

# Ideas in Philanthropic Field Building

Where They Come from and  
How They Are Translated into Actions

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*Practice Matters: The Improving Philanthropy Project* presents a series of papers that explore, and ultimately aim to advance, key practices in philanthropy. Written by national experts, the titles address ten core philanthropic practices: using intermediaries, sponsoring policy commissions, effecting community change, attracting and managing talent, creativity in grantmaking, using ideas in building a field, building organizational capacity, communications for social good, foundation partnerships, and evaluation.

The series starts from the premise that philanthropy, as a field, needs to understand good philanthropic practice much better than it does now, and that there is a discernible craft that can be taught and improved. The papers and accompanying discussion guides are available for free download at the Foundation Center's Web site at [www.fdncenter.org/for\\_grantmakers/practice\\_matters/](http://www.fdncenter.org/for_grantmakers/practice_matters/).

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Larry Hirschhorn  
Thomas North Gilmore

## Editors' Note

As one of the first papers commissioned for the *Practice Matters* series, *Ideas in Philanthropic Field Building* has helped excite the project as a whole. Based on work originally conducted for the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, the paper is filled with important concepts that surround and are embedded in philanthropy. By labeling them and describing how these concepts play out, the authors allow us to address strategy development in philanthropy from a richer, more intentional perspective.

The authors discuss how grantmakers can contribute to their fields by identifying emerging ideas and practices, and framing and marketing issues effectively. They propose techniques to help program staff stay at the cutting edge of their fields, and discern how new concepts can be translated into successful program initiatives. Hirschhorn and Gilmore suggest ways for funders to think about a portfolio of grants as an investment strategy to affect the evolution of a field. In various drafts, this paper has elicited substantial attention and discussion.

Patricia Patrizi  
Kay Sherwood  
Abby Spector

# Executive Summary

Ideas are often the currency of philanthropy. Ideas animate fields of philanthropic endeavor. Ideas can constitute “forces” in field building that determine a field’s direction. This paper examines the sources of ideas that program professionals in foundations draw from to create programs and influence fields of philanthropic interest. It also provides guidance about how foundation program staff can identify powerful and useful ideas and apply these to the work of philanthropy.

## Moral Ideas

“Moral ideas” are central to the social change work of foundations as well as to the grant-giving culture of some. Just as foundations might support right and just ways of delivering health care or protecting children’s rights, foundations might enact right and just ways of interacting with and supporting the work of grantees. In either case, the moral idea functions as a compass, directing people toward some activities and purposes and away from others. Mothers Against Drunk Driving stands out as a successful moral idea that began as a grassroots movement and gained a following in the policy and philanthropic arenas. Palliative end-of-life care in hospitals stands out as an idea that was taken up early and promoted by foundations. Respect for the nonprofit service providers at the front lines of social change is a motivating moral idea in the grant-giving practices of some foundations.

The hospice care concept illustrates how moral ideas, in conjunction with the concepts of “moral practice” and the relationships among people engaged in this practice, can stimulate program ideas. The hospice movement took off, in part, because it linked the moral idea of death with dignity to pain management as a practice and to the hospice provider as a partner to the dying. This intersection of moral idea, moral practice, and partner/provider is a productive intellectual location for foundation program officers looking for program ideas. In the youth development field, for example, Big Brothers/Big Sisters is the program idea at the intersection of: the moral idea that every child should have a caring, personal relationship with an adult; the moral practice of mentoring; and the idea of the mentor as a member of the young person’s family (sister/brother).

Powerful moral ideas often stimulate controversy because they set rights of different groups in conflict. So, when a foundation decides to champion one moral idea in its grantmaking, the foundation is often entering a field with conflicting forces at work. In the child welfare arena, for example, there has been a long-standing tension between two guiding moral ideas: that children deserve to be raised by their biological parents—even when there are issues in biological families that present risks to the safety of the children—and that children’s safety overrides parents’ rights to raise their children. Child protection law, and child protective practice more generally, has seesawed between these two goals over the last two decades.

Moral ideas can sometimes substitute for financial resources because they attract people to work for a cause without recompense and to contribute other valuable goods and services. This phenomenon represents “moral currency,” a commodity that is not only useful to foundations that want to promote their programs and strategies, but which may be essential to garnering support and leverage to build fields or change the direction of a field. The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s interest in workforce issues of the millions of people who provide services to children, youth, and families in the U.S. offers an illustration of the potential value of moral currency. The foundation has considered establishing a national commission to generate interest in and promote policy solutions to such problems as low pay, high turnover, and inadequate training for these workers. The foundation’s challenge is whether pay scales, benefits, staff development, and career ladders can generate sufficient moral traction to achieve the foundation’s goal of improving the quality of services for children, youth, and families—or whether an alternative to a commission, such as a campaign for “economic justice for child welfare workers,” might have more moral currency.

## The Ecology of Ideas

Ideas that might be germs of philanthropic programs emerge from the social and political currents of the time and work together to create an ecology of ideas. The connections or correlations between ideas, and the ways they reinforce or contradict each other, often determine whether a single idea is likely to spread and become a compelling basis for social change. In the 1990s, for example, the ideas of entrepreneurship, personal initiative, responsibility for oneself, and women’s economic independence established a moral context for changing the focus and purposes of welfare programs, particularly as they affected women with children. In the past, racial politics dominated the debate over welfare as conservative politicians inveighed against welfare spending and welfare dependency to gain white votes. But the emergence of these other moral ideas changed the moral landscape of the issue, making it possible for President Clinton, a centrist, to advocate changing welfare.

There is an ecology of ideas within and surrounding any particular field that can be mined by philanthropists to develop strategies for moving a field. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation developed a program promoting palliative care for seriously ill patients in hospitals within an ecology that contained the following elements:

- Health care professionals were in revolt against patient care protocols mandated by managed care organizations and were seeking to create hospice-like hospital settings where practice could be governed by compassion and thoughtfulness.
- Assisted suicides by terminally ill people publicized by the media raised the awareness among the public about end-of-life care.
- Adult children of aging parents—based on their own experience and media exposés—were recognizing that nursing home care for the terminally ill was indifferent, inadequate, and sometimes even neglectful or inhumane.

## The Life Cycle of Ideas

A leading scholar of ideas argues that there is a limited number of ideas in good currency in a field at any given time and that a single idea traverses a natural life cycle in four stages from latency to growth to peaking (or maturation) to decline (or institutionalization). Attending to the life cycle of an idea helps foundation program officers assess where, in the history of an idea, they are intervening—particularly to avoid investing in an idea in decline and to anticipate what might be needed to boost a latent idea to the growth stage. However, ideas that pass out of currency can resurface, as has often happened with ideas about national economic development. For example, in the aftermath of World War II, poor countries were urged to adopt policies substituting local production for imports (“import substitution”). But, beginning in the 1980s, the prevailing philosophy of economic deregulation led economists, policymakers, and politicians to argue that poor countries should open their economies, reduce tariffs, and allow for the free flow of capital. Recent economic crises in Asia, Latin America, and Africa have prompted new assessments of the “open economy” policies.

## Ideas in Foundation Practice

Paying attention to the ideas of others is a key element of the practice of philanthropy and reflects the intention of many foundations to be learning organizations. In many foundations, program officers are expected to stay current with what is happening in their substantive fields, which

includes being able to spot emerging ideas and assess their potential for foundation programs. Thus, “scanning” or “listening in to” a field or area of interest to identify emerging ideas and ideas in good currency is an essential foundation practice. The authors recommend that this should be a systematic and collective practice—i.e., that foundations should create and sustain an awareness of the importance of scanning and intelligence across programs, that the staff responsibilities for tracking various intelligence sources should be assigned, and that intelligence should be processed in groups.

Recognizing emerging ideas in action—as opposed to ideas presented in books, journal articles, conferences, and informal conversations—requires knowing how to identify the connections between moral ideas and organizational practices. The authors suggest three places to look for such connections:

1. “Found pilots,” a name given to practices that emerge from grassroots passions and eventually establish a wide enough constituency to adopt mainstream organizational trappings—and which demonstrate to philanthropy that the central idea is in “good currency” because a substantial number of people are willing to invest their own time, effort, and money, moving the idea from a latent to growth stage. Home schooling is such an idea. Having begun as a fundamentalist Christian movement, home schooling has spread across the spectrum of religious and political values and has grown its own infrastructure of institutional supports.
2. “Comings and goings,” shorthand for the movement of people in and out of organizations and fields of interest. Because new arrivals often signal innovation and departures often signal dissatisfaction, tracking changes of people in a field is a method of scanning or listening in to a field that can help foundation staff stay in touch with emerging ideas.
3. Where the tensions are between ideas—a different angle of perspective on the observation that moral ideas engender moral conflicts. People often want for themselves things that, if available to everyone, they would no longer be able to enjoy, which creates conflicts between social and individual rights and aspirations. These conflicts or intersections are ripe territory for innovation and social invention that can be supported and extended by philanthropy. The authors use the history of suburbanization to illustrate this opportunity to “locate tensions.”



In conclusion, the authors suggest how the techniques of problem framing—a classic communications skill—and marketing relate to foundation practices to seek out and promote program ideas. They return to the notion that a field of forces or influences surrounds any problem and that foundation staff need to understand what these forces are in order to effectively frame a problem or market its solution.

# Introduction

Ideas are animators of fields of philanthropic endeavor. Moral ideas are important sources for the philanthropic analysis needed to create programs and initiatives. Ideas also exist in an intellectual and political ecology that surrounds any field and, moral or not, constitute the context in which programs and initiatives are implemented.

Foundations generally expect program officers to be conversant in the ideas that dominate areas of grantmaking interest, and especially to be aware of emerging ideas and their potential to point grantmaking in new directions. This paper offers people in philanthropy guidance on how to identify and assess useful and powerful ideas, whether they are already working in a particular field or are considering entering new fields. The paper should help program officers ask and answer the following questions about an idea that could form the basis for a philanthropic effort.

- What moral imperative fuels the idea's growth and appeal?
- How is the idea related to an ecology of ideas?
- Where is the idea in its life cycle of institutional rise and decline?
- How should the problem associated with the idea be framed so that it resonates with people's practices and beliefs?
- What contradictions in social practice does the idea address?
- What social practice(s) must change if the idea is to take hold?
- How is/are the social practice(s) institutionalized?
- What new social system can institutionalize a new practice based on the new idea?
- What constraint holds back the development of the new social system?

These questions suggest a systems approach to examining the potential merit of new ideas and the answers to such questions point to strategies for leading social change.

# Moral Ideas

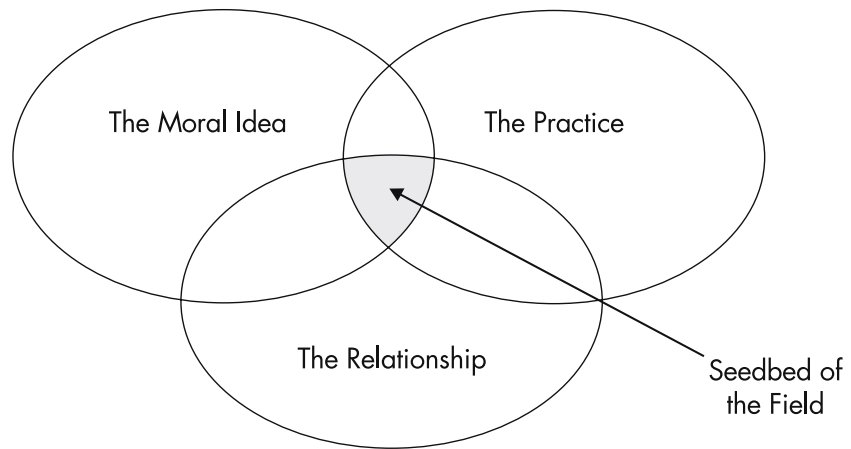
Moral ideas play a critical role in the development of most fields, particularly in the nonprofit sector where a sense of pursuing what is right and good animates people, not unlike the way profit motivates people in business. The moral idea functions as a compass, directing people toward some activities and purposes and away from others. For example, the grant giving of the David and Lucile Packard Foundation is rooted in two strong moral ideas: Programs for improving the quality of life should be based on scientific knowledge, and the not-for-profit organization, as opposed to the public agency, is a unique entity for improving community life. Both derive from David Packard's experience as an entrepreneur and leader. His company, Hewlett-Packard, built useful products by bridging the worlds of science and engineering, and the company, as an enterprise free to order its own affairs, created a moral order in which employees were treated with dignity. Even today, employees of the company still refer to the "HP way" as an expression of an ethical capitalism.<sup>1</sup>

## Moral Ideas as Stimulants for Program Ideas

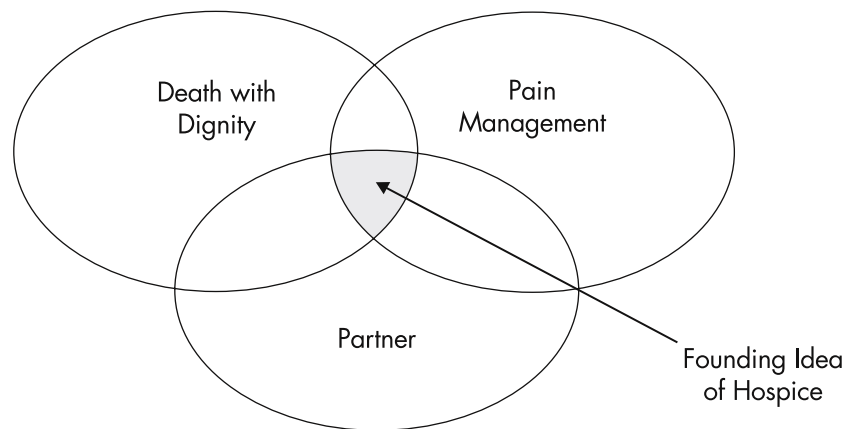
Moral ideas are particularly powerful when they are combined with the concepts of a "moral practice" and with the relationships between people engaged in this practice. For example, the hospice movement took off, in part, because it linked a moral idea (death with dignity) to pain management as a practice and to the hospice provider as a partner to the dying. The diagrams that follow suggest that ideas that can be operationalized as programs or services are located at the intersection of a broad moral idea, a moral practice implied by that idea, and a relationship between people or institutions involved in the practice.

The moral idea functions as a compass, directing people toward some activities and purposes and away from others.

### General: Locating a Program Idea



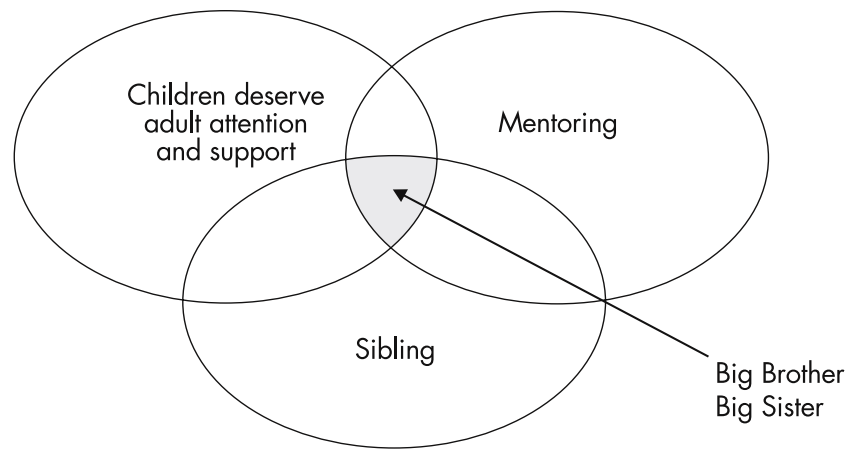
### Specific: Locating the Hospice Idea



In the youth development field, the moral idea that every child should have a caring and personal relationship with an adult underlay the growth of mentoring as a practice. As the name “Big Brothers, Big Sisters” suggests, this program envisions the mentor as a member of the young person’s family.

Moral ideas are powerful when combined with the concepts of a “moral practice” and with the relationships between people engaged in this practice.

## Specific: Locating the Big Brothers, Big Sisters Idea



Moral ideas have also shaped policy and programs outside the realm of human services. In the environmental field, some corporations have accepted the idea that nature has value independent of humanity's use of it and consequently practice environmentally safe production. This is why, for example, McDonald's switched to paper packaging. In this case, the corporation is taking up its role as a corporate citizen, rather than simply as a profit-making business.

## Moral Ideas Engender Moral Conflicts

While powerful moral ideas attract attention and resources, they also can stimulate controversy. The moral idea that every child is entitled to live with his or her birth parents created controversy in the field of foster care in the 1980s. Some people felt that this moral idea contradicted the equally powerful conviction that a child's safety must be protected at all costs. The idea of a child's right to live with his or her birth parents directed social workers and other professionals to build services that helped families stay together even when a parent stood accused of abusing or neglecting a child. But on the other side, the idea that safety is pre-eminent often led child welfare workers to remove children from their homes. Federal legislation in the 1990s attempted to elevate safety considerations in child welfare decisionmaking, but this tension is still unresolved.

"Mainstreaming" children with disabilities into regular school classrooms presents equally difficult moral terrain. The mainstreaming movement began in response to the practice of placing children with physical disabilities but normal cognitive abilities in substandard schools. This practice could be cast as unequivocally immoral. It was like warehousing people with mental illnesses in substandard mental "asylums." The powerful moral element of mainstreaming is one reason there was strong

bipartisan support in Congress for the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1975.

But the issues are far more complex and controversial when children with mental disabilities are placed in regular classrooms. Many teachers believe that they cannot meet the needs of such children without undermining their ability to teach others, and thus the principle of non-discrimination comes into conflict with ideas of fairness. To be sure, this conflict might disappear if teachers had adequate help, but it is often the fact of scarcity that forces us to choose between moral ideas.

## Moral Currency as a Resource

Moral ideas can sometimes alleviate the pressure of scarce resources when “moral currency” substitutes for financial currency. The moral idea that prisoners who have been wrongly convicted of capital crimes should be freed has attracted lawyers, law students, and law professors to give their time and attention to particular cases without expecting compensation. Similarly, “Big Brothers, Big Sisters” programs can attract volunteers because of the power of the moral idea that all children deserve to have a relationship with a supportive adult.

Absent a powerful moral idea, a foundation may fail to create moral currency. For example, the Annie E. Casey Foundation has considered sponsoring a national commission on the workforce issues affecting people who provide services—across many professions and systems—to children, youth, and families. The foundation’s challenge is whether bloodless questions of pay scales, training, career ladders, and staff turnover can generate sufficient moral traction, or whether an alternative approach to a commission—such as a campaign based on “economic justice for child welfare workers”—would be a more effective strategy to achieve the foundation’s goal of addressing working conditions that hinder the efficient delivery of high-quality services.<sup>2</sup> (Interestingly, at the turn of the twentieth century, the idea of “efficiency” in public administration *was* a moral idea because it stood against corruption and for professionalism.)

When foundations launch a program, they face the challenge of “selling” the moral idea that lies behind it. But just as a business can never be sure that its product or service will fit with potential customers’ conception of their own needs, a foundation can never be certain that the moral idea represented in its funding strategy will have the resonance needed to attract supporters, stimulate coalition building, and mobilize attention. The Annie E. Casey Foundation is committed to the idea that children in foster care should experience no more disruption than is absolutely necessary. By supporting innovations through its “Family to Family” grants program, the foundation works to change how public child welfare agencies treat children removed from their birth families. For example, the

When foundations launch a program, they face the challenge of selling the moral idea that lies behind it.

foundation supports the principle that children should be placed in foster homes in neighborhoods close to where their parents or relatives live.<sup>3</sup>

But the moral idea that foster children should be placed close to home has not been powerful enough to attract the requisite number of foster parents. Foster families are in short supply and public child welfare systems do not have the resources they need to attract and train the number they need. Children placed in foster care often end up wherever there is a place for them. Moreover, few social workers would support temporarily placing a child in institutional foster care until the ideal close-to-home foster family becomes available.

## The Emergence of New Moral Ideas

Program officers can track the emergence and propagation of new moral ideas as one way of understanding how a field is evolving. Important books or articles that set the stage for an extended social conversation often propagate moral ideas. Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross stimulated the development of the hospice movement with her book, *On Death and Dying*. Michael Harrington's *The Other America* established the moral basis for the war on poverty in the 1960s. Marc Freedman's recently published *Prime Time* is an effort to generate interest and support for mobilizing the energies and commitments of retirees for community service.<sup>4</sup>

This distinctive role of books suggests that one way a philanthropist can attempt to build a field is to support the research and publication of potentially formative books. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation used this strategy purposefully to disseminate best practices for giving patients end-of-life care in hospitals. It funded a study of medical textbooks, which found that 56 percent did not mention end-of-life topics at all. This study influenced the publishers of the 50 leading medical textbooks to expand end-of-life care content in their next editions.<sup>5</sup>

Important books or articles that set the stage for an extended social conversation often propagate moral ideas.

# The Ecology of Ideas

The ideas that animate philanthropy also emerge from the social and political currents of the time. There is an ecology of ideas within and surrounding any particular field that can be mined by philanthropists to develop strategies for moving a field. The connections or correlations between ideas and the ways they reinforce or contradict each other often determine whether an idea is likely to grow and become a compelling basis for social change. Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), for example, could be characterized as an effort to link a set of powerful moral ideas: concern for innocent victims and the prevention of unwarranted carnage, family protection, the women's movement, consumerism, self-help, and the empowerment of people without voice or power. Because MADD integrated a set of such powerful ideas, its impact was dramatic. Between 1981 and 1985 alone, state legislatures passed 478 laws to deter drunk driving.<sup>6</sup>

The idea of palliative care offers a similar example of the ecology of ideas. Palliative care is care for patients with life-threatening illnesses who do not receive hospice care. Its purpose is to relieve suffering and improve the quality of life of patients who are likely to live through periods of medical crisis before dying. The idea of palliative care for seriously ill patients in hospitals was reinforced by several ideas. First, nurses and physicians who already resented thoughtless protocols mandated by managed care health insurance programs saw the idea of palliative care as a way to create hospice-like settings in hospitals, where compassion and thoughtfulness could shape practice. Second, the population at large became aware of the moral questions surrounding end-of-life care when incidents of assisted suicide were publicized in the media. Third, the children of aging parents came to believe—based on their own experience as well as media exposés—that nursing home care was indifferently delivered to the terminally ill. These three currents helped shape a consensus that hospitals had to focus much more on the quality of patients' experience by eliminating unnecessary pain and discomfort, keeping patients informed, facilitating helpful connections between patients and their families and friends, and prescribing antidepressant medications.<sup>7</sup>

An ecology of ideas creates the shared moral context for a community and shapes which moral ideas will ultimately emerge as influential. In the 1990s, the ideas of entrepreneurship, personal initiative, responsibility for oneself, and women's economic independence established a moral context

The ecology of ideas within and surrounding any particular field can be mined by philanthropists to develop strategies for moving a field.



for changing the focus and purposes of welfare programs, particularly as they affected women with children. In the past, racial politics dominated the debate over welfare, as conservative politicians inveighed against welfare spending to gain white votes. But the emergence of these other moral ideas changed the moral landscape of the issue, making it possible for President Clinton, a centrist, to advocate changing welfare.

The idea of entrepreneurship may continue to shape how people think of addressing the issue of poverty. This is one reason there has been sustained interest in affording poor people access to capital and credit rather than simply jobs. It is why there has been great interest in helping poor people save through what are called “individual development accounts.” The idea of entrepreneurship is also a reason that the effort to privatize social security has some resonance with younger participants in the labor force.

## Ideas in Good Currency

Donald Schon has argued that there is a limited number of ideas in good currency in a field at any given time and that a single idea traverses a natural life cycle, in four stages.<sup>8</sup>

1. **Latency**, during which only a few far-sighted individuals are developing the idea, and there is little widespread support.
2. **Growth**, often exceedingly rapid, with larger numbers of actors paying attention and media publicity and resources allocated for “making it happen.”
3. **Peaking** or maturation, a leveling off during which the idea dominates discussions and attracts a disproportionate share of resources.
4. **Decline** or institutionalization, during which the idea either has not lived up to expectations or no longer requires public attention because it has been accepted and becomes part of public policy and nonprofit organizational life.

The history of publicly financed legal services for poor people can be mapped through stages in this way. Historically, legal aid was seen as charity care for the poor. But in the early 1960s, in the program’s latency state, the Ford Foundation, through its funding of Mobilization for Youth in New York City, and the Legal Assistance Association in New Haven, supported legal aid as an antipoverty strategy. Edgar and Jean Cahn, who directed the New Haven program, were particularly influential in defining this new approach to legal services for the poor.<sup>9</sup> The Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO)—the instrument for President Johnson’s War on

Poverty—took up this concept, which for the first time gave federal funds to legal services programs. By 1966, in the program's growth phase, OEO had made 130 legal service program grants, and 260 by 1968.<sup>10</sup> Legal service lawyers played a significant role in insuring that the courts protected the rights of the poor in such areas of government benefits, consumer law, and access to health care. The Legal Services Corporation was established as a nongovernmental corporation in 1974. Its funding grew from \$91 million in 1976 to \$321 million in 1981. This was its peaking phase.

Just as the Legal Services Corporation was institutionalized, the political right attacked its primary mission—extending legal help to the poor as a vehicle for improving their status in society. Since the Reagan years, the Corporation has been increasingly hemmed in by restrictions that limit its ability to advocate for the poor. The original formative moral idea, that legal services should improve the lot of poor people as a class, rather than simply represent poor individuals in court, was in some degree undermined. This shift marked the idea's declining phase.

Attending to the life cycle of an idea helps a program officer assess where, in the history of an idea, he or she is intervening. If a program officer makes grants based on an idea in decline, he or she is likely to be working against the social grain. For example, a central premise underlying social service reform in the 1960s and 1970s was that these services could be organized to empower clients. This was one of the great hopes for urban school decentralization plans. The idea did not work, partly because the people who ran some of the decentralized school systems used their positions to dispense patronage opportunities to allies and friends. A foundation officer, basing her program on the ideas of empowerment and decentralization, takes the risk that the decline in the moral standing of these ideas will undermine her efforts.

Similarly, if the officer makes grants based on latent ideas, he or she should anticipate that it will take some time before strong institutions based on these ideas will emerge, if they ever will. Thus, for example, while there are passionate advocates for school vouchers, and at least one foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, is committed to supporting voucher experiments in poor school districts, it is too soon to tell if the voucher idea will take hold, particularly outside the central cities.

Currently, school financing is based mainly on local property taxes so that the most attractive neighborhoods with the highest property values can afford to spend the most money on schooling. Over time, this relationship becomes self-fulfilling as people with school-age children choose to buy homes in neighborhoods where school support is highest. It is likely that vouchers will not be funded by a property tax, since the whole point of vouchers is to create a competitive market in schools so that, for example, a child living in Township A can attend a school in Township B. If regional markets emerge, states would most likely take over the financing of schools by giving the voucher money directly to the consumers, which would then lead to a decline in the property value premium due to

Where, in the life cycle of an idea, would a foundation program intervene?

superior schools. There may be considerable resistance to this outcome. One prediction is that charter schools funded by local property taxes will emerge as the compromise between affording parents more choices (for example, with vouchers) and preserving funding inequalities between urban and suburban school districts.

An idea may decline to a period of latency only to resurface later. Ideas about national economic development appear to have this character. In the aftermath of World War II, economists, policymakers, and politicians argued that poor countries should build up their local economic base by substituting local production for imports. This became known as “import substitution.” By contrast, beginning in the 1980s, policymakers under the impress of the overarching idea of economic deregulation argued that poor countries should open their economies, reduce tariffs, and allow for the free flow of capital in and out of the country. Today, as the result of the recent economic crises in Asia and Latin America, and the economic decline of Africa, some economists and policymakers are reconsidering the strengths and weaknesses of an “open economy.” This decline of the open economy idea may be accelerated by another idea, which argues that markets do not allocate sufficient credit to the rural poor and, therefore, a new kind of cooperative lending institution is required.<sup>11</sup>

# Implications for Practice: Scanning to Identify Moral Ideas and Other Ideas in Good Currency

A program officer does not have to agree with the ideas that appear ascendant. But she should understand the ecology of ideas that shapes people's attention and mobilizes their feelings. This attention to the ideas of others is a key element of the practice of philanthropy and reflects the intention of many foundations to be learning organizations. The foundation officer is, of course, motivated by her own moral convictions, but without paying attention to what others believe, she runs the risk of launching programs that will not attract the time, resources, and attention of others. To do this, program officers need to scan or "listen in"<sup>12</sup> to a field or area of interest to identify ideas in good currency. Foundation staff, legislators, potential service recipients, academics, and service providers, regardless of their level or role, are as important sources of intelligence on the principles and trends in a particular field as quantifiable social trends.

Because scanning is part of many people's jobs, the information must be assembled and the process of scanning must be organized, although overly formal or bureaucratic processes for this task tend to be counterproductive. Key organizing principles for effective scanning include:

- All staff need to see themselves as sources of intelligence.
- All leads should be directed to one individual.
- *Ad hoc* groups should be convened for sharing ideas and pattern detection.
- Sector responsibilities should be created and assigned—e.g., people should be assigned to stay in contact with different groups, or know what kinds of meetings are occurring, or follow the seedbeds of new ideas—in other states, countries, and cities. A few states have reputations as idea originators: California, Florida, Connecticut, Washington, and Colorado.

Attention to the ideas of others is key in the practice of philanthropy and reflects the intention of many foundations to be learning organizations.

- Documents about emergent ideas and trends should be circulated periodically, flagging areas to which people might begin to attend and collect more information.
- Staff should be assigned to study groups, or individuals should be assigned to stay on top of a selected number of potentially high-interest moral ideas and trends.
- People should be assigned different journals, newspapers, or newsletters to read as well as different Web sites and channels to follow. They should look for key events like presidential commissions, task forces, and citizen committees that signify concern and that originate ideas.
- Intelligence gatherers should watch for complex issues to be “captured” by a label—e.g., “school choice,” “welfare reform,” “the war on terrorism”—as well as for research being funded. Two or three years later, research results might be shaping the debate.

Above all, philanthropic organizations should create and sustain an awareness of the importance of scanning and intelligence.

# Ideas in Action

Ideas, whether they are moral principles or policy trends, need to be activated and given expression in practice by organizations. Ideas alone do not make a field. It is not enough to identify moral ideas relevant to a philanthropy's interest areas and correlate ideas through an analysis of other ideas in good currency. The next step in using ideas for building or moving a field is to identify what people are beginning to *do* with ideas. What are the events, initiatives, and problems that signal that people are beginning to implement new ideas and change their practices?

First, we describe three ways in which the emerging connections between moral ideas and organizational practices can be seen: in “found pilots,” the movement of innovative people (“comings and goings”), and in tensions in a field. Then, we suggest how these indicators of ideas becoming action can be combined to form philanthropic strategy.

## Found Pilots

There is always a group or organization trying something new that goes against the grain of the way people typically think, work, build communities, or take up their roles. These groups have already launched demonstration projects that can be thought of as society's “found pilots.” Consider the case of home schooling. It has roots in the 1960s, when such educational philosophers and critics as John Holt and Ivan Illich argued that children, to be educated, should be removed from schools. The first magazines for home schooling began in late seventies and early eighties. In the early eighties the shut-down of small Christian schools due to changes in the tax law led a large number of Christian families to begin schooling their children at home. These early efforts, in settings where home schooling was still illegal, became the pilot projects for what is now the home schooling movement, embracing about one million children.

Home schooling is now legal in every state. Although an anti-institutional movement, the home schooling enterprise is quite organized, with journals, Web sites, conferences, publishers, research institutes, and a legal defense association. It is likely that its success and spread will continue to play a role in delegitimizing public schooling—an unhappy outcome for people who believe that public schooling is a crucible for building citizenship. Interestingly, some historians of the movement believe that even

What are the events, initiatives, and problems that signal that people are beginning to implement new ideas and change their practices?

among the Christian home schoolers, who now represent some 80 percent of home schooled children, feminism played a role in elevating the role of the mother as teacher.<sup>13</sup>

Because found pilots emerge from the grassroots, a program officer has proof that some people are willing to invest their own time, effort, and money in advancing a new practice. In this sense, the found pilot indicates that an idea in good currency is beginning to have traction. In Donald Schon's life cycle analysis, the idea is moving from the latency stage to the growth stage. Investing in these efforts is less risky than investing in ideas that do not yet have grounding in actual practice. Indeed, volunteers are, in an important sense, a community's venture capital. People who commit their own time freely, often out of some passion about the enterprise, can be an indicator of the salience of a movement and the vigor of the idea or ideas that sustain it. What matters to eventual success is not the numbers of people involved, but the quality, intensity, and sometimes even the close-knit working relationships of volunteers—whether they comprise the board of a nonprofit organization, a small group of social entrepreneurs who (like their private sector counterparts) commit significant time and energy to build an institution, or large groups participating in a program.

A “found pilot” indicates that an idea in good currency is beginning to have traction.

## Comings and Goings

After found pilots, another theory of innovation focuses on the fact that new ideas and practices are the work of new people in organizations. Established members institutionalize a new practice or idea, but newcomers are often the source of change, either singly or in a group of recent hires who form a critical mass of people to support a new idea. After World War II, for example, the automobile industry was reshaped when a group of operations researchers led by Robert McNamara left government service *en masse* to join the Ford Motor Company and apply operations research methods to running a company.<sup>14</sup> Creative people sometimes leave and go elsewhere because a particular idea, practice, or program about which they feel strongly could not be accepted or internalized by their organization. Program officers can pay attention to these comings and goings as clues about where leaders and institutions might be responsive to foundation initiatives. Thus, for example, a foundation focused on health care research might track the appointments of new deans of medical schools and public health schools. Foundations that support the arts could track high-level appointments in influential arts organizations.

The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation launched a prison reform initiative with such a strategy in the late seventies and early eighties: The foundation hired an executive search firm that helped state corrections agencies identify potential commissioners who were liberal-minded. Often, when people are appointed for the first time to positions of

executive director or president, they are open to new ideas and are looking for help in building a strategy for their organizations. Foundations can influence new leaders and get “seats at the table” if they support executive development programs for such newcomers. To this end, the Clark Foundation also sponsored a leadership seminar for the commissioners its search firm helped recruit.

## Locating Tensions

A context for innovation is often established when an organization or a set of actors and organizations in a field need to answer some tension or conflict blocking development. People often adapt to the tension and become unaware of the costs associated with it, keeping it unresolved. For example, the ongoing tension between the belief that every family should own a home and the right to convenient access to jobs and shopping has powerfully shaped metropolitan development over the last five decades. In the initial phases of suburbanization, this tension was ameliorated by many innovations, such as migration of jobs to the suburbs, the two-car family, and even something as mundane as stand-alone freezers that reduced the number of food-shopping trips homemakers had to make. Nonetheless, trip times increased as congestion mounted.

It appeared for a while that people could adapt to the increase in the amount of time they spent driving in their cars. But, as the emergence of the “road rage” phenomenon suggests, people may be finding that the core tension between the right to one’s home and the right to convenience is no longer bearable. Indeed, the rise of the “new urbanism” movement—the idea that people should live in clustered housing near stores, schools, parks, and gyms—when made manifest in architectural practice, represents a social innovation, a new way to integrate the right to a home and to convenience. It also is based on and reinforces the moral idea that people have a right to live in a neighborhood where they are known to others and valued by them.

In the cycle of the history of ideas, this idea, which once appeared utopian, is in the ascending phase. Governor James McGreevey of New Jersey has launched a new urbanism initiative as part of his program to end sprawl and reduce automobile congestion in the nation’s most densely populated state. The initiative includes a program to reward municipalities for “transit-friendly, smart growth land use practices” and to control development spills along roads by placing restrictions on major highway access. The Governor is also reducing the percentage of the state’s capital transportation program spent on building new roads.

Tension or conflict between ideas often creates a context for innovation.



## Searching for Harbingers of New Ideas, Innovative Practices, and Successful Models: Questions to Aid Analysis

1. Questions to ask when looking for “found pilots” or promising models that connect moral ideas and institutional action:
  - Does the activity attract out-of-the-ordinary support inside or outside the originating organization? Does it attract volunteers?
  - What kind of staying power does the activity have? Is it in its first month, first year, or second year?
  - What kind of buzz has it created? Is enthusiasm about it infectious? Are journalists writing about it, fundraisers describing it, and other people trying to copy it?
  - If the pilot is designed as a solution to some problem, is it an important problem?
  - If the pilot were to become “big,” to spread far and wide, what new resources might it generate and from what sources?
2. Questions to ask when reading movement in leadership personnel (comings and goings):
  - Who has been attracted to the field to assume positions of leadership and how, if at all, are they different from traditional leaders?
  - Which leaders have recently left the field? Did something in their practice, interests, or approach seem incompatible with their organization or the field? Where did they go and what was so attractive about the other opportunity?
  - What stimulated the leadership changes? The normal demographics of succession? The sense of leaders failing in this field? The attractiveness of other sectors?
  - Which leaders appear marginalized and what accounts for their position outside the mainstream?
3. Questions to ask when locating tensions within the organizations of the field or the field itself:
  - What new conflicts have been cropping up in the field or organizations within the field? What are the roots of these conflicts? How do people experience and interpret them?
  - What conflicts seem to cut across customary fault lines, creating unlikely alliances?
  - Are people feeling the need to invent new places or venues in order to be “heard” on a divisive issue?
  - What tensions feel vital and productive and have led to unexpected collaborations or breakthroughs?
  - What tensions have attracted attention from outsiders, such as prospective employees, donors, or funding sources?
  - If a tension or issue were resolved, would it open up new opportunities for revenue or resources, or would it simply divide up existing resources?

## Seeking Convergence

Program officers launching new initiatives, or developing extant initiatives, need to ask if the initiative will have resonance. Will it leverage the passions, purposes, and efforts of people in government agencies, not-for-profit organizations, or community institutions? The program officer can use the signs discussed above—“found pilots,” “comings and goings,” and tensions in a field—as the foundation of a check list in planning her initiative. She can ask:

- Are people investing in prototypes or models of the initiative I am interested in? Even if these efforts are embryonic, do they signal that some people are willing to commit their own time and money to the effort?
- Does it appear that my initiative can help resolve an underlying and widely felt tension in social life? Do the found pilots represent innovative solutions to this tension?
- Are new leaders emerging in the pace-setting institutions of the field? Are thought leaders gaining influence among practitioners? Are the new ideas I am interested in associated with a new cohort of professionals whose education differs from their predecessors?

If the answer to all three questions is yes, it is a signal that the “market” might be ripe for the foundation’s initiative. It will neither be too far ahead, nor too far behind the field.

Program officers launching a new initiative need to ask if it will leverage the passions, purposes, and efforts of others.

# Problem Framing

The ideas for grantmaking presented here highlight the importance of problem framing to shaping a foundation’s funding strategies. Program officers are often presented with problems, but their meaning cannot be discerned unless they are situated in some concept of the field of forces surrounding the problem. (In this use of the term “field,” we do not mean an area of interest to foundations, such as scientific discovery, the arts, social services, government policy, or the environment. Rather, we draw from the sociological understanding of organizations or issues as existing in a context of influences or forces, which together constitute a field.) For example, we can say that there is a problem of “out-of-wedlock” births to young mothers. Yet, depending on how we frame the problem, we could decide that the appropriate response is to encourage young people to marry, or to encourage contraception among young people, or to make it easier for young mothers to continue their schooling. The choice we make should reflect our values as well as our conception of the field of forces surrounding this “problem.”

There is much evidence, for example, that young people throughout the West, and in Europe and Scandinavia in particular, no longer believe that they have to marry in order to have and raise children together.<sup>15</sup> Out-of-wedlock births now account for more than one-third of births in a number of western countries including the U.S., Canada, France, Denmark, Sweden, and Norway.<sup>16</sup> This phenomenon cuts across all social classes. The decline of marriage reflects a growing disregard for the government’s authority to sanction marriage, which has historically been governed by a wide range of laws specifying people’s obligations and rights as marriage partners. The same driving force underlies the growth in health benefits for unmarried domestic partners, including same-sex partners, of municipal employees. It no longer seems fair to demand that a spousal relationship be recognized by a legal marriage.

Once we frame the out-of-wedlock births “problem” in this way, we can see that many other forces are in motion that are undermining government authority—for example, the home schooling movement described earlier, and the belief among many people that governments cannot be relied upon to control global corporations. When we see this kind of linkage between ideas—in other words, when we uncover an ecology of ideas—it signals that the social development we are observing is not simply a fad.

The meaning of social problems cannot be discerned unless they are situated in a field of forces.

Program officers interested in the future of families should consider this anti-authority framing when constructing programmatic responses to out-of-wedlock births. This framing suggests that the social challenge may be to help people choose purposefully whether and when they want to have children, to help parents collaborate effectively in raising them, and to support single mothers in raising children.

Framing problems is tricky and there is no guarantee that we will discover a framing that gives philanthropy leverage in a field. Ten years ago, it appeared that managed care, based on the frame of market competition, would sweep all other forms of health care delivery before it. If researchers had paid more careful attention to the ecology of ideas, they might have wondered how the idea that people have a fundamental right to choose in matters of great importance to them could be squared with the prospect that managed care plans would decide what treatment they would get, and what doctors they could see. In the United States, at least, the moral discourse of capitalism—and its foundation of market competition—is rooted in the right to choose. Managed care was resisted by individuals who valued their right to choose their own care and care providers and it is consequently experiencing significant pressures to loosen restrictions. This American version of capitalism is also why abortion rights advocates have framed their points of view as a matter of “choice.”

# Marketing Ideas

In thinking about the development of a field, social entrepreneurs and program officers tend to focus on needs—the idea that people *should* want a good or service. What they often fail to recognize are the pragmatics of consumption, the context surrounding the good or service that leads people to take it up or make use of it. Thinking in terms of the pragmatics of consumption highlights how small details may have major impacts because they affect how people actually “practice” an activity. For example, the supermarket became a viable way to offer customers one-stop shopping only when the shopping cart was introduced—because people no longer had to carry their purchases around the store. Low-end department stores, such as Wal-Mart, that introduce shopping carts find that customers tend to buy more per shopping trip than those stores that do not use shopping carts.<sup>17</sup>

While the shopping cart’s impact on purchases may seem trivial, the pragmatics of consumption paradigm acknowledges that people make choices under constraints, that they value convenience highly, and that costs of transacting any kind of business significantly shape what people are willing to do. Public libraries have become “third sites” between school and home because working parents, concerned for their children’s safety when they are at home alone or on the streets, told them to go to the library when school was over. Libraries are scattered throughout the neighborhoods, they are not attractive to delinquent youth, they provide a setting in which children can do their homework comfortably, and librarians can readily monitor children’s behavior. While there has been a great deal of interest among youth development professionals in attracting young people to good after-school activities by creating new programs, the libraries have emerged spontaneously as such a youth development institution because they solved an important logistical and scheduling problem faced by working families.<sup>18</sup>

Understanding major alternatives from the consumer’s point of view is critical to conceiving and disseminating ideas and designing field-transforming strategies. For example, drugs may be attractive to teenagers not in spite of the danger but because of it. If program designers take a consumer-oriented point of view, we recognize how important it is to learn what the consumer values, not what we value. Too often, the zeal of social advocates, or their age, class, and race, get in the way of listening to users,

Thinking about the pragmatics of consumption highlights how small details can have major impacts.

clients, and customers. The answer is to do market research, to really understand the target of one's program or campaign.

Social marketing<sup>19</sup> is a perspective that emphasizes how daily life looks from the client's or consumer's point of view. For example, initiatives aimed at young people are most successful when they emphasize ways that teenagers can control their own lives. The Ad Council tested three approaches to a campaign against teenage alcoholism. The theme of the first was power. ("Who has the power, you or alcohol?") The second emphasized the destructive nature of alcohol, and the third emphasized the negative image of drinking. The theme of power had by far the greatest probability of getting teens to think twice about drinking.<sup>20</sup> Anti-smoking campaigns undermine the traditional view of the smoker as rebel by emphasizing the addictive quality of nicotine ("don't let cigarettes control you") and by painting the tobacco companies as power figures trying to keep information away from today's youth. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have been criticized for failing to position AIDS-prevention practices (condom use, monogamy, or abstinence) as "health information with an attitude."<sup>21</sup> If sneakers can be sold in support of in-your-face athleticism rather than as canvas covers for the feet, why can't AIDS prevention be marketed from the consumers' point of view?

### Marketing Ideas and Programs: Questions for Philanthropists Thinking about New Initiatives

1. Have you taken barriers into account? People targeted by the initiative may be reluctant to take up a new behavior because it is too hard, they do not have the time, it is not a priority, they forget, or "people like me don't do it."
2. Have you found ways to make new behavior more convenient, accessible, simple, easier, or inexpensive? Clinic hours can fit the schedules of people targeted; contraceptives can be available in every locality and outlet possible. Sometimes a new behavior can be made so easy that a person can hardly refuse, e.g., on many new cars, the seat belts tighten when the doors close.
3. Are you sure you are solving the right problem? The Peace Corps was a product in search of a market until it began sending the technical specialists the host countries actually wanted—trained agronomists instead of new liberal arts college graduates.

## Marketing Ideas and Programs (continued)

4. Does your activity fit the culture? The need to figure out the norms and assumptions of target groups is just as strong in the U.S. as it is in the classic case of public health authorities approaching a third world country. An effective strategy is to involve the target group in the design of the social program.
5. Are you targeting those around the real target? Campaigns to prevent drunk driving often aim at those around the drinker: designated drivers, spouses, party hosts, or bartenders.
6. Have you sought allies beyond the usual suspects? Family planning programs seeking to distribute contraceptives have sometimes included neutral groups such as physicians, and opponents such as religious communities.
7. Are you making effective use of popular media like TV? The designated-driver campaign pitched story ideas to TV producers, who began weaving changing attitudes about drinking and driving into network scripts. After four seasons, messages consistent with the designated-driver campaign had appeared in over 160 shows.<sup>22</sup> Anti-smoking advocates have likewise asked producers to reduce the amount of smoking (except by villains) in TV shows.
8. Are you leveraging early adopters? With some social causes early adopters stand to lose because they may be at a disadvantage in the marketplace. If I am the first to pick up litter in a littered neighborhood, but others don't follow, then my efforts will be wasted. If a few become committed to the cause, it is in their best interest to become active agents for change. A marketing campaign can strategically guide the urgency and enthusiasm of early adopters.

# A Systems View: The Concept of “Pull” and Field Building

The goal of social marketing is to change how a group of people undertakes a particular practice, for example, eating less fatty foods, exercising, using condoms, or reading to children at bedtime. But practices rarely stand alone, they are embedded in our daily lives, they are by-products of how we live. Thus, for example, we may all wish to get more exercise, but the fact that we commute by car to work, sit at desks during the day, and can garden only on weekends because of the press of time, significantly limits our opportunities to exercise. The factors that reinforce a particular practice create what is called its “pull.” We are pulled to undertake a particular practice because it is reinforced and reinforces other choices we are making. It is part of a system. This is what makes the practice convenient and easy to do.

A foundation may fund an educational program to alert people to the gains of eating healthy foods, but if it cannot reshape the system that surrounds eating habits, it may fail to influence behavior. An “eating-healthy system” has, in fact, begun to emerge: Consumers can read how many calories and grams of fat are in the foods they buy; restaurants prepare heart-healthy dishes; the Subway fast food chain markets the low fat content of some of its sandwiches; sugar substitutes such as Splenda and Nutrasweet enable people to eat sweets without imbibing calories; supermarkets provide organically grown produce; more people have access to farmers’ markets; and an increasing number of employers provide cafeterias with healthy lunch options and facilities and times for employee exercise.

When a foundation funds the institutions and settings that surround and reinforce a practice, it has shifted from social marketing to the more inclusive practice of “field building.” Institutions surrounding the focal practice make the practice convenient if their goals reinforce one another. For example, people who read the calorie, fat, and sodium content on food packages will favor restaurants that provide heart-healthy meals. Chefs who want to cook with fresh local ingredients will favor farmers’ markets. Supermarkets that want to appeal to consumers’ desires for healthy eating will sell produce bought from organic farmers. And, organic farmers will use farmers’ markets as an outlet for their produce. Each part of the system creates a pull for more activity and outcomes from the other parts of a system. In this way, the parts “co-evolve.”

We are “pulled” to undertake a particular practice because it is reinforced and reinforces other choices we are making.



When reinforcing pull forces are absent, it is difficult to change a practice. One constraint to improving teaching in poor school districts is the absence of strong pull forces. In upper income neighborhoods, where parents hope that their children will attend elite colleges and universities, these institutions’ requirements exercise a strong pull on the practice of teaching from elementary to high school. School boards, teachers, and parents, ever conscious of what children need to achieve to gain entry to an elite college, work to shape a curriculum, tutoring, test preparation programs, and extracurricular activities with the elite post-secondary institutions in mind. No such institutions shape teaching in schools populated by children from poor families. This is one reason school districts serving poor children often create “themed” high schools. The theory is that a high school focused on a particular set of skills and knowledge will stimulate pull forces—i.e., the school will interest employers, who might come to rely on the school as a source of new workers, and may empower parents who, with a more vivid picture of their children’s future, may make greater demands on the school.

“Pull” in a system is often associated with power in the system. Before the advent of managed care, physicians (directly) and hospital administrators (indirectly) determined what and how many resources to spend in delivering patient care services. They “pulled” resources toward their institutions. This resulted in significant health care cost inflation. Insurers changed the locus of pull by offering employers fixed-price contracts while simultaneously using their buying power in local markets to negotiate lower prices for physician and hospital services. Insurers then exercised the power of pull in the system. But insurers’ pull power may be declining as employers—sensitized to employees’ desire to choose which doctors they use and what services they get—buy health plans that give employees more choice over the care they get (but often with higher deductibles and more out-of-pocket expenses). The locus of pull in health care has shifted first from physicians to insurers, and then from insurers to patients.

The distribution of power in a system often makes it difficult to change the pull forces within it. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation wants to increase people’s opportunity to walk to work or shops so that they will exercise more as a by-product of their daily activities. This requires high housing density and the intermixture of commercial and residential building within the same local area. But, of course, there are many stakeholders—homebuilders, the automotive supply and services industry, land developers, and mortgage lenders—who have a deep interest in suburban tract development, which has historically separated housing from commercial development and placed a premium on low housing density. The challenge for the foundation is to kick-start a new proto-system where the action of each part, by benefiting the other parts, accelerates high-density development.

One way to conceptualize such a proto-system is to envision the set of stakeholders that might comprise it. We might include in this set,

The distribution of power in a system often makes it difficult to change the pull forces within it.

manufacturers of buses, light rail systems, scooters, and bikes; architects with expertise in designing walking-friendly landscapes; land trusts through which landowners can create conservation easements to restrict future development on their land; large retailers interested in creating two-story facilities; state highway departments that have developed pedestrian-friendly streets; insurance companies interested in reducing highway injuries; and large employers interested in containing the health care costs associated with injuries due to the use of cars. A foundation might sponsor a “system design” process through which such stakeholders envision how each can contribute to the others’ standing, profits, reputation, or social impact by participating in a system for producing higher density, mixed-use development.

In working to build a field, a foundation does not so much *wrest* power from the “old system” as create a new system—one, which, if it grows, *attracts* power to it. Moreover, as this illustration of “pull forces” suggests, field building will frequently entail working across the public and private sectors because often a deeply embedded target behavior—such as how people eat, learn, raise children, or attend to their health—is reinforced by a wide range of institutions.

Field building can entail working across the public and private sectors because often a target behavior is reinforced by a range of institutions.

### Field Building: Questions for Philanthropists Thinking About Field Building

1. What is the target behavior or practice you are trying to change?
2. What institutions reinforce the target practice? How do these institutions reinforce each others’ activities?
3. What alternative set of institutions could reinforce the new practice or desired behavior? How might these institutions together amplify the success, standing, or social impact of each its members?
4. What scale does this alternative set need to reach in order to change the target behavior?
5. What steps can you take now to bring a representative set of such institutions together?
6. What techniques (simulation, scenario writing, etc.) can you use to demonstrate the synergies of the parts to this representative set of institutions?

## Constraints as Opportunities for Intervention (Blockages to "Pull Forces")

One way to help build a proto-system is to identify where a bottleneck or constraint within it is emerging. There are many barriers to effectiveness in any particular delivery system for a service, but sometimes one is controlling, in the sense that relaxing or overcoming any other barriers does not improve overall performance. For example, in elementary and secondary education, there is strong evidence that the availability of accomplished teachers is a controlling bottleneck. New teaching programs, new methods of financing schools, or more collaboration between teachers and parents may all fail to improve student achievement if there is an insufficient number of teachers available.

If teachers' colleges cannot expand fast enough to train the requisite number and quality of teachers, alternative institutions will emerge to supply the demand and gain power in the system. For example, Sylvan Learning Systems has contracted with some public school systems to train adults for teaching positions who do not have teaching degrees.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps new intermediary institutions will emerge as well, such as school staffing agencies that supply teachers to schools. These organizations would be similar to temporary help agencies used by organizations that want programmers, accountants, engineers, and lawyers for short-term projects. Once these temporary institutions take hold, they are unlikely to disappear when the shortage is gone. Rather, they will seek to become institutionalized by taking up new functions, occupying a permanent niche in the field. Foundations interested in school reform have an opportunity to affect how and what students learn by responding to the needs created by this bottleneck in the labor force.

Shortages favor innovation. This is one reason that innovations often start at the periphery of a system, where resources are scarce, rather than at the center where resources are plentiful. Thus, for example, the nurse practitioner as a professional first emerged in rural areas where doctors were in short supply. However, nursing school deans opposed the concept of the nurse practitioner, in part because they believed that, in the context of physician private practices, the nurse would be subordinate to the doctor. Facing this opposition, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation funded demonstration sites in settings such as fishing villages, remote mountain valleys, small towns, and primary care clinics in African-American communities.<sup>24</sup> Only later, as primary care became a discipline and managed care programs put pressure on health care costs, did the nurse practitioner role enter the mainstream of health professions. In 1996, there were about 71,000 licensed practitioners. The number of practitioners grew at about 10 percent a year from 1992 to 1996.

Innovations often start at the periphery of a system, where resources are scarce.

# Conclusion

Ideas animate philanthropic activity. Relevant ideas are not simply invented by fertile minds but instead emerge out of nascent practices, felt pressures, an ecology of thought, and moral preoccupations. A foundation officer interested in launching a philanthropic program based on a new idea should consider the idea's relationship to these potential sources. As institutions that invest in ideas, foundations can improve the way they identify and assess ideas. Both individual foundation staff and their organizations can increase the chances that the ideas and programs they advance will gain traction and attract resources, attention, and the energies of committed and talented people.

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# About the Authors

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Larry Hirschhorn is a Principal of CFAR, a management consulting firm in Philadelphia. An expert in strategy development, organizational development, and economic analysis, his clients include universities, foundations, law firms, venture capital firms, and consulting firms. He is the author of four books, including *The Workplace Within* and *Reworking Authority: Leading and Following in the Post-Modern Organization*, on the psychodynamics of organizations, and his articles have appeared in the *Harvard Business Review*, *Human Relations*, and *Change*. He holds a Ph.D. in economics from Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

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Thomas North Gilmore, a Vice President and Principal of CFAR and adjunct faculty member at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, specializes in organizational development, design of new initiatives, and systems thinking. He consults with a wide range of corporations and nonprofit organizations, and has written extensively on issues of organization, management, and leadership. He is the author of the highly regarded book *Making a Leadership Change: How Organizations Can Handle Leadership Transitions Successfully*, as well as articles that have appeared in journals such as the *Harvard Business Review*, *Human Resource Management*, and *Administrative Science Quarterly*. He holds a B.A. from Harvard, and a Master's in architecture from the University of Pennsylvania.

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