Higher Education Research Priorities:
Perspectives from Selected Foundations

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Preface

This report summarizes the major activities of a grant to the Stanford Institute for Higher Education Research (SIHER) by Atlantic Philanthropies USA, Inc., under the guidance of its program staff, Theodore L. Hullar, Director of Atlantic’s Higher Education Programs. (Application 9385, Postsecondary Research Priorities: Extending a National Agenda-Setting Initiative to Foundation Representatives.)

Between February and July of 2002, SIHER invited a group of senior researchers to meet with staff members of selected foundations that have funded higher education research over the past decade. Our primary goal was to enlist them in identifying research priorities that would address the most pressing issues confronting higher education, now and in the coming decade. Our secondary goal was to gain insight into the nature of foundations’ grant-making for higher education research.

This consultation process supplemented a more extensive research priorities initiative launched in 2001 by the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement (NCPI) at the invitation of NCPI’s funder, the U.S. Department of Education. The initiative was guided by three aims: to heighten the sense of urgency about the condition of the postsecondary enterprise; to provide a persuasive rationale for developing state-of-the-art knowledge to further its improvement; and to identify a cohesive set of research priorities which, if pursued, would be useful to institutional leaders and policymakers. NCPI senior researchers consulted broadly with federal and state policymakers, higher education leaders and researchers, business executives, and members of the public. We hoped the consultation process and final report would prove compelling to an array of funding agencies that are both committed to improving American higher education and in a position to invest research funds to realize those interests. Entitled Beyond Dead Reckoning: Research Priorities for Redirecting American Higher Education, the NCPI essay was released in November, 2002. In the first eight weeks over 30,000 copies were downloaded from the website, http://ncpi.stanford.edu.

Midway through this consultation process, a small grant from Atlantic to SIHER provided funds to extend the discussion of research priorities to program staff in major foundations. We sought to understand their perspectives on higher education research through two activities: 1) convening a meeting at Stanford to obtain their advice and reaction to a draft of the NCPI research priorities essay; and 2) engaging in informational interviews and reviewing their organizations’ websites to gain insight into the nature of their grants for higher education research.

In this document, I summarize what we learned from the grant’s two major activities. I also raise issues that warrant further consideration from potential funders and higher education researchers. I am indebted to my colleagues for their many contributions to this project. However, I bear sole responsibility for this report, which is essentially an interpretive undertaking. I received comments on a draft from three higher education researchers and two foundation staff members; one from each group participated in the project, and the others lent a fresh perspective. The opinions expressed herein do not reflect the position or policies of the participants or Atlantic. I do not disclose the identity of those involved in this project nor of their organizations, as they served in an advisory rather than a representative capacity. We are all grateful to Atlantic for financing the project and to Ted Hullar for his ongoing support.

Patricia J. Gumport

June 30, 2003
Introduction

Between February and July of 2002, senior researchers from the Stanford Institute for Higher Education Research (SIHER) and the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement (NCPI) consulted with staff members of selected foundations that funded higher education research over the past decade. Our overarching objective was to enlist these individuals in identifying research priorities that would address the most pressing issues confronting higher education, now and in the coming decade. In the process, we also sought their perspectives on higher education research itself as well as on their foundations’ grant-making for higher education research.

In this report, I summarize what we learned from two targeted activities: (1) a meeting at Stanford to discuss higher education research priorities; and (2) a review of selected foundations’ grant-making to higher education research.

I then identify several issues that warrant further consideration and extended dialogue between potential funders and higher education researchers. I suggest that each of the two groups has a limited understanding of the other, not only in terms of the interests that drive their work but also the role of their respective work settings in shaping their perspectives on past and future priorities. I conclude by discussing the potential for synergy that may yield valuable, even unexpected, dividends.

The report is organized as follows:

Section I. The Stanford Meeting
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   b. Critique of Higher Education Research
   c. Potential Research Priorities
   d. Summary

Section II. Organizational Profiles
   a. Methodological Challenges
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   c. Diversity of Foundations’ Higher Education Portfolios
   d. Summary

Section III. Conclusion and Implications
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   b. Researchers’ Interests and Constraints
   c. The Action Agenda within Foundations
   d. Potential for Synergy

Section IV. Postscript One Year Later
Section I. The Stanford Meeting

A. Overview

On March 6-7, 2002, we hosted an invitational meeting at Stanford University entitled, “On the Frontier of Change: Research Priorities for Postsecondary Education.” At the request of the funder, the meeting was co-convened by Marshall Smith of the Hewlett Foundation and Patricia J. Gumport, Director of the Stanford Institute for Higher Education Research (SIHER) and the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement (NCPI).

The objective of the meeting was to consult with individuals working as program staff in foundations that have funded higher education research, engaging them in conversation about what they saw as past, present, and future higher education research priorities. Participants included twelve individuals from organizations known to award grants for domestic higher education research, issues and topics, either currently or in the past decade. Eleven were staff members in major philanthropic foundations and one was from a federal agency. Of the eleven foundations, ten were listed in the Foundation Center’s Top 100 Foundations Giving for Higher and Graduate Education, Circa 2000; eight were among the top thirty-five in this list. (In this report, the twelve organizations are referred to as foundations.) The twelve funders were joined by ten NCPI senior researchers and Board members, all of whom were asked to help the facilitators elicit and clarify the perspectives of foundation staff.

In order to provide some background and establish a common ground for discussion prior to the meeting, SIHER researchers conducted informational interviews with the staff members. We asked them to describe their organization's portfolio of grants to higher education research. (The findings are reported in Section II of this report.) We also asked them to read and prepare critical comments on NCPI’s draft statement of research priorities. The discussion at the meeting subsequently addressed both topics, in addition to asking each funder to speculate about their foundation’s future priorities, specifically the likelihood of drawing on the expertise and interests of higher education researchers.

We learned at the outset that many of these funding organizations do not use the term “higher education research” to characterize either their funding commitments or their grant-making priorities. Instead they tend to portray their grants as addressing substantive issues or problems in higher education. For the most part, their grants have taken the form of short-term projects and interventions, such as fellowships and scholarships for targeted student populations or one-time grants for organizational initiatives. Grants tend to be programmatic and, on occasion, evaluative in nature. The staff reported fewer grants for research projects per se.

Of the twelve organizations in which the staff members worked, only four had a highly visible record of funding higher education research; the other eight were not known to
have as strong a legacy. During the meeting, the participants who most actively proposed topics for future research were employed by foundations with highly visible past and present commitments to higher education research, while the other participants tended to express skepticism about the contribution of research to change or improvement. In addition to this variation, the meeting participants had a range of experience with and expertise in higher education research. Nonetheless, at our request, all of them offered their individual perspectives and their preferences for topics that researchers address in the future.

B. Critique of Higher Education Research

The discussion on higher education research priorities elicited a number of comments from individuals working in foundations about the shortcomings of existing research and, as requested, several suggestions for revising the NCPI draft statement. Comments ranged from informed and—at times—deep criticism, to support and even enthusiasm for its potential value.

Their major critique of higher education research is that it reflects what some participants called an “insider’s” agenda. They characterized research in the following ways: “navel-gazing,” “very narrow,” “not very useful,” “disconnected,” focusing on the “trivial”; that is, on “issues that the average person does not care about.” The broader sentiment underlying these descriptors is twofold: one type of judgment is dismissive; the other is simply that higher education research is not on their radar screen. It was in this context that the funders critiqued the NCPI draft of proposed research priorities. They recommended reorienting the priorities to address the deeper questions of access for whom and to what, foregrounding the societal expectation that students from all backgrounds have access to high quality higher education. (In subsequent revisions of the NCPI essay, we did follow their excellent advice, anchoring the proposed priorities in what we came to call the “Access to What?” agenda.)

Other participants were more supportive in their comments. They expressed some optimism about the potential for higher education researchers to align their projects with the action-oriented agenda of several foundations. Implicit in many comments is the presumption that researchers should orient their proposals to address “what the foundation needs.” The discussion about worthwhile projects pointed to the untapped potential for integrating basic research and “action research,” including what some meeting participants labeled “advocacy research.” Looking to the future, the foundation staff stressed that higher education research could address “what is in the public interest” and in so doing become more “socially meaningful.”

According to the participants, foundation staff tend to think about grants for higher education research not as a separate category but as inherently intertwined with grants on substantive issues. They value research that determines the leverage points for bringing about desired changes and improvements. Funders also emphasized the need to view higher education as part of an entire system of education, thereby calling attention to the
need for a better understanding of student transitions, especially the connection between
high school and college. The funders expressed a keen interest in research that would
inform their new ventures and projects, in addition to providing analysis and guidance in
their existing grant programs. They reinforced this point by noting that research
proposals of this nature would more readily gain approval from their Boards.

The funders offered several suggestions as to what higher education researchers can do to
obtain funding in the present climate. Their advice is founded in the premise that
researchers should define their projects and shape their proposals to fit the foundations’
agenda.

First, researchers need to develop proposals that demonstrate direct connections between
the proposed research activities and the anticipated value of their findings for solving
specific societal problems, such as developing recommendations for interventions and
mechanisms for evaluating progress. The nature of projects can certainly vary; they can
seek to tackle major problems and issues, determine the cause-effect features of these
problems, explore innovation, or shed light on the means for effective adoption and
sustained implementation.

Second, proposals need to be written in a language that is easily understood, not only by
program staffs, but also by their Board members, who tend not to be fluent in academic
jargon.

Third, proposals should have a commitment to expedited diffusion and adoption; that is, a
plan for actively applying the findings from research in order to maximize the public
impact of findings.

Fourth, as researchers conceptualize their proposals, they should consider joining with
other professionals who bring expertise from policy and practice that complements
researchers’ scholarly specializations. This suggestion emanates from the belief that such
a mix of personnel would better ensure that research projects address a more public
agenda.

C. Potential Research Priorities

In discussing future research topics, five broad themes emerged. Staff members from the
foundations conveyed the most enthusiasm and gave the greatest weight—nearly a
consensus—to the first cluster of issues: access, equity, and diversity. They elaborated
on the need to understand “what works”; specifically, what are more effective means to
extend access and to enhance students’ success, especially that of disadvantaged students.
Comments along these lines from many of the foundation staff were cast with a sense of
urgency, emphasizing the interests of external stakeholders who look to higher education
to fulfill the promise of educational opportunity and potential upward mobility.
Along a different tack, a small group of participants expressed an abiding interest in higher education’s internal dynamics, including how higher education organizations and systems could become more effective and how teaching and learning practices could be improved. Some exemplary research was cited for beginning to address this set of topics, while very few research projects were identified as advancing the “access, equity, and diversity” agenda.

The following lists are intended to be read as a thematic overview of the perspectives expressed during the discussion. The lists were developed from transcribed notes of the meeting. Within each of the five themes, we note specific topics that participants proposed as worthy of researchers’ attention.

1. **Access, equity, and diversity**

Nearly all participants in the meeting identified access, equity, and diversity as a set of interrelated issues that are high priorities for them as individuals and for their organizations. Several speakers expressed a deep commitment to facing up to past and present societal inequities and failures to provide educational opportunity to all citizens. They characterized this as “a social justice agenda” and “a change agenda.” They noted that earlier efforts under the rubric of “diversity” focused on inclusion, especially for students of color in predominantly white institutions, while the current emphasis is on what they characterized as “genuine access” and “demonstrated success,” especially for students from disadvantaged populations. Diversity today is also defined more broadly to extend across categories of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and nationality. Interests in promoting diversity have been galvanized by the premise that learning in more diverse settings can benefit all students. Several staff members reported that their foundations fund action-oriented programs—and to a lesser extent, research projects—to examine issues of access, equity, and diversity for students and for faculty, in addition to addressing these issues as they manifest in particular types of colleges and universities and in specific institutional practices, such as undergraduate or graduate admissions.

The discussion on this cluster of issues included the following topics:

- Recruitment, retention, persistence and degree completion of diverse students
- Improving teaching and learning for students with inadequate academic preparation
- Enhancing access and equity with or without affirmative action
- Recruitment, retention, and tenure of diverse faculty
- Socialization and training of teachers to work in a diverse environment

2. **The goals and purposes of higher education**

This theme entailed an extended philosophical discussion among the participants. Generally, most of the participants acknowledged that prevailing academic discourses (and at times, academic leadership) lack clarity or consensus about the goals and purposes of higher education. They pointed to uncertainty in today’s social contract or
charter, about the implicit understanding of what society expects from higher education and about what higher education expects from society. The need to clarify the goals and purposes of higher education was linked to the access, equity, and diversity agenda (described above) that seeks to compensate for the shortcomings of the stratified higher education system. The participants observed a societal consensus that access is a primary goal for U.S. higher education, yet they also acknowledged widespread disagreement over the meaning of “access for whom?” and “access to what?” as well as the appropriate means for achieving the desired ends.

Participants identified a number of key topics for researchers to address, including:

- The role of higher education in producing “good citizens” and “democratic values”
- Tensions between market values and public purposes, and tensions between economic priorities and educational goals
- The connection between learning in higher education and subsequent success in the workforce
- The benefits for students and faculty from a collaborative versus a competitive education system
- Fostering more meaningful student and faculty engagement in the higher education enterprise
- Defining, measuring, and improving higher education effectiveness and efficiency

3. Pathways through higher education

Throughout the discussion, participants expressed interest in learning more about student “pathways” and secondarily about how the system’s organizational structure and stratification shape student experiences and choices. Given the expansion of mass higher education and rising tuitions across all institutional types, many students are following non-traditional paths to obtain a bachelor’s degree, taking courses from a variety of institutions. As a result, new questions have emerged regarding time to degree completion, articulation agreements, and initiatives that may support diverse pathways through college.

The topics included:

- Improving K-16 linkages, especially college preparation and information for high school students, parents, and counselors
- Documenting the diverse pathways and barriers to a bachelor’s degree and the factors that contribute to students’ enrolling in multiple colleges
- Understanding the types of financial assistance that support alternative paths, including the dynamics of “working and schooling” simultaneously
- Identifying organizational factors that can support and enhance students’ success in navigating the system
- Documenting the liabilities and benefits of a stratified system of higher education
4. **Globalization of higher education**

Although most of the discussion concentrated on issues and challenges within U.S. higher education, participants did observe that globalization has become increasingly important to understanding catalysts for and dimensions of change in higher education.

The participants identified in general terms some topics worthy of researchers’ attention:

- The impact of globalization on higher education organizations, including specific catalysts for change
- The role of technology in expanding academic collaboration and communication networks, including new research and learning opportunities for students as well as for faculty
- The pros and cons of investment in international students who return to their countries after study in the U.S.
- How U.S. higher education has responded to global workforce needs

5. **Interactions**

As the meeting progressed, one foundation staff member proposed a conceptual approach, that future research on higher education address the “interactions” shaping higher education. Interactions may be understood as the “interface between endogenous and exogenous factors” that influence different areas of higher education. From this perspective, both problems and solutions must be framed in view of the inescapable interdependence between higher education and other arenas of society. Although a rather broad and abstract umbrella, the notion of “interactions” was enthusiastically echoed and elaborated by many of the participants, not only foundation staff but researchers as well.

The topics included the following:

- Interactions between K–12 education and higher education
- Interactions between high school advanced placement and higher education curricula
- Interactions between community colleges and four-year institutions
- Interactions among financial aid, costs of higher education, and student attrition rates
- Interactions of recruitment, retention, and degree attainment for different populations
- The influence of technology on access, student learning, instruction, and organizational structures
- The influence of technology on faculty roles, instructional practices and outcomes
- Interactions between public policy and institutional practices
D. Summary

According to the foundation staff who participated in this project, a number of foundations have had strong commitments to funding higher education, but not higher education research per se. For the most part, they characterized higher education research as “off their radar screen,” in part due to its inclination toward an insider’s agenda that addresses theoretical interests or examines institutional practices principally of concern to academics. Although there was some variation in the priorities of the foundation staff, many expressed a deep commitment to “an action agenda” that would identify solutions for improving students’ access and success, especially for bringing about gains in retention and educational achievement for students from low-income backgrounds. These funders indicated they would be inclined to fund research proposals that aim to solve these key challenges and determine points of leverage, rather than research that simply aims to illuminate the nature of the problems.

Among the most pressing problems in need of improvement, the foundation staff reflected nearly a consensus on giving top priority to improving access and student’s success, principally for “underprepared” and “underrepresented” populations. The common funding mechanisms they identified were programmatic grants for scholarships, college preparation and persistence programs, and, to a lesser extent, campus diversity initiatives. Among other problems in need of improvement, they noted the need for better ways to assess student learning outcomes and to determine the effectiveness of technology and distance education initiatives.

Among the silences, there was a conspicuous absence of concern about extending institutional capacity which had been common in earlier decades of “bricks and mortar” funding. Similarly, the conversation did not reflect concern about the advancement of knowledge or faculty work in the disciplines, although there were a few passing comments about interdisciplinarity. Also missing from the conversation was an interest in the disciplinary perspectives taken up by some higher education researchers, such as historical analyses, philosophical inquiries, and macro-sociological studies. Presumably, by omission, such approaches would not advance the agenda of creating identifiable and sustainable change.

The message for foundation staff from the researchers at the meeting was also clear. Although their slated role for this meeting was neither to defend existing higher education research nor to familiarize the foundation staff with the rationales for particular research approaches, some researchers offered comments about the wide range of orientations among researchers. As a matter of principle, some researchers question the presumption that they simply adapt to what interests the foundations, and they characterize the funders’ agenda and preferences as unduly narrow. While some researchers are interested in helping to promote a social change agenda and many researchers do care deeply about societal inequities and the needs of particular foundations, many of those who make their lives as scholars and teachers in research universities heed a professional mandate to make use of their analytical and methodological expertise to advance knowledge, broadly defined. From this perspective,
the social utility of research is not a primary concern. Moreover, some faculty (including those in research universities) are highly critical of the increased pressure to obtain external funding for their research as well as for the university infrastructure (i.e., support of students, staff, programs, and centers). Thus researchers exhibit a range of inclinations: some are committed to solving social problems and even promoting a social change agenda, while others aspire to make distinctive contributions elsewhere; some seek a steady stream of external funding, while others eschew it as a matter of principle.

As a general finding, this part of the discussion evidenced a chasm between foundation staff and higher education researchers, variations within each group aside. Each group exhibited a limited understanding of the distinctive constraints and opportunities the other group encounters. The nature of this chasm, the potential to bridge it, and the necessity to do so, are amplified in subsequent sections of this report.
Section II. Organizational Profiles

A. Methodological Challenges

The second activity in this grant was designed to gain insight into the nature of foundations’ grant-making for higher education research. Both prior to and following the Stanford meeting, the research team attempted to develop a summary profile on each organization. The profiles were based upon information garnered from each website (focusing on recent annual reports) and from a semi-structured telephone interview with a staff member. The interview protocol included questions that asked each individual to characterize the organization’s grant-making priorities as well as the nature of grants related to higher education research. The staff members were also asked to offer their opinions about factors influencing their organization’s commitment to funding higher education, and to speculate about future priority topics. We studied fourteen funding organizations: twelve foundations and two federal agencies. (Of those fourteen, only two were unable to participate in the Stanford meeting described in Section I of this report.)

The limitations to this approach must be noted. Due to significant budgetary and time constraints, this activity was exploratory by design. We did not attempt to gather quantitative longitudinal data on grant-making by foundations. At the national level, foundation grants to higher education are not well-documented. Although the Foundation Center does have an extensive database, its data are defined and collected in ways that are not useful for this project’s aims of understanding the nature of past and future priorities for grants to higher education research. The best objective source to gauge the activities of one foundation over time is the annual report, but some formats are more useful than others, and categories are not standardized over time, neither within one foundation nor across foundations. The absence of readily available data led us to pursue a more modest, exploratory activity: to illuminate some currents in the contemporary landscape, thereby informing more systematic inquiry in the future.

In conducting informational interviews with staff members and reviewing their websites, the research team noted the following further limitations.

First, characterizations by the individual staff members are highly subjective, tied to the person’s experience and position in the organization, as well as his or her own agenda. The websites compensated in part (and only in part) for individual biases, by providing written information in mission statements and in summaries of grant programs (either annual or programmatic). In all cases, the staff members we interviewed had been employed by their organizations for more than a year, and they confined their comments to areas of grant-making where they had first-hand knowledge. While this encouraged our confidence in their remarks, every participant expressed uncertainty in speculating on future commitments, since their Boards hold ultimate authority to determine priorities.
Second, it was also difficult to compare the relative weight given to priorities from one organization to the next. They were not asked to disclose financial data, so we could not easily determine the relative size of grant awards to priority topics. Even with financial data, a basic incomparability of scale must be noted: a grant of $200,000 may be a major funding commitment by one organization, while that same amount may be a minor commitment for another organization making awards ten or twenty times that size.

Beyond that, each foundation awards a large number of grants, and their reporting categories do not lend themselves to comparative analysis of the thematic content. Again, categories are not standardized across funding organizations. In other words, research on a set of priorities (e.g., extending access and persistence of disadvantaged students) could be embedded in several categories of an organization’s grants. The same applies to the nature of the grants themselves, which are not usually categorized by type, such as targeted interventions for organizational change, as distinct from grants for policy analysis.

In spite of these limitations, the program officer for our project encouraged us to provide a summary of what we learned in the hope that it would uncover some insights for discussion and perhaps future inquiry.

B. Foundations’ Grant-making to Higher Education by Topic

As might be expected, the case-by-case investigation of the organizations’ websites to determine grant-making priorities for higher education research produced an even greater range of topics than those discussed at the Stanford meeting. Our analysis identified twenty-five higher education topics as priorities for funding. While this is not an exhaustive list, it does provide a snapshot of the range of topics identified in the interviews and annual reports. We arranged them into meaningful clusters of issues. Admittedly, the number of topics could easily have been fifty instead of twenty-five, if we wanted to reflect more specific interests. We did not impose a predetermined taxonomy on the organizations. Instead, we identified the categories inductively. As a result, the topics tend to reflect current terminology in use in 2002, such as “access, equity, and diversity.” The list of topics includes specific institutional settings (e.g., research universities, community colleges) identified as a priority interest by the staff members. We also reported commitments by functional type (e.g., program development, policy analysis, or research), noting that research per se was rarely identified as a distinct category but was rather contained within a programmatic grant on a substantive issue. This fact alone required us to broaden the analysis to grants for higher education, not simply higher education research. We learned too that most grants to higher education are short-term and project-based. Moreover, there is little, if any, evaluation or demonstrated results that accompany the reporting of past grant awards.

In Table 1 (below, page 13), we provide a thematic overview of grant-making priorities to higher education for this sample of fourteen organizations (labeled simply as “foundations”). The topics are listed according to the number of foundations that
identified a particular topic or practices in a specific institutional setting as a grant-making priority, in descending order. For example, almost all the foundation representatives indicated that their organization provides significant funding to address issues of access, equity and diversity in higher education; therefore this topic area is listed first. It does not reflect the relative weight of the priority commitment within or among the foundations (number, magnitude/amount, or duration of grants) to a particular priority. The column labeled “past and present” in this table, as well as in Table 2, refers to the past decade, from the early 1990s to the present. The column labeled “future” should be seen as highly subjective and speculative. It reflects what the staff member believed the foundation would likely support in the near future, and in some cases, what he or she wants the foundation to support as a priority. (The anticipated priorities for the organization and preferred priorities of the individual were so intermingled that we are unable to report them separately.) The last column identifies the difference in the number of foundations listed between the first and second columns, to suggest whether foundations’ priorities may expand or narrow in scope.

Given widespread concern about future funding of higher education research, the relative invisibility of higher education research in the grants to higher education is noteworthy. Higher education research is not a prominent category in the annual reports; and in the interviews we learned that higher education research per se constituted a small proportion of the total funding. If included, it is embedded in one or more topics, either by institutional setting (e.g., community colleges, comprehensive state colleges and universities), by type of activity (policy analysis, program development), or by general theme (e.g., access, equity, and diversity, economics of higher education, or public higher education systems).

As shown in Table 1, for the present and in the recent past, the broad topic we label as “access, equity, and diversity” is evident as a top priority for all of the organizations in this study. The category includes grants to extend access for disadvantaged students, to increase student persistence and success, and to maximize benefits from diversity. At least half of the foundations have also given priority to the following topics: faculty training and development; assessment and student learning outcomes; and a broad category of activity we labeled “program development, evaluation, dissemination and adoption.” For institutional settings, nearly all foundations reported grants that examine the practices of research universities, while half or fewer awarded grants that focused on other sectors and institutional types.

The last column in Table 1 characterizes the difference between the grant-making record and possible future priorities as expressed by the staff member. This characterization is based entirely on individual phone conversations and disclosures at the Stanford meeting, where in both settings the staff members were encouraged to offer their views on anticipated priority areas along with their personal wish-list for future funding. Overall, five topics were projected as stable priorities: access, equity and diversity; undergraduate and graduate scholarships and financial aid; student experiences in quantitative and professional fields; student experiences in the humanities and social sciences; and basic research. An additional five topics were projected to be of increased interest: technology
and distance learning; public higher education systems; K–16 bridges or transitions; program development, evaluation, dissemination, and adoption; and interdisciplinary research in the social sciences and humanities. Lastly, thirteen of the twenty-five topics show anticipated declines, including declining interest in grants that foreground practices in particular institutional settings (although research universities appear to retain most interest within this group).

Table 1:
Number of Foundations Making Grants to Higher Education
By Topic or Setting (n=14)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic/Institutional Setting</th>
<th>Present &amp; Future</th>
<th>Past</th>
<th>Future</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topic</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access, equity, and diversity</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty training and development</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment and student learning outcomes</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program development, evaluation, dissemination, and adoption</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>K–12 teacher training</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>-2</td>
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<td>Public policy analysis</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td></td>
<td>-1</td>
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<td>Technology and distance learning</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate and graduate scholarships and financial aid</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>Civic leadership and community engagement</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>-4</td>
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<td>Basic research</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>Liberal arts and curriculum</td>
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<td>K–16 bridges or transitions</td>
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<td><strong>Institutional Setting</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Community colleges</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liberal arts colleges</td>
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<td>Public higher education systems</td>
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<td>Historically black colleges and universities</td>
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<td>Hispanic-serving institutions</td>
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<td>Tribal colleges</td>
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</table>
C. Diversity of Foundations’ Higher Education Portfolios

Next, to characterize the diversity of priorities within higher education portfolios, we list in Table 2 (below) each foundation by an identification number and the number of priority topics they fund.

In the present and recent past, four foundations reflect highly diverse priorities in their higher education portfolios, with activity in more than ten of the twenty-five priority areas. The average number of priority areas for the present and recent past is eight. Four foundations show more focused portfolios for higher education, with grant-making in four or fewer topics.

As with Table 1, the “future” column is highly speculative, and at times reflects the staff members’ own agenda. Looking to the future, eight of the fourteen organizations indicate possible or likely reductions in their priority topics, while two anticipate stability. Four other foundations foresee an increased number of priority topics. The staff from two organizations reported that their Boards recently directed a narrowing or redirection of priorities, which will likely result in reducing or eliminating higher education grants from their portfolios. The lack of alignment between a foundation’s projected priorities and the hopes of its staff members is in itself an issue worthy of analysis, but beyond the scope of this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foundation</th>
<th>Number of Priority Topics</th>
<th>Present &amp; Past</th>
<th>Future</th>
<th>Difference</th>
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</table>
D. Summary

This exploratory activity led to five noteworthy insights about the present and past decade of foundation grant-making for higher education research. Embedded in this summary are the staff members’ perceptions of higher education research, both its shortcomings and its potential.

The first point is the relative invisibility of higher education research as an established category of grant-making. Foundations tend to organize their thinking and commitments by higher education’s problems (e.g., barriers to access) or issues (e.g., technology and distance learning). This means that grants to higher education research, if supported at all, tend to be distributed throughout each organization’s program areas and across the categories of funding commitments, making it difficult for investigators like us to assess easily the commitment to higher education research, relative to other funding commitments. The reporting of grants for “basic research” is the exception. Furthermore, the absence of a standardized classification scheme over time and across organizations impedes efforts to analyze shifts in the nature of funding for any given topic, including higher education research.

Second, this sketch of organizational profiles suggests a varied landscape. The portfolio of each foundation reflects a distinctive mix of funding commitments related to higher education, a mix often explicitly linked to the purposes articulated in each organization’s mission statement. Some foundations have diverse portfolios reflecting commitments to a multiplicity of priorities within and related to higher education, while others are more narrowly focused. Although the missions may endure, changes in leadership of staff, presidents, or Board members may prompt a reinterpretation of mission and thus redirection or focusing of priorities. Given that grants for higher education have covered such a wide range of topics, are of short duration, and have few, if any, built-in evaluation mechanisms, it is no wonder that some foundation staff report with frustration that they see no identifiable or sustainable change in higher education resulting from their grant awards. Making genuine progress along these lines requires reconsideration, not only of what potential grantees are proposing, but also of the limited effectiveness of short-cycle funding mechanisms.

Third, improving access, equity and diversity is a top priority for grants by many of the foundations studied in this project. Although they emphasize different dimensions within this cluster of issues, the chorus of voices expressing interest in access-related issues parallels their interest in grants that will lead to change and improvement. Both the impetus and the justification for prioritizing funding initiatives on these issues tend to be action-oriented and solution-driven. (This orientation contrasts with an interest in the generative value of basic research, which a few of the foundation staff held in high regard.) The fact that this cluster of access issues appears to be shared across several foundations raises the opportunity for collaboration in strategically funding initiatives on a targeted set of issues. During the meeting, a few people spoke about the feasibility of
collaborative funding among foundations, citing examples of past and present co-funded initiatives that produced valuable activities and findings. Some participants also noted that many foundations want to be seen as having a signature commitment or as a pioneer in a specific area, both of which may constitute a barrier to collaboration.

Fourth, the foundation staff expressed a range of views about higher education research, with many of them identifying its shortcomings. These comments from the informational interviews affirmed what was said at the Stanford meeting. Although some participants expressed harsh critiques of research as unduly narrow and insular, several others saw potential for higher education research to become more socially meaningful and useful to foundations. This would entail reorienting research to develop solutions and design interventions, both of which would further the agenda of those foundations that are committed to solving particular social problems, such as improving student access to and success in higher education.

Fifth, in speculating about the future, foundation staff anticipated that their funding capacity is diminished, at least in the near term, given shrinking endowments in the weak economy. We also heard about specific shifts in the priorities of some foundation Boards away from higher education. On this latter point, the staff members indicated that some foundations are scaling back or discontinuing their funding to higher education and specifically to higher education institutions. Although they did not elaborate on the reasons, we understood that at least two factors contribute to this. One is an intention to move on, after realizing that they did not achieve the hoped-for changes or improvements in higher education. The nature of the frustration was not specified, other than to suggest that foundation funding to universities is dwarfed by massive university endowments and revenues from capital campaigns. The other factor is a growing interest in other social problem areas that are either longstanding, like K–12 education and disadvantaged populations, or that are gaining public attention, like globalization and aging.

However, more than one staff member suggested that countervailing forces could and should redirect interest to higher education in the coming decade, noting that this is an era when the knowledge economy has grown in importance and higher education is the most significant knowledge-transmitting and knowledge-producing institution in society. Simply put, now is not the time to turn away from higher education, when the nation depends on the health of the enterprise and its institutions. Higher education researchers can also be quite eloquent on this point, not necessarily out of self-interest, but out of genuine desire for their research to shed light on the problems in universities and colleges that, without attention, will prevent the enterprise from realizing its potential contributions to society.

Finally, while we undertook this activity to gauge the nature of foundations’ grant-making for higher education research, we conclude with deep concern about an anticipated decline in grant-making to higher education more generally.
Section III. Conclusion and Implications

A. Points of Convergence and Divergence

The primary purpose of this project was to enlist staff members from major foundations in identifying research priorities that would address the most pressing issues confronting higher education, now and in the coming decade. Our secondary aim was to gain some insight into their views on existing higher education research and their organizations’ grant-making for higher education research. Using an exploratory approach, we uncovered expected variation in the perspectives of foundation staff, and among researchers who participated in the project. Aside from the within-group variation, there were points of convergence as well as divergence between the foundation staff and the researchers.

During the course of this project, the researchers and the staff members of foundations all expressed interest in improving the quality of higher education in the United States. A key component of improvement, cited time and again during the meeting and in the interviews, is the need to broaden access and promote a more equitable distribution of high quality education beyond high school. Participants widely agreed upon the need to clarify and strengthen the social charter between higher education and society, the implicit understanding of their respective responsibilities and rights. The foundation staff and researchers who expressed their commitment to promoting a social change agenda also acknowledged that neither piecemeal funding nor piecemeal research would yield identifiable or sustainable change. There was widespread agreement that higher education research was “off the radar screen” of many of its potential users and funders.

The discussions at the Stanford meeting and in the informational interviews also powerfully illustrated some fundamental differences in perspective between higher education researchers and those who are in a position to provide funding—not only the foundation staff, but also their Boards, who have the authority to set mission and funding priorities. Many of these divergences derive from a mix of structural and normative factors, as the two groups reside in different institutional settings and experience different sets of pressures and incentives. Each groups’ limited understanding of each other’s priorities is, to some extent, shaped by these varying organizational circumstances.

B. Researchers’ Interests and Constraints

Most higher education researchers operate within a more traditional academic framework, particularly those who develop their academic careers within research universities. The reward structure in these settings places the greatest value on the advancement of knowledge and original contributions to scholarship. Moreover, several academic disciplines carry strong legacies that cast a social change agenda as inappropriately political or biased, rather than scholarly and disinterested. Some faculty do manage to reconcile this tension, carving out a change-oriented research agenda that is
deemed cutting-edge rather than over the edge, as we have seen among some feminist scholars and critical theorists. Yet the norms of traditional academic departments are known to constrain researchers who want to work on solving social problems or promoting social change. Researchers within professional schools tend to find a more hospitable climate for addressing issues of policy and practice. Yet within more elite research universities, even the professional schools may hold advances in scholarship in higher regard than applied contributions. To pursue the latter, whether primarily or exclusively, may still entail sanctions or lost rewards. Higher education researchers are socialized within these academic settings, which filter the diverse interests and commitments they hold as individuals. As a result, researchers are inclined to propose studies designed to describe and understand the complex nature of problems. It is more unusual for higher education researchers to propose work that will yield solutions to social problems, although they may assert such aims in their proposals, to capture the interest of foundation staff.

C. The Action Agenda within Foundations

According to the funders who participated in the meeting, most of their foundations have a primary commitment to pursuing a social change agenda directly, by advocating particular policies, engaging in targeted interventions (such as fellowships for students), and, much less prominently, evaluating the results. From their point of view, this agenda is action-oriented and solution-driven. Some conceptualize this as “a social justice agenda” that begins with correcting the limitations of K–12 education and supporting future generations of students from all levels of academic preparation and socioeconomic backgrounds, so that they will attain greater success than their predecessors.

Many of the foundation staff saw potential for higher education researchers to provide information and to serve as an occasional resource for particular methodological expertise, such as program evaluation. They indicated that research proposals often fail to generate the interest of either the foundation staff or the Board members. They attribute this to the fact that researchers tend to focus on issues of basic importance to those who study higher education, or issues most pressing for those who work within colleges and universities, without elaboration of clear or concrete connections to critical social problems. Such efforts on the part of researchers—to define and understand the nature of the higher education enterprise—appeared to many of the foundations to be an insider’s agenda, unduly focused on institutional practices and processes. (This research orientation does align with that of the few foundation staff in this study who expressed greater interest in the internal workings of higher education, including how colleges and universities can become more effective as organizations and systems.)

The contrast between the action agenda and the researchers’ interests may not be as stark as it appears. Many of the foundation staff focus their attention on the wider society. They commonly identify the most tractable and treatable sources of problems for higher education as outside the institution—if not in the inequities of society, then in public policy, or in K–12 education. Researchers tend to view academic structures and practices
within colleges and universities as major determinants that, once understood, can be reconfigured or navigated so as to strengthen higher education’s contributions to society. Researchers often study complexities that are systemic in nature, and which are likely to thwart interventions at the outset or ultimately erode their sustainability. Although these frames and foci are different, they may be seen as complementary.

D. Potential for Synergy

Paradoxically, the very differences in perspective between higher education researchers and foundation staff as articulated in this study can be seen as comprising two sides of a very valuable coin. Taken together, they could produce a synergy.

One example was evident by the end of the meeting, when the discussion turned to “interactions.” The spirit of the dialogue encouraged researchers and foundation staff members to look to the future in new ways: to examine what is inside and outside of colleges and universities, to study the interaction between external forces and internal dynamics, to determine changes for higher education that emanate from changes underway in other societal institutions—all of which could result in new understandings, in addition to enhancing and accelerating the processes of change. A second example of potential synergy was seen in the shared recognition that foundation grant-making has not been studied for its impact, which is of obvious interest both to foundations that seek genuine leverage and to researchers who are interested in studying the effects and outcomes of interventions.

Building on the strengths of both groups could create unprecedented synergies between theory and practice, between disciplinary frameworks and realities, between research findings and effective solutions to social problems. Even for those researchers who are less eager to turn their expertise to promote a social change agenda, their work may help further the interests of foundations and higher education’s external stakeholders. Their findings may advance our understanding of the institutional and systemic issues that underlie or reinforce a range of societal problems, which ultimately can contribute insights to guide the design of interventions for improving student access and success. In order to make this more apparent, the higher education research community needs to cultivate support from higher education leaders and other potential users of higher education research, who are in a position to advocate more forcefully for the value of research to foundations, and to help demonstrate how research can make a difference in improving the lives of students and the wider society.

Indeed, it is rare when a discussion articulates differences that seem intractable, yet also suggests a path toward understanding; and it was our good fortune that this occurred during the meeting. However, it is not apparent that the thesis, antithesis, and synthesis were clear in the minds of all the participants. Much is to be gained by extended dialogue about these differences, the desirability of establishing common ground, and the implications for the funding and conduct of future research. Further exploration of this synergy may produce substantial, even unexpected, dividends.
Section IV. Postscript: One Year Later

The long-term significance of our project is apparent in the context of developments during the calendar year of 2002. The funding climate for higher education—research or otherwise—worsened in light of a series of announcements by foundations that their funding for higher education would be reduced or eliminated. This broader shift was characterized as a “focusing” of priorities. We learned that the source was in part economic, shrinking endowments due to a weak economy, and in part a matter of changing interests of foundation Board members. Prospects for research funding from the U.S. Department of Education also narrowed considerably when the Office of Educational Research and Improvement did not launch a competition for a new postsecondary R & D center, a source of funding that historically has supported multi-year, large-scale studies and collaborative networks of university-based researchers and their graduate students. On the bright side, some new foundation support has emerged.

Higher education researchers became very concerned about the apparent downturn, although its extent and duration were unclear. They depend on funding not only for their research and career development, but also for sustaining the institutional capacity of higher education programs in research universities. Externally-funded research projects directly contribute to faculty and staff salaries as well as graduate student support; these are building blocks of the infrastructure. In most universities, the number of students who are admitted and who complete their degrees corresponds with the ebb and flow of funded projects. In this sense, the future preparation of higher education researchers and of higher education as a field of study is directly effected by the ability of researchers to obtain funding. If that capacity is eroded, so is the field and its future.

Funding patterns for higher education warrant attention for their cumulative impact as well. The present mix of economic constraints and shifting priorities of visible foundations has generated much reflection—even soul-searching—among foundation staffs and higher education researchers, as they contemplate their next steps. While professional self-interest and personal ideals understandably figure into individual deliberations, it is worth exploring how to foster more genuine collaboration between external funders and academic experts. As we learned from the Stanford meeting, certain conditions are likely to facilitate our dialogue: not only available funding, but also openness to each others’ distinctive interests and expertise. The road ahead would be more productive if foundations recognized that they depend on higher education as a source of research and trained experts who can help them deploy their resources effectively, and if researchers lent their expertise to advance the public interest in its varied forms. It would be beneficial if foundation boards more readily accepted the value of basic research and scholarly advancements, while academics more actively made their expertise and knowledge both accessible and meaningful to non-academics. In other words, what is needed is greater, mutual appreciation for the distinctive strengths that each group can bring to their collaboration.
Extended dialogue is a pivotal step towards fostering such an appreciation, and for determining how to leverage the skills and resources of these groups for the overall improvement of American higher education, to the ultimate benefit of students and the wider society. This overarching aim is as important today as at any time in history. Foundations now have the opportunity to launch a bold, multi-faceted agenda that is grounded in a vision of higher education’s future. Given diminished state and federal support for higher education, foundation grants to higher education—and to higher education research—are more critical than ever for maintaining institutional vitality, supporting innovation across colleges and universities, and improving the quality of research that emanates from this valuable national resource. A necessary step in ensuring this future is to enhance communication and understanding between foundation staff and researchers. Within the domain of higher education, such an investment of time, energy, and funds holds great promise for advancing society’s ability to comprehend and conquer some of its most vexing problems.