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Building to Last: Field building as philanthropic strategy



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Blueprint Research + Design, Inc. helps grantmaking foundations, individual and family donors, and philanthropic networks achieve their missions. We offer services in strategy and program design, organizational learning, and evaluation, and we think and write about the industry of philanthropy. Since 2004, Blueprint has provided the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation with research, advice, and documentation of the Digital Media and Learning Initiative. That work includes the writing and distribution of five reports on field building, written for the public, as a means of informing the field of philanthropy and as a way to strengthen the emerging field of Digital Media and Learning.



The MacArthur Foundation's Digital Media and Learning Initiative aims to determine how digital media are changing the way young people learn, play, socialize, and participate in civic life. Answers are critical to education and other social institutions that must meet the needs of this and future generations. Through November 2009, the foundation has awarded 106 grants for a total of \$61.5 million to organizations and individuals in support of digital media and learning. The grants have supported research, development of innovative technologies, and new learning environments for youth — including a school based on game design principles.

Building to Last: Field building as philanthropic strategy

“Field building” is an increasingly popular practice in philanthropic work because it offers an opportunity to go beyond funding individual organizations or projects and to create a coherent strategy for change on a much larger scale. However, there is little consensus about what we as a profession mean when we speak of field building. Our goal in this paper is to inform and provoke a broad conversation about field building in philanthropy. Our hope is that this becomes a useful starting place for foundations, corporations, and other grantmakers who seek results beyond the impact of individual grants. What does it mean to move beyond individual grants or even a portfolio of grantees? This is a question that grantmakers are grappling with in many arenas. We hope this paper accurately captures the challenges, identifies the possibilities, alerts us to potential pitfalls, and nudges the conversation and the practice forward.

Philanthropy and field building share a long history. As far back as 1906, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching helped standardize and reform the field of medical education through its funding of the Flexner Report.¹ In 1954, the Ford Foundation set out to reform business education in the United States through its philanthropic donations to educational institutions.² In 1974, the Commonwealth Fund played a pivotal role in pioneering hospice care.³

Recent field-building initiatives include the Skoll Foundation’s support for social entrepreneurship,⁴ the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation’s support for open educational resources,⁵ and the Rockefeller Foundation’s support for impact investing.⁶

Despite this long history, there is no simple answer to the question: how do you build a field? The

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areas in which foundations embark on this work are as diverse as the program areas they fund. Sometimes the efforts at field building are deliberate, strategic, and carefully planned within the foundation before any external partners are engaged. Other times, the recognition that a broader approach is necessary emerges naturally from a foundation’s long involvement with key organizations doing complementary work on a specific issue. There is no set definition of “field” in the lexicon of philanthropy, nor is there a singular set of strategies for building one, and we are only now starting to see the beginnings of a shared literature on how, why, to what ends, and with what success or failure foundations and their partners have worked in this endeavor we call field building.

Instead of offering a recipe for success, we offer a number of design principles for philanthropic

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field building, drawn from our direct experience in working with the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and its five years of funding digital media and

learning as well as from interviews, research reviews, and literature scans of other foundations' field-building efforts.

Why Build a field?

Foundations undertake field building for many reasons, some of them stated and others implied. Not every activity that a foundation undertakes — no matter how far-reaching — may be considered field building. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's global agricultural development work, for example, builds upon decades of international aid work. The foundation's role here is to pick up where government spending ends, not necessarily to create something new.

This notion of newness, or working to advance new concepts or activities in a previously unheralded way, is an important part of field building. Among the other attributes of field building that we identified are:

- Seeking attention and legitimacy for a certain issue
- Increasing the exchange of theory and scholarship between existing domains
- Reducing inefficiencies and duplicate activities
- Providing incentives for collaboration that may not have happened organically

- Aspiring to a leadership role in a pioneering endeavor

Perhaps the most significant characteristic of field building is the focus on multiple institutions and strategies to address an issue. The work ranges beyond individual grants or institutional partners. It involves considerations of scale, exit strategies, and even sustainability, since field-building efforts frequently create mechanisms for future work.

In this paper, we will demonstrate how some foundations and their partners have managed the challenges of integrating divergent sectors and fostering collaboration in order to move a field forward.

What is a Field?

Before identifying design principles for building effective and sustainable fields, we must consider the question: what exactly is a field? Both fields and field building are abstract concepts without precise definitions. In our research we encountered several definitions of "fields" in the context of philanthropy.

In the 1960s, a "field" generally referred to the building of an academic base and establishment of institutional scholarship on a given issue. Indeed, within the academy, the definition of fields, subfields, domains, and disciplines is often quite specific and rests on the presence or pursuit of distinct methodologies. For example, cognitive science, a multidisciplinary academic field, evolved from the intersection of research in artificial intelligence, psychology, and linguistics. By the 1970s it had drawn in diverse disciplines

and emerged as its own scholarly field. Exploration of the mind via experiments in psychology, brain imaging, language acquisition, and computer modeling demonstrate the breadth of the field, and the founding of both a dedicated journal and the Society for Cognitive Science has solidified its presence within the academy.⁷

These university-based definitions are not readily transferable to the broader idea of fields as we know them today. The involvement of nonprofit institutions, commercial interests, and even the beneficiaries themselves has stretched both the locus and definition of fields. They may be university-based or multi-institutional and they often encompass community or beneficiary action, policy statements, and even product development.

Foundations look at fields through different lenses and with different priorities. Sometimes a foundation will use field building to focus on expanding an innovation or practice, as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation did when it created its Small Schools Initiative. By contrast, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation uses field building to draw attention to a particular issue, associating the brand of the foundation with the field of entrepreneurship. Other grantmakers try to bridge the divide between theory and practice, as has been done in both conflict resolution and youth development. To determine the best approach for your organization, you may want to ask yourself and your partners these questions: How does your current grantmaking reflect the practice of field building? What do you want to accomplish by building a field? Whose philosophy is aligned with your own?

Although the complexity and evolving nature of the concept of “field” makes definition difficult, it is helpful to have some general guidelines. One useful definition comes from the Bridgespan Group, a nonprofit consulting firm, which defines a field as “a community of organizations and individuals working towards a common goal and using a set of common approaches to achieving that goal.”⁸ However, a field is defined not only by its community of organizations but also by the area of practice and a body of evidence. Thus, we define a field as “a multidisciplinary area of specialized practice that engages diverse stakeholders.”⁹

This draws from the academic experience, in which a field relies on distinctive research methods and a concrete evidence base, and adds the practitioner component, bringing in the world outside of the academy.¹⁰ While field-building efforts can originate from the for-profit, nonprofit, and public sectors,¹¹ this paper focuses on the opportunity that field building presents as a philanthropic strategy.

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SIX DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR BUILDING A FIELD

Existing literature and experience with philanthropic investments in building fields as wide-ranging as conflict resolution, homeschooling, impact investing, and digital media and learning has led us to posit six key design principles that shape successful efforts. These principles may be

EXAMPLES OF PHILANTHROPIC FIELD BUILDING

In our research, we came across many examples of field building in the context of philanthropy. A full list of those we encountered can be found in the Appendix. This paper will draw examples primarily from the following six efforts to illustrate the principles we discuss.

- **Conflict Resolution** — The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation ran its pioneering Conflict Resolution Program from 1984 to 2004, helping to develop tools and processes to manage and mitigate disputes in a vast array of conflict settings.
- **Impact Investing** — The Rockefeller Foundation is spearheading foundation involvement in this relatively nascent practice of making investments that generate both social/environmental and financial returns.
- **Clean Technology** — Google.org launched its RE<C (Renewable Energy cheaper than Coal) and RechargeIT (commercialization of plug-in vehicles) programs in 2007 as a two-pronged strategy for combating greenhouse gas emissions.
- **Service-Learning** — The W. K. Kellogg Foundation implemented a grants and investment strategy over a ten-year period from 1990 to 2000 to help standardize the practice of service-learning, nurture a generation of leaders, and develop tools and curricula.
- **Health Entrepreneurship** — The Michael J. Fox Foundation, funding scientific research and activism aimed at Parkinson's Disease since 1998, along with the Myelin Repair Foundation, is defining a new strategy for combating disease and functioning more like a business than a traditional foundation. Both efforts are part of the Milken Institute's FasterCures initiatives.
- **Digital Media and Learning** — Officially launched in 2006, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's Digital Media and Learning Initiative has sought to understand and act on the ways digital technologies are changing the way young people learn, play, socialize, and participate in civic life.

considered building blocks in the process of field building. These principles are based on the literature from several philanthropic efforts but draw most heavily from the Kellogg Foundation's reflections on the field of service-learning. They are:

- Recognize the Philanthropic Opportunity
- Establish a Research Base
- Prioritize Sets of Actors and Networks
- Develop and Adopt the Right Standards
- Build a Network Infrastructure
- Share Knowledge

This design process represents a cycle of activity in which the principles may be acted on concurrently as well as consecutively. As important as each principle is on its own, the interplay among and between them will also prove important during each stage of building a field, from the messy beginning of finding key players to the ongoing process of defining terminology to the roles and types of standards to be considered. We should be clear not to suggest that these six principles are all it takes to develop a field; this is not a simple checklist. However, the principles provide a framework for action and have significant roles in the design and development of a successful field.

Recognize the Philanthropic Opportunity

Philanthropic field building begins with making sense of the opportunities that exist, assessing the potential for a foundation's role, and taking advantage of those circumstances. All of these are vital to a philanthropic field's ultimate success and impact.

Although a foundation is rarely present at the start of a field, it may be uniquely positioned to provide a mezzanine-level view across many far-flung independent efforts; from this vantage, it can see patterns and possibilities emerge and support the development and advancement of common goals. One role foundations may play in field building is to bring together disparate players and help them to achieve legitimacy. To do this, foundation staff can take advantage of the sociopolitical environment to build an emergent field's relevance to current needs

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and strengthen its ability to grow. For example, public debate over video games as distractions or educational tools is key context for the emergent field of Digital Media and Learning.

A foundation must determine the best approach to field building, given the strengths and weaknesses of its own philanthropy. If foundations are an organizing force for private dollars, then foundation staff must identify the environments in which their funds are able to sustain the most impact. More often than not, these environments exist in worlds far from a foundation milieu, so it is important to recognize philanthropy's potential in supporting emerging opportunities.

Many fields emerge, solidify, and sustain themselves amid a confluence of external factors. Microfinance may have begun in the 1970s in Bangladesh, but only in the 1990s did it solidify as a field embraced by the philanthropic sector. Its emergence as a field was driven partly by public

awareness, partly by foundation investments in research and infrastructure organizations, and partly by broader social trends, such as greater financial connectedness. Contributing to these last two factors was the broad availability of cheap personal computers, online video, and online banking or payment systems that allowed quick, global financial transactions. Once this occurred, individuals, as well as large institutions, were able to join the microcredit movement, expanding it and providing new types of capital.

Similarly, the development and growth of digital media and learning as a field is premised on the social and political environments made possible by broad access to Web 2.0 technologies. Some of these changes are both field-supporting and field-challenging. For example, without the rapid adoption, easy deployment, and widespread and diverse uses of these digital tools in everyday life there may never have been an interest in understanding their uses for learning. At the same time, the market-driven and entertainment-heavy uses that led to the proliferation of these tools also feed the skeptics who question their viability or appropriate place as learning tools. The final section of this paper will focus on the digital world and, in particular, the impact of a digital society and its effects upon field building.

Establish a Research Base

A core set of shared beliefs exists among the players whose collaboration marks early stages of field building, although their professional setting, industry jargon, or spheres of influence may make these beliefs hard to articulate. Along with a recognized affinity for a particular issue or

ASK YOURSELF...

- What tools or practices are foundation program staff using to recognize and assess a philanthropic opportunity? Some use a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis while others develop vision and values statements.
- How can foundations help grantees prepare for emerging opportunities, such as new areas of work, new ways of working with different partners, or ways to become part of emergent fields or movements? One example is the policy of many foundations to offer funds to encourage grantees to adopt online social networking tools

constituency, the existence of these shared beliefs is a primary component of a field. However, to move the field forward these beliefs need to be informed by, to guide, and ultimately even to reconstitute research about the subject matter at hand. By establishing a base of research and values, what the contributors to a new field are really doing is verifying each of their assumptions in the context of a larger movement.

A common set of ideas may exist in isolated pockets, but recognizing the assumptions among them is key to identifying interested parties and articulating common hypotheses and questions, especially where cross-disciplinary and

cross-institutional collaboration is essential. Establishing a research base helps those involved in the work consider whether they are asking the most pressing questions and learn from other disciplines, experts, or actors whose methods of investigation may differ but whose areas of inquiry are the same. The particular lines of hypothesis, research, and justification (or synthesis) are what ultimately differentiate one field from another, especially in academia but also in fields where practice matters as much as theory.

It is also important to identify the “exemplars” of a field — those groups that help solidify what counts as good work or accepted work in an emerging field or approach.¹² Once shared values are recognized and exemplars are embraced, a more unified voice can emerge and the field will be able to represent itself as a distinct entity when dealing with the public¹³ or considering policy implications.

For example, K-12 service-learning, championed by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, evolved from a tradition that focused mainly on community service opportunities for adults. Scholars note that before Kellogg’s official involvement, “many schools valued community service as an after-school activity, (but) few had connected service with learning in any formal way.”¹⁴ Youth educators, service advocates, and policymakers all believed in the inherent value of service but their individual interests had not been informed by a common research base or fused into action. Kellogg staff recognized the opportunity to build on research underlying the National and Community Service Trust Act and launched

“Learning in Deed,” a multi-year national initiative to “engage more young people in service to others as part of their academic life.”¹⁵

Prioritize Sets of Actors and Networks

While the second principle focuses on what groups will have in common, the next requires that they also bring key differences to the table. New fields emerge and can be built when the edges of existing practices or disciplines begin to blur or meld into each other.

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This design principle is at the heart of the field of clean technology; the continued success of the field relies upon its diverse players’ values, perspectives, and objectives, but without a definition of and manifest belief in a central issue the field would never have been developed. In other words, each stakeholder’s objective may vary: a funder such as Google.org may focus on using “the power of information and technology to address the global challenges of our age,”¹⁶ while

ASK YOURSELF...

- Is it an important foundation role to set a baseline for the research of a field?
- Should foundations set a lexicon of key terms for an emerging field?
- What are the best ways to identify where research methods are complementary and where they might conflict?

scientists may care about technological advancement and discovery, and entrepreneurs and venture capitalists may pursue market opportunities from clean-tech products and services. But it is the common belief in the need to further research and develop avenues of innovation in the clean-tech realm that unites these stakeholders into a clearly defined field.

In the field of digital media and learning, this is taking place in the dynamics between sectors — including informal learning, civic engagement, and product development, among others. In the United States, particular schools have been synonymous with teaching and learning for so long that many of us have forgotten about the multitude of other environments where learning takes place. Digital media, of course, are not limited to the area between the walls of a school or any other institution. Digital environments exist in their own realm; they can facilitate media creation, access, use, critique, and learning from anywhere, and thus they fundamentally call into question the “where” of learning.

As an emerging field, digital media and learning is broad enough that it attracts interests beyond educators. Corporate game developers, hardware and software manufacturers, media companies, public oversight agencies, nonprofit groups, individual tinkerers, and independent gamers, as well as academicians from communications, media studies, education, sociology, anthropology, and other disciplines are all involved in relevant work. This diversity is critical, but it can sometimes be a barrier to rapid progress. The different study methods, multiple ways of framing

a question, and variety of perspectives often lead to robust conflict that is ultimately fruitful and helps define the actual boundaries of a new field. This process of choosing among and managing a diverse and yet select group of actors is key to solidifying a field’s identity and ultimate survival.¹⁷

The specific mix of participants or vested interests will vary depending on the field. In the field of conflict resolution, the key players are academics, public agencies, policymakers, and nonprofit groups.¹⁸ In clean technology, the universe includes scientists, environmental activists, and venture capital funders. The MacArthur Foundation’s Digital Media and Learning Initiative involves diverse partners, each of whom brings a distinct perspective and contributes to a collective that can legitimize the work in multiple communities. However, in every field it is also important to consider the role of charismatic and magnetic personalities. As Harvard Professor Howard Gardner comments:

ASK YOURSELF...

- What can foundations do to ensure that they keep new ideas coming in while maintaining some stability within an initiative? (And how do they do this without funding the same people over and over?)
- In what ways can technology bridge the gaps between (and within) institutions? What else might foundations provide to help bridge those gaps?

“Even in academic fields, the role of such individuals is likely to be important.... It is hard to think about social entrepreneurship without the personalities of individuals like Bill Drayton and Muhammad Yunus. Or the rise of cognitive studies without Jerome Bruner or Noam Chomsky or Herbert Simon.... In our own nascent study of successful and unsuccessful collaborations, the role of personalities emerges repeatedly.”¹⁹

Develop and Adopt the Right Standards

Standards cut in many directions but fall into three main categories.

- Standards can be used to define common terminology (such as “digital,” “media,” and “learning”) so that participants from different backgrounds can make progress together. In this way, standards allow for discussion and debate about substance beyond the mere meaning of a term.
- Standards can also be used to exclude certain things, such as when they are used to set a bar for participation or a standard of quality. In some cases, for example, foundations have set reporting requirements that are too sophisticated for emerging organizations to meet, and those standards effectively exclude certain participants.
- Finally, standards also facilitate inclusion and growth, as when they are applied to certain networks or components that allow for a shared point of connectivity, like the standard size of the “poles and holes” on a LEGO piece. These kinds of standards that make it possible for building blocks to be joined together in limitless combinations are necessary for widespread

innovation and growth.

In the early stages of building a field, the first type of standard — definition setting — dominates. Often, groups with different backgrounds realize they all have a shared interest in an emerging field. As Arizona State University Professor James Gee writes of the emerging digital media and learning field, everyone’s interest in the field emerged in different ways, but somehow everyone ended up in the same “place.”²⁰ However, in order to work together effectively and move beyond mere common ground, members must agree upon the same standards — language and

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jargon among them. As the Rockefeller Foundation’s recent initiative in impact investing illustrates (see sidebar on next page), defining terms is a critical challenge for many field-building initiatives. This process is time-consuming, often painstaking, and seemingly endless, but it moves quickly once some basic agreements (especially the terminology for common beliefs) are reached.

The second kind of standards is those that exclude. To some degree, these are inherent in both the first kind (defining something also defines what it is not) and the third (innovation is bound by the scalability of the building blocks). This second type of standard — the exclusionary one — is probably most important to building a field because of the role it plays in setting boundaries. We commented earlier that fields emerge where two (or more) earlier disciplines

IMPACT INVESTING AND THE NEED FOR STANDARDS

In the report “Investing for Social and Environmental Impact,” the Monitor Institute identifies several challenges for the field of impact investing related to the issue of standards. Like many emerging fields, impact investing lacks a common language, which affects the field’s ability to coordinate activity and advance. The report notes that “the lack of universally accepted vocabulary and market segmentation makes it difficult for impact investing actors to communicate about opportunities. The diversity of approaches and ways of describing them makes it difficult for actors to locate themselves in the impact investing ecosystem and to identify potential partners.” It quotes Preston Pinkett, the director of Prudential Social Investment, who explains: “It takes consistency in language to create a business. The biggest challenge is to have a coherent set of terms and phrases that are clearly defined and have clear meaning.”

However, language may not be the only standard a field needs to adopt. A closely related but distinct need is a common standard for measuring outcomes. Investors and entrepreneurs alike have found common financial terms insufficient for the new industry. They have discovered that new metrics for financial return, as well as social and environmental impact, are needed to fully capture and compare the value created by different impact investment opportunities. The report notes that “there are no metrics or ratings agencies to help make relative financial risk and social or environmental impact more transparent” and “the financial performance of many impact investments is uncertain, even though these investments might meet or beat return benchmarks ... which make valuation quite challenging.”

To solve the thorny issue of developing and adopting standards, the report observes that two key initiatives would help: developing rigorous metrics and a standard-setting body to implement them. Developing rigorous metrics “would allow [investors] to assess the results from investments that may be below market rate” and a “basic rating system would help organize the market by making it possible to compare outcomes of investments.”

To download and read the report, please visit:

http://www.rockfound.org/efforts/impact_investing/impact_investing.shtml

or fields start to blend or blur. To locate this intersection, it can be helpful to draw lines or Venn diagrams in order to find the common beliefs and build the most appropriate new set of connections to deepen work in that blurred space. Eventually, what was once blurred becomes clear; this marks an important transition in field building from emerging to solidifying. At this point, standards will be used to “protect” those lines in order to deepen the work *within* the field. These types of standards may be represented by professional qualifications, key publications, or even the presence of acknowledged leading institutions or “gurus” in the field.

The third kind of standards, those that allow for innovation and expansion, are particularly important in both the digital realm and the world of learning. Digital media are, by definition, remixable, reusable, and easily duplicated. What makes this possible is that some underlying forms (software code, application and program standards) are set to certain standards so that a person can borrow another person’s content, add to it, and put it back into the world in a new form. Without these kinds of standards, research and knowledge production remain fragmented, individual endeavors. Good examples of “collaboration-enabling” standards include the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation’s support of GrantsFire, which publishes grants data in an open-standards format to enable better collaboration and information-sharing in the field of philanthropy, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s support for common standards in the reporting of childhood obesity research.

STRENGTHENING NETWORKS DIGITALLY

President Barack Obama’s presidential campaign website successfully harnessed networks of existing communities, such as Latinos, organized labor, and the under-25 vote, and catalyzed these organized grassroots groups into action for the campaign itself. A wise and expedient use of technology helped, and the success of the website, YouTube misses, and email blasts demonstrated that online media can not only expand networks but strengthen already existing networks and relationships.

Likewise, the emergence of “Twestival” in early 2009 pledged to bring together Twitter communities and their non-user friends for in-person meetings in more than 180 cities worldwide with the goal of raising money and awareness for a nonprofit organization that provides safe drinking water in the developing world. The impact of the Twestival is drawn from a diverse global digital network collaboration and is perhaps less about any one issue than the use of the technology itself. This low-cost, potentially high-impact social networking fundraising model could benefit a variety of nonprofits or causes.

ASK YOURSELF...

- What is the process for developing new standards in your field? What about agreeing upon standard terminology? Have you felt it is easy or difficult to contribute to this standard-setting?
- Are there examples of standards nurturing *social* innovation in your area of expertise?
- When is it too early for a foundation to get involved? When should a foundation let something evolve on its own? What unintended (negative) consequences could result from foundation involvement?

The role of these kinds of standards in the field of philanthropy is just becoming apparent. For most of its history, organized philanthropy has been too dispersed and institutionally independent for common standards to emerge. In the last five years or so, driven by forces as diverse as interest in financial returns and technological innovation, philanthropy itself has become more of a field, and thus the possibilities and limitations of standards are beginning to be visible.

Networking allows for organized and logical relationships among a field's participants ...

Build a Network Infrastructure

One of the more important features of a field's future viability is the strength and reach of its networks. Some practices that emerge from the grassroots level and ultimately find widespread

support in the mainstream benefit from an existing participant infrastructure.²¹ Service-learning, for example, emerged out of collaboration between two established communities — youth educators and community service practitioners — and was then able to take advantage of the networks, processes, and players already involved in these groups.

Networking allows for organized and logical relationships among a field's participants, and recent field-building efforts have also demonstrated the potential in networks of networks. By layering networks of schools, educators, researchers, and funders, the MacArthur Foundation is developing a larger web of interconnectedness, allowing it to move beyond the connections of its individual grantees. The MacArthur Digital Media and Learning network differs from the approach of many other fields by eschewing familiar institutions such as schools and relying on hybrid institutional models, such as an after-school program administered by a consortium of public schools and research universities. The network also includes partners, such as the Woodrow Wilson Institute and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, whose roles are to help members of the network connect through information sharing, small-meeting facilitation, and network mapping. This complex web of relationships and joint projects has many benefits: it brings together broad bases of support, helps to catalyze new ideas, makes product lines more efficient, and provides better feedback mechanisms.

Network theory, networked organizations and learning networks are relatively new concepts for

philanthropy. The David and Lucile Packard Foundation has undertaken a line of work looking specifically at the role of networks in social change. It has commissioned research on the topic and also tried some experiments in using networks for information gathering and diffusion. More traditional views of networks — which might have been called clusters of organizations or even collaborations in earlier foundation parlance — offer a useful perspective on the role of networks. Our view has shifted from focusing on a set of independent organizations brought together to pursue common goals to instead trying to see and influence how the connections between those organizations shape the work of the collective.

Share Knowledge

Sharing knowledge is important to field building at all stages in the process — from the earliest efforts to identify common beliefs to the deployment of standards that will allow innovation, growth, distribution of knowledge, and remixing of ideas. Without a commitment to sharing information, research won't progress, practices and lessons learned won't be shared, and collaboration won't occur. In many cases, a foundation's most useful investment in new fields is the time and effort it puts into supporting both the creation and sharing of knowledge.

The natural barriers to effective information sharing are numerous. The Hewlett Foundation, in a paper co-written by McKinsey & Company, articulates three challenges to effective information sharing across the philanthropic sector: improving information supply, increasing demand

for information, and strengthening intermediaries and interactions.²² A number of initiatives exist to improve the information supply, from GuideStar to GiveWell,

DonorEdge, and DonorsChoose. Where information demand is concerned, the issue is as much about knowing what information is really useful as about building the demand for those data. To date, much of the data on nonprofits that can be made easily available to outsiders has been of somewhat limited value. The demand equation is

Without a commitment to sharing information, research won't progress, practices and lessons learned won't be shared, and collaboration won't occur.

ASK YOURSELF...

- The network model, which is relatively new in philanthropic circles, focuses on funding clusters of activity as opposed to individual grantees and deliberately considers the dynamics between organizations and clusters as part of the strategy for change. One possible outcome of this model is that it might allow for more of the network's strategy to come from the grantees themselves, restricting the grantmaker to a convener role. How else might this change the role of funders?
- Can you envision social media as a way to facilitate this network funding model? Are there ways these tools might *undermine* a network infrastructure, by blurring boundaries too quickly, for example?

shaped by trying to find, aggregate, and standardize meaningful data, then make it available while also making its uses widely understood. The third part of this information puzzle — collecting, vetting, and providing the data — is where the dependence on strong intermediaries between nonprofits and donors comes into play.

One tactic is to stipulate that knowledge sharing among relevant stakeholders is a requirement for receiving grants. A relatively new set of philanthropic foundations, which *The New York Times* calls “activist disease foundations,” such as the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, the Prostate Cancer Foundation, the Myelin Repair Foundation, the Multiple Myeloma Research Foundation, and the Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson’s Research, are “us(ing) their money, unabashedly, as weaponry, to finance targeted research, hold conferences where scientists must share information and underwrite clinical trials conducted by drug companies.”²³ By stipulating information

sharing as a condition for grant money, these foundations are trying to change the culture of research to speed the development of treatments and cures. Their money is a tool; information sharing is the key.

Nonfinancial incentives can play an important role as well. As the Kellogg Foundation writes in its report on service-learning: “It is human nature to want to be valued and appreciated. Service-learning advocates are no different. Launching any innovation is usually labor-intensive and challenging, so incentives to continue the innovation play an important part in the adoption process.”²⁴

The MacArthur Foundation has provided support in the Digital Media and Learning Initiative to the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation to convene grantees and other Digital Media and Learning stakeholders in small meetings and larger conferences. The expressed purpose of the meetings is to “ask what lessons are emerging and where those lessons lead.”²⁵ By funding grantees to do nothing but hold meetings, MacArthur has established these sessions as explicitly separate from the work funded by individual grants. It has not merely encouraged grantee-led conversations and information exchange but has mandated it. This series of face-to-face meetings provides an opportunity for participants to meet on their own terms, outside the confines of their own grant-funded operations. It also creates an incentive for them to collaborate with one another, building on individual discoveries to create new, remixed, and refined content and theory.

ASK YOURSELF...

- Has your organization changed how it uses and shares information in pursuit of your mission? What has worked well or not so well?
- How might you ease resistance to or encourage greater information exchange, both within your organization and with others? What has been difficult for you, and what has worked?

Another information sharing tactic is to have grantees support any in-person meetings with online discussions before or after the event. Yet even the Digital Media and Learning grantees, who are generally tech-savvy and engaged in multiple online communities, have not wholly embraced the idea of an online grantee portal. For this group, the challenge is not generating interest in or familiarity with the tools; it is layering on an additional website, RSS feed, or other information source to people who are already immersed in many digital resources.

FIELD BUILDING IN A DIGITAL WORLD

The application of our suggested design principles will illuminate and inform any field-building endeavor, whether rooted in human rights, community development, conflict resolution, or information-sharing. This section focuses on the impact of information and communication technologies on field-building activities, as seen through the lens of the MacArthur Foundation's approach to its Digital Media and Learning Initiative.

Of course every foundation's experience will be unique, but the communication tools available today are relevant to most sectors and fields. Before the advent of the Internet and widespread digital information sharing, the approach foundations took to field building was very different. Research was conducted on site or through phone calls and letters, printed, shared by mail, and discussed in academic settings. Practitioners waited for that research, discussed it among them-

selves, and determined what did and did not work. In the best-case scenarios, there was slow and episodic exchange between those who conducted research, those who used it, and the funders for whom it was relevant. Today, there are countless tools to make these exchanges easier, more ongoing, and more inclusive.

A look at some of the partners in the Digital Media and Learning Initiative illustrates how some of the six principles outlined above work in the real world. Groups like the National Writing Project follow a central mission (to improve student achievement by improving reading and writing) as a professional development network that focuses not just on teachers but on K-12 schools and university research centers as well. NWP's participation in the initiative helps it to adapt digital media and learning tools to fit its network. It also ensures that the standards developed by academics and policymakers are tested, modified, and put into practice by teachers in thousands of sites across the country rather than in one research environment.

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The MacArthur Foundation funded the game development company Gamelab,²⁶ which used the opportunity to create a game to redefine the ways media literacy is taught and game theory is used as a pedagogical approach. Gamelab created "Gamestar Mechanic," an experiential game that teaches media literacy through activities and problem-solving rather than through traditional explicit lessons. The developers made use of the

learning principles of game-playing identified in academic research by their grantees, the University of Wisconsin Academic Co-Lab and the Institute of Play, and by adding a social networking component created a game that required a player to call upon a number of diverse skills and abilities. The next step — connecting

Digital environments are reforming each of the field-building design principles.

Gamestar Mechanic to curriculum — will allow teachers to adapt the game to their content areas. Students then modify it further, adapting it to

their areas of interest, learning skills, and content in customized ways that can also be widely shared. The potential is the redefinition of literacy, games, and learning theory in classroom settings. New forms of learning and new ways of teaching may yield new learning environments; none of the elements alone represents a total departure from present-day learning, just a new way of reusing them all in cooperation with each other.

In the past, differing standards and platforms led to networks based on *exclusion*; today's digital networks promote *inclusion* through standards that facilitate innovation and remixing. We expect that these approaches will lead to fields that are defined, heterogeneous, and interconnected, with specialized activities contributing to a core objective.

Digital environments are reforming each of the field-building design principles: common beliefs are centered on activities that harness new technologies for one's advantage; networks are capable of connecting people and institutions worldwide cheaply and efficiently, and standards for inclusion

are critical. But digital innovation isn't game-changing simply because it facilitates new relationships or identifies allies faster and at greater distances. Rather, the attribute of digital environments that we believe is most significant is the way it both encourages and relies on remixing. It is an environment and a culture in which our analog expectations about ownership, borders, innovation, inclusivity, distribution, and creation are being constantly reset. This dynamism and ambiguity are now widely mirrored in the work of and relationships among commercial, nonprofit, and public institutions. We expect that some of these core characteristics of digital media and learning will be apparent in the field that develops and the ways in which it forms.

CONCLUSIONS

We have considered the whys and hows of field building and we have offered six design principles for foundations to keep in mind as they shape

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their own strategies. Part of field building is the learning involved in the process itself; as literature on field building is developed over time, we continue to learn from and add to it. One important element that emerges from the literature is the variety of roles that foundations may play in these processes, from “catalyst for growth” to a “steward of the field.”²⁷ One effort may be focused on reducing fragmentation while another may be set on responding to a pressing national issue. These different intentions may ultimately drive field-building processes down different paths.

The different styles of initiation and growth among fields also lead to different models of sustainability. Traditional academic fields are more stable and may persist over time, but the more complex model of a field that we’ve outlined here may transform quickly. Not every field should persist, particularly if participation narrows over time or its relevance is tied to a specific temporal environment. Given the rapid pace of technological change, it is not hard to imagine that success may come to be defined less by longevity than by interconnectedness, fruitful production of ideas or methodologies, the capacity to generate new fields, or other measures. Some successful philanthropic fields may be short-lived, perhaps even by design. This may even be the case with service-learning, which evolved from a niche activity into a widespread practice; it was formed and supported initially within the nonprofit sector but eventually spread out into the mainstream and was embraced and adopted by public institutions.

The advantages of field building in a digital age are numerous. This environment allows for the

inclusion of diverse voices across many sectors, as seen with Google.org’s clean-energy efforts. It can also draw on a wide range of funding sources, as seen in the foundation, multilateral, and private-sector support for the mobile health field. By actively supporting this diversity, the foundations involved have established themselves as the force that galvanizes and organizes communities, combats fragmented efforts, and facilitates relationships and networks. How this will work

Success may come to be defined less by longevity than by interconnectedness ...

We welcome your comments and suggestions, and we hope this paper begins a discussion in the philanthropic sector at large. We’ve included questions within each design principle section, but we ask our readers not to feel limited to these questions. Consider, also, how you might change portions of this brief. Or let us know with whom we should share it. Do the design principles we’ve offered resonate with your work? What principle is missing? What principle is obvious and should be removed? What have you learned — and what would you like to learn — about building a field? What can you share with us and others about how to do it, how to define it, how to determine success? Please contact us with your thoughts on these issues, on this brief, and of course, on how we are sharing what we learn.

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<http://digitallearning.macfound.org>

over time, as new funders enter the field and alternate funding mechanisms are deployed, remains to be seen. Small-scale experimentation with the notion of remixing is underway across almost every aspect of field building — from the digital environments being developed, the methods of academic research being used, and the participants in different discussions to the types of licenses and ownership rights sought, the means of distribution and partnerships among institutions, and the sources of sustaining revenue for those efforts that require it. Defining success in this sphere is not easy, nor is there likely to be a single, static, or simple model. What we do know is that those with the ability to transform and develop rapidly are in the best position to see that success.

Appendix: A

Review of Philanthropic Efforts in Field Building

- Digital media and learning (John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation)
- Homeschooling (Hewitt Research Foundation)
- Palliative care (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation)
- Microfinance (Acción International, Grameen Foundation)
- Afro-American studies (Ford Foundation)
- Gender studies (Ford Foundation)
- Clean tech/clean energy (Google.org)
- Social enterprise (Skoll Foundation)
- “Green” economy (United Nations Environment Programme, Nathan Cummings Foundation)
- Combating childhood obesity (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation)
- Mobile health (Vodafone Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, United Nations Foundation)

- Spirituality in youth development (John Templeton Foundation)
- Capacity building for small foundations (Annie E. Casey Foundation)
- Out-of-school-time nonprofits (Wallace Foundation)
- National security and human rights (Open Society Institute)
- Service-learning (W. K. Kellogg Foundation)
- Donor education (Ford Foundation, among others)
- Children, youth, and families (William and Flora Hewlett Foundation)
- Impact investing (Rockefeller Foundation)
- Health entrepreneurship (Michael J. Fox Foundation, Myelin Repair Foundation, Multiple Myeloma Research Foundation)
- Business ethics (Aspen Institute)

NOTES

¹ Joel Fleishman, *The Foundation* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007), 102–106.

² *Ibid.*, 70.

³ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴ For more information about the Skoll Foundation’s work in building the field of social entrepreneurship, see <http://www.skollfoundation.org/aboutskoll/index.asp>.

⁵ Daniel E. Atkins, John Seely Brown, and Allen L. Hammond, “A Review of the Open Educational Resources (OER) Movement: Achievements, Challenges, and New Opportunities.” Report to the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (February 2007), <http://www.hewlett.org/oer>.

⁶ Jessica Freireich and Katherine Fulton, “Investing for Social & Environmental Impact” (January 2009), http://www.monitorinstitute.com/impactinvesting/documents/InvestingforSocialandEnvImpact_FullReport_004.pdf.

⁷ From “What is Cognitive Science?,” Cognitive Science at UC Berkeley (UC Regents: 2008). Available at

<http://ls.berkeley.edu/ugis/cogsci/major/about.php>

⁸ “The Strong Field Framework” (San Francisco: Bridgespan Group, June 2009), 2.

⁹ Often it is overly ambitious for a foundation to think it is *creating* a field. Usually the foundation’s role is to bring together fragmented players already engaged in related activity. A foundation can then be said to *launch* or *build* a philanthropic field, which is our focus for this paper.

¹⁰ Note that our definition of a field builds upon the GoodWork Project’s characterization of a field as involving “requisite organizations, publications, (and) meetings” and more closely resembles GoodWork’s depiction of a domain, which includes “agreed upon standards, values, mission.” (“The GoodWork Project: An Overview,” May 2008 33). See http://www.goodworkproject.org/docs/papers/GW%20Overview%204_08.pdf.

¹¹ Examples of public agencies engaged in field-building efforts include the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, and the Corporation for National & Community Service.

¹² James Paul Gee, “Digital Media and Learning as an Emerging Field, Part II: A Proposal for How to Use ‘Worked Examples’ to Move Forward,” *International Journal of Learning and Media* 1, no. 2 (Spring 2009).

¹³ David Kovick, “The Hewlett Foundation’s Conflict Resolution Program: Twenty Years of Field-Building,” (May 2005), 44, <http://www.hewlett.org/programs/past-programs/conflict-resolution>.

¹⁴ Shelley H. Billig, “Adoption, Implementation and Sustainability of K-12 Service-Learning.” In *Advances in Service-Learning Research: Essence of the Pedagogy*, edited by Andrew Furco and Shelley H. Billig (Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishers, 2002).

¹⁵ Brien McHugh, “Formative Years: Lessons from a Decade in the Service-Learning Field.” 3, <http://www.servicelearning.org/filemanager/download/166/Formative%20YearsRev.pdf>.

¹⁶ Google.org home page, <http://www.google.org/>.

¹⁷ Lucy Bernholz, “Design Principles for Building a Field,” February 20, 2009, <http://philanthropy.blogspot.com/2009/02/design-principles-for-building-field.html>.

¹⁸ Kovick, 10.

¹⁹ Email from Howard Gardner, Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education, Harvard Graduate School of Education, July 15, 2009.

²⁰ James Paul Gee, “Digital Media and Learning as an Emerging Field, Part I: How We Got Here” *International Journal of Learning and Media* 1, no. 2 (Spring 2009), 13–23.

²¹ The discovery of grassroots efforts that ultimately become mainstream is also known as a *found pilot*. Larry Hirschhorn and Thomas North Gilmore, “Ideas in Philanthropic Field Building: Where They Come from and How They Are Translated into Actions,” Foundation Center’s *Practice Matters* series (March 2004), http://foundationcenter.org/gainknowledge/research/pdf/practicematters_06_paper.pdf.

²² Maisie O’Flanagan, Jacob Harold, and Paul Brest, “Bridging the Information Gap in Philanthropy” (William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the McKinsey and Company, 2008).

²³ Joe Nocera, “Taking Science Personally.” *New York Times*, November 10, 2008.

²⁴ McHugh, “Formative Years.”

²⁵ Anthony Byrk and Arthur Levine “Convenings to Take Stock and Look Ahead” (Spotlight on Digital Media and Learning blog, MacArthur Foundation, January 19, 2009), http://spotlight.macfound.org/main/entry/bryk_levine_convenings/.

²⁶ Funded via grants to the University of Wisconsin Academic Co-Lab and the Institute of Play, which in turn subcontracted to Gamelab.

²⁷ Kovick, 2.