

Turning Good Intentions into Educational Capital

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Abstract: A call for foundations and educational institutions to build their programs around the goal of increasing educational capital through more open and accountable forms of education grantmaking and educational activity.

Essay:

Education needs philanthropic foundations to enliven imagination, spur improvements and test solutions. Foundations need education to increase individual and collective capacity to act effectively in the world. The problem we face today is that these two cultures are spinning away from each other, particularly in the key arenas of teaching and learning. As knowledge about teaching and learning has grown, foundation-education partnerships to further develop and use this knowledge have shrunk. As foundations turn away from the educational institutions that they once supported, society suffers.

Civic, social and political environments in which the new economy operates are escalating in complexity, and educational institutions at every level have struggled—and sometimes failed—to keep pace with the multiple expectations for graduates. Now more than ever, foundation support is needed to promote innovation in teaching and learning to meet these challenges.

As part of a three-year project at the Carnegie Foundation, we interviewed leaders in foundations and in K-12 and higher education seeking their candid assessments and asking them to help us take the pulse of what we felt was a relationship in tatters. The news we heard was not good.

Foundation leaders were pessimistic about the intentionality of educators when the assessment and improvement of teaching and learning are on the table. When it comes to

probing deeply, being analytical, mobilizing follow-through and, most of all, tackling problems in ways designed to have field-wide payoff—those in foundations were often skeptical and occasionally cynical about educators' commitment to such work. Educators, for their part, thought that foundations are too distant in their understanding of how schools and colleges work and that they are looking for speedy solutions to long-germinating problems and indifferent to academic priorities. These old pals were behaving more like distant acquaintances.

To dig more deeply into where the sour notes were coming from and what could be done to reconnect foundations and education, we invited 15 distinguished analysts to join us in writing essays and case studies on the key issues involved. We reviewed this work and our preliminary recommendations with a larger group of education and foundation leaders from around the country. Central to [the book that resulted from this collaboration](#) is the concept of "educational capital," the accumulation in useable form of tested and validated experience and knowledge about successful ideas and strategies to improve teaching and learning. By designing and funding projects that build on relevant research and examined experience, a body of assets can be built that will add to the knowledge about what really works.

This goal stands in sharp contrast to much about present practice that admires the adjective "unique" and even its adverbial pal "truly" when referring hopefully to a fundable idea. Very little in education is unparalleled or incomparable. And if it were, we would be hard-pressed to build a cumulative, interconnected and widely applicable body of knowledge about teaching and learning. Educational capital, rather than a collection of products whose value cannot be coaxed beyond the grantees that produced them, enables scarce foundation dollars to function more effectively, adding potency to the solutions to common problems.

To build educational capital, five criteria must be met:

1. **Ground Project Design.** Build on what is known in order to move forward rather than operate behind the learning curve or reinvent wheels.
2. **Identify Non-negotiables.** Be clear about the essential elements so that adaptation to local conditions and customs does not undermine the project's logic.
3. **Incorporate Staying Power.** Identify the barriers to entry into educators' repertoires and design ways to take them into account.
4. **Build in Appropriate Assessment at Every Stage.** Rigorously use the assessment tools most appropriate to the project and its stages, allowing for mid-course corrections as well as summative judgments.
5. **Encourage Interconnectedness.** Consider educational and administrative strategies and practices complementary to the project's thrust, and build in connections to them.

When foundations aim consistently to create educational capital, they can expect more grants that reveal and confirm better and broadly useful educational practices, especially in regard to teaching and learning. Here, as elsewhere, context is important. These five

additional recommendations also emerged from our study. They support and reinforce building educational capital, while strengthening foundation performance in other ways as well.

1. **Openness.** Most grantseekers agree that they work in an information-poor environment regarding foundation aims and accomplishments. We recommend that foundations maintain a public Web site with detailed information on their programs, proposals, decisions and results. Openness at every stage is a key factor in building educational capital and putting it to use.
2. **External Review.** Individuals outside the foundation can bring objectivity and perspective to the issues involved. We recommend that foundations use external reviewers at key stages of their work.
3. **Professional Development.** Knowing how to build educational capital from a distance through the medium of grants is knowledge not easily acquired. We recommend that a consortium of foundation and educational leaders, working together with an organization like Grantmakers for Education, develop a curriculum and delivery methods for introductory training and continuing professional development for program officers in their craft.
4. **Collaboration.** Building educational capital usually means focusing collaboratively on common concerns. Collaboration can span K–12, higher education and K–16. We recommend that investment in collaborations be increased along with developing practical knowledge of how to manage such collaborations to optimize benefits and costs.
5. **Putting Educational Capital to Work.** For educational capital to work wisely, well and over a broad sphere, it must be made available in ways comparable to how medicine and law make professionally essential information available to practitioners. We recommend that foundations, acting individually and in concert, take increasing responsibility for moving educational capital into education practice through the use of information technology, collaborations and intermediaries.

We realize that much of what we found in our study was negative and that putting our recommendations into practice will require that both foundations and education want to change the nature of their relationship. Although we found that those in foundations over-expect, those in education over-promise, and both sides over-claim, we also heard leaders in both sectors say that they are interested in adapting our proposals to their work. We need now to push each other intellectually and develop and deepen the ideas that will carry this work forward.

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