

## MACARTHUR FELLOWS PROGRAM

# Five Myths About the MacArthur “Genius Grants”

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Opinions section, September 20, 2013

By Cecilia Conrad

On Wednesday, the new class of MacArthur Fellows — known to the world as the “genius grant” winners — will be announced. Each year, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation identifies 20 to 30 exceptionally creative individuals with the potential for important work and provides them with financial support, freeing them to pursue their most innovative ideas. These Fellows will receive \$625,000 each, up from \$500,000 in years past, to spend as they see fit. No one can apply, and no one knows if they are even being considered. We don’t want to spoil the surprise, but we can separate fact from fiction about the program.

### 1. YOU HAVE TO BE A GENIUS TO WIN IT.

The foundation does not use the name “genius grant”; the news media coined that nickname in 1981, when we named our first class of Fellows, and it stuck.

Yet, “genius” is both too narrow and too broad to describe MacArthur Fellows. It’s too narrow because the word connotes someone with great academic success or a high score on a standardized test. The Fellows exhibit more than intellectual prowess. They include people like Ruth Lubic (a 1993 Fellow), a nurse-midwife who helped establish birth centers delivering personalized care for low-income women, and Rueben Martinez (2004), who used his barbershop to promote literature in Latino communities.

“Genius” is also too broad because creativity is only one manifestation of genius. It may be expressed through a range of abilities, such as virtuoso artistic performance or athleticism. We admire prodigies and great athletes, but those are not the attributes we are seeking when we make the award. We are looking for individuals who are engaged in the process of making or finding something new, or in connecting the seemingly unconnected in significant ways. We are looking for people on the precipice of a great discovery or achievement.

### 2. THE SELECTION PROCESS IS SHROUDED IN SECRECY.

We are actually quite open about the process for selecting Fellows; it is posted on our Web site.

Each year, the MacArthur Fellows Program invites new nominators — intellectual leaders in their fields — to put forward the most creative people they know. Our staff researches each candidate, collecting examples of the nominee’s work and soliciting the opinions of experts from outside the foundation. An independent selection committee, made up of about a dozen diverse leaders, evaluates the nominations and sends its recommendations to the foundation’s president and board.

To encourage honest evaluations and discussion, nominators, evaluators and selectors all serve anonymously. Their correspondence is kept confidential. We never reveal the names of nominators, evaluators or selection committee members — not even to the Fellows.

### 3. THE WINNERS ARE USUALLY ACADEMICS AND ARTISTS.

Fellows come from every field of human endeavor, from theoretical physics to urban farming.

Many Fellows, like sports-medicine researcher Kevin Guskiewicz (2011), are engaged in highly practical work. Guskiewicz is making advances in the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of concussions. Others are working on projects whose benefits may not be apparent until many years in the future. Astrophysicist Joseph Taylor, for instance, was named a MacArthur Fellow in 1981, but it was more than 10 years later that his work on pulsars was recognized with a Nobel Prize. Some Fellows, like Rosanne Haggerty (2001), address pressing social issues — in her case, providing housing for homeless individuals and families.

Fellows work across fields and sometimes change fields over time. Jim Kim, a physician and medical anthropologist at the time of his Fellowship in 2003, is now president of the World Bank. From 2001 to 2012, 36 percent of the MacArthur Fellows came from the arts and humanities, 36 percent from science or social science, and 26 percent worked on social problems such as homelessness, food security and health care.

The award is speculative; it does not recognize lifetime achievement but invests in individual potential.

### **4. CREATIVITY “JUST HAPPENS.”**

One of the biggest misunderstandings is that creativity is a flash of brilliance that does not require support — that people are either creative or they are not. In fact, virtually all Fellows have invested years honing their expertise, and many have overcome obstacles to projects that have later defined new frontiers. Sometimes an experiment does not yield the expected results but points to a new direction. A researcher may be unable to find money for exploratory research, or a social entrepreneur may lack access to the financiers who can support a smart idea. Fellows have told us about being on the verge of quitting — selling the piano or leaving academic research for a commercial lab — when they got our call.

Creativity blossoms when someone is given the autonomy and flexibility to take on ideas or projects whose potential payoff may be distant or unknown. Creativity shrivels when there are short-term pressures for publication or financial reward. For instance, the 2000 Fellowship program gave radio documentary producer David Isay the freedom to build StoryCorps, now celebrating its 10th year of collecting the oral histories of people from all backgrounds.

And creativity requires role models: stories of individuals who have taken risks and persisted through failures to make something new, to find unexpected solutions to old problems or to create objects of beauty that renew the human spirit. The MacArthur Fellowship is meant to recognize, celebrate and inspire creativity among us all.

### **5. IT’S ALL DOWNHILL AFTER WINNING THE FELLOWSHIP.**

We do not track the hundreds of books published, patents granted and awards received by our Fellows. It is not even clear that these are the right metrics to capture the program’s success or theirs.

The Fellowship is speculative, based on the potential for creativity, and creativity involves taking risks. If every Fellow hit only home runs, we would worry that they were not taking enough risks or that we’d chosen the wrong people. Also, the success of the program cannot be measured solely by individual outcomes. We bring attention to many overlooked fields, such as blacksmithing (Tom Joyce, 2003) and bowmaking for stringed instruments (Benoît Rolland, 2012), typography (Matthew Carter, 2010) and ornithology (Richard Prum, 2009), language preservation (Jessie Little Doe Baird, 2010) and elder rights (Marie-Therese Connolly, 2011).

So, when we announce the new Fellows Wednesday, remember that they were not selected out of the blue. Individually, they demonstrate a track record of enduring accomplishment through tenacity, imagination and risk-taking. Collectively, they reflect the diversity of American creativity.

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## It Isn't Easy Being a Genius

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By Jim Collins

Let me begin by making something very clear: I'm not a genius. Tomorrow, 25 people are going to find themselves making similar protestations — at least most of them are — after the MacArthur Foundation announces its latest class of fellows for its so-called genius award. And as someone who once received one of those awards, here's a little insight into what the new fellows experienced over the last few days and what they're going to have to deal with.

Two years ago, I received a call. The person on the other end of the line asked if I was Jim Collins and if I was alone. For a moment, I thought I was receiving an obscene phone call.

The caller then told me I had been selected as a MacArthur fellow. I laughed, convinced this was another well-orchestrated prank by one of my former college roommates. The caller tried to reassure me, and eventually gave me a number to call to confirm the award. The number had a Chicago area code, the home of the MacArthur Foundation. Maybe this was legit.

I called the number and was assured by the folks on the other end that I really had been selected for the award. They then told me I couldn't tell anyone, except my immediate family, until the announcement in a few days.

That night, my wife and I told our young children about the award. Our daughter quickly chimed in that she too was a genius, but her brother was not, because he didn't know all of his colors and he could count only to 10.

The foundation avoids using the term "genius," and stresses that the award (worth \$500,000) is for creativity. Most people, however, play up the genius label. I got my first taste of this the morning the awards were announced. As I left home to get coffee, my neighbor leaned from his second-story window, still in his pajamas, and yelled: "Hey, Jimmy Neutron! I didn't know I was living next to a genius."

Within days, I began to receive requests from family, friends and strangers to evaluate various pet theories, some well

founded, some half-baked, ranging from the therapeutic benefits of magnets to the location of the missing dark matter in the universe. People sought me out for answers and insights, usually prefacing their question with, "You're a genius":

"We just saw 'War of the Worlds': are there aliens out there?"

"What's the difference between an alligator and a crocodile?"

"Does it really take seven years to digest chewing gum?"

"How do you weigh someone's soul?"

Some wanted my advice on which stocks to buy. Interestingly, the only time I felt like a genius was in 1999 and early 2000, when I was investing in high-tech stocks. In April 2000, I began my "Flowers for Algernon" post-brilliance, post-Nasdaq-bubble decline, and quickly picked up the nickname "idiot," several years before the Red Sox made it popular. So I don't give out stock tips.

But here's a little advice to the new fellows. If you're an academic, expect your colleagues to assume that all of your papers are being accepted — little will they know that your work still gets rejected regularly.

And expect not to have a lot of fun with board games. Trivial Pursuit has never been the same. My team always assumes it has the competitive advantage. But once I miss a few questions, my teammates turn on me: "What's the matter with you? You're supposed to be a genius!" The other team chimes in: "Clearly, the MacArthur Foundation made a mistake."

These unrealistically high expectations extend even to children's games. After my daughter recently beat me at Candyland, she looked at me, disenchanted, and said, "Dad, I thought you were supposed to be a genius." I tried to explain that the MacArthur award was for creativity, not genius, and that my creative work did not encompass the selection of colored cards from a randomly shuffled deck. My daughter just slowly shook her head and walked out of the room.

Congratulations new MacArthur fellows, you geniuses.

*Jim Collins, a bioengineer and 2003 MacArthur fellow, is a professor at Boston University.*

MACARTHUR FELLOWS PROGRAM

# Leader of “Genius Grant” Program Spreads the Word to Inspire Creativity

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## THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

*September 17, 2014*

By Nicole Lewis

A few weeks ago, Cecilia Conrad called 21 strangers to surprise them with the news that they were each getting \$625,000, national media attention, and the chance to pursue creative projects that appealed to them.

Ms. Conrad has what she called “the coolest job”: leading the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation’s Fellows Program, an annual set of awards commonly dubbed the “genius grants.”

The round of phone calls capped the first time she had overseen the selection process from start to finish since landing the job last year. She follows Daniel Socolow, who retired after 15 years leading the program.

Now Ms. Conrad, a former economics professor and college administrator, is spearheading the foundation’s efforts to shine a brighter spotlight on the fellows’ work as well as on the importance of creativity in all parts of society.

MacArthur has begun collecting and mining data on the fellows’ backgrounds to gain insight into the origins of creativity and how to cultivate it, which Ms. Conrad calls “something incredibly important for individuals in terms of mental health, in terms of economic well-being, and also for our society writ large.”

### WIDE AWARENESS

A survey MacArthur conducted last year found that 43 percent of Americans knew about the “genius” program and 10 percent of people surveyed reported that the program inspired them to pursue their own creative activities.

Ms. Conrad hopes to increase those numbers by talking up the program at more conferences, events, and diverse news outlets. She and her staff members hope to meet with school districts to discuss how teachers can use videos about the fellows’ work.

All those efforts are designed to help meet the foundation’s ultimate goal: to inspire other creative work, and not just by the lucky few named as fellows. “We want to show that creativity happens everywhere, in all different fields and spaces, and in between fields and spaces, representing different geographies, racial, and ethnic groups,” says Ms. Conrad. “We want people to look at it and think, ‘See? That person is kind of like me.’”

Since 1981, when the program began, 918 people have been chosen as fellows. They represent a kaleidoscope of experts: charity founders, humanities scholars, medical researchers, human-rights activists, artists, novelists, and musicians. People can’t apply for the award and the chosen fellows almost never find out who nominated them to receive it.

The award is not intended to reward past achievement but recognizes projects and talents with the potential for the betterment of society, says Ms. Conrad. “We are always looking for something just beyond accomplishment,” she says.

To that end, there is no age requirement: Previous fellows have ranged in age from 19 to 83. However, in a speech earlier this year, Ms. Conrad said the foundation pays particular attention to people under age 40.

While the foundation plans to better publicize its fellows, it will continue to limit disclosure of how the winners are selected.

General information is posted on MacArthur’s website about how the fellows are chosen, but the process remains shrouded in secrecy, with almost everyone involved sworn to silence. More transparency would hamper the program, says Ms. Conrad.

“People want to know who is involved; we are not going to share that,” she says. “It’s very important to our process to protect the anonymity of participants. It encourages frankness and it encourages people to take some risks when they suggest candidates.”

Even watchdogs who usually urge grant makers to be more open don’t argue with that philosophy.

“I understand the need for anonymity in this process given the fact it is not a competitive grants process,” says Aaron

Dorfman, head of the Committee of Responsive Philanthropy. "If the foundation believes it needs this amount of anonymity to protect the program's integrity, I side with them on that."

### JUDGING THE GENIUSES

Ms. Conrad came to her current job knowing firsthand about how the selection process works.

Twelve years ago she herself got a surprise phone call from Mr. Socolow, when she was on the economics faculty at Pomona College.

Alas, the call was not offering congratulations about becoming a fellow. Instead, Mr. Socolow invited her to join the program's selection committee, a dozen people from a range of disciplines who give MacArthur's board final recommendations for each year's crop of 20 to 25 fellows.

For the next five years, Ms. Conrad received a large box every few months full of reams of information—videotapes of performances, newspaper articles, CDs, research papers, letters of evaluation, and more—about the work of potential nominees.

The committee later met to discuss each person and how the award might further their work, giving them freedom and flexibility as well as financial backing and name recognition to pursue their projects.

The committee is aided by a rotating network of several hundred volunteers—experts in their fields—who serve for several months as nominators.

They can nominate any number of potential fellows by submitting a one- or two-page letter for each, describing their work's merits.

Eventually the selection committee whittles down the hundreds of annual nominations to the small cohort of fellows. If a nominee doesn't get selected one year, he or she is still eligible indefinitely.

Getting picked for the selection committee is nearly as mysterious a process as getting picked for a fellowship. Ms. Conrad says she once asked why she was chosen, and she received a broad answer about how the foundation relies on a large network of informants who have their eyes peeled for potential nominees, nominators, and committee members.

Now that she's in charge of selecting committee members, she says, she looks for "people who we believe in some ways have a good eye, and they have some breadth of experience or interest they bring to the table. More important, they themselves are creative in some way—creative problem-solvers—who have a strong sense of what is important to society."

### PROGRAM CHANGES

In addition to Ms. Conrad's push to raise the program's profile, other small changes are percolating.

A survey of fellows conducted last year found that many would like more help from the foundation in adjusting to their notoriety after the award is announced.

The foundation used to place a single phone call to recipients—who were often disbelieving they had been selected—before the press announcement. Now the foundation follows up with a second call to answer questions that might arise after the initial shock wears off.

In addition, fellows reported they would welcome more opportunities to interact with one another. A chance meeting between two previous fellows resulted in their collaboration on a dance piece about the human genome.

Next month, for the first time in several years, the foundation will host a large gathering of fellows. MacArthur is also exploring connections among fellows through social media.

But the program's goal, she says, will continue to be encouraging a group of people to stay focused on what is possible, with no strings attached.

"We are making an investment in a creative person," says Ms. Conrad. "We don't have a specific notion of what the outcomes are going to be."

MACARTHUR FELLOWS PROGRAM

# Geography of Genius: New Data About MacArthur Fellows Shows Creative People Move More

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Opinions section, September 3, 2014

By Cecilia Conrad

I was not sure where playwright Tarell McCraney would be when I called to tell him that he had won a MacArthur Fellowship and an accompanying stipend of \$625,000 with no strings attached. McCraney grew up in Miami, went to college in Chicago, and had no permanent address last September when I was to share the news with him. McCraney is one of the 897 exceptionally creative individuals who have been recognized by the MacArthur Foundation since 1981 and, among our Fellows, his story is not unique. MacArthur Fellows turn out to be a highly mobile population, prompting us to ask, “Do highly creative people move more than others, or does moving make people more creative?”

We recently compared data on the geographic distribution of MacArthur Fellows at the time of the award to their distribution by place of birth. This is the first time that these data have been compiled and made available publicly. MacArthur Fellows are a distinctive demographic, people identified as “creative,” “talented,” “innovative,” and “intelligent” in a survey of thought leaders conducted for a recent program review. The data may shed light on the environments that nourish creative people.

We learned that MacArthur Fellows are more mobile than the general population. Of the 701 individuals born in the United States who have been named Fellows, 79% lived, at the time of the award, outside the state where they were born. According to recent U.S. Census Bureau data, approximately 30% of the general population and 42% of the college-educated population live outside the state where they were born.

This pattern of mobility of MacArthur Fellows resembles that of exceptionally creative and innovative people

throughout history. In a recent paper in *Science*, Maximilian Schich and his collaborators observe that notable antiquarians of the eighteenth century were born all over Europe but died in cultural centers such as Rome, Paris, or Dresden. Fellows display an analogous tendency to congregate in cultural centers. Comparing birthplace to location at the time of the award, the most popular destination state for Fellows was California, followed by New York. For example, 2009 Fellow Camille Utterback, born in Indiana, and 2008 Fellow Walter Kitundu, born in Minnesota — both artists — lived in San Francisco at the time of the award.

People move for a variety of reasons, but one driving factor is economic opportunity. Scientists tend to cluster near the research universities and high-tech corridors of Massachusetts and California. For those in the arts, the concentration of potential employers and prospective customers in New York City, Los Angeles, and San Francisco makes these urban centers attractive places to live. In addition, there are spillover benefits of being surrounded by other artists — the density of artists makes it possible for supporting services such as art supply stores or instrument repairers to prosper.

But the factors that affect location decisions are not purely economic. Richard Florida, an economist who has written extensively on the creative class, argues that talent is attracted to cultural amenities and to a high degree of openness to diversity. And the economic benefits of cultural centers are sometimes counterbalanced by their high cost of living. These factors might explain why, when we adjust for population, the states that most MacArthur Fellows call home include New Mexico, Alaska, and Vermont.

Our information on location at the time of the award is based largely on place of employment, but some Fellows worked in one state and lived in another. There are also Fellows who are difficult to assign to a single “home,” and Fellows for whom the spiritual home might be very different from the place where they live. Author and 2013 MacArthur Fellow Karen Russell was born in Florida, lives in New York,

but was teaching in Camden, New Jersey, at the time of the award. Many of her stories take place in the Florida Everglades.

The data also highlight the contribution of immigrants to the creative culture of the United States. Nearly a quarter of MacArthur Fellows were born outside of the country. Though Fellows must be citizens or residents of the United States, their countries of origin span the globe. Historian and 2003 Fellow Anders Winroth was born in Sweden and was teaching at Yale University in Connecticut at the time of the award. Economist and 2012 Fellow Raj Chetty was born in India but attended college and now works in Massachusetts. Atomic physicist and 2013 Fellow Ana Maria Rey was born in Colombia, earned her doctorate in Maryland, and now lives in Colorado.

It may be, as suggested in a 2012 article in *Nature*, that research money is the driving force behind the global migration of scientists—exceptionally creative scientists move to the United States because of its science and technology infrastructure. However, it is also possible that the scientists who move to the United States become more creative because of the move. In a series of studies, social psychologists Adam Galinsky and William Maddux found that time spent living abroad increases creativity. The theory is that living abroad exposes individuals to diverse, multicultural experiences and these experiences contribute to the production of new ideas. A similar dynamic might explain why even MacArthur Fellows born in the United States are highly mobile.

We aspire to have the MacArthur Fellows represent American creativity in all its dimensions. Geography is an important aspect of that diversity, and it is revealing not just about the Fellows but about the movement of creative people generally. We strongly believe that creativity exists everywhere, and one of our continuing goals will be to recognize and inspire others to embrace that creativity, in all of its many manifestations, both inside and outside traditional, expected locations.

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MACARTHUR FELLOWS PROGRAM

## Our Society Discourages Innovation

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ROOM for DEBATE

July 23, 2014

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*Is creativity endangered?*

*Critics have lamented the “creativity crisis” in recent years, faulting an education system focused on standardized tests and a reliance on technology that atrophies the mind. But The Times recently reported that in the summer, many schools nationwide become incubators for creativity. And every September, the “genius grants” from the MacArthur Foundation highlight plenty of innovative individuals for whom technology has sharpened the mind, not dulled it.*

*Are the critics onto something? If creativity is endangered, what is suppressing it, and what would reverse the trend?*

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By Cecilia Conrad

Reports of the death of American creativity are an exaggeration. The hyperloop, Google Glass, nano-pharmaceuticals and mind-controlled robotic legs are all examples of its continued vitality.

That said, people with innovative and cutting-edge ideas have likely spent much of their lives swimming against the tide.

Creativity flourishes at the intersections of traditional disciplines, but traditional means of assessment often marginalize individuals working to define new and unique fields of endeavor. From the high-stakes tests in K-12, to the academic tenure clock, to the economy’s focus on short-term return on investments, American society’s reward structures tend to discourage unconventional thinking and limit risk-taking.

And yet, creativity thrives in an environment where individuals have the freedom to devote time and effort to ideas and projects that may not have an immediate payoff—projects like John Dabiri’s analysis of the aerodynamics of schools of fish, to inform the optimal placement of wind turbines. Creativity requires giving self-directed original thinkers space for the missteps and dead ends that are often prerequisites for groundbreaking work. That’s the philosophy behind the MacArthur Fellows program and its “no strings attached” grants.

For over 30 years, the MacArthur Foundation has recognized and inspired creativity among the Dabiris of the world through its fellowship program. Each year the program awards 20 to 25 exceptionally talented individuals five-year, unrestricted fellowships, which the news media have dubbed “genius grants.”

The widespread adoption of a “no strings attached” rewards structure is neither practical nor advisable. However, the basic insight—that the best incubator for creativity is an environment that gives the individual autonomy and flexibility—should inform the design of incentives in both the schoolhouse and the workplace. A healthy society requires that we cultivate the next generation of innovators to maintain economic competitiveness, to solve deep-rooted social problems and to create objects of beauty that inspire.