

CULTIVATING COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY FOR POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

Alternative Education Lessons from La Sierra Charter School



by Steven Kellner, Ed.D.

The *Report and Recommendations of the California Advisory Task Force on Alternative Schools* encourages alternative schools to develop a learner-centered approach to teaching and learning that is linked to—and intentionally designed to support—high expectations for student outcomes (John W. Gardner Center, 2020). Whereas a student-centered approach centers student learning, a learner-centered approach centers the learning of all members of the school community—inclusive of leaders, teachers, staff, parents, and students—and cultivates the conditions for their individual and collective growth and development (McCombs & Whisler, 1997).

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INSIGHTS FROM
TULARE COUNTY



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Operationalizing a commitment to both high expectations and a learner-centered design often proves challenging: How do educators set high expectations for all students and support them as individual learners? Is it possible to be learner-centered and hold high expectations, or does a learner-centered approach necessitate varied expectations? These questions can become especially salient in alternative schools where, typically, students' needs are complex, and it is hard to know which expectations are in service to their growth and development.

And yet the Task Force's recommendations highlight that these are precisely the settings where these commitments may be most important—perhaps even symbiotic in the way that they catalyze and strengthen one another. How then might we set high expectations for students and create the conditions for a learner-centered approach to ensure that students meet them? La Sierra, an alternative school serving students in grades 6 through 12 in Tulare County, California, provides one example of what this looks like in practice.

INTRODUCTION: LA SIERRA

Authorized by the Tulare County Office of Education, La Sierra Charter School is one of three military academies in California, and it offers the following alternative options:

- La Sierra High School Military Academy (grades 9-12)
- La Sierra Junior Military Academy (grades 7-8)
- La Sierra Charter Independent Studies

La Sierra was established in 2000 in an effort to provide a tuition-free school of choice for students who were not experiencing success within the local public schools, yet remained committed to “honor, leadership, postsecondary ambition, and service” (Tulare County Office of Education, 2020).

La Sierra's programs are co-located on a single campus in Visalia, California and together they serve 250 students who are admitted through an application process. The majority (75%) of La Sierra's students enter in need of credit acceleration and/or recovery and 87% qualify for free or reduced-price meals. Additionally, one in five students at La Sierra has an Individualized Education Program (IEP), a rate that is nearly twice as high as the County's overall percentage of students with IEPs in grades 9 through 12.

La Sierra endeavors to provide a rigorous academic education in a strict military environment, but this is just part of their story. La Sierra is also deeply committed to the whole child—the whole student—and with this in mind, it has a robust vision for their students that goes beyond academic success to include qualities associated with being “college- and career-oriented for a successful future” (Tulare County Office of Education, 2020). Whereas many alternative education settings tend to set their sights rather exclusively on increasing graduation rates, La Sierra goes one step further. For La Sierra, graduation is not the end goal, it is the starting point; the end goal is for their students to have access to a robust range of postsecondary options, including but not limited to college.

Due, in part, to its capacity to translate these ideas into practice, in 2011 La Sierra was one of eleven California schools selected for the prestigious California Academic Partnership Program (CAPP) Model School Program.

CENTERING LEARNING, GROWTH, AND DEVELOPMENT: SHIFTING FROM GRADUATION TO GRADUATES

When La Sierra was selected to be part of the CAPP Model School Program, a team including the principal and seven teachers was invited to attend CAPP's professional development conference at Fresno State focused on what it takes to cultivate a college-going culture. Established in 1984 by the California State Legislature and administered by the California State University, CAPP focuses on supporting schools with low numbers of students entering college to "improve the academic preparation and college readiness" of their students (California State University, 2020). While CAPP provides a range of services designed to improve teaching and learning throughout California's secondary schools, their efforts focus exclusively on comprehensive high schools with one exception: La Sierra.

Rhonda Hash, one of the La Sierra teachers present during that first convening, recalls the team's conversation over lunch on the second day of the conference: *"We sat around the table and one of us said—'we're doing it wrong.' It was an amazing moment."*

La Sierra's teachers and administrators had always been deeply committed to their students; their students arrived with complex needs, and they worked tirelessly to support them. And yet, as Rhonda looks back on that moment, she remembers that something shifted: They realized that while they had cared deeply for their students, they had not necessarily prepared all of them for vibrant postsecondary options. In Rhonda's words, *"We all knew at that moment that we owed a postsecondary opportunity to every student."*

Another La Sierra teacher who attended the CAPP convening recalls the shift as well: *"It was about a different finish line. ... As a staff we were so focused on graduation that we were missing the bigger picture."* La Sierra's principal, Anjelica Zermeno, remembers that the team left the workshop committed to preparing all of their students for postsecondary success, however students envisioned or defined their path: *"It is about students having Plan A, B, and C all of which are postsecondary."* There was a collective understanding between Anjelica and the teachers that they could do better by their students by preparing them for success after graduation.

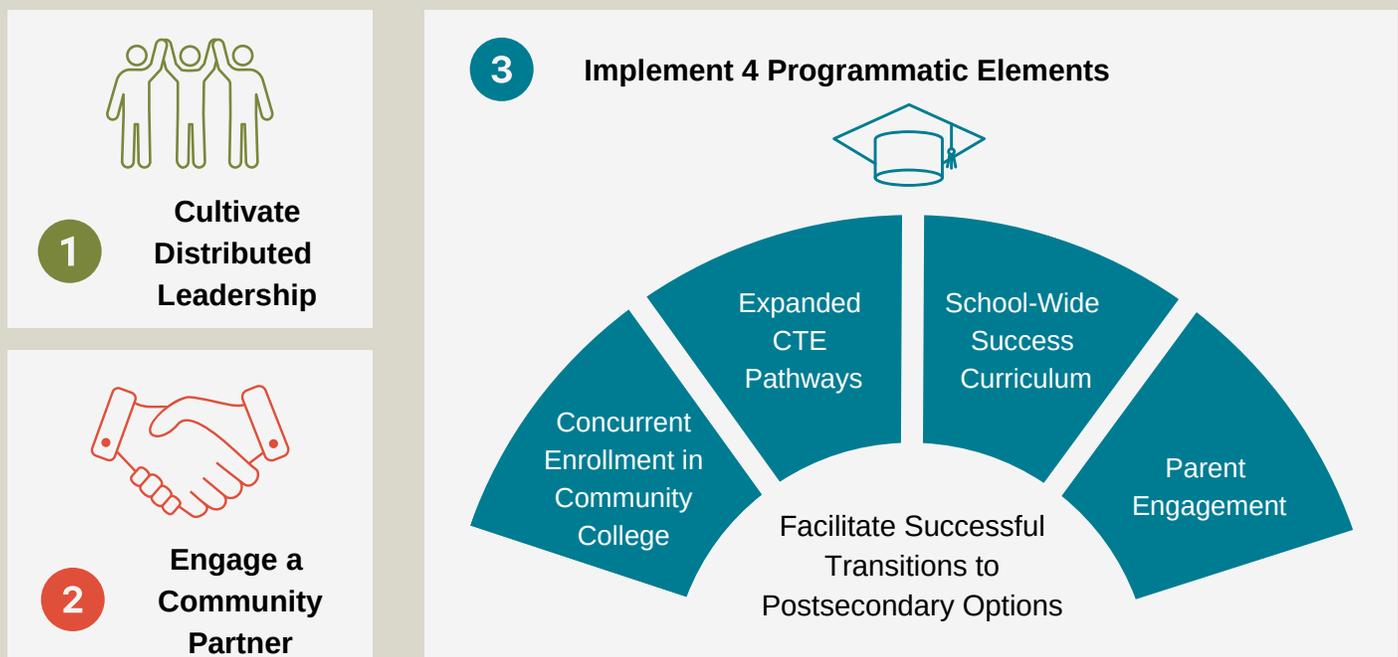
The team also recognized that such a transformation would not take place over night. Looking back, Anjelica remembers that they all knew that they had a long way to go. She recalls that at that time, only 11% of La Sierra's graduates enrolled in a two- or four-year college in the year following graduation.

La Sierra's students needed support tied to particular—and more robust—expectations. Not only would this shift take time, it would also take a different level of effort. While reflecting on her own journey through college and her early postsecondary years, Rhonda notes, *"I had to fight so hard for myself [during those years], but I wasn't fighting hard enough for my students. It was a real wake-up call."*

By all accounts, both the students and the adults who are part of La Sierra's community responded to this call: Today, over 86% of La Sierra's students complete career and technical education (CTE) coursework, 95.3% of their students graduate, and 87% of those students enroll in a two- or four-year college in the year following graduation (Tulare County Office of Education, 2020).

Many educators can relate to the type of inspiration the La Sierra team experienced at the CAPP workshop. What is unique about La Sierra's story is that they translated that inspiration into sustained, intentional, and effective action. This approach is emblematic of a learner-centered model wherein teachers and site leaders are taking intentional steps to sustain their own learning and development to serve their students' learning and development. Three strategies that were central to their efforts are described in the infographic below.

3 CENTRAL STRATEGIES



CULTIVATING DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

Given the breadth and depth of students' needs in alternative education environments, it takes more than a set of practices to support the kind of holistic outcomes La Sierra describes in its vision for all graduates. Hollywood has long lifted up the single teacher or principal who transforms a school through sheer force of will; however, the reality is that the full story of such change is often more complex. Reflecting back on her early days at the school, Anjelica notes, *"We were not a big school. I didn't have layers of administrators to turn to. I knew if we were going to change outcomes for kids it had to be through each one of our teachers."*

To that end, Anjelica doubled down on a distributed leadership approach. With twelve full-time teachers, it took the shared vision, commitment, and participation of the entire staff to shift from focusing on graduation to postsecondary options for every student.

According to Ritchie and Woods (2007), within a distributed leadership model, the principal and teachers share authority and power; teachers take leading roles, assume responsibility, and act independently as individuals or groups. While this model assumes that leadership roles are distributed among the traditional administration and faculty groups in a high school, it is often implemented in ways that limit distribution to a small subset of a school's teachers, such as lead teachers or department chairs.

Natsiopoulou and Giouroukakis (2010), who have studied this extensively in their native Greece, note that while distributed leadership models may function more effectively than traditional models, they do not always promote robust participation and harmonious collaboration among all stakeholders. Anjelica's approach sought to do more than activate the participation of a few key teacher leaders. Anjelica set out to activate an entirely different culture, including new norms and practices, rooted in an ethic of shared and collaborative responsibility—perhaps better described as "democratic and distributed leadership." It was not enough for teachers to simply "have a voice" in running the school—they would actually have to support student wellbeing and success—interaction by interaction, moment by moment.

At La Sierra, sharing leadership responsibility for student learning and achievement included attention to curriculum, instruction, and pedagogy. This went beyond content expertise and delivery, as one teacher explains: *"We needed to grow a team of like-minded individuals who worked together to improve outputs for students. It was more than academics; social-emotional learning was key. Teachers needed to be trained in this area and everyone needed to see their student as a whole, not just a number in their class."*

In addition to training, it was critical that the staff build trust in each other as allies in their collective effort to transform teaching and learning.

Teaching, even at a small alternative school, is by its nature, an isolating profession. The team at La Sierra had talked about collaboration as a component of personalizing teaching and learning, providing social-emotional support, and fostering a college-going culture. Now they needed to turn their plans into action.

This involved several new practices, including teachers observing one another's teaching practice and providing each other with feedback. *"There is no question that many of us were out of our comfort zone...it wasn't easy,"* says Rhonda. Rhonda recalls how, at first, some teachers felt defensive of their practice, and asserted that it was not appropriate for their colleagues to observe them and offer feedback—especially colleagues who taught outside of their subject area. Rhonda notes that what got them through was their commitment to their students and their *"willingness to have hard conversations without taking it personally."*

In addition to observing one another's practice, the teachers also found that co-teaching lessons was an effective starting point for improving their classroom practices. At most schools, and La Sierra was no exception, when another adult steps into a classroom, students know that something is out of the ordinary. *"At first the students were confused,"* remembers Rhonda, *"they would say things like 'hey, you're not supposed to be in this class' and it just reminded me how little, as teachers, we were in each other's classrooms. It was a wake-up call."*

Over time, once co-teaching of lessons and visiting one another's classrooms were more commonplace, students' comments changed. One teacher elaborates, *"They started to tease us about it. They would say 'geez will you guys just leave us alone already' and that was when knew it was working!"* The students' responses reveal that the teachers' efforts to learn and improve were visible, prompting confusion at first and then easing into an acceptance of the new normal. This provides a poignant illustration of the way a learner-centered approach facilitates continuous learning and improvement.

ENGAGING A STRATEGIC PARTNER

In addition to engaging the partnership of her teachers, Anjelica also knew that she needed to engage a strategic partner to support their effort. Anjelica wasn't looking for a traditional technical assistance provider or consultant who would offer a short-term engagement focused on a discrete area of practice. Transforming La Sierra's culture and practices to reflect a learner-centered approach to achieving high expectations would require the wisdom and presence of a partner who not only understood this vision, but also understood how to support this change journey over time.

Anjelica remembers looking for someone who would make a long-term commitment to walk alongside them through this process. *"We knew this was not going to change overnight,"* she recalls, *"so it was critical that we work with someone who was going to be with us for multiple years."*

California Education Partners, with expertise in both school change processes and learner-centered design, proved to be just the partner she was looking for.

In the spring of 2018, the La Sierra team joined California Education Partners' College on Track collaboration, a collection of schools committed to improving college access for Black, Latinx, and socioeconomically disadvantaged students through the 2022-23 school year. The College on Track network is part of The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Network for School Improvement (NSI) initiative. Launched in 2018, the NSI supports networks of schools to support students of color and low-income students to increase access to and success within institutions of higher education. The students at La Sierra are now part of more than 250,000 students across 13 states supported by the NSI.

With a focus on sustainability, California Education Partners' approach is grounded in the belief that when it comes to driving change in classrooms, those working at all levels within districts are best positioned to push each other to engage in the kind of learning and improvement that would forge lasting solutions. California Education Partners' approach aims to create a culture of collaborative continuous learning and improvement, essentially cultivating and advancing a learner-centered approach within the change process itself. The change process, in turn, is not something to pursue or endure in order to eventually achieve a particular school culture, but an opportunity in and of itself to cultivate and advance a new culture (California Education Partners, 2020).

The work of each team in the College on Track network is connected to the three principles of heart, head, and hands. California Education Partners defines heart as cultivating and communicating an equity-centered improvement culture and mindsets that empower educators and their system to do their best work for each student. Likewise, the head principal supports teams to adopt, utilize, and curate a coherent and contextually driven suite of tools, processes, and structures that establishes a collaborative, continuous improvement approach that better serves each student. Finally, California Education Partners emphasizes the importance of the hands principle to develop a systemic collaborative approach that leverages the expertise and perspectives of individuals throughout their organization, as well as students, community members, and other districts and thought partners.

Ideally, outside partners can stretch the thinking of school staff, and support them to notice and challenge the status quo within their schools and districts. They can also create the conditions for those designing and implementing the change process to participate in a process of continuous inquiry, reflection, and improvement. California Education Partner's network did both. *"The [College on Track] improvement convenings were always great, but our heads would be hurting on the way home!"* Anjelica remembers. *"The drives home were when we did some of our best thinking."* This partnership stretched their thinking, but it also offered practical support.

"Working with California Education Partners was great," reflects Rhonda. "As teachers, we were part of [our school's] decision-making team. We [were] a resource for the other staff members and this gave us the tools to do just that."

La Sierra's willingness to seek outside support, whether that was going to Fresno State for a CAPP conference or embarking upon a deep and long-term relationships with California Education Partners, is not common among most high schools, much less alternative schools. More often than not, teachers and site leaders at alternative schools report feeling that they cannot commit to long-term capacity-building partnerships or professional development because their priority has to be attending to the needs of the students who are right in front of them. In such contexts, partnerships and capacity building efforts are often framed as luxuries, as matters that can and must wait. But at La Sierra, it was precisely their commitment to the students who were right in front of them that was the impetus for their journey with California Education Partners.

Anjelica and her teachers knew that their commitment to their students necessitated both attending to the crisis of the day and investing in their capacity to improve student experiences and outcomes into the future. Anjelica may have opened the door to this partnership, but it was the dedicated staff members of La Sierra who walked through that door to create lasting change for the students.

IMPLEMENTING FOUR PROGRAMMATIC ELEMENTS

In addition to fostering democratic and distributed leadership and engaging the sustained support of a strategic partner, La Sierra implemented four programmatic elements that raised expectations of students—shifting the focus from graduation to graduates, and fostering a learner-centered approach to reaching those expectations.

School-Wide Access to Information Regarding Postsecondary Pathways

Research has shown that student access to information regarding postsecondary options often varies widely within and across schools (Avery & Kane, 2004; Gandara, 2001). Some students receive expert support from counselors, college representatives, or career liaisons, and others do not. La Sierra viewed this as a form of tracking, the inequitable distribution of knowledge based on assumptions regarding student ability or potential, and as such, sought to disrupt this practice by providing every student with information regarding college and career pathways and what they needed to do to access their pathways of interest. Every Monday, teachers provided students with access to this information through what they called the Monday Matters Success Curriculum. This staff-developed curriculum focused on College and Career Exploration Lessons for all students grades 7-12 (Tulare County Office of Education, 2020).

Students met with the same Monday Matters teacher for the entire school year, allowing for authentic mentoring relationships to develop over time. One hallmark of the Monday Matters Success Curriculum was that it attended to both knowledge of postsecondary options and knowledge of self. Students were supported to reflect on their strengths, weaknesses, hopes and concerns, and to use these insights as guideposts, pointing them in the direction of their next steps inclusive of the support they would need to navigate those steps successfully.

Parent Engagement around Postsecondary Success

Middle and high schools often engage parents by providing them with parent education in the form of advice or instructions on how to support their students. Research has found that it is far more effective to engage parents as authentic partners in the students' education; this proves to be even more important with students who are not experiencing success in the traditional educational system (Fehrer, 2019). Through their outreach efforts, La Sierra's faculty discovered that only one in five La Sierra parents held a postsecondary degree. It is common for parents without college degrees to feel that they do not have an important role to play in supporting their child's postsecondary success. Recognizing that nothing could be further from the truth, La Sierra set out to build parents' capacity to engage as full partners in helping students imagine and pursue a range of postsecondary options.

La Sierra created a program titled Parent Enhanced Awareness for College and Career Excellence (PEACCE). This program included bimonthly meetings organized around a curriculum designed by La Sierra to guide parents in helping their students become more successful. While PEACCE provided parents with important information regarding postsecondary options, it also emphasized the importance of their role in their child's life during this time of development which strengthened their sense of efficacy in supporting their child's postsecondary success.

Researchers have often noted that one of the persistent barriers to postsecondary success is students' limited exposure to different pathways and limited access to the support they need to pursue those paths, highlighting that it can be difficult for students to imagine a future they have not seen (McLaughlin, 2018). Many of La Sierra's students and their parents had never been to a college campus, and so in an effort to build each family's capacity to imagine college as a viable postsecondary option, the PEACCE program organized college visits that parents, students and La Sierra staff attended together, nurturing their collective imagination and sense of postsecondary possibilities.

Robust Career and Technical Education

Another programmatic element that was instrumental in creating a postsecondary culture at La Sierra was an effort to ensure that students were well-prepared for success in postsecondary career and technical education (CTE) opportunities. The categorical funding for CTE courses, provided through the Regional Occupational Program model, was eliminated in 2015 under the Local Control Funding Formula (California Department of Education, 2020). As a result, many high schools found their traditional CTE courses without funding. At about the same time, research was highlighting the importance of linked learning standards which lifted up the importance of preparing students for both college and career through integrated college and career pathways (Ruiz de Velasco, 2019).

With the support of the Tulare County Office of Education, La Sierra was able to create new, integrated pathways that prepared their graduates to successfully earn college credit and/or industry-recognized credentials either through their partnership with West Hills Community College or local trade unions. For example, La Sierra created a sequence of courses aligned with the Culinary Arts program at West Hills which facilitated students' seamless and successful transition to this program following graduation. Similarly, the Media Arts courses at La Sierra were integrated with the Graphic Design Associate's Degree at West Hills.

La Sierra also offered a Residential and Commercial Construction pathway that aligned with the Carpenter's Local Union Apprenticeship Pathway. Upon completion of their high school CTE pathway, La Sierra students were equipped with the knowledge, skills, and habits need to continue their courses of study, and they received preferential placement in each of these postsecondary programs.

Concurrent Coursework in Partnership with Local Community College

While the stated goal of La Sierra was for all students to complete their A-G requirements so that they would be eligible for admission to a UC or CSU, the vast majority of La Sierra's graduates begin their postsecondary experience at a community college. The West Hills Community College District operates three campuses in the central valley, with the closest one, Lemoore, located less than 30 minutes from the La Sierra campus. With support from the Tulare County Office of Education, Anjelica was able to develop an important working partnership with West Hills College Lemoore. One of the significant results of this partnership was the offering of College Success (STUDEV 001), a class taught at La Sierra, by La Sierra's teachers, through which students could earn concurrent credit from West Hills College Lemoore. This course assists students in obtaining skills and knowledge necessary to reach their educational, career, and life objectives.

Topics include orientation to college, motivation, memory development, physiological well-being, study skills and techniques, career-life planning, financial literacy, and skills for navigating various personal issues, interpersonal relationships and other life challenges that students encounter throughout the various stages of their lives. This experience allows students to begin to shift their identity from high school student to college student and, more importantly, allows them to leave high school with college credits and a college GPA they can be proud of.

MOVING FORWARD

Reflecting back on some of the early moments of their transformation process, Anjelica remembers thinking, *"We owe it to our students to continue to think outside the box. I can't, on one hand, say to our students 'don't limit your dreams' while on the other hand say to our teachers 'we can't do that because that's not what alternative schools do.'"*

Anjelica anticipated that embarking upon this journey would mean breaking out of the mold of the traditional continuation high school. Rhonda acknowledges this as well, noting, *"our students didn't arrive at La Sierra because they followed a traditional path. We can't simply provide a traditional education for them."*

Along with parents, staff, students, and the support of California Education Partners, La Sierra's principal and teachers moved into this new space together—a space not neatly defined by the terms "comprehensive" or "alternative"—but one that invites a new, more collaborative, more learner-centered response of fulfilling our shared responsibility for the postsecondary success of each student.

La Sierra has been able to share their successes and challenges throughout this journey. Most notably, in August 2017, the La Sierra staff members were featured presenters at the Breaking Barriers: Transforming Education Conference held in Visalia California. At this conference, administrators, counselors, teachers, support staff and college faculty were invited to learn about case studies in California schools that were paving the way for transformational strategies for building seamless transitions for students K-16. Sessions included Anjelica presenting "Trauma, Poverty and the Classroom: What Every Administrator Needs to Know" and Rhonda presenting "The Raw Truth: How to Inspire and Build Successful Leadership Teams from a Teacher's Perspective."

While it is key for the team from La Sierra to continue to share their story with the larger educational community, what is equally important is the learning that comes from preparing to tell that story.

“It’s easy to forget what we did,” Anjelica recalled when preparing for that presentation. *“I think we learn as much from the process of presenting as those who attend. We don’t have all the answers but hopefully our journey will inspire other schools.”*

Perhaps one of the most inspiring things about La Sierra’s story is that it is still very much in process. While the staff at La Sierra should be very proud of their accomplishments over the last 10 years, new challenges are always on the horizon. Staff and teachers retire, district and county administrators change, and as we are all aware, global pandemics prompt sudden and dramatic shifts to teaching and learning.

Even in the midst of all of the challenges that 2020 has presented, La Sierra’s staff are noticing that they have created a system in which the students, parents, teachers, staff, and principal are connected and committed to the success of their students. They have developed a shared vision, cultivated distributed leadership, and nurtured a culture of collaboration that persists even in a time of unprecedented uncertainty.

And so, La Sierra’s story will continue. In the words of one teacher, *“we have come too far to start over.”*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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PROFILES IN CALIFORNIA ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

Kristin Geiser & Jorge Ruiz de Velasco, Series Editors

This profile is part of a series created to highlight challenges, creative policy responses, and exemplary practices in California’s legislatively created public alternative high schools. The series is a project of the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University in support of the California Learning Collaborative on Alternative Education. It is intended to invite a new conversation among educators and policymakers about innovations to better support the success of youth enrolled in public alternative secondary schools across the nation. The series is funded by generous grants from the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Stuart Foundation.

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