A Philanthropic Push to Diversify the Ranks of Researchers in Economics and Other Social Sciences

Paul Karon | June 29, 2023

New faculty members often face a catch-22: it's hard to land research grants because they haven't the time or resources to develop their research interests, but they can't do the research without the grants. Since grants are crucial to an academic's career and income, a not-insignificant number of young professors leave their main field of interest as they follow the money to better-funded topics. Others leave academia altogether, amounting to the loss of an expensive investment by the researchers and the institutions that trained them. But for academics from diverse backgrounds, under-represented groups and less-resourced institutions, the problem is vastly amplified.
Several philanthropies seek to support researchers during this tenuous time, but the Russell Sage Foundation (RSF) is one of the few that is primarily interested in the social sciences. The foundation supports academic researchers working in fields like economics and sociology, with a focus on equality and opportunity for people of all backgrounds. Research that involves these extremely hard questions of cyclic poverty, economic mobility and equality for all groups is best conducted by researchers who are from diverse backgrounds. So in 2020, RSF launched its Pipeline Grants Competition, a program to support early career social scientists with $30,000 grants to pursue research and get it published. They've partnered with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which is funding the initiative through its Economic Mobility and Opportunity program.

BIPOC scholars face barriers to their success in academia, a problem that may be particularly glaring in social science departments, where issues like economic inequality are addressed without including the lived experiences of researchers from diverse backgrounds.

"Because the program is targeted to early career scholars who are from underrepresented groups or under-resourced universities, they are not likely to have gotten other external grants," said Sheldon Danziger, president of RSF. The RSL Pipeline and other grants often have the same catalytic effect on funding and careers that philanthropy throughout the research world hopes to have. "A number of researchers have told us that the Russell Sage grant on their CVs helped them get an NIH grant or to be recruited for a new university job."

To date, with four funding rounds completed since the program's launch in 2020, RSF has awarded 77 grants, up to 20 each year. The grants support research into the areas of study that the foundation has long supported, like combating systemic racism and other social, political and economic inequalities. The organization encourages interdisciplinary and quantitative research, including novel and creative uses of new or underused data.

The Pipeline Grant program is also a way for awardees to form professional networks and relations and to find the mentorship that's invaluable in academia, Danziger said. The RSF program also operates conferences where grantees, mentors and other social scientists can provide feedback on research articles ahead of publication and foster collaboration.

Diversity in academia is a worthy goal, in and of itself, but this type of support for the social sciences can have profound, lasting impacts throughout society. In fact, as IP's David Callahan has written, the research the foundation has backed has helped move inequality into the national debate and kept it there — even if the process took years.
"Social scientists play the long game," Danziger said. For example, the Child Tax Credit enacted in recent years can be traced back to research done in the late 1970s; similarly, ideas like a $15 minimum wage, once thought impossible, are based on research pursued for years by economists and other social scientists.

The Russell Sage Foundation is one of the oldest philanthropies in the country. It was established in New York City in 1907 by Olivia Slocum Sage, who possessed a strong philanthropic bent. She inherited $63 million upon the death in 1906 of her husband Russell Sage, a wealthy financier, railroad executive, conservative whig politician and, by all accounts, a non-philanthropic guy. Olivia committed $10 million to start the Russell Sage Foundation — the endowment has grown to around $440 million today.

An important part of this story is the simple fact that RSF is one of the few philanthropies that centers academic research in the social sciences in their programmatic giving. Along with RSF, top funders specializing in this space are William T. Grant Foundation, which funds research to understand how to reduce inequality in outcomes for children; the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, whose funding programs includes support for research economists; and the Spencer Foundation, which focuses on education research. Further constricting the available support, says Sheldon, some top past funders of things like economics and other social sciences, such as the Ford Foundation, have backed away from social science research.

That relative dearth of philanthropic support for the social sciences seems like an error of omission, and one that's easily correctable. Such fields of research are at the center of many of the debates in government and throughout society. Funding for the research that's needed to develop policy based on facts rather than political slogans is vitally important and is a role where philanthropy can make a difference. For one thing, compared with many types of biomedical, health and scientific research, the work conducted by social scientists can be accomplished for far less.

As we've noted in previous coverage, the RSF is overseen by academics and it doesn't support advocacy. "Our mandate is to strengthen social science research methods and data to inform policymakers," said Stephen Glauser, program officer for the Pipeline Grants Competition. "We don't have a policy outcome that we require — we just want to put good information out there for the people and policymakers who need that information."
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