innovation and quality at the institutional level.

And Arthur Levine, president of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, observes that many of the programs from the learned-foundation era did not see lasting effects:

Within a very short period of time, those exciting and shiny programs had all disappeared. It would have been wiser for FIPSE and Carnegie to work with state legislators or systems of higher education to change all the rules to make those things possible. That's what Gates is doing today (Gose, 2013).

Jamie Merisotis, president of the Lumina Foundation, unabashedly states, “The fact is, foundations can be part of a leadership culture, and not simply support the ideas of others. We’re an investor in good ideas, but we can also help create those good ideas” (Marcus, 2013).

But there is a third way. The Teagle Foundation—a small philanthropic organization with about $140 million in assets, $5-7 million in annual grants, and a program staff that has never
exceeded three people (including the president)—has taken a hybrid approach, combining strategic philanthropy with a learned or knowledge-based approach to grantmaking. As such, it serves as an alternative model for foundations.

A FOCUS ON LEARNING

Although Walter C. Teagle established his foundation in 1944, this article focuses on its work since 2004. That was when it began a period of intensified focus on improving student learning and made a concerted effort to shape the national conversation on this issue—no small task for a foundation of Teagle’s size.

When W. Robert “Bob” Connor was named president of the Foundation in 2003, he began with a one-year moratorium on grantmaking. Although this pause was necessary for financial reasons, it also allowed him time to listen to campus voices. He conducted the “great road trip,” as he called it, to visit institutions of all types. He discovered that, in spite of the “high-minded rhetoric” about learning, the responses to the question “how do we know what we are achieving” were often “vague and irrelevant” and the evidence sparse.

In late 2004 he and the vice president Donna Heiland convened an invitational “listening session,” which included prominent figures in the assessment movement, as well as presidents, deans, and faculty members from a wide variety of institutions. Their strongly positive response to the proposal that the Foundation should take an active role in this arena began a new direction in Teagle’s grantmaking.

Although assessment was a new area for the Foundation, it was consistent with its founding mission to promote liberal education and with the personal experiences of its founder: Walter Teagle had “caught fire” as an undergraduate at Cornell. Assessment was a way to at least “stimulate a frank, pragmatic, and badly needed discussion of the goals of liberal education,” in Connor’s words, or at most to improve student learning in the arts and sciences. And, as Walter Teagle III, grandson of the founder and current board chair, put it, “student learning is the end game for education.”

By the end of 2005, the Foundation had made grants to several higher education associations that were already active in assessment to work with groups of institutions. It also invited some liberal arts colleges to take the lead in forming ad hoc collaboratives with other institutions on assessment topics.

Connor observed the power of inter-institutional collaboration, a hallmark of Teagle grantmaking, in creating shifts in faculty thinking. Although the more than 150 projects funded were quite diverse—ranging from “Creativity and Critical Thinking: Assessing the Foundations of a Liberal Arts Education” to “Using CLA to Measure Value Added at Liberal Arts Colleges”—they all focused on student engagement and learning in liberal education, and all were faculty-led.

Connor’s two successors—Richard Morrill (2010-2013) and Judith Shapiro (appointed in 2013)—have maintained the focus on, to use Judith Shapiro’s words, “how students learn best
and most.” By 2010, assessment had matured on campuses, although the work was far from done. It was a good time to hone in on learning, while keeping assessment as an important aspect of any Teagle grant.

Its philanthropy also began to include board and presidential leadership for student learning, as well as education for civic and moral responsibility, through projects such as “Improving Board Oversight of Student Learning” and “Creating Cohesive Paths to Civic Engagement.” As Morrill noted:

Assessment has not been seen as an end in itself, but as one potentially powerful means to lift up the larger questions of the purpose and the performance of undergraduate liberal education. The goal has been to ignite a new conversation about the aims and achievements of liberal education, to refocus the ways we think about it, and to press the use of new tools and methods to make it better. The underlying purpose has been to help to embed processes of systematic improvement of student learning into the work of the faculty and of the colleges and universities in which they serve.

Judith Shapiro took the Foundation’s helm July 1, 2013. She will continue to focus on pedagogical and curricular innovation and dissemination. Shapiro is unequivocal about the importance of faculty-led innovation. “Anything that involves student learning involves faculty development,” she observes. She rejects “student centered” versus “faculty centered” as a false dichotomy. Student learning improves when faculty culture and student learning interests are aligned, she maintains, and that is the work of the Foundation.

A “Strategic and “Knowledge-Based” Foundation

As this historical overview suggests, Teagle represents a hybrid of the learned foundation and the strategic foundation. In the spirit of a learned foundation, Teagle works collegially with its grantees, who are trying many different approaches to advancing student learning in the arts and sciences, while insisting that they set clear goals and measure progress and anticipating that not every approach will be equally successful.

As Teagle board member Richard Light put it,

One of the things well worth doing is to encourage a culture of experimentation on any campus…even if it does not succeed. For example, if five different professors try a new way of teaching history to sophomores, would you expect that all five would be better than the traditional way?”

But Teagle also acts like a strategic foundation. Since 2005, it has maintained its focus on student learning in the arts and sciences. It has worked primarily with liberal arts colleges, whose strong focus on undergraduate and liberal education make them good laboratories for innovations that can be adapted by other types of institutions.

Their small size also tends to create a greater sense of community among faculty and between faculty and administrators, which can facilitate collaborative ventures within and among
institutions. The Foundation generally requires institutional grantees to work within existing consortia or to form collaboratives. And with an eye toward influencing the national conversation on teaching and learning, the Foundation has encouraged more widespread adoption of the knowledge generated through its grants by disseminating the results, as we describe below.

The Foundation is also strategic in its choice of grantees. Although the doors are open to visitors and inquiries (there are literally no doors to the Foundation’s offices), proposals are by invitation, based on the board and staff’s knowledge of promising initiatives around the country.

THE FOUNDATION’S APPROACH TO GRANTMAKING

The Foundation sees its role as seeding innovation and catalyzing new discussions and approaches. At the same time, it aspires to have a disproportionate effect on teaching and learning nationwide through the knowledge gained in its grantmaking. As Morrill has said, “Grants are made not only with the purpose of aiding grantees to fulfill their purposes, but of gaining new knowledge and fostering practices that can be applied in other contexts and that can inform and influence higher education.”

The following principles guide its approach:

Knowledge as a basis for action

In his 2008 evaluation of the Foundation, Peter Ewell cited “know-how” as one of two key concepts undergirding Teagle’s theory of change. He defines “know-how” as “applied knowledge about what works to foster higher levels of undergraduate learning and how to practically implement these practices across a range of collegiate settings and student populations.”

Scholarly work on what does and does not work to foster learning requires attention to results. Beginning discussions about improving student learning with the “a” word (i.e., assessment) does not always go over well. But if efforts to bring learning to the highest level appeal to faculty members’ natural interest in inquiry, then a lot more progress can be made. As a grantee from St. Olaf noted, “Most faculty not only want to do their work well, but they want to find ways to do it even better.”

For knowledge to be acted on in higher education, faculty need to own it. As the final report from the collaborative project of St. Olaf, Carleton, and Macalester observed,

Assessment is like champagne. It’s far more likely to be enjoyed when it bubbles up from faculty-led units of the institution (for example, departments, elected committees, and faculty development centers) than when its consumption is required by administrators, as if they were enjoining faculty to drink their milk.

Among the ways they suggested making the topic of assessment more salient to faculty were to show them data about things they really care about (all faculty don’t need to engage with all the available data all the time), to show them whether or not an innovation improved student
learning and success, and to synthesize different types of data from different sources to enhance their credibility.

**Collaboration**

Collaboration is the second key concept of the Teagle’s change strategy—the principal way to experiment in a range of settings, foster creativity, distill know-how, and disseminate knowledge. Consequently, most Teagle grants are awarded to groups of individuals or institutions in order to develop communities of practice and networks both within and across institutions.

On campus, efforts to improve student learning can break down academic silos and help form strong collegial relationships. As one Teagle grantee observed, student learning is a bridge-builder. Conversations about assessment, particularly when focused on outcomes that cross disciplinary boundaries, can bring together faculty from many different divisions and departments, faculty at different stages of their careers, and faculty and staff in different sectors of the institution.

And because collaborations require a great degree of trust to function well, the relationships formed through this work are often of the strongest kind.

In their 2007 report on the Foundation’s collaborative work, Kinzie et. al observed,

> Conceptually, a major benefit of participating in a collaborative is the collective support provided for campus leaders in planning, implementing, and sustaining activities. That is, the collaboratives will likely provide campus leaders with a peer group to find support, to dialogue about assessment results, and to consider implications from findings.

The grantees agree. As one said, “Another set of eyes is always valuable, particularly [when] these eyes are attached to critical and compassionate colleagues.” And one dean explained, “If I can say ‘other schools in our consortium are trying this,’ it always helps me at my institution.” The evaluators named this the “competitive camaraderie” effect.

Ewell’s evaluation revealed that “the size of the collaborative appeared to be optimized at three to six institutions or partners.” A range of partners provides a diversity of experience, but if too many are involved, “the overhead of running a multilateral initiative gets in the way of mutual learning.” Creating a true collaborative also takes time—often more than colleges anticipate.

Another form of collaboration, one that enables Teagle to leverage its modest resource base, is co-funding projects with other foundations. In 2008, Teagle and the Spencer Foundation together funded a project, based at Duke University, to systematically strengthen undergraduate education at thirteen major research universities.

In 2012, Teagle partnered with the Alfred B. Sloan Foundation in funding the Council of Graduate School’s work on embedding assessment into future-faculty preparation programs.
Additionally, Teagle was one of several foundation partners that supported Arum and Roksa’s book *Academically Adrift*, which provoked widespread discussion of college-student learning (and the lack thereof) within academe and beyond.

**Communication and dissemination**

Atul Gawande, in a 2013 article in the *New Yorker*, observed that a lot of important innovations spread very slowly, while others are adopted quickly. It does not generally work to ask or even tell people to do new things or to do things differently. Quoting Everett Rogers, Gawande asserted that “the diffusion of change is essentially a social process through which people talking to people spread an innovation.”

The Teagle Foundation shares this view, so providing faculty with opportunities to talk with each other is a major feature of its grantmaking. Sharing knowledge within and across campuses increases the likelihood of widening the circle of interested faculty, addressing existing norms and barriers to change, and encouraging the adoption of new thinking and practices.

Andrew Delbanco refers to the Foundation’s role as an “amplifier.” Some institutions have a hard time telling their stories, and others will only listen to a small group of peers. By disseminating information nationally, the Foundation can spread knowledge in ways that institutions often cannot.

Sometimes the Foundation promotes a specific innovation. “Reacting to the Past” is an innovative pedagogy created by Mark Carnes of Barnard College that engages students in intensive research and role-play in an historical context. In 2013, the Foundation made a grant to Barnard to formalize a network of participating colleges from around the country that have adopted this approach. Teagle support will enable more systematic collaborations among the faculty using this pedagogy and expand the number of institutions adopting it.

The Foundation’s dissemination work goes beyond catalyzing dialogues and innovation within and among grantee campuses. Foundation “convenings” are a key aspect of its work. At these face-to-face gatherings, the Foundation seeks ideas from current and prospective grantees, engages with grantees as they work on their projects, and brings others into the conversation who both contribute to the dialogue and learn from the grantees’ experiences. These convenings, which for Teagle staff are “listening,” enable them to hear from experts and take the pulse of the higher education community while facilitating exchanges among the participants.

Teagle also harnesses technology to spread ideas. Its Facebook page promotes communication between the Foundation and grantees and within the larger Teagle community. Although websites are a more passive form of communication than social media, they are still a useful source of information about the Foundation and the work of the grantees. The Teagle site (www.teagle.org) is updated promptly when new material becomes available, and it has 2,000 unique visitors, on average, each month.

**Assessing the Foundation’s Impact**
It should come as no surprise that it is as difficult and complex for a foundation to assess its impact as it is for institutions to assess student learning. For both, methodological issues abound. One is the source of information.

The Foundation relies on regular reports from grantees and conversations with them as a major source of information. Although a number of grantees are refreshingly honest, it is natural for them to put their best foot forward in their reports. No one wants to appear not to have made good use of the funding. External evaluators provide more objective information, and Teagle currently has several evaluations underway for each of its initiatives.

Another difficulty in assessing impact is the fact that a foundation grant is often part of a series of interrelated efforts on a campus, and isolating the effect of one particular initiative is not easy. And as is the case with student learning, the impact of a grant may not be immediate; it may become apparent many years after the grant has ended.

Finally, although the wisdom of assessment tells us that the clearer the goals, the easier the assessment, not all goals have handy direct measurements. In evaluating the Foundation’s success in influencing the national conversation, for instance, Peter Ewell relied on a poll of liberal arts college presidents about their knowledge and impressions of the Foundation to ascertain the Foundation’s visibility (he found that its work was well recognized by higher education opinion leaders and by the leaders of liberal arts colleges).

These caveats notwithstanding, the impacts of the grants, taken as a whole, are visible. They put the spotlight on student learning.

Although it may seem obvious, a first step in any institutional change is focusing attention on the topic. Attention is in very short supply, given the urgent demands on both faculty and administrators. The immediate always trumps the long term, and improving student learning is certainly a long-term issue, requiring many cycles of data gathering, interpretation, and application of the results.

Foundation funding helps draw attention to an issue and signals its importance. Ewell noted in his 2008 evaluation that the Foundation had “substantially increased the salience of the topic [of assessment] among a set of institutions that had not previously paid attention to it.” Although assessment and improving student learning have become much more prominent topics of discussion in and among liberal arts colleges since that report was written, there is still a lot of work to be done, requiring institutions to devote special funding and attention to these issues.

The spotlight is enlarged when grantees share their work on student learning at national gatherings and through publications. In the past two years alone, over twenty-five presentations at the Association of American Colleges & Universities have been focused on Teagle-funded projects. Additionally, Teagle grantees and staff are encouraged to write articles, news stories, and opinion pieces.

They help develop a cadre of faculty leaders
Andrew Delbanco observed that “the Foundation is a mechanism for identifying and
supporting faculty who are committed to improving teaching and learning and who often find themselves isolated on campus.” Teagle grants are led by teams of faculty from collaborating institutions who usually have a well-established interest in improving student learning.

The legitimacy bestowed by external funding gives them the space (and sometimes the compensated time) to involve themselves in an issue where faculty leadership is crucial and sometimes in short supply. Some grantees have said that the Foundation provides a “safe space” and even serves as a “demilitarized zone” for discussion of issues that on some campuses have become areas of contention about how faculty should use their time and talents.

The Teagle Assessment Scholars was an important initiative to enhance faculty leadership capacity among liberal arts colleges. This cadre of faculty members and administrators, who were experienced in assessment, provided consulting services to other campuses by engaging in peer-to-peer dialogues. Similarly, the Teagle-funded National Forum of the Future of Liberal Education prepared, through a series of intensive seminars, a core national group of emerging academic leaders on key issues facing liberal education.

Hundreds of faculty members have been involved in Teagle-funded projects since 2004. The Foundation has consistently framed improving student learning not simply as a question of accountability but as form of faculty scholarship and an important part of institutional learning, an approach that seems less common in the foundation landscape today.

They help change policies and practices
The answer to the “so-what” question lies in what institutions actually do as a result of what they have learned. In a collaborative involving Goucher, McDaniel, Ursinus, Washington, and Washington & Jefferson Colleges about enhancing student engagement with diversity, for example, the institutions used the lessons they learned to make changes to general education. At Ursinus College, faculty revised guidelines for the US diversity and global diversity core requirements, while Goucher College implemented a “Diverse Perspectives” general education requirement.

As a result of the collaborative efforts of Allegheny College, Colorado College, Connecticut College, and Franklin Pierce University to use assessment data to improve learning, Allegheny faculty members worked with the Board of Trustees on developing key performance indicators for student learning. Colorado College faculty succeeded in instituting assessment plans for both the first-year experience seminars and senior capstone projects.

Changes in policies tend to be more visible than changes in practices. But as one grantee said, “Just because the impacts are subtle does not mean that we’re not making real progress.” Culture change can be slow and iterative, yet still very real.

For instance, the Teagle Assessment Scholars noted in their 2012 report on Kalamazoo College’s work that the culture there had clearly “tipped” toward an environment with a “sustained, palpable, and systemic presence of evidential (and consequential) conversations about learning.” Faculty and staff there regularly ask and answer the “How do we know?” question.
A NEW MODEL

We began by observing that foundations come in all shapes and sizes. The mission and grant-making philosophy of any single foundation is by determined by an unscientific mixture of its history, changing external realities, and leaders. The Teagle Foundation is no exception. But its commitment to improving learning has been a constant as well as its focus on faculty-led change.

Unlike the mega-foundations, Teagle operates from the belief that faculty can and must lead academic change. The challenges of increasing completion rates, improving learning, and containing costs must be addressed through the curriculum and by shining the spotlight on how to facilitate learning.

As Zemsky points out, deep and enduring change will require strong faculty leadership, rethinking the tasks, responsibilities and rewards of individual faculty members as well as a strong sense of collective ownership of the curriculum. Unlike the previous model of the learned foundations, the Teagle Foundation emphasizes the creation of community among faculty members within an institution and across institutions.

To those who see faculty members as the obstacle to change rather than the key to it, the approach of the Teagle Foundation may seem quaint or naïve. It does not seek to turn liberal arts colleges into distance-learning institutions or triple their class size so that they may become more efficient. Changing the nature of the campus conversation about curriculum and faculty roles is the essential foundation for lasting change. This is an ambitious goal for a small foundation. But although the Teagle Foundation recognizes its limits, it persists in thinking big.

Resources


