

John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

MacArthur Fellows Program: Decennial Learning Exercise

Executive Summary

June 2024

Prepared by:



ABOUT THE FELLOWS PROGRAM

Since 1981, the MacArthur Foundation has sought to support creative, pathbreaking work across fields through the MacArthur Fellows Program. Each year, the Foundation awards 20 to 25 Fellowships to individuals whose work has been evaluated as exceptionally creative by Foundation Staff and an anonymous, interdisciplinary committee. The Fellowship is notably not a lifetime achievement award; instead, it is an investment in individuals at any career stage who have shown a unique ability for originality and innovation in their field. The monetary award and national visibility of the Fellowship are intended to enable new, exciting work and opportunities for each Fellow, leading to societal impact.

2022-23 DECENNIAL LEARNING EXERCISE

In 2022, the MacArthur Foundation engaged Learning for Action (LFA) and Public Profit (PP) to lead a decennial learning exercise for its Fellows Program, the goals of which were to: understand the Fellowship's defining characteristics and place in the field of award programs; understand the Fellowship's outcomes; gather feedback on specific program processes; and, ultimately, support the Fellows Program Team to develop recommendations for any shifts to the Fellowship based on findings. Additionally, The Harris Poll (Harris) was commissioned to conduct a public opinion poll on awareness, perceptions and impact of the Foundation and its Fellows Program. This executive summary of findings is co-written by all three evaluation and learning partners (LFA, PP, and Harris) and represents our perspective of the key findings and their relevance to the Fellowship.

KEY FINDINGS

The learning exercise uncovered the following key findings that are further detailed in this summary.

The Fellowship's Defining Characteristics:

1. The Fellowship continues to occupy a unique niche in the field of award programs due to a combination of features.
2. The award recognizes individuals who exemplify extraordinary creativity, inspire others, have the courage to challenge and disrupt systems when necessary, and do catalytic work in interdisciplinary spaces.
3. Perceptions of the Fellows Program among the Engaged Public, including that it recognizes creativity and supports people who make important contributions to society, are on par or even more favorable in 2023 than in 2012.

Fellows' Experience and Outcomes:

4. The program has significant impacts on Fellows' professional and personal lives such as enabling Fellows to engage in new creative projects, expand previous work, or act on ideas they were incubating prior to receiving the award.
5. The impact of the Fellowship is more pronounced for some Fellows, often based on their identity and lived experience, while some experience negative impacts.

The Fellowship's Broader Impact on People Close to Fellows and Fellows' Fields:

6. The Fellowship can have positive ripple effects on Fellows' peers and in the Fellows' fields.

Feedback on the Program:

7. Fellows deeply appreciate the opportunities to engage with each other across fields and class years.
8. Major changes to the nomination, selection, and award process are not needed. However, ongoing fine tuning is appropriate.

DATA COLLECTION Between April and December of 2023, the following data collection methods were conducted:

Source	Method	Details
Landscape Review	Desk Research	Analysis of 54 comparable awards
Fellows	Survey	415 Fellows completed the survey (46% response rate)
	Focus Groups	12 Fellows across 2 focus groups
	Interviews	5 Fellows (selected from focus group participants)
Fellows' Peers	Interviews	18 field leaders and peers of Fellows
	Polling	318 peers of past 10-year Fellows
Nominators	Survey	1,973 Nominators completed the survey (29% response rate)
	Interviews	12 Nominators
Selectors	Interviews	6 current or former Selectors
Foundation Staff	Interviews	7 MacArthur Foundation Program Staff
Foundation Board	Discussion	Full Board feedback discussion during a Board meeting; small number of Board members interviewed
Public	Polling	2,000 adults who are past or likely voters, closely follow two or more social issues, and do not work in media or philanthropy

THE FELLOWSHIP'S DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS

KEY FINDING 1: The Fellowship continues to occupy a unique niche in the field of award programs due to a combination of features.

A landscape review of 54 other comparable awards showed there are several areas where the Fellowship is distinct, and while many awards programs share some of the characteristics of the MacArthur Fellowship, none offer the same blend of valuable attributes. Of the other awards examined, only eight are considered multidisciplinary, awarding individuals from many disciplines in the same cohort. While selected Fellows have records of past accomplishments, the Fellowship separates itself from peer awards through awarding individuals who show promise for future work and for whom the award would enable future work. The MacArthur Fellowship also offers a generous award amount with no strings attached. This combination of a multidisciplinary approach, distinctive award criteria, catalytic investments, and no-strings philosophy is unmatched by its peers.

KEY FINDING 2: The Fellowship recognizes individuals who exemplify extraordinary creativity, inspire others, have the courage to challenge and disrupt systems when necessary, and do catalytic work in interdisciplinary spaces.

The nature of the Fellows themselves - and the distinctive way in which they embody creativity - is a hallmark of the program. Nominators, Selectors, peers of Fellows, and Fellows Program Staff believe that many of those selected for the Fellowship are exercising their creativity in bold, inspiring, and sometimes disruptive ways. Fellows are not only leaders in their fields for their exemplary research or outstanding artistic endeavors, but they also pursue their work in ways that push the boundaries of their fields, challenge the status quo of systems, tackle questions related to today's most pressing challenges, and explore paths not yet taken by others. While these are not explicit criteria of the award, they seem to be a natural consequence of exceptional creativity. Interviewees gave examples of scientists using soil science and agriculture practices to address climate change, historians bringing together computer science and history utilizing computer programming to transcribe ancient script, architects considering more than just physical infrastructure and integrating natural species and habitats in urban development, and artists charting new paths in drama and performance, pushing the boundaries of genre or form. These Fellows bring creativity and risk-taking to bear in ways that are vital to questions of our collective success and survival.

KEY FINDING 3:

Perceptions of the Fellows Program among the Engaged Public, including that it recognizes creativity and supports people who make important contributions to society, are on par or even more favorable in 2023 than in 2012.

The research found that the Engaged Public¹, representing over half (53 percent) of the general population, are concerned about the direction of the country: two-thirds (67 percent) think the country is headed in the wrong direction, and when presented with an array of economic and social issues more than six in ten considered them to be a major problem. However, the Engaged Public were both realistic and hopeful. They understand the complexity associated with solving these issues, especially in the face of political polarization. Majorities agreed that today's issues are complex and require creative solutions, and that the country is too divided to come together to solve big problems. Yet nearly nine in ten agreed that they believe people who can make a difference exist, they just need someone to take a risk on them (see Fig. 1). This opinion—the belief that individuals can be trusted to improve the human condition—is a natural fit for the Foundation and the Fellows Program.

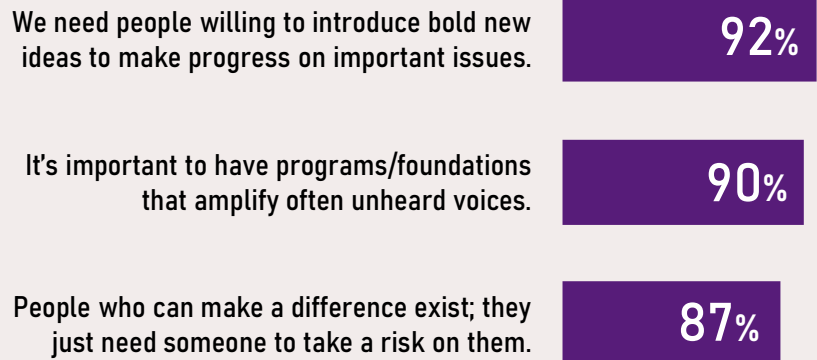
Perceptions of the Fellows Program were even more favorable than in 2012, among those aware. There were notable increases that the program rewards people with a personal passion for what they do, recognizes creativity, and supports people and activities that make important contributions to culture and society. Additionally, this audience was more likely to say they were inspired to pursue personal creative activities and ideas.

Despite a decline in awareness among the Engaged Public of both the Foundation and the Fellows Program (Foundation: 37 percent 2023, 44 percent 2012; Fellows Program: 34 percent 2023, 43 percent 2012), these data indicate that once the Foundation and the Fellows Program became known to people, perceptions were quite favorable in many ways, including that the program recognizes creativity and rewards people with a personal passion (59 percent agree for each, see Fig. 2).

Overall, this research suggests that the Foundation and the Fellows Program continue to have the opportunity to bring forth people and ideas that are innovative and creative to help make important contributions to culture and society.

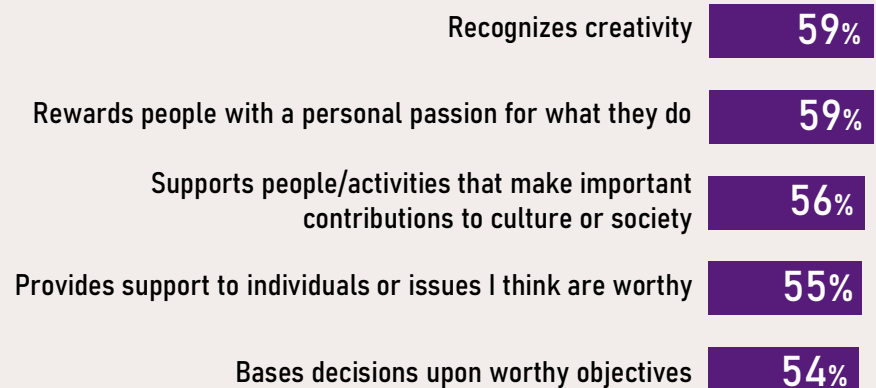
¹ Engaged Public is defined as adults who are past or likely voters, closely follow two or more social issues, and do not work in media or philanthropy.

Figure 1. Public perceptions toward finding solutions



Source: MacArthur-Harris Poll Engaged Public Polling 2023. Base: All Respondents (N=2000).

Figure 2. The Engaged Public perceives the Fellows Program positively (top five responses)



Source: MacArthur-Harris Poll Engaged Public Polling 2023. Base: Aware of The Fellows Program (N=680).

KEY FINDING 4:

The program has significant impacts on Fellows' professional and personal lives such as enabling Fellows to engage in new creative projects, expand previous work, or act on ideas they were incubating prior to receiving the award.

The program has significant impacts on Fellows' lives, careers, and accomplishments.

"The MacArthur Fellowship changed my life massively. It launched me on this incredible trajectory of recognition, opportunity, and responsibility to do something great."
- MacArthur Fellow

The Fellowship supports most Fellows to continue the trajectory of their work, yet some Fellows branch out. About a third of Fellows said they started a new professional collaboration (31 percent) and/or changed the direction of their work (29 percent) as a result of receiving the Fellowship (see Fig.3). One Fellow shared, *"the Fellowship has contributed to my willingness to make changes that are rare in academia."* Fellows in the Humanities (41 percent) and Sciences (41 percent) were more likely to report changing the direction of their work, compared to other fields.

Fellows who branch out engage in new creative projects, expand previous work, or act on ideas they have been incubating prior to receiving the award. The award accelerates or amplifies these projects by shifting the conditions surrounding the Fellows' work. For example, the award may lower the financial risk associated with new or expanded projects, making it easier to embark on this new work. One Fellow described it as shifting *"the probabilities more in the favor of success."* Through these shifts, the Fellowship enables what was possible to become probable.

The Fellowship increases self-confidence and the freedom to take risks; however, with that comes "genius" pressure. Most Fellows (78 percent) said the Fellowship increased their self-confidence. As one Fellow said, it is *"very liberating to feel like I can trust my vision."* Many Fellows shared that the Fellowship gives them the confidence to share imperfect work or works in progress. Others felt pressure to *"achieve more or at least push harder to minimize failure."* Fellows acknowledged the nuances of this phenomenon, reflecting that the award puts pressure on them to do important things while allowing them more freedom and protection to take risks.

"I struggled, and do still struggle at times, with feeling worthy of this extraordinary gift. There is a pressure to perform at a level that meets this vote of confidence. I am grateful for this struggle, even when it has been a difficult hurdle to clear. It's really pushed me to think about my work in new ways and to consider how to use this gift to give to others."

- MacArthur Fellow

Figure 3. Fellows continued their work in the same direction while gaining access to professional opportunities



Source: MacArthur Fellows Survey 2023, N=413. Percentages do not add up to 100 since respondents could select more than one.

KEY FINDING 5A:

The impact of the Fellowship is more pronounced for some types of Fellows.

Many women Fellows reported that they received a particular boost through the award. This trend occurred for women in all fields. For example, 95 percent of women reported increased respect from colleagues, compared to 89 percent of men (see Fig. 4). These percentage point differences were a persistent trend across nearly every survey item.

Some women noted the award helped counteract sexism they experienced in their field. The award boosted their confidence and increased their sense of legitimacy, both in the eyes of others and for themselves.

“As a woman working on behalf of vulnerable people and marginalized ideals, I am taken more seriously.”
- MacArthur Fellow

Figure 4. Women Fellows reported greater professional impacts than men (some examples)



Source: MacArthur Fellows Survey 2023, N=415, differences between women and men respondents are statistically significant.

One Fellow described the Fellowship as providing a “coat of armor.” *“I walked into a dean’s office one time and said something I’d been saying for a long time. All of a sudden, I was heard. It was like I have this special superpower now. It’s kind of humorous and kind of disgusting at the same time.”* For women Fellows, especially those in traditionally male-dominated fields and from minoritized communities, the validation conferred by the Fellowship may have a particular power. One Fellow in public issues shared, *“My whole life I’ve been told I can’t do this, and I can’t do that because I’m a woman. I’ve been told that bluntly. So, the award made a huge difference for me because all of a sudden there’s this major national foundation that’s recognized me, and obviously I must not be the loser that other people were telling me I had been. It’s a reality in America that, in my field anyway, there’s a lot of sexism.”* As one Fellow in science shared on the 2023 Fellows survey, the award stood up for her in the face of other people’s doubt, saying *“Yes, she’s the inventor, the brains, no one else”*.

Asian, Black, and Latino/a/x Fellows also frequently reported stronger impacts compared to White Fellows. For instance, nearly all Asian (89 percent), Black (87 percent), and Latino/a/x (90 percent) respondents reported increased ambitiousness of their work because of the Fellowship, compared to 75 percent for White respondents. More Latino/a/x and Black respondents reported greater impacts on their fields (interest by others in entering their field and advancements in their field) as a result of their award as compared to White and Asian respondents (see Fig. 5). These differential impacts may be particularly true for women of color; further analysis is needed to more confidently disaggregate their experiences.

Figure 5. Black and Latinx Fellows reported greater impacts on their work and field than White Fellows

	Alaska Native, American Indian (N=10)	Asian (N=28)	Black, African American (N=33)	Latino/a/x, Hispanic (N=31)	White (N=252)	Prefer to Self-Describe (N=21)
Ambitiousness of your work	80%	89%	87%	90%	75%	62%
Interest by others in entering your field or area of work ©	70%	64%	86%	82%	65%	56%
Advancements in your field or area of work ©	80%	68%	88%	87%	68%	72%

Source: MacArthur Fellows Survey 2023, N=415. © Indicates a statistically significant difference between groups with sufficient sample sizes (Asian, Black, Latine, White).

KEY FINDING 5B:

Some Fellows have negative experiences; there are things the Foundation can do to mitigate them.

Some Fellows have negative experiences in the wake of receiving the Fellowship. Several respondents described a great amount of pressure, both from others and from themselves, to live up to the “genius” designation. A few Fellows had difficulties getting funding for their work from other sources. Some Fellows experienced jealousy from peers and colleagues to varying degrees of severity. While some Fellows experienced the jealousy as minor, “*little more than unpleasantness*,” several Fellows experienced a level of jealousy that was disruptive to their lives. One Fellow who experienced intense negative, unwanted attention after her Fellowship sought help from the Foundation and appreciated that the Staff was “*really helpful and supportive giving me advice on how to deal with this kind of thing*.” Other Fellows reported being accused of betraying their community or experiencing a decrease in funding for their work as a kind of backlash. These negative experiences may be more common for women, and especially for women of color, as they navigate pervasive sexism and racism.

Most Fellows reported no or minimal negative impacts and others shared that the positive outweighed the negative. However, the Foundation has a responsibility to Fellows whom they push into the limelight. The Foundation is currently considering additional ways to support Fellows as they navigate sudden notoriety.

THE FELLOWSHIP'S BROADER IMPACT ON PEOPLE CLOSE TO FELLOWS AND FELLOWS' FIELDS

KEY FINDING 6:

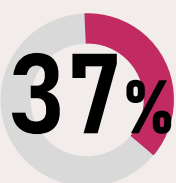
The Fellowship can have positive ripple effects on Fellows' peers and in the Fellows' fields.

The Fellowship positively impacts people close to Fellows. Peers and collaborators of Fellows experienced notable impacts as a result of the award. Some Fellows described how the Fellowship inspired current colleagues in their field to be bolder and more confident about their work. 37 percent of peers agree that hearing about the MacArthur Fellows inspired them to pursue their own creative activities and ideas (see Fig. 6). The profiles of people directly collaborating with awardees were raised by their association and many people close to Fellows directly benefited from the financial resources they shared. The profiles of students working with Fellows were elevated as a result of their connection or from receiving a letter of recommendation. Fellows also attracted other scholars to their institutions. Additionally, Fellows model a new way of doing work, whether by increasing creativity or collaboration.

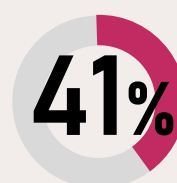
“Being a MacArthur Fellow gives her the power to change how things are done in the field – how we collaborate, how we train students. Before, people would not share, they were territorial. She has changed that dramatically. Now it is about sharing, not feeling threatened. Her success raises the tide for all of us. She makes the people around her better.”

- Peer of MacArthur Fellow

Figure 6. Peers agreed that the Fellows inspire them and pique their interest



of peers said that hearing about the MacArthur Fellows inspired them to pursue their own creative activities and ideas.



of peers said that hearing about the MacArthur Fellows led them to be interested in a topic they weren't interested in before.

Source: MacArthur-Harris Poll Fellows' Peers Polling 2023. Base: All Respondents (N=318).

The Fellowship positively impacts Fellows' fields. Fellows said the award increased validation of their work inside (83 percent) and outside of their field (79 percent), as well as increased the public's awareness of their field (81 percent), media coverage of their field (74 percent), and advancements in their field (71 percent). When Fellows receive the award as their field is emerging, they feel the award accelerates the growth and recognition of those fields. Fellows described a variety of ways the Fellowship increased visibility and legitimacy of their area of work, especially among people outside their fields. The Fellowship elevated the perception of fields in science outside of the sciences, for example, because of its rare position as an award that recognizes work across many domains. As an award that recognizes creativity, the Fellowship also makes a statement that the areas of work it acknowledges are creative when some traditionally may not be considered as such. Fellows from multiple disciplines noted there is power in the Fellowship that stems from its interdisciplinary nature.

"I think that the MacArthur Fellowship has a huge influence in the public's support of visual art as a field of knowledge production, cultural research, and a field that affects the public sphere. The fact that artists, scientists, activists, writers, etc. are all treated as equally important is hugely meaningful and encourages many, with huge unmeasurable, but real results."

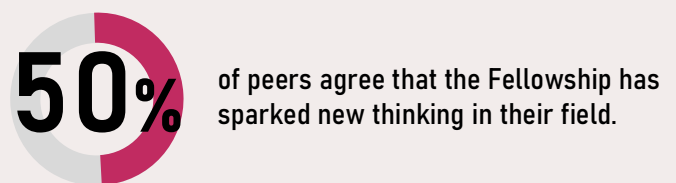
- MacArthur Fellow

The Fellowship increases the legitimacy of certain fields. Fellows' peers also agreed that the Fellowship increased the visibility and legitimacy of Fellows' work noting that in math and physics, MacArthur has recognized people doing field-shifting work and, in a smaller field, one interviewee noticed the network effect as especially powerful. Additionally, another peer knew of two Fellows that used the award to do original independent work that was supported by an institution after the Fellowship. One peer interviewee noted the innovative approach a Fellow took to working with kids who are gender diverse, *"She was one of the first people to look at gender diverse kids from a non-clinical perspective. There is a bad history done in a way that pathologized those kids and she did not start with that assumption. Her work is really influential and important. Part of it is that it is really public. It shows to the world this is important work and this is a serious person."*

Fellow's peers noted that the Fellowship helped validate less recognized fields including Latinx history, medieval studies, and sports medicine. One peer interviewee spoke to the importance of recognizing less conventional fields: *"Despite the niche quality of what we do or what we study it's actually quite central to the formation of the American culture."* Another person noted the award can galvanize a field well beyond the Fellows such that the award is incredibly significant *"to people who are many, many steps away from these writers. It is an announcement of the potential of the importance of their own work that can't be overestimated. I know that in flurry of publicity after a Fellow has been announced, there is an entire community that claims that Fellow with such joy. It is not just the joy of what that will mean for that person, but for that community, we have been noticed. Now we see ways that others are valuing us, and that make so much possible for so many people."* Furthermore, by fostering recognition of Fellows in mainstream media, the Fellowship increases public awareness of the accomplishments of these fields.

Additionally, as a highly visible, reputable, and influential program, the Fellows Program is perceived as a manifestation of the MacArthur Foundation's mission and values by Foundation Staff from other programs. MacArthur Foundation Staff appreciate the Fellows Program's unique capacity to legitimize an issue or interdisciplinary approaches which help inform the Foundation's grantmaking or how programs collaborate, even if indirectly.

Figure 7. Peers reported a ripple effect on their field



Source: MacArthur-Harris Poll Fellows' Peers Polling 2023. Base: All Respondents (N=318).

"It is the most prominent program in the organization, as a flagship program, from a public profile they really breathe life into the Foundation's values and how it is perceived. We all have that responsibility within our individual programs, but in some ways, Fellows is especially uniquely situated to do that because of how much attention it gets publicly, and they do a tremendous job."

- MacArthur Foundation Staff

FEEDBACK ON THE PROGRAM

KEY FINDING 7:

Fellows deeply appreciate the opportunities to engage with each other across fields and class years; some Fellows want more opportunities to connect.

In-person gatherings are a source of inspiration, exchange of ideas, relationships—including emotional support—and collaboration. Fellows reported that these gatherings, whether organized by Fellows or by the Foundation, were a highlight of the Fellowship. Some Fellows specifically noted the cross-disciplinary nature of the engagements made the benefits so powerful. Fellows glowingly described the experience and impact of Wingspread gatherings, an annual weekend retreat for incoming and outgoing Fellows, with several characterizing them as one of the most important aspects of the Fellowship. Fellows shared effusive comments like, *"Wingspreads were among the highlights of my personal/professional experiences over the past two decades."* These events, as one peer close to Fellows observed, helped new Fellows navigate the dynamics of notoriety. Many Fellows reported wanting more connections with other Fellows. Some requested more frequent Forums and MacArthur-organized events. Others expressed interest in Fellow-initiated engagements and want the Foundation's support in sharing contact information and encouraging informal contact.

KEY FINDING 8:

Major changes to the nomination, selection, and award process are not needed. However, ongoing fine tuning is appropriate.

Nomination Process: In general, Nominators reported a positive experience with the process, with a large majority finding the level of effort to submit a nomination to be reasonable, the instructions and guidelines clear, and the invitation an honor. Feedback suggests that Fellows Staff are meeting the needs of Nominators, who offer their perspectives without financial incentives. The main reasons that individuals do not submit a nomination after being invited is because they are otherwise occupied, or they cannot think of someone who meets the award criteria.

Selection Process: Overwhelmingly, Selectors appreciate and value their experience. They see the process as fair and successful in its objectives, largely due to the observed commitment to the Foundation's mission and values, the wide range of candidates brought to Selectors, the diligent work of Fellows Program Staff, the diversity of the Selection Committee Members, and the quality of discussion during meetings.

Award Structure: This learning exercise considered whether the MacArthur Fellowship should award pairs or collaborators in addition to individuals and found mixed opinions. A few Nominators saw value in providing the Fellowship to multiple people, naming a shift in people working more and more collaboratively. However, most people (including all Selectors interviewed, a few Nominators, and the Fellows Program Staff) believe the program should continue to only recognize individuals. They believe the Fellowship is not the best vehicle to recognize multiple people, and that a new, separate award program or other vehicle would be a more appropriate strategy than changing the current practices of the Fellowship.

While the feedback from Nominators and Selectors was generally positive, the Foundation is considering identified opportunities to further improve the experience of the program for its partners.

CONCLUSION

The findings do not suggest a need to change the core structure or premise of the Fellowship. Feedback indicates that Fellows appreciate the opportunities to connect with each other. In the future, the Foundation can consider additional strategies to counteract some of the negative impacts from the Fellows' unexpected notoriety.

The Fellows Program continues to be a well-designed and profound program that yields intended results. It exemplifies the Foundation's value of creativity and supports individuals who shape the future in significant, beneficial, and sometimes unexpected ways. It has a positive impact not just on the Fellows themselves, but on many people they work directly with and the broader fields they work in.

<https://www.macfound.org/programs/awards/fellows/>