

HIGHER EDUCATION AND PHILANTHROPIC FOUNDATIONS: THE COLLEGE  
COMPLETION AGENDA AND POSTSECONDARY POLICY NETWORKS

By

Nabih Haddad

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **HIGHER EDUCATION AND PHILANTHROPIC FOUNDATIONS: THE COLLEGE COMPLETION AGENDA AND POSTSECONDARY POLICY NETWORKS**

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This dissertation investigates the policy strategies of major foundations in higher education, with a focus on the college completion agenda. Recently, researchers have begun documenting the pronounced role of philanthropic foundations in higher education policymaking. Philanthropists have long exercised influence in higher education, working to promote an array of social and political agendas throughout the sector. However, journalistic accounts and recent empirical research suggest that philanthropists' approaches to higher education have shifted drastically in recent years. Contemporary foundations, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation, have introduced a high-leverage, policy-focused strategy called "advocacy philanthropy." The newer foundations not only adopt an activist approach to higher education philanthropy but also stimulate grant recipients around college completion initiatives. Advocacy philanthropy is closely linked to the college completion agenda, a powerful reform movement that includes policymakers, private foundations, business interests, educational nonprofits, think tanks, consultants, and membership entities. These groups have coalesced around the goal of increasing degree productivity nationally. One aspect of advocacy-focused philanthropy is a reliance on intermediary organizations, which are translational entities that operate between funding agencies and the systems that they are attempting to influence.

Despite the growing significance of philanthropic foundations in public policymaking, little is known regarding how this is operationalized. In fact, such processes are rarely examined

in an empirical and robust manner, with many researchers simply taking the influence of philanthropy for granted or failing to notice philanthropists' active presence in the public policymaking process. This motivates the basic question of this dissertation: How do major philanthropic foundations interact with public colleges and universities, state and federal governments, and political and economic elites in raising awareness of completion and implementing their social agendas? This study utilizes a mixed-method research design, drawing on an original dataset of nearly 7,000 grants representing nearly \$3 billion in higher education-filtered dollars. Moreover, 40 semi-structured interviews were conducted with high-powered officials from the philanthropic, public policy, and higher education sectors that contextualize the grant analysis.

This study demonstrates that philanthropic foundations regularly work to shape and influence public policies and organizational practices in higher education. In particular, this study finds that philanthropic organizations regularly mobilize policymakers, business representatives, and institutional leaders around college completion. In fact, over the course of a decade, the field of higher education philanthropy has shifted, with a decrease in traditional forms of philanthropic grantmaking and an increase in field-building efforts. Indeed, philanthropic dollars are elevating a network of intermediaries that now influence the field of higher education toward completion. My analysis reveals that philanthropic foundations are becoming not only more strategic in their grantmaking efforts but also influential coalition builders. More generally, this study extends postsecondary policy analysis from a state-centric approach to one that considers the role of nonstate actors in policy advocacy and educational reform.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, the primary goal of higher education policy has shifted from broadening postsecondary access to increasing the proportion of young adults earning postsecondary credentials (AASCU, 2011; Bernstein, 2014; Callan, 2011; Kelly & Schneider, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Calls for increasing national attainment rates are amplified by projected shortages of skilled labor (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013; Carnevale & Rose, 2011; Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013; Lumina, 2017). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2018), only 36 percent of young adults hold a bachelor's degree or higher. Although this is an increase from a decade ago, current estimates suggest that nearly two-thirds of all jobs in 2025 will require some form of post-high school credential (Lumina, 2017). These findings, supported by other studies (Carnevale & Rose, 2011a; Carnevale & Rose, 2011b; Carnevale et al., 2013), indicate that if these trends persist, nearly 12 million jobs will be unfilled by 2025 (Lumina, 2017). On a global scale, U.S. attainment rates lag behind other industrialized economies (OECD, 2019). In particular, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) ranks the U.S. 13th out of 36 in postsecondary attainment rates for working adults (25–34 years of age) (OECD, 2019). Overall, these figures emphasize the need for more young adults to obtain credentials beyond high school (AASCU, 2011; Bernstein, 2014; Callan, 2011; Kelly & Schneider, 2012; Kelly & Strawn, 2011).

### **The College Completion Agenda**

Given this context, it is not surprising that college completion has become an overriding concern for policymakers and postsecondary leaders. In the early 2000s, college completion and student success predictably dominated policy discussions, with many state and national policymakers, major educational foundations, advocacy groups, think tanks, and business

interests actively engaging in bringing attention to higher education completion rates (AASCU, 2011; Bernstein, 2014; Humphreys, 2012; Kelly & Schneider, 2012; Lederman, 2010; Merisotis, 2016). While politicians and state policymakers have led the implementation of completion-related policies, these priorities, at least as a preferred policy preference, originated within philanthropy (Ashburn, 2010; Hebel, 2009). Most notably, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Gates) and the Lumina Foundation (Lumina) have long spearheaded completion efforts in higher education (Bernstein, 2014; Hall & Thomas, 2012; Hebel, 2009).

During the same period, a reform movement emerged premised upon promoting policies and practices incentivizing degree production through policy involvement and systems change—what many journalists and observers have dubbed “the college completion agenda”—with many initiatives underwritten by private donors (AASCU, 2011; Bernstein, 2014; Humphreys, 2012; Kelly & Schneider, 2012; Lederman, 2010). The college completion agenda rests on four assumptions: (1) increasing its proportion of degree holders will make the U.S. more globally competitive; (2) a changing labor market requires an educated workforce to meet projected labor gaps; (3) once enrolled, students should succeed in college in a satisfactory timeframe, typically four to six years; and (4) student outcomes are fundamentally the responsibility of postsecondary institutions (i.e., colleges and universities) (Bernstein, 2014; Heller, 2011; Humphreys, 2012; Kelly & James, 2015; Kelly & Schneider, 2012; Kelly & Strawn, 2011).

Many analysts attribute the success of the college completion agenda to the strategic alignment of key interest groups, including philanthropic foundations (AASCU, 2011; Bernstein, 2014; Haddad & Reckhow, 2018; Hall & Thomas, 2012; Humphreys, 2012; Kelly & Schneider, 2012). In her book *Funding the Future: Philanthropy’s Influence on American Higher Education*, Alison Bernstein (2014) writes,

Interestingly, a wide variety of organizations came together with governors, business leaders, and other education reformers to adopt a college-completion agenda. With foundation support, they developed scores of programs and projects to increase significantly the number of traditionally aged and older adults who, once enrolled in postsecondary education, attained their degrees, including the associate's degree that community colleges offered. (p. 224)

From this perspective, the college completion agenda involves several institutional, political, and private players coalescing around a singular policy goal (Bernstein, 2014; Haddad & Reckhow, 2018; Hall & Thomas, 2012; Humphreys, 2012; Kelly & James, 2015; Miller & Morpew, 2017). Analysts credit philanthropists for much of the momentum behind the college completion agenda, as Hall and Thomas (2012) argue in their analysis on major funders and their policy agendas: "...college completion has experienced the strongest push from the philanthropic sector, with a number of foundations making the goal of raising college completion rates the core of their postsecondary grantmaking missions" (p. 14). Popular reporting has offered similar arguments. According to a grant analysis conducted by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2013, Gates spent nearly \$500 million, and Lumina nearly \$240 million, championing their shared completion-related policy goals (Parry et al., 2013). Indeed, major funders have been crucial in underwriting several initiatives and programs and even in launching new entities dedicated to promoting college completion policies and practices (Bernstein, 2014).

### **Problem Statement**

The existing K–12 and political science literatures demonstrate that major foundations are uniquely situated as policy entrepreneurs—who, with relative freedom, can draw upon their affiliated grantee networks, host of researchers and consultants, and internal communications

arms to advance their political and social agendas (Ferris, Hentschke, & Harmssen, 2008; Ferris & Mintrom, 2009; Quinn, Tompkins-Stange & Meyerson, 2013; Reckhow, 2013; Scott, 2009; Scott & Jabar, 2014; Tompkins-Stange, 2016). Moreover, philanthropic foundations can galvanize support through field-building efforts, which can be central in creating a political landscape conducive to a specific goal (Bartley, 2007; Domhoff, 2005; Lubienski, Scott, & DeBray, 2011; Powell, 2007; Reckhow & Tompkins-Stange, 2015, 2018). According to Bartley (2007), “Foundations may even enroll social movement organizations in the field-building project...” (p. 231). As such, recent work reveals that foundations are not only investing in networks of organizations linked to completion but also enrolling other funders to support similar causes (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018).

Scholars note that philanthropic foundations have acted as institutional entrepreneurs in educational politics (Quinn et al., 2014; Reckhow, 2013). In fact, this area of research finds that the power of organized philanthropy is based not only simply on their (admittedly substantial) philanthropic investments but also on their capacity to confer prestige, amplify policy voices, influence public and elite opinion, and build strategic relationships across diverse sectoral lines (Hess, 2005; Hess & Henig, 2015; Reckhow, 2013; Tompkins-Stange, 2016). In particular, foundations frequently work with a number of grantees who fill these boundary-spanning roles (Dougherty & Natow, 2015; Hall & Thomas, 2012; Kezar, 2014; Lubienski et al., 2011; Metcalfe, 2008; Miller & Morpew, 2017; Reckhow & Tompkins-Stange, 2018; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). According to *The Chronicle* (2013), philanthropists “leave advocacy mostly to their grantees” (Parry et al., 2013, para. 91). Beyond supporting traditional advocacy and policy organizations, foundations also employ their vast resources in agenda setting by sponsoring project-specific initiatives, such as research, networking events, media publications, and private

consultancies (Blumenstyk, 2013; Hall & Thomas, 2012; Hess, 2005; Hess & Henig, 2015; Reckhow, 2013; Reckhow & Tompkins-Stange, 2018).

### **Philanthropic Foundations as Political Actors**

Overall, the scholarly literature confirms the centrality of K–12 foundations in mobilizing intermediaries to promote policy reforms and influence educational discourse (Ferrare & Reynolds, 2016; Hess, 2005; Hess & Henig, 2015; Scott & Jabber, 2013; Tompkins-Stange, 2016). For example, based on ten years of grant data, Reckhow and Snyder (2014) demonstrate that major foundations in K–12 were more willing to fund jurisdictional challengers (entities that offer alternatives to the public sector) in 2010 than they were in 2000 (also see, Mehta & Teles 2011; Reckhow, 2010, 2013). Shifting the focus back to higher education, commentators note that philanthropists are promoting college completion as a preferred policy preference (Barnhardt, 2017; Russell, 2011); however, little is known regarding how this is operationalized. In fact, scholars in higher education have largely ignored the policy advocacy roles of major foundations more generally, aside from a few recent studies (Dougherty & Natow, 2015; Gándara, Rippner, & Ness, 2017; Haddad & Reckhow, 2018; Hall & Thomas, 2012; Kelly & James, 2015; Miller & Morpew, 2017). That philanthropic foundations promote college completion as a preferred policy preference is no secret. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Education* have documented the growing roles of major foundations in completion-related educational reform. While helpful, this sort of reporting reveals very little about how foundations marshal support behind their agendas (Ness, Tandberg, & McLendon, 2015).

In the field of higher education, private foundations are assumed to be passive patrons that are not involved in the policymaking process (Barnhardt, 2017; Ness et al, 2015), yet recent

qualitative research demonstrates that foundations are working through intermediary organizations (IOs) to frame policy narratives (Miller & Morpew, 2017; Ness & Gándara, 2014), diffuse social agendas (Gándara et al., 2017), and support budgeting proposals (Dougherty & Natow, 2015). Unlike elected officials or for-profit firms, grantmaking foundations are not accountable to electoral politics or market forces (Dowie, 2001; Reich, 2016, 2018). As such, their legal forms allow foundations to engage in long-term activities that other entities could not justify (Anheier & Hammack, 2010; Dowie, 2001; Reich, 2016, 2018; Simon, 1995; Zunz, 2012). Put simply, foundations have no “voters or customers, no alumni, students, parishioners, [or] patients” to answer to (Barnhardt, 2017; Simon, 1995, p. 245).

At a more general level, little is known regarding how “the sausage” is made. In fact, unlike the existing literature in K–12 and political science (Hess, 2005; Hess & Henig, 2015; Reckhow, 2013; Reckhow & Snyder, 2015; Snyder, 2015; Tompkins-Stange, 2016), such processes are rarely systematically and empirically examined, and many simply take the influence of philanthropy for granted or fail to notice philanthropists active presence in policymaking. This motivates the basic question of this study: How do major philanthropic foundations interact with public institutions, state and federal governments, and political and economic elites to implement their social agendas? The goal of this analysis is to provide a window into how foundation-led policymaking is formulated, disseminated, and operationalized in higher education. Indeed, these findings contribute to the growing literature on not only foundations and intermediaries in public policy but also the role of informal actors involved in higher education reform (Ness et al., 2015). Rather than examining traditional policymaking mechanisms that focus on state characteristics, this study emphasizes private actors and their hidden roles in public policymaking processes (e.g., Miller & Morpew, 2017).

## College Completion as a Preferred Policy Preference

Advocacy groups and think tanks supported college completion and student success as a policy preference well before 2009; however, it was President Barack Obama who brought completion to the national stage (AASCU, 2011; Bernstein, 2014). Specifically, in 2009, President Obama outlined his 2020 College Completion goal to Congress, highlighting his aim of producing 10 million more graduates by 2020 (Bernstein, 2014; Obama, 2009). Presenting his commitments to Congress, President Obama said, “That’s why...we will provide the support necessary for all young Americans to complete college and meet a new goal: By 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world” (Obama, 2009). President Obama’s emphasis on college completion elevated the goal of producing more graduates from a topic of discussion among policy wonks and researchers in closed circles to one enjoying wider popular recognition (AASCU, 2011; Bernstein, 2014).

Alene Russell (2011), a senior policy associate at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), writing in an influential policy brief, notes, “This speech has helped to define a national problem and to stimulate activity around the nation, as evidenced by the frequency with which the 2020 goal has been cited by a wide range of individuals and organizations” (AASCU, 2011, p. 2). In fact, since 2009, leading postsecondary institutions, membership associations, advocacy groups, business leaders, the U.S. Department of Education, and of course, Barack Obama have all championed college completion as an overriding policy priority for higher education (AASCU, 2011; Bernstein, 2014; Hebel, 2009; Humphreys, 2012; Kelly & Schneider, 2012; McPhail, 2011; U.S. Department of Education., 2011). Speaking to the newly formed completion agenda in 2010, the editor of *Inside Higher Ed*, Doug Lederman (2010), observes, “[In] [t]he last two years [we] have seen the emergence of the closest thing in

arguably 50 years to a national higher education agenda in the United States” (Lederman, 2010). Likewise, in their edited volume, *Getting to Graduation: The Completion Agenda in Higher Education*, Andrew Kelly and Mark Schneider (2012) agree, stating, “These goals represent more than political talking points or an incremental shift in emphasis: they constitute a fundamental rethinking of priorities in higher education policy” (p. 1).

Many policy ideas linked to completion were incubated within the philanthropic sector (Bernstein, 2014; Hebel, 2009). Most notably, Gates and Lumina have spearheaded completion efforts for years (Hebel, 2009). For example, when Jamie Merisotis became the CEO and President of Lumina in 2008, he introduced a policy-focused strategy for meeting the foundation’s goal of increasing the proportion of individuals with degrees by 2025 (Bernstein, 2014; Hebel, 2009; Kelly & James, 2015; Lumina, 2008). Lumina began mobilizing a host of educational reformers around this goal, including business representatives, policymakers, researchers, and institutional leaders and quickly became an influential policy actor in the process (Bernstein, 2014; Hall & Thomas, 2012). As such, federal policymakers took note. According to reporting by Sarah Hebel (2009, May 1) on behalf of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, “Mr. Merisotis was among the experts the Education Department consulted when it sought to determine the right goals for education and the best numbers to use in measuring progress toward them” (para. 10). President Obama would later introduce his 2020 College Completion goal to Congress.

### **The Advocacy Philanthropists**

Gates and Lumina belong to the newly emerged group of advocacy philanthropists who are introducing a high-leverage, policy-focused strategy called “advocacy philanthropy” to the field of higher education (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018; Hall & Thomas, 2012; Kelly & James,

2015; Ness et al., 2014; Parry et al., 2013). In contrast to the hands-off approaches of older foundations (Bernstein, 2014; Kelly & James, 2015; Snyder, 2015), the newer entrants are pushing for specific policy reforms in more direct and obvious ways (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018; Hall & Thomas, 2012). Not only do the newer philanthropists apply an activist approach to higher education policy reform (Hall & Thomas, 2012; Kelly & James, 2015), they also stimulate grant recipients around completion (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018; Miller & Morpew, 2017).

These foundations enjoy close relationships with federal and state policymakers (Hall & Thomas, 2015). In a special report published by *The Chronicle* entitled “The Gates Effect,” Parry et al., (2013) describe this dynamic in the following way,

Gates’s rise occurs as an unusual consensus has formed among the Obama White House, other private foundations, state lawmakers, and a range of policy advocates, all of whom have coalesced around the goal of graduating more students, more quickly, and at a lower cost, with little discussion of the alternatives (para. 8).

Overall, without the collective influence of Gates and Lumina, the White House may not have been as unified and single-mindedly committed to the completion agenda.

### **Research Purpose**

This study seeks to identify how policy ideas and initiatives from external actors (in this case, philanthropic organizations) enter into state and federal policymaking, as well as into colleges and universities. Understanding how college completion has emerged as a preferred policy solution will help to illuminate how this new form of policy engagement is achieved. Interfacing resources with policymakers and institutional administrators generally require some type of intermediary linking together the worlds of philanthropy and higher education (DeBray,

Scott, Lubienski, & Jabbar, 2014; Honig, 2004; Lubienski et al., 2011, July 22; Scott, & Jabbar, 2014). Intermediaries are defined as entities functioning as boundary-crossing organizations seeking to influence policies and practices on behalf of granting agencies (DeBray et al., 2014; Honig, 2004; Lubienski et al., 2011; Ness et al., 2015; Scott, & Jabbar, 2014). These boundary-spanners include regional or national organizations, policy institutes, research centers, consultancies, researchers, and representatives of businesses (Ness et al., 2015). The K–12 literature finds that major philanthropists have elevated intermediaries in educational politics, what many refer to as “jurisdictional challengers” (Mehta & Teles, 2011, p. 2; see also, Reckhow & Snyder, 2014). One implication of this strategy is the shifting of resources away from traditional actors and toward these jurisdictional challengers. Similar strategies are being employed in higher education.

Following a similar sampling strategy as many political scientists and K–12 researchers (Reckhow, 2013; Reckhow & Tompkins-Stange, 2018; Snyder, 2015; Tompkins-Stange, 2016), I focus on the largest funders in higher education (Hall & Thomas, 2012; Kelly & James, 2015). Furthermore, I draw upon a mixed-method research design, including the statistical analysis of grantmaking (Greene, 2005; Greene, 2015; Reckhow, 2013), social network analysis (McClure et al., 2017; Haddad & Reckhow, 2018; Reckhow & Snyder, 2014), and in-depth interviews with foundation officials and policy elites (Tompkins-Stange, 2016), to address the following research questions:

1. What grantmaking strategies do philanthropic foundations employ in higher education policy?
2. How have philanthropic foundations engaged with intermediary organizations to promote policy goals in higher education?

3. How do major foundations in higher education promote information sharing through philanthropic-sponsored networks?

A strong indication exists that foundations are actively supporting intermediaries to advance their policy agendas in higher education; however, to this point, empirical research exploring this relationship is scarce. Barnhardt (2017) finds, “The scholarship on foundations’ social agendas and higher education is limited at best” (p. 183). The same is true for IOs (Ness et al., 2015). In a recent study, Gándara et al. (2017) find that “...previous studies have largely overlooked the role of intermediary organizations...in the higher education literature broadly” (p. 702). In this study, I provide insight into the relationship between postsecondary funders and IOs and the motivations behind this investment strategy.

### **Definitions**

The following comprises a list of definitions that are commonly used in reports, popular and scholarly articles, and interviews throughout this study:

- **Advocacy Philanthropy:** Advocacy philanthropy refers to a set of high-leverage, policy-inspired strategies seeking to influence higher education governance and practice (Hall & Thomas, 2012). Advocacy philanthropy is typically associated with the newer funders in higher education—Gates and Lumina (Bernstein, 2014; Kelly & James, 2015).
- **Attainment–Completion:** In a number of interviews, informants used attainment and completion interchangeably. However, researchers note that differences exist between the two (Kambhampati, 2015). In particular, attainment denotes to the highest level of education an individual receives, whereas completion considers the number of individuals who completed their degrees once enrolled (Kambhampati, 2015; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018; U.S. Census, 2016).

- **Venture Philanthropy:** Venture philanthropy is a grantmaking strategy that functions like venture capital, seeking to produce the greatest return on social investments (Snyder, 2015). Similar to venture capitalists, venture philanthropists are characteristically more hands-on, holding grantees accountable to measurable outcomes (Tompkins-Stange, 2016).

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

The goal of this study is to systematically investigate how major foundations are advancing their policy agendas in higher education, with an emphasis on college completion. In the following sections, I begin by reviewing the relevant literature that informs the research questions stated above. I first provide a brief history of philanthropic foundations in higher education, which is followed by an overview of the existing literature on postsecondary philanthropists and the subsequent lack of analysis relating to their policy agendas. I then consider both the existing K–12 and recent higher education policy literature regarding foundations and their policy advocacy involvements. Next, I describe how the college completion agenda is linked to the broader political environment of postsecondary accountability, including outcome-based policies supported by major philanthropists and affiliated grantees.

### **Brief History of Higher Education Philanthropy**

Throughout the history of American higher education, philanthropy has played a central role in its development (Bernstein, 2014; Curti & Nash, 1965; Thelin, 2011; Thelin & Trollinger, 2014). Beginning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, philanthropists supported the sector by commissioning system-wide evaluations, sponsoring novel areas of academic research, and establishing entirely new colleges and universities (Bernstein, 2014; Thelin, 2011). As the historian Oliver Zunz (2012) shares, “The modern American university, a latecomer to the world of knowledge, owes an enormous debt to the new philanthropy” (p. 35). In fact, early mega-donors recognized the sector “as the catalyst for new ideas and critical knowledge building, and for challenging societal structures in every aspect of human life” (Bernstein, 2014, p. 34). This is most evident by the number of academic institutions that bear the names of their

rich benefactors, including Carnegie, Cornell, Harvard, Stanford, and Yale, to name a few (Ris, 2017; Thelin & Trollinger, 2014; Yeakey, 2015).

Throughout the history of U.S. higher education, philanthropists have supplemented traditional services offered by colleges and universities, usually by providing grants for general operating support, fellowships, scholarships, research, and capital projects. In other words, they have worked to expand higher education (Bernstein, 2014; Thelin & Trollinger, 2015). They have also acted as institutional entrepreneurs, engaging in forms of experimentalism, from supporting academic initiatives to launching entirely new organizations to represent higher education (Reich, 2018; Thelin & Trollinger, 2015; Wheatley, 2010; Zunz, 2012). Early philanthropists, for example, contributed financial assistance to several nonprofit academic organizations that promoted the wellbeing of the sector, including the American Council of Education (ACE) (1918), the American Council of Learned Society (ACLS) (1919), and the Social Science Research Council (1923) (Bernstein, 2014; Wheatley, 2010).

The principal foundations in American higher education are the Carnegie Corporation and the array of Rockefeller entities. Historians reference the Gilded Age industrialists, Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller Sr. in particular, as having pioneered organized philanthropy in the U.S., with the latter creating the first international foundation (Bernstein, 2014; Chernow, 2013; Condliffe Lagemann, 1983, 1989; Nielsen, 1972; Ris, 2017; Thelin & Trollinger, 2014; Zunz, 2012). These Gilded Age industrialists were “captains of industry,” accumulating immense amounts of wealth from the industrial sector, largely from steel and oil. Both contributed to higher education in meaningful ways. Although Carnegie’s initial focus was on libraries, he eventually made substantial investments in higher education (Bernstein, 2014; Ris, 2017). For example, one of his key achievements was the creation of a free pension system for aging faculty

members (Bernstein, 2014; Condliffe Lagemann, 1983; Thelin & Trollinger, 2014; Zunz, 2012). In 1905, Carnegie endowed the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (CFAT) with a \$10 million grant (over \$250 million in today's dollars) to establish and manage the pension system for retiring faculty members, reaching nearly 100 universities and colleges in the process (Bernstein, 2014; Condliffe Lagemann, 1983; Ris, 2017). The president of Cornell University at the time, Jacob Schurman, described the program as “[t]he wisest thing ever conceived in the interest of higher education in America” (Ris, 2017; Schurman, 1905).

Similarly, Rockefeller Sr. created the General Education Board (GED) in 1902 to promote “education within the United States of America, without distinction of race, sex, or creed” (The Rockefeller Foundation, n.d.). Two years after its founding, Rockefeller gave the GED an additional \$10 million for the purposes of encouraging “a comprehensive system of higher education in the United States” (Gates, 1905; Ris, 2017). The GED focused heavily on medical education and increasing postsecondary access for African Americans, and it even launched a fundraising campaign for minority-serving institutions in the South (Bernstein, 2014; Chernow, 2013). In *Philanthropy and American Higher Education*, Thelin and Trollinger (2014) describe Carnegie’s and Rockefeller’s philanthropy as unparalleled for the time period:

The private foundations represented unprecedented philanthropic support as suggested by Andrew Carnegie’s gift of \$480 million to various Carnegie philanthropies, followed by John D. Rockefeller’s providing \$445 million for the assorted Rockefeller initiatives. To put these two bequests from a century ago into context, each would be worth more than \$10 billion in 2013. (p. 67)

Together, when establishing their foundations, the industrial philanthropists set the tone for future donors by introducing a scientific approach to wide-open philanthropy (Zunz, 2012).

Indeed, in the early part of the twentieth century, the concept of a philanthropic foundation was relatively new (Bernstein, 2014; Thelin, 2011). Historian Allison Bernstein (2014) notes, “Even though individuals and organizations, especially religious institutions, have been giving away money for centuries, the creation of new organizations whose primary business is to donate funds is largely a twentieth-century phenomenon” (p. xv). In particular, prior to the 1990s, relatively few foundations existed (Barnhart, 2017; Harrison & Andrews, 1946), with Hollis (1938) estimating that only 22 were established before 1900. By the early 1900s, foundations “were transformed into prominence with the creation of the great Trusts based on industrial wealth...” (Thelin & Trollinger, 2014, p. 67).

### **Industrial Philanthropy**

Undoubtedly, foundations are products of their time (Bernstein, 2014). Hence, the industrial philanthropists focused heavily on brick and motor investments, as demonstrated by their grant portfolios (Bernstein, 2014; Gasman, 2012; Karl, 1985; Kohler, 1985; Ris, 2017; Sears, 2010). For example, by 1918, Carnegie’s foundation had provided \$4 million to college libraries, nearly \$5 million to college buildings, and nearly \$10 million for endowments (Gave \$350,695,650 of Fortune Away,” 1919). The GED’s portfolio consisted of similar purposes, including university endowments, fellowships, scholarships, public school funding, and general operating support (Chernow, 2013; Thelin and Trollinger, 2014). However, this does not suggest that the industrial philanthropists were not actively involved in systems change or broad-based reforms efforts. On the contrary, early mega-donors and other educational leaders associated with these philanthropies regarded higher education as a chaotic enterprise in need of drastic reform (Barnhardt, 2017; Barrow, 1990; Bernstein, 2014; Clotfelter, 2007; Holis, 1938; Ris, 2017, 2018; Thelin & Trollinger, 2014; Zunz, 2012).

To address this apparent lack of standardization, philanthropists began working with academic leaders and other elites with “the common goal of rationalizing colleges and universities into effective systems” (Thelin, 2011, p. 238). To do so, the industrial philanthropists drew upon a “carrots not sticks” strategy, where “...foundations sought to improve the quality of teaching and research in the academy through incentives, directed mostly to faculty and campus leadership, to innovate and try new approaches at the campus level” (Bernstein, 2014, p. xxi). One example is CFAT’s pension system. To be eligible, colleges must agree to a series of conditions, such as increasing enrollment standards, employing at least six full-time faculty members, and becoming nonsectarian institutions (Bernstein, 2014; Ris, 2018; Zunz, 2012). After meeting these criteria, colleges would be eligible for private funding. In fact, CFAT’s program had the effect of secularizing much of the field of higher education (Zunz, 2012).

Nonetheless, this investment strategy had its critics (Barrow, 1990; Ris, 2017; Thelin & Trollinger, 2014). For instance, Thorstein Veblen (1918), a leading intellectual at the time, warned of the growing influence of business principles in higher education. In his book *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities By Business Men*, Veblen (1918) critiques the growing intervention of elite patrons as an “imposition of a mechanically standardized routine upon the members of the staff,” warning that “...the intrusion of business principles in the universities goes to weaken and retard the pursuit of learning, and therefore to defeat the ends for which a university is maintained” (p. 224). More recently, other well-respected academics have echoed Veblen’s (1918) concerns.

For example, in March 2012, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* ran the headline “Beware of Big Donors” by Stanley Katz (2012), President *Emeritus* of the ACLS and Princeton historian. In his piece, Katz (2012) argues, “The new strategic foundations behave as though they

are entitled to make public policy, and they are not shy about it” (para. 16). He continues by noting, “Federal adoption of philanthropically supported policies has long been a dream of activist foundations, and that dream has now substantially become a reality in the Obama White House” (para. 19). Following this publication, a stream of reports began detailing the growing centrality of activist-oriented foundations in higher education reform, such as *The Gates Effect* (Gose, 2013; Parry et al., 2013; Ruark, 2013) (discussed in more detail below).

Accordingly, observers took note of the stark differences between the industrial philanthropists of the past and the advocacy philanthropists of today (Bernstein, 2014; Hall & Thomas, 2009; Kelly & James, 2015). According to Gasman (2012), “One major difference between today’s philanthropists and individuals like Rockefeller and Carnegie is a focus on specific policies and reforms. The industrialist philanthropists focused much of their efforts on institution building” (p. 10). Similarly, Clotfelter (2007) contends that the newer foundations are demonstrating “an unmistakable reformist orientation, if not missionary zeal” (p. 221), and Rogers (2015) came to a similar conclusion, stating, “There has not been a generation of hands-on, self-made donors of this magnitude in over 100 years and there has never been one with quite the same focus on leveraging public tax dollars to ultimately finance their projects” (p. 747).

In many cases, the new philanthropists are men who have accumulated their wealth from the technology and financial fields. As a result, many donors apply the same strategies that led to their success in the corporate sector to their foundations, such as strategic investments, top-down management styles, and measurable outcomes guiding investments (Tompkins-Stange, 2016). Furthermore, these newer foundations have little patience for bureaucracy or working through established networks, and they tend to rely on high-risk investments to maximize impact, or what can be described as an outcome-oriented approach (Hess, 2005). Despite the growing discussion

in media outlets by commentators and educational journalists, empirical work on the policy activities of major foundations is scarce (Barnhardt, 2017). In an interview with *The Chronicle*, the former editor of the *Journal of Higher Education*, Scott Thomas, highlighted this point, noting that “he has yet to receive a well-developed manuscript on the role of philanthropy in academe” (Parry et al., 2013, para. 35).

### **Higher Education Development**

Historically, research on higher education philanthropy was conducted to inform practitioners of their trade, by focusing on professional fundraising, institutional advancement, and development efforts (Bloland, 2002; Caboni, 2003, 2010, 2012; Carbone, 1986; Iarrobino, 2006; Proper, & Caboni, 2014; Tempel & Beem, 2002), with little scholarly attention given to the policy activities of institutional philanthropists (Barnhardt, 2017; Ness et al., 2015). In the last two decades, however, fundraising as a profession has experienced rapid growth, due in part to shifts in the political economy of higher education. For example, since the 1980s, state appropriations for public higher education have significantly declined (Heller, 2011), with many institutions looking to voluntary donations to fill financial gaps (Cheslock & Gianneschi, 2008; Cheslock & Hughes, 2011; Speck, 2010). This shift in economic policy has made individual contributions an important mechanism for the wellbeing of many postsecondary institutions and motivated colleges and universities to enhance their institutional advancement and development efforts (Drezner, 2011; Hearn, 2003). Indeed, this has elevated the study of institutional advancement as an important subfield in higher education for meeting the objectives of institutional leaders during times of economic austerity.

Proper and Caboni (2014) define the field of institutional advancement and development as focusing on university fundraising efforts relating to alumni engagement, public relations, and

marketing (e.g., Bloland, 2002; Drezner, 2011; Payton et al., 1991; Roland, 1986). Existing fundraising literature examines best practices regarding how universities can leverage their resources to identify potential donors, cultivate relationships with alumni, and draw upon communication strategies to raise awareness for capital campaigns (Payton et al., 1991; Rowland, 1983; Webb, 2002). One feature of the field is relationship building. In particular, this scholarship highlights strategies around “cultivation, solicitation, and stewardship” (Lindahl, 2010, p. x). In fact, much of the existing literature is considered nontheoretical, or sociological. In an analysis of the field of institutional development, Kelly (1991) finds “...few, if any studies on basic research or theory building” (p. 114). Indeed, students from the fields of institutional advancement, where there is little to no incentive for publishing in scholarly outlets such as peer-reviewed journals or conferences, tend to obtain advanced credentials for promotional reasons (Kelly, 1991, 1995, 1998, 2002; Proper & Caboni, 2014). Therefore, questions that dominate the field ask “Why donors give?”, “How to better engage alumni?”, or “What are best practices in fundraising?” (Bekkers, R., & Weipeking, 2011; Grusec, 1982; Prince & File, 2001; Schervish, 2005).

In recent years, the institutional advancement literature has become much more robust and theoretically grounded (Drezner, 2011). However, philanthropic foundations and their impacts on higher education remain all but absent (Bardhardt, 2017; Bernstein, 2014; Ness et al., 2015). For example, in a 2011 Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) reader, one of the most respected publications in the field regarding the state of affairs for a topical area, the edition on higher education philanthropy focuses exclusively on institutional advancement and fundraising, with little discussion on philanthropic foundations or educational nonprofits involved in policy advocacy or educational reform.

## **Limited Research on Philanthropic Foundations in Higher Education**

Overall, media outlets have reignited a lively discussion regarding the role of major funders in postsecondary reform. Nonetheless, contemporary scholarship has not kept pace. Bernstein (2014) "...conducted a search for what already existed in the literature and was surprised to learn that there was little scholarship in the field of philanthropy and higher education studies" (p. 8). Many factors contribute to this lack of empirical inquiry. First, organizational research on philanthropy is difficult to conduct due to professional norms of secrecy. Tompkins-Stange (2016) finds, "Foundations' actions are frequently opaque, concealed in order to protect against legal and reputation risk" (p. 8). Indeed, many foundations' officials do not discuss their trade with those outside of the field.

Second, few, if any, transparency mechanisms exist to hold foundations accountable to external stakeholders (Reich 2016, 2018). Rob Reich (2016) describes contemporary foundations as "institutional oddities" that are "the most unaccountable, non-transparent, peculiar institutional form we have in a democratic society" (p. 67). For Reich (2016), foundations have no market or electoral accountability, other than payout rules. As a result, these entities operate in "black boxes," creating additional barriers for organizational researchers seeking to examine their policy advocacy activities in the public sphere (Reich, 2016, p. 69). Likewise, higher education historians Thelin and Trollinger (2014) highlight this point:

Apart from outright fraud, embezzlement, or mismanagement of funds, most foundations are free to operate so long as they answer satisfactorily to their boards of trustees and file accurate, annual IRS reports. It also is difficult for external analyst from such disciplines as sociology or history to gain access and full disclosure of foundation records and

operations that would tell the story of both the achievements and dysfunctions of various foundation program strategies. (p. 92).

The third reason for a lack of organizational research is accessible datasets. Bachetti (2007) contends, “Data are not readily available at the level where one could reliably assess foundation giving according to reasonably well-defined objectives” (p. 255). As such, no universal standard exists for measuring philanthropic impact, nor are there any legal requirement for foundations to make evaluations or internal reports available to the public (Prewitt, 2006; Reich, 2016, 2018). This is further compounded by the existence of few, if any, universal accepted measurements or assessments on philanthropic activity or output (Sealander, 2007). Lastly, several scholars have posited that a level of self-censorship occurs among educational researchers, with many having close ties with philanthropy (Hess, 2005; Ravitch, 2011). For many, critical assessments of a field that is premised on promoting a public good are viewed as being in bad taste, particularly during a time of general austerity for public expenditures (Thelin & Trollinger, 2014). Rogers (2015) highlights this point, sharing that many may find it “rude to investigate giving, especially in areas where there is clear need” (p. 539). In higher education, for example, several scholars have expressed similar sentiments. The following statement by Thelin and Trollinger (2014) speaks to this issue:

...even if such organizational research were possible, one has to ask, ‘To what end?’ To push hard on external accountability probably would be mistaken as it would jeopardize the overall good works and contributions the legal and customary arrangements for philanthropic foundations have contributed to the quality and access of American higher education (p. 255).

Overall, a culture of secrecy, a lack of accountability, a dearth of accessible datasets, and close relationships between academia and philanthropy have created significant research gaps for scholars interested in the policy activities of major foundations. As a result, there are two prevailing tendencies in the field: 1) an exaggeration of foundations' influence on postsecondary policies and practices and 2) a general failure to notice their policy advocacy efforts across the sector.

### **Foundations and Policy Engagement**

The existing scholarship on foundations' policy agendas is heavily historical (Condliffe Lagemann, 1992; Sealander, 1997), with little work focusing on theory building or the contemporary affairs of philanthropists in the public sphere (Condliffe Lagemann, 1983, 1999; Tompkins-Stange, 2016). In particular, Tompkins-Stange (2016) finds that only recently did scholars begin to explore the role of educational philanthropists in policy deliberation and notes that "research on foundations' policy influence has predominately been historical, conducted via archival analysis or retrospective interviews after several decades..." (p. 9). As such, scholarly attention has emphasized the historical retellings of programs, initiatives, and foundation intentions in specific moments of time.

For example, in an edited volume, *Philanthropy and Cultural Imperialism* by Arnove (1980), Slaughter and Silva (1980) examine the influence of the progressive era (1900–1920) foundations and their role in promoting pro-capitalist ideologies in academic fields. For Slaughter and Silva (1980), philanthropic investments were directed "toward a nationwide ideology of efficient, systematic social amelioration directed by trained social workers" (p. 59). Specifically, through historical analysis, Slaughter and Silva (1980) find that early philanthropists advanced the notion that societal ills are consequences of individual actions

rather than general social conditions. Therefore, professionals, such as social workers, should be trained to address character issues, with little attention paid to social structures. By sponsoring academic programs, research, and national associations, philanthropists “claimed objectivity and value neutrality in their practice and publications...” (Slaughter & Silva, 1980, p. 78.).

Interestingly, and despite their efforts, Slaughter and Silva (1980) contend that private philanthropy was not successful in pursuing its agendas, concluding that its “experiment at pragmatic ideology formation had borne little fruit” (p. 79).

Since the 1970s, a growing area of scholarship has developed regarding the role of elite patronage in policymaking. Inspired by Arnove’s (1980) volume and other sociological theories focused on elite theories of power (Domhoff, 2005, 2010), Roelofs (2003) examines the role of philanthropists in policy engagement, with an emphasis on ideological production. In her book *Foundations and Public Policy: The Mask of Pluralism*, she considers the influence of private philanthropists on ideological production and decision-making in public affairs. For Roelofs (2003), philanthropists can “produce consent without resort to force” (p. 1), primarily through their granting powers in the interests of corporate elites, who are able to “appear distant from their corporate origins and support, so they may claim a neutral image” (Roelofs, 2003. p. 2). She contends that philanthropy is closely linked to knowledge-producing institutions—universities, professional associations, and think tanks—and by extension, the policy planning process: “Foundations, social science, and ‘social engineering’ evolved together; the Progressive movement was their political, public arm” (Roelofs, 2003, p. 28). Although foundations such as the Ford Foundation have a long history of supporting social justice initiatives and civil rights movements (Domhoff, 2005; Teles, 2008), Roelofs (2015) later writes, “Foundations exert even more direct influence by co-opting activists and their organizations,” leaving out radical

alternatives (p. 662), which some organizational and movement scholars refer to as the channeling strategy (Jenkins, 1998; Jenkins & Eckert, 1986).

Many in the philanthropic sector have questioned the conclusions put forth by sociologists and other historians that are critical of philanthropic interventions in public policy. Addressing the many of the critics of his day, Alan Pifer, the ninth president of the Carnegie Corporation, noted, “Virtually all critics have attributed to them a position of power quite out of proportion to reality” (Pifer, 1983, p. 106). Likewise, in an analysis of philanthropists and their policy impacts, Sealander (2007) concurs with Pifer’s (1983) conclusions, arguing:

Consistently some analysts have seen them as the driving force behind revolutions in human betterment. Others, in direct contrast, have viewed them as evil threats to democracy: the sinister creation of the very rich. Both interpretations have always been grossly overdrawn. (p. 2)

For Sealander (1997), “Most scholarship about private philanthropy’s public policy-making influence still exaggerates its power, for good or for all” (p. 8), where “[b]oth critics and defenders of early-twentieth-century foundations have paid too much attention to stated goals – too little to results” (p. 31). Many of these limitations are due to the lack of contemporary works investigating what foundations are doing in a measurable and quantifiable manner, linking grants to direct outputs.

### **Contemporary K–12 Philanthropy Research**

In the last decade, the K–12 literature experienced a surge of interest regarding the policy activities of institutional philanthropists (Carr, 2012; Quinn et al., 2013; Hess, 2005; Hess & Henig, 2015; Reckhow & Snyder, 2014; Reckhow & Tompkins-Stange, 2015; Reckhow, 2009, 2013; Scott & Jabbar, 2014; Tompkins-Stange, 2016; Wohlstetter et al., 2011). More

significantly, this line of scholarship grounds its analysis by systematically investigating philanthropic strategies over time using unique datasets and diverse methods. Rather than focusing on individual foundations or historical retellings of grant portfolios, scholars are beginning to examine philanthropy using field-level perspectives. For example, *Follow the Money: How Foundations Dollars Changed Public School Politics* by Sarah Reckhow quantifies the social agendas and activities of leading funders in K–12 education. Her study drew upon a mixed-method research design, relying on an original dataset of tax filings, survey analysis, and in-depth interviews to examine foundation-led reforms in urban areas. Similarly, Megan Tompkins-Stange’s book *Policy Patrons: Philanthropy, Education Reform, and the Politics of Influence* drew upon semi-structured interviews of high-powered officials, secondary sources, and archival data to examine the management approaches of four leading K–12 funders involved in educational reform.

These studies, among others, are documenting the growing centrality of Gates, The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation (Broad), and the Walton Family Foundation (Walton) in K–12 policy reform. Indeed, scholars demonstrate that funders are increasingly involved in policy advocacy efforts and are cultivating new ideas and establishing strategic alliances when engaging in system-wide reforms, typically by funding nontraditional actors who can challenge traditional educational sectors (Carr, 2012; Ferrare & Reynolds, 2016; Hess, 2005; Hess & Henig, 2015; Quinn et al., 2013; Reckhow, 2009, 2013; Reckhow & Snyder, 2014; Reckhow & Tompkins-Stange, 2015, 2018; Scott & Jabbar, 2014; Tompkins-Stange, 2016). According to this literature, these newer philanthropists are supporting “jurisdictional challengers” or “alternative governing coalitions”—entities that offer alternatives to the public sector—to influence policy and reshape how public expenditures are channeled (Mehta & Teles, 2011, p. 2; Reckhow, 2013; Reckhow &

Snyder, 2014; Scott, 2009; Teles, 2008; Thümler, 2011). These jurisdictional challengers include charter schools, charter management entities, advocacy groups, and teaching and leadership training centers (Ferrare & Reynolds, 2016; Mehta & Teles, 2011). This area of research provides support to the notion that major funders are shifting resources away from the educational establishment (e.g., public schools, school districts, etc.) and toward nontraditional actors (e.g., venture capital firms, charter management organizations, charter schools, nonprofit advocacy groups) (Hess, 2005; Hess & Henig, 2015; Reckhow, 2009, 2013; Tompkins-Stange, 2016).

While this area of empirical research has become more productive, this was not always the case. For example, in 2005, as a response to the lack of organizational scholarship on K–12 philanthropy, the Director of Education Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), Fredrick Hess, organized a conference addressing this empirical void, which accumulated into an edited volume, *With the best of intentions: How philanthropy is reshaping K–12 education* (2005). In the preface, Hess (2005) writes,

... I was astonished by how little information I could locate on educational giving. My research assistants and I had great trouble finding data on the national picture, detailing the role of givers in influential reforms, or documenting the role of funders in particular initiatives or locales. (p. vii)

In an attempt to provide a more robust account of philanthropic activity in K–12 grantmaking, Hess (2005) convened scholars, researchers, and practitioners to examine the influence of major foundations in the field. In Hess’s (2005) view, the rise of the newer entrants—Gates, Broad, and Walton in particular—made this area of inquiry timely: “[I]t is fair to say that the ranks and ambitions of these have grown in the past two decades—dramatically so in the past five to ten

years” (p. 2). For Hess (2005), the differences between the older funders and the newer philanthropists lie in their strategies, and he defines newer foundations as those founded in the 1990s and early 2000s who “...exhibited little patience for educational bureaucracies, [and] traditional approaches to giving...” (p. 6).

In the same volume, and drawing upon an original dataset of tax filings, Greene (2005) estimates the amount of funding flowing from the top 30 funders to K–12 education. To do so, Greene (2005) examines each funder’s 2002 IRS tax forms, by applying an original coding schema to investigate granting purposes across the sector. A subsequent survey of the largest school districts in the country estimates the amount of funding private philanthropists give to K–12 education. He finds that philanthropy comprises a small fraction of overall K–12 spending when compared to total expenditures. According to Greene’s (2005) calculations, philanthropic giving represents only one-third of one percent of total spending. This led Greene (2005) to conceptualize philanthropic grantmaking as akin to “buckets in the sea,” having little to no effect on how public school systems function or operate. For philanthropy to be successful in driving system-wide reforms, Greene (2005) argues that limited investments should be directed toward high-leverage grants intended to influence how public spending is directed. As Greene (2005) notes, K–12 funders have traditionally engaged in low-leverage forms of giving, such as curriculum development and general operating support, allowing educational systems to continue doing what they traditionally do. Alternatively, Greene (2005) asserts that “if philanthropists aspire to improve public education more broadly...Their private dollars have to be leveraged by redirecting future public expenditures” (p. 49–50). Such grants include charter school support, investments in voucher programs, and advocacy research. In contrast to low-leverage purposes, high-leverage investments are more likely to create lasting effects through policy change.

Extending Greene's (2005) analytical approach, Reckhow's (2013) study investigates the policy agendas of 15 major foundations in K–12 policymaking. Drawing on data from 2000 and 2005 in addition to survey analysis and interviews with key policy actors and philanthropic officials, Reckhow (2013) demonstrates that over time, major philanthropists have increased investments in policy advocacy efforts. In particular, by surveying the largest school districts in the U.S., she finds that foundations change their strategies when engaging with the sector; they provided fewer grants to traditional actors in 2005 (25%) when compared to 2000 (40%) (Reckhow, 2013). Moreover, these investments are more likely to flow to policy actors challenging public education, such as nonprofit intermediaries, charter schools, and charter management organizations (Reckhow, 2013).

Since Hess's (2005) and Reckhow's (2013) publications, several scholars have applied similar analytical techniques to assess philanthropic interventions in public education. In particular, many scholars have begun to draw upon original datasets, in-depth interviews, and survey analyses to examine the policy involvement of major foundations. The existing literature also applies a diverse set of methods, including inferential statistics, trend analysis, social network analysis, and qualitative data analysis to investigate policy strategies (Greene, 2005, 2015; Klopott, 2015; Reckhow, 2013, 2014; Reckhow & Tompkins-Stange, 2015, 2018; Tompkins-Stange, 2016). One theme that ties together many empirical studies is the use of 990 tax forms. Recently, researchers have begun to utilize these forms to compare and contrast the strategies of several foundations in education. Until recently, 990 tax data were difficult to access (Barreto & Villinski, 2019). If, for example, researchers wished to use it for research, they had to send requests to the IRS or the foundations. When they did receive the forms, they were usually

scanned, requiring researchers to code and clean the data themselves, a labor-intensive process (Barreto & Villinski, 2019).

However, more online resources are now systematically collecting 990 forms that researchers can exploit. For example, the Foundation Directory Online (FDO) is a database managed by a staff of researchers who collect and apply filters relating to philanthropic giving. Those interested in examining specific sectoral trends can now apply unique filters while conducting a database search (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018; Kelly & James, 2015). 990 tax forms provide a rich source of information on the activities of major foundations, particularly in education (Barreto & Villinski, 2019). Since foundations are legally required to file these forms each year, researchers can assume that this data source is reliable, consistent, and honest. Indeed, 990 tax forms allow researchers to not only quantify the social agendas of leading funders but also find what actors philanthropists have elevated based on granting trends (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018).

The use of such data sources is evident in recent K–12 philanthropy scholarship. In fact, Hess followed his 2005 book with an updated edition entitled *The new education philanthropy: Politics, policy, and reform*, coauthored with Jeffrey Henig, Professor of Political Science and Education at Teachers College, which included more manuscripts that were data driven. In this updated volume, Greene (2015) expands on his 2005 chapter by analyzing nearly 1,600 grants from 2013 and finds that philanthropists have in fact taken his advice, increasingly financing high-leverage-oriented purposes to create sustained reform. Greene (2015) finds that nearly half of the grants sampled were allocated to programs considered self-sustaining beyond the duration of the grant. However, many of these efforts are undermined due to the lack of mobilized actors who have stakes in these policy reform efforts (Greene, 2015). In other words, when funders pull

out, mobilization ends. Greene (2015) offers additional advice, admonishing philanthropists to build natural constituencies with shared political interests to uphold advocacy efforts and ensure that goals are maintained.

In the same volume, using grant data from 2000, 2005, and 2010 and applying social network analysis, Snyder (2015) investigates whether older, more traditional funders (Annenberg, Carnegie, Kellogg, and Wallace) differ in their grantmaking strategies when compared to the newer philanthropists (Broad, Dell, Gates, Robertson, and Walton). Snyder (2015) finds that unlike traditional funders, the “newer” philanthropists are more likely to engage in venture-inspired strategies (Snyder, 2015). Snyder’s (2015) analysis reveals that older funders have embraced many of the advocacy–policy strategies introduced by the newer foundations; however, they still maintain some of their own funding priorities (Snyder, 2015).

Reckhow and Tompkins-Stange (2015) employ a mixed-method research design, using grant data from Gates and Broad for 2005 and 2010, Congressional testimonies, and in-depth interviews. They find that both Gates and Broad are increasingly funding national policy efforts, including investments to think tanks and advocacy groups. Moreover, they find greater issue alignment in 2010 when compared to 2005, with both funders investing in similar areas around standards and teacher quality. By focusing on foundation-funded Congressional testimonies, Reckhow and Tompkins-Stange (2015) also highlight a growing prevalence of grants given to groups invited to Congress (Reckhow & Tompkins-Stange, 2015). Through affiliation networks of shared references (reports and studies) cited by witnesses, they find a high frequency of studies with similar policy views with funders. Overall, they demonstrate that Gates and Broad are increasingly targeting federal policy efforts, in addition to funding more advocacy groups that align with their political agendas (Reckhow & Tompkins-Stange, 2015).

Outside of this edited series, others have drawn upon grounded theory and qualitative inquiry to compare and contrast the granting behavior of leading foundations in K–12 education. In her book *Policy Patrons: Philanthropy, Education Reform, and the Politics of Influence*, Tompkins-Stange (2016) examines the norms and values of four major foundations in K–12 education: Gates, Broad, Kellogg, and Ford. In particular, she finds that the newer entrants—Gates and Broad—are “outcome-oriented” foundations that employ a top-down management style when dealing with grantees. In addition, these philanthropists are more likely to fund elite organizations and experts and to use quantifiable metrics for accountability. In contrast, the older funders—Kellogg and Ford—fell within the “field-oriented” category due to their bottom-up approach to grantee management, and they are more holistic in assessing their goals. These funders also tend to be capacity builders and use a mixture of data (quantitative and qualitative) to evaluate success. They also fund a more diverse group of nonprofit organizations than the field-oriented foundations.

### **Coalition Builders and Grantee Intermediaries**

A common theme in this literature is the reliance on networks and coalitions to advance educational reform. Reckhow and Snyder (2014), Snyder (2015), and Ferrare and Reynolds (2016) all demonstrate that foundations are central in establishing and maintaining national networks of intermediaries involved in policy advocacy. Scott and Jabber (2014) offer a widely used metaphor of the hub and spoke to highlight this point, suggesting that “foundations are uniquely situated in the reform landscape as a central actor, at the ‘hub’ of intermediary activity as a funder of IOs, but also as a ‘spoke’ in the wheel that helps to mobilize and, in many ways, direct the activities of the IOs” (p. 233). Indeed, through foundation investments, funders can

draw upon a network of recipients to share information and best practices, typically through convenings, conferences, meetings, and partnerships.

Likewise, many nonmajor foundations are emulating some of these same strategies as the national funders. Building upon Reckhow and Snyder's (2014) work, Ferrare and Reynolds (2016) examine the policy advocacy strategies of 15 nonmajor funders in K–12 education. By drawing upon grant data from 2010, and by applying social network analysis and geographic information systems mapping, they find that elite agendas from major foundations are spreading to smaller funding agencies, although some strategic differences exist. In particular, nonmajor funders are mimicking many of the strategies introduced by the major foundations, investing in national advocacy organizations and other nontraditional actors. However, when compared to the larger foundations, the level of collaboration does not occur to the same degree. One interesting finding, in particular, is that the smaller funders in K–12 education are investing in organizations that are involved in college preparation and student enrichment, or what can be considered college completion-oriented purposes (Ferrare & Reynolds, 2016).

This trend toward collaboration and coalition building has created a robust organizational field of intermediary activity. Indeed, intermediary grantees, in turn, can assist directly in knowledge transfer and policy diffusion. As Gándara et al. (2017) note, “Intermediaries have the potential to play a significant role in promoting diffusion through policy learning, such as by dispersing policy information (e.g., through meetings and publications) or by sponsoring policy evaluations” (p. 704–05). In fact, foundations can create shared trust between two grant recipients, creating channels for communications and information sharing. For example, many foundations invite grant recipients to the same conferences, informal meetings, presentations, and site visits to share information, evaluation tools, and best practices. In other cases, they may

ask two distinct grantees to collaborate on a specific project. Intermediary grantees, in turn, can assist directly in knowledge transfer. In higher education, this can include a variety of entities, including nonprofit organizations, think tanks, media outlets, membership associations, for-profit firms, and government agencies (Kelly & James, 2015).

### **Higher Education Accountability**

One theme that connects all of the contemporary K–12 literature is that philanthropic organizations should be assumed to be policy actors with the ability to influence fields and galvanize sectors around specific policy proposals and preferences (Reckhow & Tompkins-Stange, 2015, 2018; Tompkins-Stange, 2016). Moreover, this literature reveals that venture philanthropists are increasingly providing support to charter school systems (Scott, 2009; Wohlstetter et al., 2011), advancing educational reforms (Cohen, 2007; Ferris et al., 2008), targeting national policy organizations (Debray-Pelot, & McGuinn, 2009; Reckhow & Tompkins-Stange, 2015, 2018), and investing in policy networks, both at the local and national levels (Ferrare & Reynolds, 2016; Reckhow, 2013; Reckhow & Snyder, 2014). This area of scholarship acknowledges that informal actors are often influential policy entrepreneurs in the realm of education politics.

Traditionally, higher education policy research focused on the role of states—both federal and local—and emphasized the influence of legislation on policy outcomes (McLendon, 2003a; McLendon, 2003b; McLendon, Deaton, & Hearn, 2007; McLendon & Hearn, 2003; McLendon, Hearn & Mokher, 2009; Ness & Tandberg, 2013; Nicholson-Crotty & Meier, 2003). While these studies have provided valuable insights into the mechanics of formal higher education policymaking and their consequences, few works, other than a few book chapters or thought

pieces, have considered the involvement of informal and nonstate actors in policy advocacy and education reform (Miller & Morhew, 2017; Ness et al., 2015).

Indeed, many higher education scholars are beginning to cite the growing significance of philanthropists in the sector. For example, in Donald Heller's 2011 edited volume *The States and Public Higher Education Policy: Affordability, Access, and Accountability*, Zumeta and Kinee (2011) discuss the growing prominence of educational foundations in higher education accountability:

...large philanthropic organizations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation for Education have recently taken an interest in postsecondary accountability. The Gates Foundation, with vast resources and influence never before seen in a philanthropic organization, has a stated goal of doubling the number of low-income young adults who have obtained a post-secondary credential with a market value by age twenty-six. As a part of its strategy, the Gates Foundation believes that institutions should be held accountable for outcomes such as student retention and graduation rates and that institutions much focus on completion as much as access (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2009). Similarly, the Lumina Foundation, the largest foundation focused primarily on higher education, is supporting efforts in several states to improve efficiency in instruction and to do a better job of tying state resources to student outcomes and success. (p. 176-77)

As this quote suggests, college completion is tied to postsecondary accountability. Due to rising costs, colleges and universities now face growing pressures for greater accountability that is tied to outcomes, referred to as the “new accountability movement” (Burke & Minassians, 2003; Kelchen, 2018), which shares many similarities to the reform efforts in K–12 education (Carey &

Schneider, 2010; Deming, & Figlio, 2016). As such, the new accountability movement assumes that postsecondary institutions should be measured by outputs linked to degree production and job placement (Burke, 2002; McLendon, 2003; McLendon, Hearn, & Deaton, 2006). McLendon and Hearn (2013) characterize this new policy environment in the following manner:

This ‘new accountability’ movement took shape as incentive systems have been designed to link campus funding levels to desired institutional performance outcomes in such areas as student retention and graduation rates, undergraduate access, measures of institutional efficiency, student scores on licensure exams, job placement rates, faculty productivity, campus diversity and, increasingly, student learning. (para. 4)

The rise in popularity of outcome-based policies coincided with President Obama’s 2020 Completion goal (Miller & Morpew, 2017). Projections by President Obama’s Department of Education found that 50 percent more graduates would need to attain degrees to meet this goal (U.S., Department of Education, 2011). Analysis conducted by the Integrated Post-Secondary Education Data System (2013) revealed that public four-year institutions graduated less than 60 percent of their undergraduates in a six-year span (Berkner & Choy, 2008; Nisar, 2015). From the perspective of reformers, colleges and universities should be responsible for producing more graduates to fill these gaps (Zumeta & Kinee, 2011).

### **Institutional Outcomes**

One type of preferred policy mechanism for promoting greater accountability linked to outcomes is performance-based funding (PBF) models (Dougherty & Natow, 2015; Miller & Morpew, 2017). For public higher education, PBF ties state appropriations to outcomes relating to performance, degree production, student retention, course completion, and job placement (Hillman & Corral, 2018; White House, 2015). Scholars note that PBF has occurred in two

waves (Dougherty et al., 2014). The first generally lasted from 1978 to 2000, providing an additional layer of support to public institutions that enrolled more students and thus rewarded access (Dougherty et al., 2014; MecLendon, Hearn, & Deaton, 2006). The second wave emerged in 2007 and focused heavily on outcomes relating to degree attainment, retention, and outcomes (Dougherty, et al., 2014). The latter version was more embedded than previous iterations and tied a greater share of state funding to outcomes, and it thus no longer acted as an additional layer of financial support (Dougherty, Jones, Lahr, Natow, Pheatt, & Reddy, 2014; Hillman et al., 2014). Many state policymakers enacted PBF with the intent of aligning universities with state priorities (Dougherty et al., 2014; Hillman et al., 2014). Since 2008, PFB has become popular among policymakers, with nearly 40 states implementing or enacting outcome-oriented funding models (Dougherty & Natow, 2015; Li, 2018).

The two newer foundations have been supported by PBF (Miller & Morphew, 2017). Dougherty and Natow (2015) find that Gates and Lumina regularly fund intermediaries that are proponents of PBF. Likewise, in a content analysis of philanthropic organizations and nonprofits, Miller and Morphew (2017) demonstrate that nongovernmental entities supported by foundations export specific policy narratives around PFB. These entities include advocacy nonprofits and think tanks, who can frame policy debates, confer legitimacy around best practices, and promote specific bodies of research (Miller & Morphew, 2017). Overall, this literature confirms that major foundations are important patrons in promoting policies that tie outcomes to completion at the state level (Ness & Gándara, 2014).

Another feature of the new accountability movement is greater federal involvement in postsecondary education (Heller, 2011; Kelly & James, 2015). For example, in his 2012 State of the Union address, President Obama placed higher education “on notice” due to affordability

concerns (Kelly & James, 2015; Obama, 2012). In a later speech at Knox College in 2013, President Obama promised to “lay out an aggressive strategy to shake up the [higher education] system, tackle rising costs, and improve value for middle-class students and their families” (Obama, 2013). The speech was followed by a number of federal attempts to promote greater accountability among colleges and universities linked to performance (Lederman & Fain, 2017). The Obama Administration also targeted community colleges, with the American Graduation Initiative, providing support to enhance the sectors institutional productivity and outcome measures (Bernstein, 2014; Russell, 2011).

During the same period, the Department of Education marshaled support behind outcome-based policies, most notably in its *College Completion Tool Kit*, published in March of 2011 (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The tool kit offered states best practices for increasing completion rates, as well as “technical assistance, [and]...available resources to assist states in their college completion efforts...” (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, p. 3). Beyond providing assistance, the Department of Education allocated \$20 million for the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education initiative in support of “innovative solutions and evidence for what works in addressing persistent and widespread challenges in postsecondary education for students who are at risk for not persisting in and completing postsecondary programs” (U.S. Department of Education, 2017; also see, Perna, Finney, & Callan, 2014).

From this context, the completion agenda did not emerge by accident, with state and federal policymakers making completion central in their higher education agendas (Lederman & Fain, 2017). Although federal and state policymakers did make completion a priority, the momentum was financed largely by private philanthropists (Bernstein, 2014; Russell, 2011). At a 2010 ASHE conference, Lederman (2010, Nov 22) suggested that “...arguably even more

important [than the President’s speech] has been the fact that the country’s highest-profile foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the most visible foundation focused primarily on higher education, the Lumina Foundation for Education, have both thrust college completion to the top of their agendas” (para. 2; also see, e.g., Hall & Thomas, 2012). In particular, Gates and Lumina both pressed completion as a preferred policy preference well before President Obama’s address. For example, in 2008, Lumina introduced its Big Goal, which sought to increase the number of degree holders to 60 percent by 2025 (Lumina, 2017). Similarly, Gates announced its similar goal of doubling the number of low-income students earning credentials within the same period (Gates, 2017).

Both foundations subsequently gained close ties to the Obama Administration (Hall & Thomas, 2012). According to reporting conducted by Sarah Hebel (2009, May 1) for *The Chronicle*, Jamie Merisotis “...gained the ear of the White House... [where] Mr. Merisotis expressed his concern about ‘dangerous stagnation’ in the nation’s degree-attainment rates and urged the incoming administration to ‘make human-capital development a cornerstone of U.S. economic policy.’” She further adds that “[s]ince then he [Merisotis] has had several conversations about Lumina’s ‘big goal,’ and policy issues, with members of the White House economic and domestic-policy councils.” Mr. Robert Shireman, the former Deputy Under Secretary of Education, told *The Chronicle* that Mr. Merisotis was selected “to determine the right goals for education and the best numbers to use in measuring progress toward them” (Hebel, 2009, May 1).

### **Philanthropy and Policy Advocacy in Higher Education**

In recent years, popular commentary has drawn attention to the largest and newest foundations in higher education—Gates and Lumina—and their policy advocacy strategies in

promoting outcome-based accountability in higher education. For example, in 2013, *The Chronicle* published a five-part series entitled *The Gates Effect*, reporting on the influence of Gates, Lumina, and even the Kresge Foundation (Kresge) in encouraging completion-linked public policy and systems change (Parry et al., 2013). According to a special report conducted by *The Chronicle*, Gates seeks “to overhaul higher education, changing how it is delivered, financed, and regulated” (Parry et al., 2013, para. 6). As *The Chronicle* notes, philanthropy has created policy networks and a great deal of research, where similar individuals and policy elites share worldviews and information regarding higher education, as *The Chronicle* notes, “The effect is an echo chamber of like-minded ideas, arising from research commissioned by Gates and advocated by staff members who move between the government and the foundation world” (para. 10).

As such, recent research suggests that contemporary foundations and their affiliated advocacy groups have been instrumental in mobilizing support for college completion, including PBF (Dougherty et al., 2014; Dougherty & Natow, 2015; Miller & Morpew, 2017). Through a series of qualitative case studies, Dougherty and Natow (2015) find that Gates and Lumina, along with intermediaries such as HCM Strategists, a for-profit consulting firm, and Complete College America, a national advocacy organization, have been central in advocating PBF to policymakers. In particular, Dougherty et al. (2014) credit these external policy groups for raising awareness of PBF models through research, convenings, and state promotion: “[T]he strong influence of external policy organizations – such as Complete College America and Lumina Foundation’s Achieving the Dream, Making Opportunity Affordable, and College Productivity Initiatives – in sparking interest in new approaches to performance funding” (p. 42). Other scholars find similar philanthropic support for PBF. Miller and Morpew (2017) find that

both the advocacy philanthropists, including affiliated organizations such as Complete College America, HCM Strategists, and Jobs for the Future, have framed policy debates, conferred legitimacy around best practices, and promoted specific bodies in support of PBF (Miller & Morphew, 2017).

### **Current Empirical Postsecondary Philanthropy Research**

The notion of “advocacy philanthropy,” a close cousin of venture philanthropy or strategic philanthropy, was introduced by Hall and Thomas (2012), who contend that the newer entrants (Gates and Lumina) are introducing an advocacy-oriented strategy, dubbed “advocacy philanthropy.” Through public documents, secondary data, and interviews, they find that the advocacy philanthropists are promoting an array of college completion reforms through policy promotion and organizational change, unique in higher education philanthropy. According to Hall and Thomas (2012), Gates and Lumina have altered how traditional philanthropy is practiced. These funders, they argue, unapologetically seek to influence the governance of higher education by collaborating with advocacy groups, think tanks, state and federal policymakers, consultants, and governments. As Hall and Thomas (2012) share,

The emergence of ‘advocacy philanthropy’ has resulted in the unabashed use of foundation strategies to influence government action, policy, and legislation—in their own words, foundations are taking on a leadership role, acting as a catalyst for change, identifying research areas, supporting best practices, engaging in public policy advocacy, enhancing communications power, using convening power, fostering partnerships, building public will, and employing the bully pulpit (p. 23).

Moreover, Hall and Thomas (2012) assert that this strategy “reflects a deviation from the established norms in higher education philanthropy, norms that generally created a distance

between foundation activity and politics” (p. 23). One aspect of this policy-inspired philanthropy is a reliance on IOs to advance foundation-led agendas (Hall & Thomas, 2012; Kelly & James, 2015), which is caused by a general distrust of traditional academic institutions enacting reforms themselves (Hall & Thomas, 2015). As Hall and Thomas (2012) argue,

Over the past decade, there has been an increasing level of distrust that higher education institutions can successfully enact reforms that will result in meaningful changes to our postsecondary system; this distrust has led to an increasing reliance on internal foundation research and strategy teams and the funding of external and intermediary organizations, with philanthropies soliciting proposals from specific entities rather than the field at large... (p. 17)

According to several journalistic accounts, foundations have experienced a number of successes by applying this strategy of working with grantee intermediaries in higher education. Reporting for *The Chronicle*, Mangan (2013) writes,

Working alongside the Lumina Foundation through intermediaries like Complete College America and another nonprofit, Jobs for the Future, the Gates Foundation has helped influence higher-education policy at the state level to a degree that may be unprecedented for a private foundation.

Building upon Hall and Thomas’s (2012) analysis using 2012 grant data, Kelly and James (2015) note that the emergence of the newer foundations has, in fact, introduced a new form of grantmaking to the sector. Unlike traditional philanthropists, who allow colleges and universities to continue their traditional activities, advocacy philanthropists promote organizational change and policy reform through their grantmaking. Strategies include supporting external groups (entities that operate outside of the university system), sponsoring research to impact or inform

policy discussions, and funding scalable technological innovations. According to Kelly and James's (2015) 2012 grant analysis, the newer entrants—Gates and Lumina—had invested far less in colleges and universities when compared to older, more traditional foundations. In fact, other research demonstrates that older foundations are emulating similar strategies. Similar to Snyder's (2015) analysis of K–12 foundations, Haddad and Reckhow (2018) examine the grantmaking strategies of the “newer” (Gates and Lumina) and “older” funders (Kellogg and Kresge) in higher education. Through social network analysis and grant analysis, they find that the older funders are aligning their strategic priorities with Gates and Lumina, funding similar purposes and grantees over time. In particular, between 2003 and 2012, they find that the older funders' strategies are aligning with Gates's and Lumina's, who are dedicating a greater share of their portfolios toward college completion, policy advocacy, and action-oriented research.

Overall, these reports and studies demonstrate the importance of intermediaries for interfacing resources and knowledge between foundation administrators and the systems that they are attempting to affect (Metcalf, 2008; Ness & Gándara, 2014; Ness et al., 2015; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Indeed, while traditional philanthropists have always been prominent influencers and reformers (Bernstein, 2014; Ris, 2017; Thelin, 2011; Thelin & Trollinger, 2014), this literature demonstrates a notable shift in recent years (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018; Hall & Thomas, 2012; Kelly & James, 2015). As Bernstein (2014) shares, contemporary philanthropists are more impatient with the sector than ever, where “several foundations have joined forces with the federal government to help develop public policies that reward and/or penalize colleges and universities according to the number of students they graduate” (p. xxi). Rather than using incentives to encourage change, newer philanthropists define problems from the onset, reaching out to specific grantees who share similar policy priorities, as well as driving reform through

high-leverage policy strategies (Hall & Thomas, 2012; Haddad & Reckhow, 2018; Kelly & James, 2015), as the K–12 literature finds.

## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH STRATEGY

In the following section, I consider two works of literature that provide the conceptual underpinnings of my empirical design. A field-level perspective informed by a neo-institutional perspective emphasizes how major foundations, postsecondary institutions, and intermediaries interact in a dynamic and interdependent ecological environment. Moreover, insights from social network theory and structural hole theory, in particular, provide a framework to investigate how policy ideas are transmitted across sectoral boundaries. This work highlights the role of intermediaries in knowledge transfer and policy diffusion. I then provide an overview of my methodological approach, detailing my sampling strategy, data collection techniques, and coding procedures.

### **Theoretical Framework**

A field-level perspective informed by a neo-institutional lens emphasizes how elite entities mobilize resources for field-building efforts in organizational fields (Bartley, 2007; Clemens, 2005; Cress & Snow, 1996; DiMaggio, 1991; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Powell & Meyer & Rowan, 1977). DiMaggio and Powell (1983) characterize organizational fields as “constitute[ing] a recognized area of institutional life...” (p. 148). Accordingly, higher education includes a diverse organizational field, such as colleges and universities, philanthropic foundations, educational nonprofits, think tanks, membership organizations, and for-profit firms (Barnhardt, 2017; Miller & Morphew, 2017). This theoretical framework allows me to conceptually frame my empirical findings from an open systems perspective, viewing fields as interconnected and interdependent organizational arrangements between colleges and universities and intermediaries and policymakers (Cantwell, 2015; Scott, 2001).

## **Strategic Action Fields**

In *A Theory of Fields*, Fligstein and McAdam (2012) synthesize perspectives from neo-institutionalism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) and Bourdieu's notions of fields to consider how competing segments jockey for strategic advantage (Cantwell, 2015). According to Fligstein and McAdam (2012), strategic action fields (SAF) are socially constructed arenas within which members possess shared beliefs regarding the stake and rules for playing the "game" (Cantwell, 2015; Fligstein & McAdam, 2011, 2012). In particular, Fligstein and McAdam (2012) describe these SAFs in the following manner:

a constructed meso-level social order in which actors (who can be individual or collective) are attuned to and interact with one another on the basis of shared (which is not to say consensual) understandings about the purposes of the field, relationships to others in the field (including who has power and why), and the rules governing legitimate action in the field. (p. 9)

In other words, field theory assumes that field-level dynamics are influenced by power, with social actors positioning themselves for strategic action (Cantwell, 2015; Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). For Fligstein and McAdam (2012), strategic action is "the attempt by social actors to create and maintain stable social worlds by securing the cooperation of others" (p. 17). This requires social actors to possess the "social skills" necessary to mobilize support for their causes, including the ability to engage with other social actors, understand field-level dynamics (the rules), and form strategic relationships (Fligstein & McAdam 2012, p. 17). Accordingly, social skills are an important aspect of strategic action and field theory more generally, particularly for those involved in field-building efforts (Bartley, 2007; Fligstein & McAdam 2012).

## **Challenger–Incumbent Dynamic**

Field theory assumes that SAFs are in constant flux, even when the landscape appears stable and firmly established (Fligstein & McAdams, 2012). This is due to constant contention between organizational actors playing the game. Contentions can occur at any time but are more likely to arise when fields are experiencing uncertainty, particularly from external shocks (Fligstein & McAdams, 2012). Therefore, in such organizational environments, astute social actors contend for influence through challenger–incumbent dynamics (Fligstein & McAdams, 2012). In particular, SAF included three types of social actors: incumbents, challengers, and governance units (Fligstein & McAdams, 2012; McAdam & Scott, 2005). Incumbents are well established in their fields and possess the most symbolic and material resources at their disposal (Fligstein & McAdams, 2012; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Hence, not only do they possess the most power, but the established rules in a field reinforce their influence and status as well (Fligstein & McAdams, 2012).

In contrast, challengers do not receive the same level of benefits from established rules or norms. In fact, challengers are more likely to encounter asymmetries in field-level dynamics and offer alternative visions for a new social order (Fligstein & McAdams, 2012). Moreover, challengers regard disruption as beneficial to their strategic interests and wait for opportunities to challenge established norms. As Fligstein and McAdams (2012) emphasize, however, this does not suggest that challengers are “aggressive purveyors of oppositional logics” (p. 13). Rather, they wait until such opportunities arise, adopting prevailing field norms while going along with the crowd. However, since contenders are not firmly established within a field, they are not bounded by the same rules or norms. Lastly, governing units offer regulatory frameworks to guide field-level interactions, which ensures that systems run smoothly. From this lens, field-

level changes occur both slowly and during periods of punctuated contentions and shocks (Fligstein & McAdams, 2012).

Field theory provides a useful lens for examining organizational field dynamics in educational philanthropy (Ferrare & Reynolds, 2016). Moreover, a field-level analysis allows me to assess how philanthropic foundations work to mobilize supporters across higher education through field-building efforts. In Bartley's (2007) analysis of foundations and social movements, he finds that "foundations may work at a higher level of aggregation—creating or structuring organizational fields that embed social movement activity in new inter-organizational networks and new standards of success, and enrolling social movements in institution-building projects" (p. 233). Foundations such as Gates and Lumina have not only played an important patronage role in the college completion agenda but have also challenged established norms in higher education philanthropy (Hall & Thomas, 2012). Accordingly, the newer philanthropists represent the "challengers," who contest how traditional philanthropy is practiced. In contrast, the older funders are the incumbents, who benefit most from the status quo and established relationships with the sector (Bernstein, 2014; Haddad & Reckhow, 2018; Kelly & James, 2015). Thus, field theory allows me to consider endogenous sources of change while emphasizing the role of foundations as network entrepreneurs in the completion agenda.

### **Network Theory**

Field theory provides valuable insights into the role of power in field-level dynamics. However, according to Kluttz and Fligstein (2016), "A blind spot of field theory is how ideas move across fields" (p. 202). Therefore, to examine how ideas and resources are mobilized through interconnected fields, I draw on the notion of brokerage derived from social network theory (Burt, 1992, 2001; Gould & Fernandez, 1989; Fernandez & Gould, 1994). According to

Burt (1992), brokers linking two or more actors accumulate the greatest social advantages due to their network positions (Burt, 2004; Figure 1; Gould & Fernandez, 1989). In particular, by filling “structural holes,” brokers control informational and resource flows to other nodes, in addition to gaining greater access to novel policy ideas (Burt, 1995, 2005; Gould & Fernandez, 1989; Powell & Oberg, 2017). Accordingly, the more structural holes a network has, the greater is the potential for brokerage (Burt, 1992, 2001; Gould & Fernandez, 1989). It must be noted, however, that brokers must decide to use their strategic positions in advantageous ways (Burt, 1995, 2004; Gould & Fernandez, 1989).

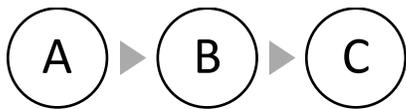


Figure 1. *A directed line where (B) represents the broker in the directed triad.*

Gould and Fernandez (1989) provide a quantitative test to systematically measure the brokerage potential of nodes in networks. More importantly, this measurement is sensitive to established field boundaries, based on “activities or interests” (Gould & Fernandez, 1989, p. 91). This distinction is crucial for higher education philanthropy, which includes several highly autonomous and interdependent subfields (Barnhardt, 2017). From this point of view, this approach emphasizes the “how” in knowledge transfer among subgroups based on social ties (Gould & Fernandez, 1989).

Gould and Fernandez (1989) offer five classifications of how brokerage can arise: coordinator, itinerant, gatekeeper, representative, and liaison (see Figure 2). The coordinator scenario occurs when all actors involved belong to the same subgroup. Itinerant brokerage (also referred to as the consultant) involves an external actor linking two nodes belonging to the same subgroup. The gatekeeper and the representative are similar in their interactions, but in reverse—gatekeepers restrict or allow information to flow to the rest of their group members, whereas the

representative transfers information from their groups to external members (Gould & Fernandez, 1989). Lastly, the liaison brokerage occurs when every actor involved in the exchange belongs to separate subgroups. One critical note is that social actors can occupy multiple brokerage profiles (Gould & Fernandez, 1989; Fernandez & Gould, 1994).

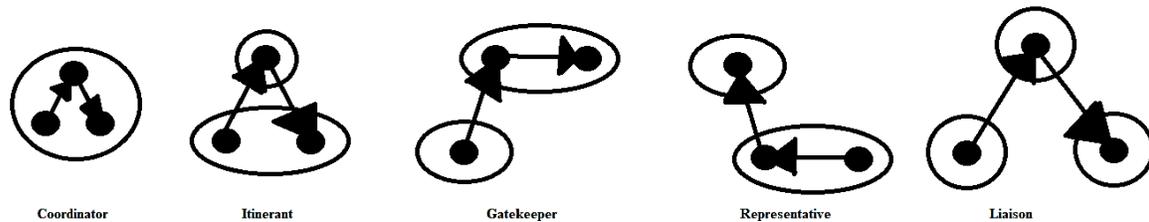


Figure 2. Adapted from Gould and Fernandez (1989); “insiders” are coordinators, gatekeepers, and representatives; “outsiders” are itinerants and liaisons.

Gould and Fernandez (1989) also designate an insider–outsider dynamic among their classifications. In particular, coordinators, representatives, gatekeepers are considered “insiders,” since the broker belongs to at least one member’s subgroup in the process chain. On the other hand, itinerants and liaisons are considered “outsiders,” since only the broker comes from its own membership group. Lastly, while the Gould and Fernandez’s (1989) brokerage analysis is agnostic to the type of social ties it tests, their classifications are based on the directionality of interactions (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002). However, the grant data analyzed is nondirectional. Therefore, I have collapsed the representative and gatekeeper roles, since they are separated based on their directionality, which is reflected in Figure 3.

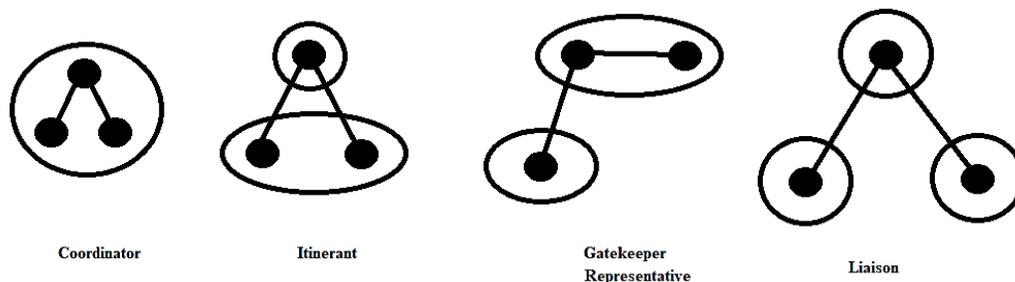


Figure 3. *Revised brokerage roles adapted from Gould and Fernandez's (1989) social roles of brokers.*

Indeed, a brokerage perspective emphasizes the roles of foundation grantees involved in idea promotion and diffusion. In a study on urban educational reform and political coalitions, Ansell, Reckhow, and Kelly (2009) note, “A brokerage approach to public policy focus attention on how public policy dynamics are influenced by people in a position to mediate between competing factions or ideas” (p. 721). In higher education, few studies have explored the brokerage potential of boundary-spanning organizations and their impacts on the wider policy environment (e.g., Ness, 2010b; Ness & Gándara, 2014; Ness et al., 2015). Therefore, I emphasize the structural positions of grantees and their potential for knowledge transfer based on granting ties. I can thus shed light upon the underlying processes of how higher education policies and practices are established and diffused by informal networks.

### **Analytical Plan**

To systematically investigate the policy agendas of major foundations in higher education, this study draws upon a number of analytical approaches to assess philanthropic strategies (Culleton Colwell, 1980; Prewitt, 2006; Reckhow & Tompkins-Stange, 2015). Therefore, following the analytical strategies of Reckhow (2013) and Reckhow and Tompkins-Stange (2015), I utilize an in-depth, mixed-method research design to investigate philanthropic and intermediary activity in higher education, using the statistical analysis of grants (Greene,

2005), social network analysis (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018; McClure et al., 2017), and the qualitative analysis of documents and interviews (Tompkins-Stange, 2016).

### **Sampling Strategy**

This study focuses on private foundations, rather than on community or corporate funders (Barnhardt, 2017; Lawrence & Atienza, 2006; Parrish, 1973). The Foundation Center describes a philanthropic organization in the following manner:

A nongovernmental, nonprofit organization with its own funds (usually from a single source, either an individual or a family, or a corporation) and program managed by its trustees and directors, established to maintain or aide educational, social, charitable, religious, or other activities serving the common welfare, primarily by making grants to other nonprofit organizations. (Lawrence & Atienza, 2006, p. X)

Moreover, I decided to limit the analysis to the largest funders in higher education due to this study's focus on policy advocacy and systems change (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018; Hall & Thomas, 2012; Kelly & James, 2015). In particular, scholars have identified that major foundations are more likely to engage in advocacy than smaller organizations (Tompkins-Stange, 2016). According to Ostrander (2004), "[L]arge foundations are nearly four times as likely to be involved in policy than smaller foundations" (p. 45).

To select the top funders in higher education, I consulted the empirical literature on postsecondary philanthropy and policy engagement (Hall & Thomas, 2012; Haddad & Reckhow, 2018; Kelly & James, 2015), as well as the Foundation Center's ranking of top funders in education (Foundation Center, 2018). My purposes require the exploration of foundations seeking to influence the sector through policy advocacy investments. Thus, following the sampling strategy detailed by Kelly and James (2015), I examined the 14 funders outlined by

Hall and Thomas (2012) and then compared that list to the criteria outlined by Kelly and James (2015). I then inferred which foundations were most active in influencing the sector, based on coded grants and secondary material. In particular, I examined the grant data, as well as the mission statements and annual reports of each funder. I identified foundations that emphasized impacting or improving the sector, similar to the work of Kelly and James (2015). I then judged which foundations most actively influenced the sector based on grant descriptions, secondary material, and peer debriefing. Finally, I cross-referenced this list with philanthropic officials and educational researchers, which resulted in the list presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics of Higher Education Grants*

Foundation Sampled	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014
Alfred P. Sloan Foundation	211	210	179	186	219	207
Gates Foundation	44	44	71	135	164	165
Carnegie Foundation	42	40	63	32	48	62
Ford Foundation	128	152	119	94	123	92
Lumina Foundation	147	131	100	67	203	204
The Kresge Foundation	22	34	56	66	66	83
The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation	196	236	341	267	229	235
The Starr Foundation	75	62	49	42	20	22
The Hewlett Foundation	77	64	60	50	58	63
W. K. Kellogg Foundation	65	76	81	83	81	74

*Notes.* Data collected and analyzed by the author using foundations’ PF-990 tax filings extracted from the Foundation Center Online. Represents higher education-filtered grants.

### **Data Collection**

Current data on higher education grantmaking provides an incomplete representation of philanthropic activity (Prewitt, 2006). To address this gap, I created a dataset limiting foundation giving to higher education. In particular, I used the Foundation Center’s Foundation Directory Online database, filtering for “higher education,” to extract the grant data (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018; Kelly & James, 2015). According to The Foundation Center’s website, this is “the most trusted data about philanthropy” (Foundation Center, 2018). The dataset, including grants from 2004 to 2014, represents the most accurate data available at the time of this study (Kelly &

James, 2015). The 6,615 grants came from each foundations' 990 tax forms, which they are legally required to file each year (Zunz, 2012). This allowed me to empirically assess social agendas and policy networks across multiple funders (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018). In total, the dataset represented \$2,904,208,994 in higher education-filtered grants.

To empirically assess social agendas, each grant was coded based on a scheme developed by Kelly and James (2015), which is represented in Table 2. This coding scheme included purposes relating to advocacy, policy, research, college completion, general operating support, capital projects, and other areas pertinent to higher education philanthropy (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018). As with Greene (2005) and Kelly and James (2015), I wished to examine whether philanthropic organizations employed low- or high-leverage granting strategies over time through a trend analysis. I also coded grants unrelated to impacting the sector as “non-higher education” purposes. Moreover, grant recipients were coded based on their institutional types—For-profit Firm, Government Agency, Institution of Higher Education (colleges and universities), Media, Membership Organization, Nonprofit: Direct Service (educational nonprofits), and Nonprofit: Research (think tanks) to identify intermediary funding patterns (Kelly & James, 2015), which is represented in Table 3. For the purposes of this study, organizations other than colleges and universities are considered IOs.

Table 2. *Coding Scheme*

Primary Codes	Sub-Codes
Advocacy & Engagement	
Capital Projects	
Direct Service	Readiness, Access, Success Technology & Innovation Cost-effectiveness Curriculum Development Faculty Development Financial Aid Non-higher Ed Other Policy
General Operating Support	
Research	Cost-effectiveness Financial Aid Non-higher Ed Policy Readiness, Access, Success Technology & Innovation

*Notes.* Adapted from Kelly and James (2015).

*Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Total Grants, 2004 to 2014*

Organizational Code	Total
For-profit Firm	N=19
Government Agency	N=130
Institution of Higher Education	N=5286
Media Organization	N=27
Membership Organization	N=313
Nonprofit: Direct Service	N=587
Nonprofit: Research	N=290

*Notes.* Data collected and analyzed by the author using foundations' PF-990 tax filings.

### **Social Network Analysis**

Next, social network analysis was applied to examine the relationships between philanthropic foundations and higher education (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018; McClure et al., 2017; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Political scientists and K–12 scholars note that major foundations rely on national networks to advance reforms. Recent works by Reckhow and Snyder (2014), Snyder (2015), and Ferrare and Reynolds (2016) all demonstrate that K–12 funders are influential network builders. Following this analytic approach, a 2014 affiliation network graph was created to examine the types of organizations foundations funded (Ferrare & Reynolds, 2016). Grant data, as aggregated by the FDO, is a form of relational ties between foundations and their grantees. In particular, each grant recorded includes the funder's name, grant recipient, location, grant amount, year, and grant description. According to the recent literature on higher education philanthropy (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018; Hall & Thomas, 2012), foundations regularly share information among their grantees. Based on this assumption, network data can be created using 990 tax forms to examine possible paths of knowledge and

resource transfer and methods to examine whether multiple funders have shared policy goals (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018). I first drew on the 990 forms to create a two-mode network dataset (foundations to grantees), which I then collapsed into one-mode network data (grantees to grantees) (Reckhow, 2013).

To examine strategies longitudinally, one-mode grant networks focused on two points in time—2004 and 2014. All grant recipients shared at least two funders and received at least \$600,000 (Reckhow & Snyder, 2014). Information exchange is an important policy tool for advocacy groups; since the 2014 network was denser, I calculated information centrality to assess the most central IOs regarding information flow (Stephenson & Zelen, 1989; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Central IOs, therefore, have the greatest access to other funders, IOs, and information and resources due to their network positions (McClure et al., 2017; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). UCINET was used to create the networks and calculate centrality measures (Borgatti et al., 2002).

To identify the brokerage roles of foundation-funded entities, I applied Gould and Fernandez's (1989) brokerage analysis to the 2014 grant network (Borgatti et al., 2002). This test offers a quantitative assessment, "rather than relying on subjective impressions that certain actors seem to occupy brokerage positions" (Gould & Fernandez, 1989, p. 123). This process calculates the number of times a grantee can act as a broker in each possible role. Total brokerages equal the total number of times a grantee can occupy each profile. Gould and Fernandez's (1989) analysis requires subgroups to be separated based on their activities and interests. To create field boundaries that were separated by their activities and interests, I relied on the organizational affiliations created by Kelly and James (2015). These organizational affiliations include institutions of higher education (colleges and universities), membership organizations,

government agencies, nonprofit entities, think tanks, for-profit firms, and media outlets (see Table 3). By considering these organizational affiliations, I coded each grant based on these classifications. I then created attribute data based on each grantee's organizational subgroup (Borgatti et al., 2002). For example, think tank grantees would fall under the Nonprofit: Research category. Similarly, an organization such as ACE would be classified as a Membership Organization, since it comprises university presidents. UCINET calculates both relative and absolute brokerage scores for each of the five scenarios (Borgatti et al., 2002).

### **Statistical Analysis of Grants**

Following Klopott's (2015) analytical approach for K-12 grantmaking, I applied a mixed-effects logistic regression to evaluate the effects of grant purposes and grant year on the likelihood that a foundation would fund an IO (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Given that grants are nested within each foundation, this study examines the hierarchical structure embedded within the data. In particular, each foundation includes a series of grants for each year. The binary outcome is an investment to an IO (entities that are not defined as a university or college), which is coded as 1, and 0 otherwise. Each grant is coded based on the organizational type to which it is directed (an intermediary or a college or university) and the grant purpose.

Since the grant data is nested, with multiple grants within a year and multiple years within a foundation, a mixed-effects analysis is appropriate (McLean, Sanders & Stroup, 1991) because the random effects allow for differences among funding agencies to be accounted for. However, the effect for time is modeled as fixed at the first level, because this study aims to determine possible differences between what was occurring in 2004 and 2014. These years are not randomly chosen, and the fixed effect allows for comparisons of likelihood across years. The year "2004" is used as the reference for grant year since the college completion agenda had not

yet gained national prominence. For examining the effects of grant purpose, the reference group is traditional philanthropic investments, including capital projects, general operating support, and scholarships, since this is broadly understood as a form of traditional philanthropy (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018; Kelly & James, 2015). It is reasonable to expect that the relationship between grant purpose and whether the grant goes to an IO would vary from foundation to foundation. To capture this variability, the effect of grant purpose is allowed to vary randomly at the second level (the foundation level). The variability in this effect is further examined graphically to visualize the differences in effects across funders.

### Model

The analytical model for this study is given below:

Level 1:

$$\eta_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}Adv\&Eng + \beta_{2j}CostEffect + \beta_{3j}Curric\_dev + \beta_{4j}Faculty\_dev + \beta_{5j}FinAid + \beta_{6j}Non\_HighEd + \beta_{7j}Policy + \beta_{8j}Coll\_comp + \beta_{9j}Tech\_Innov + \beta_{10j}Year_{2006} + \beta_{11j}Year_{2008} + \beta_{12j}Year_{2010} + \beta_{13j}Year_{2012} + \beta_{14j}Year_{2014}$$

Level 2:

$$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + u_{0j}$$

$$\beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + u_{1j}$$

⋮

$$\beta_{9j} = \gamma_{90} + u_{9j}$$

$$\beta_{10j} = \gamma_{100}$$

⋮

$$\beta_{14j} = \gamma_{140}$$

Combined model:

$$\eta_{ij} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{10}Adv\&Eng + \gamma_{20}CostEffect + \gamma_{30}Curric\_dev + \gamma_{40}Faculty\_dev + \gamma_{50}FinAid + \gamma_{60}Non\_HighEd + \gamma_{70}Policy + \gamma_{80}Coll\_comp + \gamma_{90}Tech\_Innov + \gamma_{100}Year_{2006} + \gamma_{110}Year_{2008} + \gamma_{120}Year_{2010} + \gamma_{130}Year_{2012} + \gamma_{140}Year_{2014} + u_{1j}Adv\&Eng + u_{2j}CostEffect + u_{3j}Curric\_dev + u_{4j}Faculty\_dev + u_{5j}FinAid + u_{6j}Non\_HighEd + u_{7j}Policy + u_{8j}Coll\_comp + u_{9j}Tech\_Innov + u_{0j}$$

$$\text{Where } \eta_{ij} = \log\left(\frac{P_{ij}}{1-P_{ij}}\right),$$

$P_{ij}$  is the probability of giving a grant to an IO.

$\gamma_{00}$  is the intercept or the log odds of a grant to an IO for capital grants, scholarships, and general operating support in 2004.

$\gamma_{10}$  through  $\gamma_{90}$  represent the differences in log odds of a grant to an IO between the reference grant purpose and the respective grant purpose.

$\gamma_{100}$  through  $\gamma_{140}$  represent the differences in log odds of a grant to an IO between 2004 and the respective year.

$u_{0j}$  through  $u_{9j}$  are the random effects for the intercepts and the grant purpose terms.

The R statistical software was used to perform the analyses (R Core Team, 2016), along with the lme4 package for R (Bates, Mächler, Bolker & Walker, 2015). The unconditional model demonstrates a level two intercept variance of 2.059, suggesting that some variability exists across the foundations sampled, which is yet another piece of evidence to justify the need for a mixed-effects model. Data includes grants from 2004 to 2014, with a total of 37,140 grants—28,640 directed to colleges and universities, and 8,500 to intermediaries. Grants directed to for-profit firms, government agencies, media organizations, membership organizations, educational nonprofits, and think tanks are coded as IOs (Bates et al., 2015).

## **Qualitative Analysis**

In the final stage of analysis, I conducted 40 semi-structured interviews with both foundation officials and representatives of IOs. These in-depth interviews triangulated the grant analysis. To select informants, a snowball method was used that relied on referrals from foundation informants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Informants were selected purposefully since they are part of a small circle, which ensured that all interviewees were part of leading educational foundations and major IOs. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), “Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most the most can be learned” (p. 96). In total, 25 informants were interviewed from the philanthropic sector (see Table 4), and 15 from the IO and policy sectors (see Table 5).

Interestingly, many philanthropic informants were former grantees or possessed extensive experience in state and federal policymaking. Some informants, for example, worked at the U.S. Department of Education, the White House, Congress, or prominent think tanks before joining philanthropy, entering the sector with extensive histories in crafting educational policies. The 15 IO informants came from the nonprofit and policy sectors and were selected to discuss the influence of philanthropists in higher education. As with many of the foundation officials, several IO informants worked on a national or regional stage, as well as at different levels of government. In particular, some worked in the Obama Administration during a time when the federal government considered completion a key policy priority. Others worked at leading membership organizations that assisted foundations in collaborative efforts. Nearly all IO informants were referred by foundation officials, who regarded these participants as knowledgeable insiders.

Table 4. *Number of Foundation Informants*

Title	Total (N=25)
CEO/Executive Vice President/Vice President/Chief Operating Officer	4
Office of the President	1
Managing Director	5
Deputy Director	1
Strategy Director	4
Senior Program Officer	5
Program Officer/Strategy Officer	4
Communications Officer	1

Table 5. *Number of Intermediary Organization and Policy Informants*

Title	Total (N=15)
CEO/President	7
Senior Vice President	2
Managing Director	5
Associate Director	1

### **Qualitative Coding Procedure**

Early on, I decided to conceal my informants' identities to protect against professional backlash and ensure the reliability of the information. Interviews occurred between February 2016 and July 2019. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and lasted 30–90 minutes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interview questions focused on higher education policy advocacy efforts, with an emphasis on college completion. The interview questions built upon a

protocol for a study on K–12 philanthropy and adapted for higher education. I shared the final protocol with an external reviewer who had experience in philanthropy and policy research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During and after each interview, I took notes about the interview, the environment, and future interviewing strategies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Qualitative themes emerged from an inductive analysis of the interview data. After several readings of each interview, I developed thematic categories, comparing them to other interviews to examine whether themes emerged (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Stake, 2005). During this open coding process, I created labels for specific categories and subsequently for subcategories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles et al., 2014). I then created a structural coding scheme in NVivo (2015) to systematically code concepts. I verified and triangulated the interview themes with the 990 tax forms, field notes, interview memos, informal conversations, and annual organizational reports (Miles et al., 2014; Stake, 2005).

### **Limitations**

This study faces three major limitations. First, while the FDO is a widely used resource in philanthropy studies (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018; Kelly & James, 2015), the data is based upon self-reported documents (Foundation Center, 2018). This creates the possibility that some grants are excluded from the database. Therefore, FDO data was cross-referenced with the online databases of two of the largest foundations in the sample—Gates and Kresge. In both instances, searches were limited to higher education and 2014 and compared to the FDO-generated data. According to the Gates (2018) database, 93 grants totaling \$81,667,056 were awarded in their U.S. Programs and Postsecondary Success program. For Kresge, 63 grants totaling \$23,323,500 were directed toward higher education (Kresge, 2018). I discovered a lower discrepancy for

Kresge (\$8,766,724 and 20 grants) when compared to Gates, whose differences were much greater (\$45,405,161 and 10 grants) (Kresge, 2018). However, when I filtered out non-higher education coded purposes, Gates and Kresge's figures were closer to their websites' numbers. Therefore, non-higher education grant purposes were excluded from the trend analysis.

Second, the process of grant coding includes levels of subjectivity. For example, a Lumina grant awarded to Research for Action "to provide rigorous, quantitative analysis of the effects of outcomes-based finance models on student retention and completion in one or more states" could fall under either the policy or college completion category, depending on the coder. To address such limitations, I tested for interrater reliability (Greene, 2015). Another researcher and I independently coded a series of grants and then conducted a Cohen's Kappa test statistic to measure interrater comparability (Landis & Koch, 1977). We received a Kappa score that represents a substantial level of agreement ( $\kappa=0.715$ ,  $P>0.001$ ), suggesting that the coding procedure was consistent.

Lastly, qualitative research on elite officials introduces several hurdles, primarily around acquiring accurate data and accessing networks of influence (Harvey, 2010, 2011; Ostrander, 1995). Therefore, before conducting interviews, I reviewed the elite interviewing literature, which offers strategies for interviewing high-powered officials (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002; Harvey, 2010, 2011). This literature notes that researchers should gain trust, use open-ended questions, and understand that respondents may not always be objective (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002; Berry, 2002). To address these concerns and to ensure trustworthiness (reliability and validity), I preserved the anonymity of informants to minimize potential risks and allow them to be candid (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles et al., 2014). Moreover, I was as transparent as possible, sending IRB forms detailing the goal of this study, sharing research questions, previous

work, and interview questions and, in some cases, making data analysis available (Harvey, 2011).

I also conducted off-the-record conversations with foundation presidents and directors, former Obama officials, executives at university development offices, directors at influential nonprofits and think tanks, and higher education leaders regarding their experiences. I found that these conversations supported many of the descriptions detailed by the interview informants, and they became a form of peer debriefing (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles et al., 2014). In addition, I attended multiple meetings between foundation officials (presidents, directors, program managers, and program officers) and representatives of higher education (faculty members, development staff, and administrators) regarding grant agreements. Together, these discussions and observations informed my interviewing techniques.

In the following two chapters, I investigate the grantmaking strategies of ten major foundations from 2004 to 2014. To address the three research questions, my findings are presented around the following five themes: (1) a growing proportion of grant purposes (investments) being dedicated to high-leverage purposes, with an emphasis on college completion; (2) increasing support for constituencies that challenges the status quo, such as advocacy nonprofits and think tanks; (3) a mounting national strategy based upon network building and collaboration; (4) a reliance on policy networks that facilitate knowledge sharing among grantees; and (5) the influence of elite patronage in shifting the field dynamics of higher education philanthropy.

## CHAPTER 4: SHIFTING GRANTMAKING APPROACHES

In the last decade, philanthropic foundations have risen to prominence in higher education policymaking, with many referencing the newer philanthropists as introducing an advocacy approach to the field (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018; Hall & Thomas, 2012; Kelly & James, 2015). In particular, traditional higher education philanthropy focused on institutional building efforts, such as capital grants, general operating support, and scholarships (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018). In fact, when foundations did engage in policy advocacy, it was subtle. One thought leader stated, "...Foundations haven't been very involved with higher education and on completion from a national perspective for all that long...They were a little bit more focused on more discrete issues..." However, by 2014, major foundations were "more strategic" and decidedly "more focused" on policymaking, as the same source explained.

### **High-leverage Grantmaking**

Contemporary philanthropists are concerned less with building the capacity of higher education than with employing high-leverage strategy linked to systemic reform. Referring to an interview with an executive in higher education, one informant discussed this shift: "There was a period in which foundations were involved in institution building in one form or another because that's how capacity was going to be created. I would say there is a dramatic change in that regard." The same informant noted that many older funders, such as Kresge, "...used to fund capital projects, bricks and mortar projects in nonprofits and in of a lot of colleges and universities," or what can be described as a low-leverage form of grantmaking (Greene, 2005, 2015). Low-leverage grants permit universities and colleges to engage in their traditional activities, producing more higher education (Kelly & James, 2015). These types of investments include capital grants, general operating support, and scholarships.

In contrast, high-leverage investments seek to alter or change educational systems (Greene, 2005, 2015; Kelly & James, 2015). High-leverage grantmaking is a strategic form of philanthropy that seeks to produce the greatest return on investment, where funders “have a very specific point of view of what we’re trying to achieve with that work...,” as one foundation source described it. Compared to traditional forms of higher education philanthropy, “They see it as an opportunity to get higher leverage of return on philanthropic support...and bring [in] more resources to solve the problem,” as one policy informant contends. This can be done by supporting constituencies advocating for alternative policies, shaping public or elite opinion, or influencing the flow of public expenditures—in this case, state funding (Greene, 2005, 2015; Kelly & James, 2015). One foundation leader described their organization’s high-leverage strategy in the following manner: “You also need to look at the role that states have in terms of their funding of institutions, their oversight in accountability systems, and their regulatory powers.” Other informants echoed this interpretation. One leader from a national advocacy group focused on completion stated, “If you only focused at the institution level and tried to have reform, you can do a lot of good things, but inevitably, institutions that are going to bump up against either federal or state policies that can end up limiting what they can do.” Accordingly, these high-leverage purposes include policy advocacy and technology and innovation grants that are intended to push the needle on completion through policy and systemic reform (Kelly & James, 2015).

I assess this empirically by examining funding purposes from 2004 to 2014, limiting my analysis to capital projects, general operating support, and scholarships. In particular, I was primarily interested in the strategic shifts that occurred when the college completion agenda was first introduced in 2009. The grant analysis reveals that the most prominent change to occur was

a decline in the proportion of capital projects and scholarship funding. As illustrated in Figure 4, capital projects represented nearly 18 percent of higher education directed grants in 2004 and peaked in 2006 (24 percent). Capital grant projects began to decline in 2008 (19.6 percent), ultimately representing less than four percent in 2014. In contrast to 2004, capital grants no longer represented a significant portion of aggregated budgets. In 2004, scholarships represented nearly 11 percent of total higher education grants. Scholarship investments began to decline in 2006 (5.5%), and by 2008, scholarships hovered just over three percent. There was a slight uptick in 2012 (5%), followed by a decrease in 2014, to less than one percent. Spending for general operating support mirrored these trends; for example, in 2004, nearly 15 percent of grants were allocated for general operating support. By 2008, this decreased to six percent, with a slight uptick in 2014, when it represented nearly 14 percent of aggregated higher education budgets.

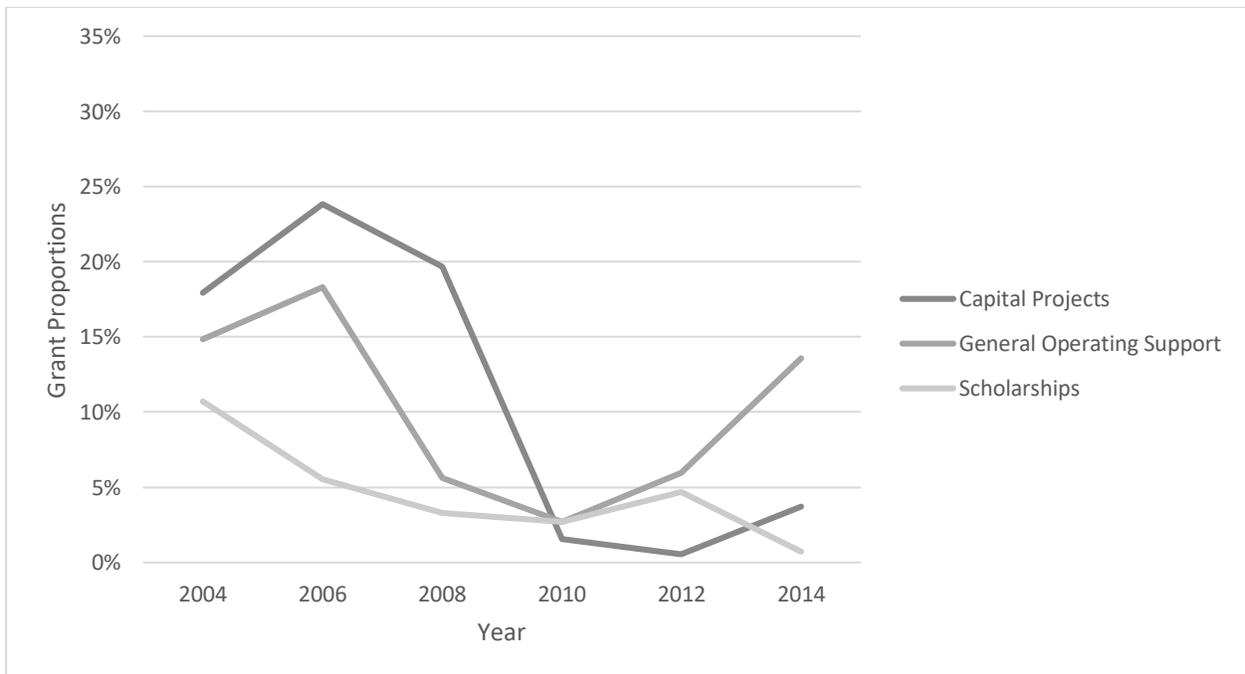


Figure 4. *Low-leverage investments.*

I also wished to compare the trends between low- and high-leverage investments (Kelly & James, 2015). One of the most obvious findings was the prevalence of high-leverage grants for systemic reform. Overall, I found an inverse relationship between the two philanthropic granting strategies. In particular, I analyzed the proportion of higher education grants directed toward policy advocacy and technology and innovation purposes. For example, I found that prior to 2008, policy advocacy grants comprised a smaller portion of total grants. However, by 2010, policy advocacy grants represented a greater share of overall budgets. In 2004, policy advocacy grants represent only 11 percent of postsecondary budgets, but by 2010, this had increased to 30 percent (see Figure 5).

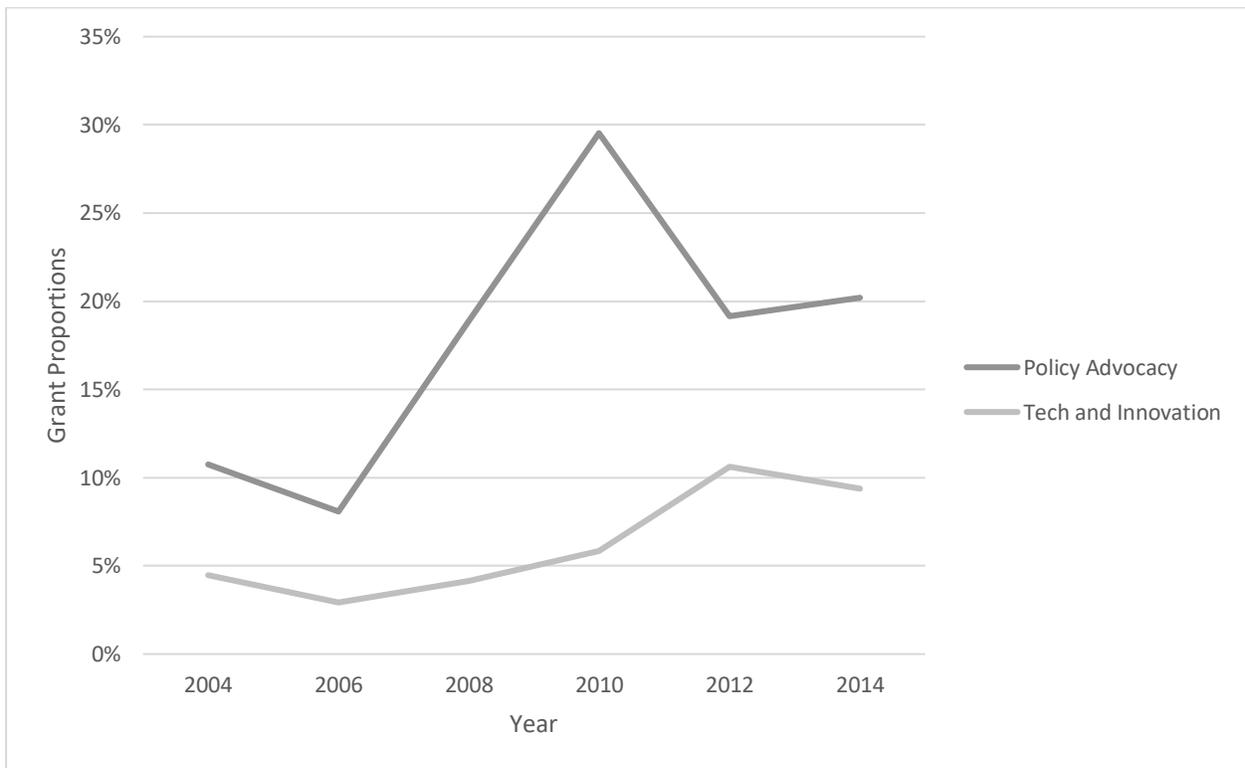


Figure 5. *High-leverage investments.*

I identified a similar trend occurring with technology and innovation purposes. Technology and innovation grants are projects designed to pilot and diffuse reform models from

one college to another. Several interviewees asserted that such grants allow foundations to promote best practices across several institutions, or, as one foundation source described it, “trying to mainstream that [innovation] across the entire network of institutions.” Initially, in 2004, technology and innovation grant purposes represented only 4.5 percent of total higher education budgets, with a slight decline in 2006 (3%). However, in 2012, these sorts of investments peaked at 11 percent (see Figure 5). By 2014, technology and innovation grant purposes represented nearly ten percent of total budgets.

Overall, rather than targeting investments for capital projects or general operating support, grant analysis demonstrates that over the span of a decade, more foundations began concentrating efforts on programmatic (high-leverage) projects intended to influence policy and diffuse reforms. Informants confirm this shift in strategy: “Some people think that the higher ed infrastructure is overbuilt, I’m not sure that’s true. But we no longer see foundations investing routinely in building up the capacity of higher ed institutions.” One foundation leader explained their strategy by noting that the majority of their work focuses on grants that will impact institutions: “I would say that 80 percent of our work, of our dollars...is on the ground, programmatic, in what I would call at the programmatic level.” Several philanthropy sources echoed this sentiment, stating,

We don’t actually give grants for direct services. If you said I want to evaluate this and write a best practice guide for other colleges, that would be something we’re interested in, but we don’t actually give people grants to do direct services the same way we don’t give up scholarship [funding].

Indeed, interview data supports the notion that funding agencies are shifting from the traditional form of educational philanthropy, such as capacity building and funding single initiatives, to

high-leverage forms of grantmaking linked to policy advocacy and reform. One leader in philanthropy, who regularly collaborates with both Lumina and Gates, described how their organization changed over the years:

I would say 2011-ish, a lot of our funding was focused on specific initiatives, so for example emergency aid programs or internship programs where we really focused on helping an institution build their capacity around a single initiative, like emergency aid. What we learned very quickly is that sort of focus on working directly with let's say student support services often didn't prove effective, because there were so many other touch points within an institution that needed to be made and needed to be coordinated in order for the initiative to be successful. ...So, we've made a pretty strategic and intentional shift away from grants really that are focusing on an initiative, and more on focusing on where an initiative might fit within an organization or an institutions overall strategy related to student success....

This notion of major funding agencies shifting their internal strategies was a reoccurring theme in the interviews. One leader at a national organization involved in college completion reform concurred with this overall trend, stating,

A lot of the philanthropic investment before was focused more on things like creating scholarship opportunities. I think now you see more investments in the institutions themselves in trying to build up the capacity within Higher Ed institutions to do things that are student-focused and that are going to support students. Maybe less investment in brick and mortar and more investment in developing data capacity, developing leadership capacity, developing faculty, awareness and capacity to lead reform efforts.

In fact, many informants argued that this new strategic approach is an effective form of philanthropy. One source, an elected official working closely with major foundations on postsecondary reform, referenced this strategic shift as more impactful: “I think they’re becoming more effective. They’re moving away from the historic practices of funding the kind of a ‘fund model,’ and moving toward pilot programs, with the hope that they’ll be picked up by policymakers.”

Overall, these strategies are intended to promote greater alignment around completion, particularly among policymakers: “They’re finding more things that will be more effective and trying to shape the policymaking environment and shape what policymakers choose to focus on, you know, governors, legislators,” as the same informant explained. Moreover, these investments can target both “the state and federal levels” with the goal of shaping “how money [is] flowing to the institution” through “federal financial aid and other entitlement funds,” as one foundation source stated. As such, major foundations are investing in policy advocacy and completion purposes to create “enabling environments that encourage colleges to adopt those solutions,” as the same respondent reported.

### **College Completion Investments**

Consistent with my initial expectations, the policy priority of college completion dominates contemporary higher education philanthropy. Several informants noted that the field of philanthropy has adopted similar completion goals as have Gates and Lumina (e.g., Haddad & Reckhow, 2018), although not as explicitly. One interviewee, a high-level official from an advocacy organization, summarized this sentiment:

I think that there are some foundations that are doing work, that are I wouldn’t say completions goals, but really it is inherent in what they’re talking about. So, you know,

organizations that have a little bit more of a focus on workforce, foundations like Kresge, Skillman and that have a little bit more of like place-based focused and a little bit more of a workforce-focused. They're still really talking about completion because they want people to be enrolling in and finishing programs.

A similar perspective was shared by a number of sources, who suggested that several foundations have “gone with the trend of...completion.” However, one foundation official pushed back against this notion, arguing that “not every funder, of course, has anything to do with higher education. Not every high education funder works squarely on completion and not every funder who looks at completion will look at it the same way as we do...”

Moreover, I was interested in examining the prevalence of completion-related purposes across foundations in the sample. Thus, I filtered grant data for college completion-related purposes (see Figure 6). Through a grant analysis, I have found that completion has been the most salient issue underlining grantmaking strategies across all funders, particularly since 2009. Grant data, as illustrated in Figure 6, reveals that since 2008, many funders have adopted goals of completion in one form or another. For example, in 2004, completion was an important strategic priority among major foundations, representing 35 percent of higher education grants. Although this was substantial, a considerable increase occurred in 2010, where completion grants represented over half (52%) of aggregated budgets. Even later, in 2014, completion-related purposes remained consistent across all funders, representing 47 percent of total funding purposes.

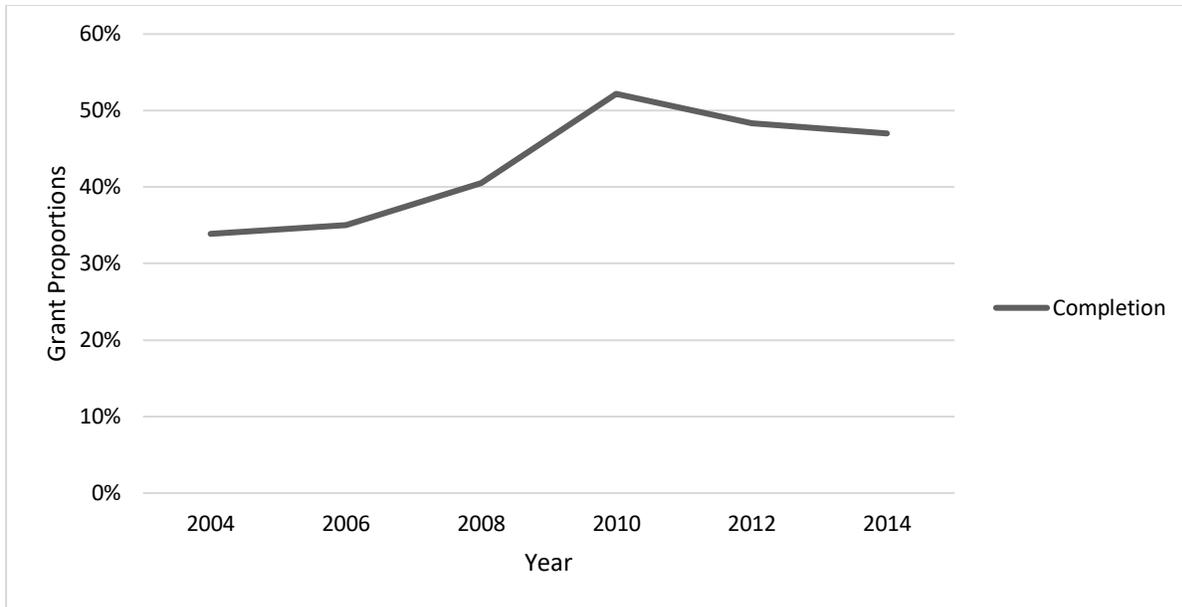


Figure 6. *College completion investments.*

I have also found that college completion grants greatly overlap with policy grants. An illustrative example is a 2014 grant to the Urban Institute “to refine existing and develop new policy options with the central goals of simplifying the student aid system and promoting the success of adult students” (2014, \$275,000). One foundation official described this nuance: “We think that policy is key to making progress toward attainment because there are many policies in place actually going to hinder who has been able to make progress toward attaining a high quality of degree...” Therefore, I decided to place grants intended to promote completion through policy in the completion category, since the intention was to promote attainment.

It is clear that grantmaking strategies are converging toward completion. Overall, grant data analysis indicates that grantmakers are dedicating a larger share of their investments to completion-related purposes (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018). One source, a thought leader at a prominent think tank, argued that the overall field of higher education philanthropy is converging around the attainment agenda: “...I definitely think they’ve certainly gone with the trend of, you know more focused on completion, more focused on system change—so institutional design

structures of college.” Certainly, these findings demonstrate that the field dynamics in higher education have shifted toward completion.

### **Multiple Constituencies—Increased Reliance on Intermediaries**

According to Hall and Thomas (2012), “Policy organizations play an important role in adding the technical expertise, people connections, and overall legitimacy needed to advance and implement foundation strategies” (p. 19). I found similar themes in the interview data. For example, several interviewees from philanthropy cited the importance of intermediaries in advancing their agendas. One foundation official explained their relationship with intermediaries, stating, “We work with—what we call intermediary organizations—that work directly with colleges and universities, sometimes work with policymakers to translate research into action.” Another foundation leader also referenced the importance of intermediaries to their internal strategies: “Most of our grants are either to higher education institutions, or to researchers, or to intermediaries that support those two groups.”

Foundations work with several intermediary types, depending on their goals. As the same foundation official stated, “I would probably suggest that there’s a taxonomy of partners.” This includes advocacy organizations, think tanks, membership organizations, government agencies, media outlets, and even for-profit firms (Kelly & James, 2015; Miller & Morpew, 2017; Ness & Gándara, 2014). One respondent described this diversity in the following manner: “That array of stakeholders can be other foundations, it can be other grantees. It can be policymakers, and so then we think about based on what we have learned and based on this group, who could enact, and actuality deliver on a body of work...” Another interviewee, a think tank informant and thought leader in the field, made similar comments, noting, “I mean, they fund a wide range of

things, they fund progressive organizations, they fund more conservative organizations, they fund schools, they fund nonprofits...”

I was primarily interested in exploring the amount of funding directed to intermediaries over time. Hence, by relying on the grant dataset, I calculated the proportion of grants dedicated to intermediaries. Overall, grant analysis reveals that intermediary-directed funding increased proportionally over the course of a decade. As illustrated in Table 6, in 2004, 19 percent of grant dollars were directed toward intermediaries (entities that are not colleges or universities). I also identified an uptick in 2008 representing 27 percent of higher education directed dollars. Intermediary investments would peak in 2010—at nearly 40 percent—eventually leveling out to just below 30 percent in 2014 (see Table 6).

*Table 6. Statistical Trends of Intermediary Grants*

	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014
Intermediary-directed Grants	19%	24%	27%	38%	31%	27%

*Notes.* Grants extracted and analyzed using the Foundation Center Directory Online. Includes advocacy organizations, research centers, for-profit firms, membership entities, media outlets, and government agencies.

For many philanthropic respondents, intermediaries who have “policy roles or advocacy roles or research and evaluation roles” are central to their advocacy efforts. This also includes membership “associations” that can “act as intermediaries between large bodies of the people that they represent...” In some instances, respondents reported that several foundations targeted organizations that aligned with their policy agendas, irrespective of partisanship. One foundation source explained, “Our federal policy priorities are about making sure that we continue to offer non-partisan expertise on issues and also that we continue to educate policymakers, health staff, especially but generally on higher education attainment and higher education attainment

agenda...” In fact, several philanthropy interviewees noted that their foundations fund both liberal and conservative groups: “I can’t think of a think-tank on the right or the left or wherever, in DC, that is actually interested in the goal of access and success probably that we haven’t funded—we funded Brookings, we funded Urban, we funded America, we funded CAP, we funded AEI.” For many philanthropy officials, they “actually try to fund across the ideological sector” where “the dividing thing is, ‘are they interested in work that we are interested in?’”

Accordingly, I wished to extend the trend analysis of intermediaries by investigating the types of organizations philanthropists supported in 2014. To do so, I created a directional affiliation graph (see Figure 7) to examine funding relationships across foundations (Ferrare & Reynolds, 2016). Thicker ties denote a larger quantity of grants, not grant amounts. The size of the nodes represents the number of investments received and distributed for 2014. Red circles denote organizational types, and blue squares represent individual foundations.

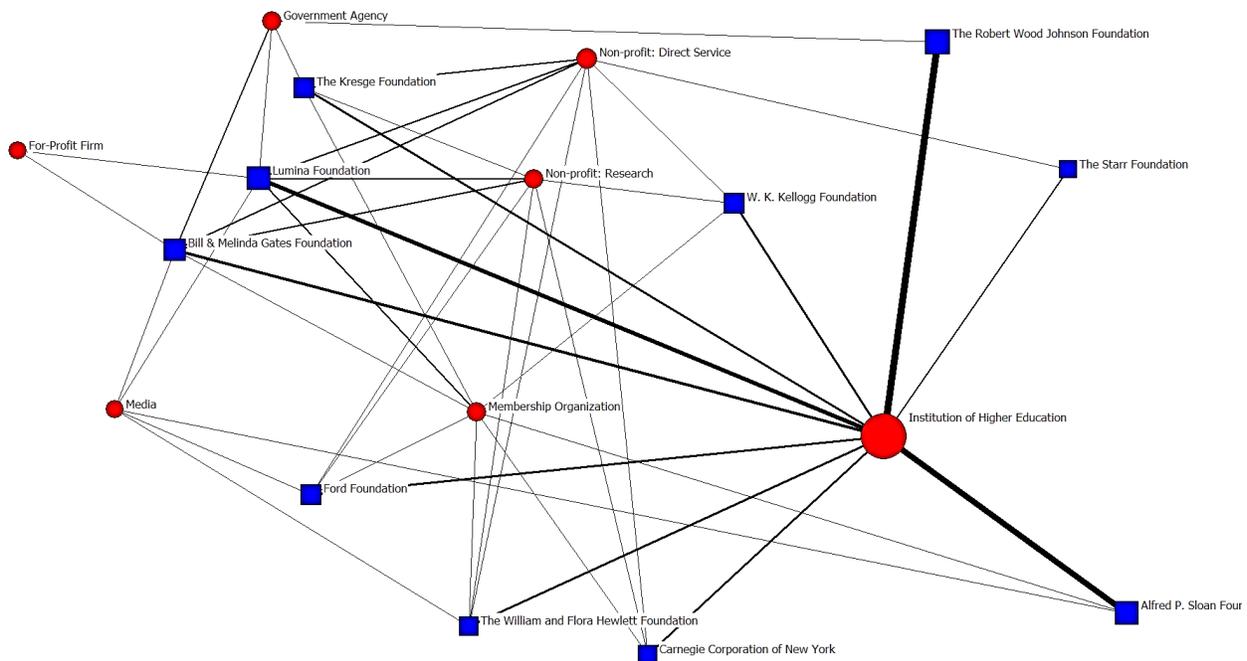


Figure 7. 2014 directed funding network.

As illustrated in Figure 7, the majority of grants flow toward colleges and universities, particularly among the older foundations, such as the Alfred Sloan Foundation, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the Starr Foundation. For the advocacy philanthropists (Gates and Lumina), including Kresge, these funders are still clustered together. While all three foundations are investing in traditional higher education organizations, such as colleges and universities, they also fund a diverse group of organizational types, such as Nonprofit: Direct Service (educational nonprofits), membership organizations, media, government agencies, Nonprofit: Research (think tanks), and even for-profit firms (see Figure 7).

During the interviews, I was interested in examining why major foundations choose to partner with intermediaries in the first place. Thus, for each foundation official I spoke to, I asked about their motivations behind this grantmaking strategy. Several philanthropy sources responded by highlighting a “triangulation strategy.” In particular, funders supported a diverse group of policy actors that can influence the higher education “ecosystem” in a number of ways. According to one Gates source,

So it really runs the gamut and we have to do that because when you are looking at the scale of impact that we are hoping to have, or at least catalyze through our work, you kinda have to triangulate it in a lot of different ways and that includes constituency-based and non-constituency based organizations.

In fact, various foundation officials cited similar granting strategies. As one source from an older foundation explained, “I’d say we have multiple approaches there. It’s not one particular approach... We want strategy.” Informants stressed the importance of partnering with organizations “that have a large footprint,” as the same respondent contended. One philanthropy source stated,

So statewide organizations that touch an entire state, organizations that touch a region, organizations that touch multiple institutions at one time, organizations that have a broad and deep capacity for telling the story of the work that they do. We tend not to partner just one institution at a time, or one community at a time, or an entity that has a narrow reach. We want entity organizations that have a broad reach.

Moreover, I found that several foundation officials rely on IOs to target policymakers through policy associations. One respondent stated,

...I think that we would see it as being used as really informing some of our key partners that really serve policymakers. So, if you look at like a national governor’s association or national conference of state legislators or education commission of the state, that it feeds back into how they present these issues to policymakers in their process of educating them and raising their awareness about what ‘good looks like.’

From this perspective, I wished to extend the interview themes highlighted above. Therefore, I drew upon the grant dataset to examine the proportion of completion and policy advocacy grants (and therefore, social agendas) directed to IOs (see Table 7). In particular, I wished to examine how funding priorities for intermediaries have changed over time.

*Table 7. Grant Purposes Directed to Intermediaries*

	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014
Completion	64%	68%	60%	55%	47%	61%
Policy Advocacy	26%	14%	29%	39%	29%	28%

*Notes.* Grants extracted and analyzed using the Foundation Center Directory Online. Grants only include investments to intermediaries (filtering higher education institutions out of the analysis).

Direct and research grants are collapsed.

I found that a majority of grants directed to intermediaries across all years fall within the college completion bucket. For example, in 2004, completion represented 64 percent of intermediary grant purposes. This increased in 2006 (68%) following a 20-percentage point dip in 2012 (47%). By 2014, completion denoted over 60 percent of total postsecondary grants. Similarly, policy advocacy grants also represented a significant portion of postsecondary funding, with a similar spike after the completion agenda was first introduced. For example, in 2006, policy advocacy purposes represented only 14 percent of overall intermediary-directed budgets. By 2010, these purposes increased to nearly 40 percent, eventually leveling out to just below 30 percent in 2014.

### **Intermediary Research Grants and Think Tanks**

The existing literature on higher education philanthropy provides evidence that foundations rely on research to influence policy (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018; Miller & Morphew, 2017; Ness & Gándara, 2014). To further explore this issue, I asked informants about the expectations of how research would be used. In several cases, a high frequency of informants described a general expectation that research would be used to impact or inform public policy. In particular, several philanthropy staff members contended that research is central for advancing their policy preferences, described by one foundation leader as “more action-oriented research.” In fact, research grants are very significant to philanthropists, with one foundation source noting, “I probably do a sizable amount of grant work with researchers.” Several sources shared the view that they “are not supporting or funding research that is going to sit on a shelf or reside in an academic journal.” Rather, they are supporting research that fulfills “the primary purpose...to inform some aspects of the postsecondary attainment agenda,” as this philanthropy leader explained. In addition, many policy informants cited the centrality of elite patronage in policy

research. One respondent who has conducted extensive work with major funders noted, “A lot of the research and policy development has been funded by philanthropy, and that certainly the case here in [redacted], as well where our funders have been funding our efforts.”

For many foundation leaders, think tanks are central partners in promoting a common set of ideas and policies. Researchers provide the “intellectual muscle” around specific policy proposals and recommendations. As one philanthropic source stated,

We also worked with policy partners, New America, Center for American Progress, American Enterprise Institute, which are, you know, think tanks in a way, right? Which are, which have a verbal in higher education and they’re...you know, the Urban Institute... they’re the kinds of folks who are kind of, the analysts. They’re looking at different policy options, they are evaluating the implications of various – Institute of Education Policy, IHAP – so they’re kind of the intellectual muscle and analyst that you know you begin to use to test really good, to test different policy options and what their implications would be with respect to cost and benefits.

Furthermore, several grantees expressed “unspoken rules” regarding policy-related research grants, where “some expectation[s] that research will be used for advocacy” exist. One interviewee, a director at a leading think tank, noted that “a very explicit expectation” exists that research “will be picked up by policymakers and turned into federal legislation.” Research grants are intended to not only be picked up by policymakers but also challenge the status quo. One foundation source stated,

We also work with groups that don’t have or aren’t dedicated to particular constituencies. Why? Because the limitation of constituency-based groups is sometimes that they are not in the position to speak truth because their members don’t always want to hear it. So, we

fund think tanks, we fund the Center for American Progress, we fund the American Enterprise Institute, we fund New America, because they help throw ideas into the mix that perhaps others can't.

To systematically investigate research related funding, I examined the proportion of research grants directed to intermediaries from 2004 to 2014. This analysis demonstrates that research grants intended to influence policy are a high priority. In particular, in 2004 and 2006, research funding represented 21 and 26 percent of intermediary portfolios, respectively. My analysis also identified an uptick in 2008, representing over 40 percent of total grant purposes. Overall, these figures leveled out in 2010 and 2012, at 26 and 27 percent, respectively. Table 8 outlines this issue:

Table 8. *Research Grants Directed to Intermediaries*

	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014
Research	21%	26%	43%	26%	27%	28%

*Notes.* Grants extracted and analyzing using the Foundation Center Directory Online. Grants only include investments to IOs (filtering higher education institutions out of the analysis).

Critics suggest that this form of grantmaking mirrors political lobbying. In Scott Thomas's (2013) assessment, this is "...an intrusion into the public sphere more directly that has not been seen before...That's an interesting position, for a nonprofit to be involved in things that look a lot like lobbying" (Pullman, 2013, p. 163). Private foundations cannot legally lobby (Zunz, 2012). However, distinctions exist between lobbying and foundation advocacy. For example, foundations are permitted to educate policymakers on key issues. One philanthropy source explained that his foundation intends to educate policymakers and raise "their awareness about what 'good looks like.'" Indeed, several philanthropic sources pushed back on the idea that

foundations are lobbying, with one arguing that "...we don't lobby because we can't lobby." The same informant went further, describing the following dynamic:

Lobbying is asking people to go for or asking members of Congress or people to support a specific bill, right? That is, Marco Rubio has this bill on college transparency and you should support Marco Rubio and call your Congressman and after that, just vote for that. We do not do that. We don't anything like that. We don't help people write their bills. We have a sense about what we're going to do... If somebody says, 'well what are the things that we should care about?' We say, well, research shows that if you help decrease the net price which in college parents are more likely to see, and to see it and we can tell people what net price is, and we can inform that. We like to use independent research and analysis.

According to K–12 researchers, legislative output is not a leading concern for foundations (Tompkins-Stange, 2016). Rather, philanthropists seek to influence practices in education. Intermediary entities provide foundations a forum to test and pilot innovations before bringing them to scale, with the intent of promoting systemic change (Hall & Thomas, 2012). More importantly, IOs are integral in bridging the policy–research divide regarding best practices (Ness, 2010; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997).

### **Government Partnerships**

Through the grant analysis and in-depth interviews, I found that major foundations are increasingly partnering with government agencies, particularly in states without higher education coordinating boards. This Lumina grant to the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education provides is an illustrative example of such an agreement: "To serve as an intermediary organization for Lumina's Adult Degree Completion program for a mechanism for effective

networking, communication, and dissemination” (2014, \$600,000). Indeed, informants highlighted that during times of public austerity, officials regard philanthropy as an alternative revenue source to launch programs and initiatives. Foundations also allow policymakers to bypass traditional government bureaucracies that may slow projects down. One informant with experience in both state policymaking and nonprofit advocacy describes this relationship:

So, when the governor needs something, it's hard to get funding out of the legislator for every specific project and sometimes you just need a little bit of money. You don't want to go through the whole appropriations process for just you know a relatively small amount of money. Being able to call on the foundations to say, 'here's what I need' and making that happen, is a beautiful thing.

Thus, during times of political gridlock, government officials can launch new programs or initiatives with philanthropic support. Nevertheless, informants highlighted that this is a “two-way street.” In particular, such relationships provide philanthropists an “ear” to government officials, “where they can have the influence to say, ‘here are the things that are top of our mind, here are our priorities, things that we really need you to work on at a policy mechanism level...,’” as one source notes.

As I analyzed interview data regarding government partnerships, I was also interested in the grant amounts directed to government agencies over time. Therefore, to extend the interview findings, I drew upon the grant dataset to examine grant dollars to government agencies from 2004 to 2014, and I identified a growing trend in government and philanthropic partnerships. In particular, in 2004, government-directed funding only comprised \$1.9 million. However, this peaked in 2006 at \$31 million, leveling out to just below \$16 million in 2014. Table 9 illustrates this issue:

Table 9. *Grants Directed to Government Agencies*

	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014
Government Grants \$	\$1.9m	\$31m	\$7m	\$13.5m	\$22.7m	\$15.5m

*Notes.* Grants extracted and analyzed using the Foundation Center Directory Online.

From this context, policy informants note that some funders work “really closely with policymakers at the governor’s office, the legislature, state agencies...” to “mobilize these people that need to move on these issues...strategically,” as one elected official shared. This can materialize in a few ways. For example, I found instances where foundations financed entire positions dedicated to brokering relationships between philanthropists and state agencies. One source with direct knowledge of this process stated,

... when I was working for governor [redacted], I worked with the office of foundation liaison to connect the thoughts we were starting to have around what could become ...a college access strategy. In general, two foundations that would be interested, and Kresge was one, that like immediately said this is our sweet spot and so they linked us up and then we’ve just been working really closely together ever since. They gave [redacted, non-profit] some start-up funding when we were just getting started to work on helping to develop [redacted] which is our core strategy, helping establish these local college access networks very similar to what I described that Lumina did but within [redacted, the state referred].

Such relationships provide direct links between philanthropists and government agencies. As this same source explained, this connects the “priorities and agendas” of philanthropy to those of government. One source from a membership organization confirmed this affiliation, noting that “a lot of our policy work is done with the Office of Foundation of Liaison...and actually has it [policy work] recognized by the state government.” Hence, by working with government

officials, foundation-led programs are legitimized to the rest of the policy and higher education communities.

### **Informal Policy Associations and State-level Field Building Projects**

Beyond working directly with governments agencies, foundations also support informal policy groups. In particular, several policy informants credited philanthropy for investing in membership organizations, affinity groups, and state-based student success initiatives. Many of these entities are supported by major philanthropists through their active membership or their investments. In several cases, these informal groups allow foundations to align state and institutional leaders around specific priorities and goals. One informant stated, “There’s a variety of those networks, the affinity groups that have been supported by philanthropy that help states and some cases individual institutions within the states or between the numbers of states to improve their performance.” The same informant noted that this can occur nationally: “Lumina is working with the national government association to facilitate a state network of states committed to higher education attainment overall and setting a goal.” This interviewee, an elected state official who leads a higher education affinity group, described his leadership role in the following manner:

....more recently, I helped bring together similar stakeholders to stash in in an updated blueprint for higher education attainment which you referenced, the [redacted] report so, I use my role as the [elected official] to try to promote policies and practices that increase higher education attainment for more people and support policy legislative budgets and institutional changes that help promote that ideal.

Often, these informal groups include influential political and economic elites who can provide input on policy proposals for higher education. For example, the same official shared that his

group includes “two legislators, and...the government’s office...” in addition to “institutional and business leaders.” When I asked why this affinity group was created, this informant responded with the following questions: “How do you brief the legislatures...? How do you get these allies from the business and the larger community for particular legislative changes?” Stated simply, these affinity groups are intended to mobilize diverse coalition around specific policy priorities by providing input and creating buy-in in the process. One informant, a leader at a membership association who is also part of this affinity group, noted that “it’s voluntary,” but at times, they “...felt some repeated kind of nudges or people kind of exploring whether or not we can formalize things.”

Foundations also launch statewide associations and initiatives that promote completion-based policies, particularly in states without higher education coordinating bodies. One national leader at a completion organization stated,

Jobs for the Future is also another organization that's been doing a lot of work at the policy level. Right now, you may be very familiar with what they're doing, but they are supporting the growth of student success centers which Kresge has been investing heavily in. In states where there's not a strong State Department on research base, they've been helping to create student success center offices, where there can be a presence inside the state that can both advocate for policy change that would help more students be successful as well as support spread of best practice. And working with individual colleges and institutions in that state to do things that have been shown ... Through research and through practice, have been shown to be effective.

Indeed, several informants credit Kresge for creating a state-based infrastructure around student success in places such as Michigan, one of its focus states. One example is a \$100,000 Kresge

grant to Jobs for the Future meant “to provide technical assistance and strategic support to Student Success Centers in up to seven states.” One staff member, a VP at a leading membership organization, explains this dynamic:

The Kresge Foundation, actually that’s one of their major program goals is that they believe it’s critical to raise a credentialing of students in Michigan to grow the number who have higher Ed credentials i.e., a college education. So, they actually created, or funded the creation of the Michigan College Access Network and all of the local College Access Network infrastructure across Michigan. They continue to fund them. ...So they’re supporting infrastructure to help get more students in higher Ed so they would also tend to be worth looking at the programs and the supporting program such as increasing staff by completion so that more students can get aid in order to be able to go to universities.

In fact, foundations such as Kresge are important field builders around college completion, particularly in states that lack formal postsecondary regulatory agencies. One Kresge official highlighted their involvement in creating Student Success Centers across Michigan:

...the student success centers came about out of this concern in Michigan, where there is no state higher education authority....And so, we thought if we can create an entity that would have this as a subset, some members of the association, it could advocate for pushing policies that it thought were more effective for student success. And the association could focus on the association needs, and that’s how they began. So, we now have them all over the country and we are working with the Gates Foundation to have expanded them.

Although several of these interviewees referenced Michigan, a leader at one membership organization noted, “Kresge has been funding Centers for Student Success all around the country

for years, primarily community colleges because of that sector’s abysmal graduation rates.”

Overall, such system-wide initiatives do not hold legislative authority over higher education governance; however, they do have convening power to share best practices and lessons among members, who are typically postsecondary institutions and policy leaders. Overall, foundations have worked with grantees to influence state and federal policy through field-building projects. Philanthropists have launched advocacy organizations dedicated to similar agendas, forged strategic partnerships across the sector, and sponsored policy-oriented research.

## CHAPTER 5: NETWORKED COALITIONS AND INFORMATION SHARING

College completion coalitions are sustained in large part by the patronage of major foundations. A growing number of foundations employ strategies to promote educational reform by funding networked coalitions (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018). Likewise, interviewees cited philanthropy as central in national network-building efforts around completion. One policy official commented that “there have been a lot of interest from philanthropy, from the policy community, in supporting networks nationally...in regard to closing education gaps...” Similarly, foundation sources revealed that networks allow major funders to align diverse coalitions around singular issues. One source explained, “...so the high-level leaders from K–12, higher ed, business, philanthropy, the nonprofit sector and the government get together in the same room around one table to look at data, to define goals, to select priority areas, and to align each other’s resources around those goals...” When I asked one philanthropy leader the question, “Is there an increasing trend toward collaborative work in higher education philanthropy,” she responded, “I would say absolutely, yes. Absolutely I believe so. Certainly, looking at our portfolio, we are doing much more in collaboration with others in that the nature, and the form of that collaboration I think has actually also changed over the last five years.”

To empirically assess collaborative grantmaking among foundations, I relied upon the 990 tax form data and constructed two affiliation network diagrams of foundation-funded grantees—one for 2004 and one for 2014. Figure 8 represents the shared grantee network in 2004, and Figure 9 represents 2014. All grantee recipients are intermediaries and have received grants from at least two funders and at least \$600,000 in investments. The 2014 grantee network was much larger than 2004 network; in particular, for 2004, the grantee network represented nearly \$30 million in postsecondary funding, while the 2014 network represented nearly \$60

million. Moreover, in 2004, less shared granting activity occurred than in 2014, with the majority of cofunding directed toward intermediaries that provide low-leverage investments such as scholarships. In particular, entities such as the United Negro College Fund, the Hispanic Scholarship Fund, and the Thurgood Marshall College Fund all shared more than two funders in 2004 (see Figure 8). Very few advocacy or research entities were represented in the 2004 network, other than MDRC, the Higher Education Policy Institute, and CFAT. Moreover, many organizations represented are traditional representatives of higher education, such as the American Association of Community Colleges and the Council for Aid to Education.

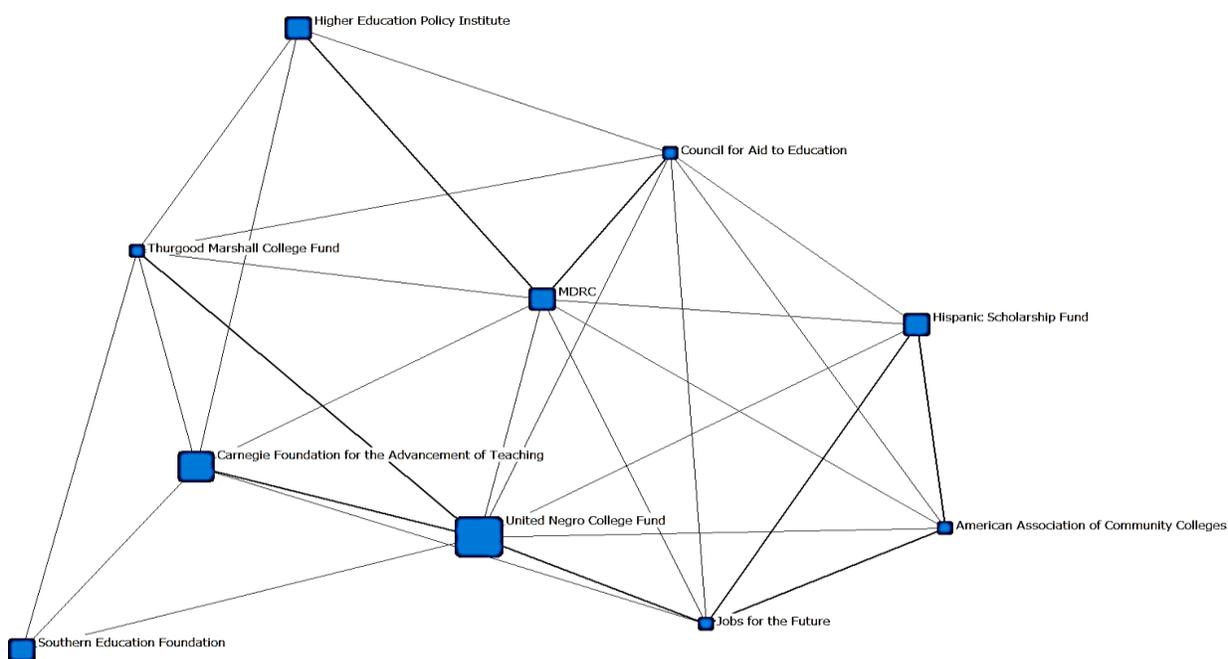


Figure 8. 2004 *Philanthropic-sponsored intermediary organization network*.

In contrast, the 2014 grantee network was denser and included greater convergent grantmaking. Many reform-oriented entities tied to completion were also represented (see Figure 9). For example, advocacy groups such as Achieving the Dream, Complete College America, and the Gateway to College National Network all received funding from multiple funders (see

Figure 9). In addition, more research centers were represented, such as the Center for American Progress, the New America Foundation, and EDUCAUSE. While traditional higher education entities were also involved (American Council on Education), I found that foundations have increasingly cofunded entities engaged in educational reform.

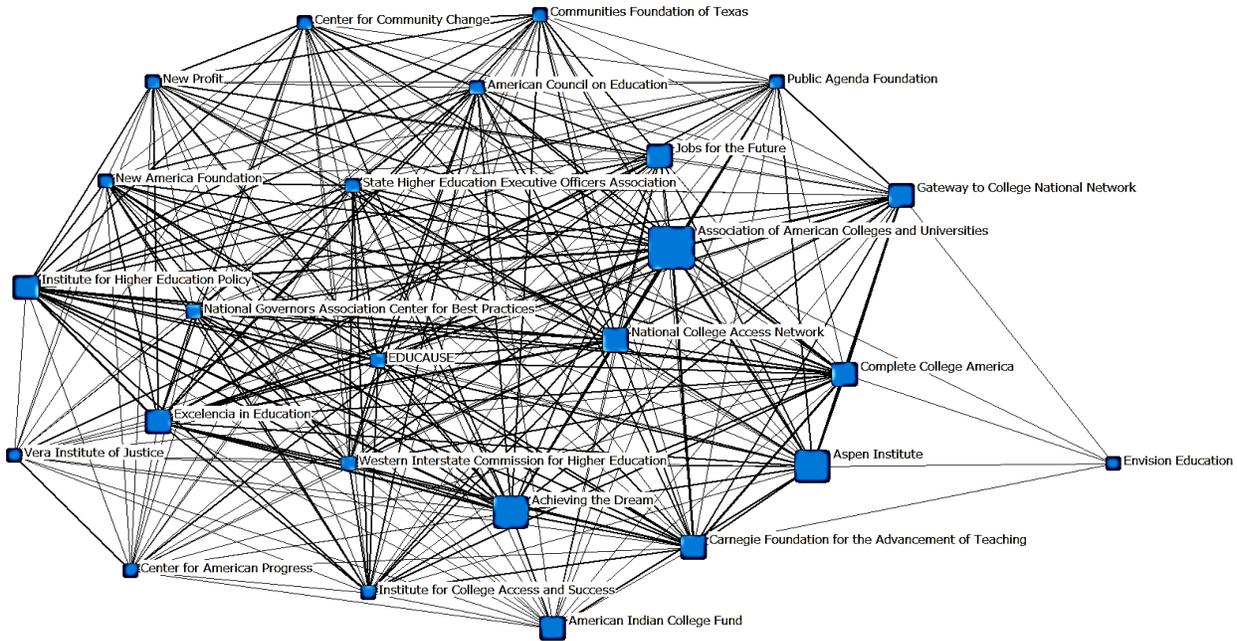


Figure 9. 2014 philanthropic-sponsored intermediary organization network.

I calculated information centrality for the denser network, as ranked in Table 10 (Stephenson & Zelen, 1989). The most central IOs are the Association of American Colleges and Universities (19.32), Achieving the Dream (18.72), Excelencia in Education (18.57), National College Access network (18.57), Institute for Higher Education Policy (118.57), and Complete College America (17.7) (see Table 10). Many of these entities are active in promoting completion.

Table 10. *Information Centrality Measures, Figure 9*

Intermediary	Centrality Measure
Association of American Colleges and Universities	19.32
Achieving the Dream	18.72
Excelencia in Education	18.57
National College Access Network	18.57
Institute for Higher Education Policy	18.57
Complete College America	17.7
Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching	17.7
Aspen Institute	16.96
Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education	16.7
EDUCAUSE	16.7
American Council on Education	16.7
Institute for College Access and Success	16.7
State Higher Education Executive Officers Association	16.7
New America Foundation	16.7
National Governors Association Center for Best Practices	16.7
Jobs for the Future	16.28
Gateway to College National Network	16.09
Communities Foundation of Texas	15.36
Center for Community Change	15.36
New Profit	15.36
Public Agenda Foundation	14.85

Table 10. (cont'd)

Center for American Progress	13.42
Vera Institute of Justice	13.42
American Indian College Fund	13.11
Envision Education	4.5

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*Notes.* Mean=16.029. Standard Deviation=2.863. Grants extracted and analyzing using the Foundation Center Directory Online. Grants analyzed are filtered for “higher education.”

### **Purposeful Collaboration**

Overall, I found a rise in philanthropic collaborations at the national level, with many leading funders enrolling other foundations in similar field-building projects. “Kresge foundation is very influential in getting other foundations to invest in ways that they see as important. I think Lumina is very influential. Kresge, Lumina, Casey and others tend to be good collaborators and they are willing to co-invest in things,” as one leader at a national advocacy group stated. Moreover, I found that grantmaking is converging around similar intermediaries, particularly those involved in college completion and educational reform. For many, this strategy is donor driven. One leader from a national advocacy organization working to promote institutional reforms stated,

I think it tends to be donor driven because most organizations are going to have a hard time putting in the amount of energy it takes to get co-investors.... That was maybe an unusual model as well, but we went out and jointly marketed and sold and tried to bring other investors on. Now, we were successful, I would say mostly because Lumina was out there putting themselves out there, saying they would put up so much money if somebody else would put up so much money.

Indeed, several rationales for collaboration were mentioned, but the most salient issue is “to get more done with the resources that we have,” as one source stated. Interviewees argued that collaboration is an effective strategy for reaching numerous grantees through single granting projects. In fact, one leader at a leading funding agency stressed the substantial impact of collaborative funding:

I think that this is much more power in the philanthropy space when you have multiple national funders sort of standing side by side saying collectively, we agree that this thing is important, and not only do we agree that it is important, but we're all willing to commit funding to demonstrate how important we think that is. Rather than, I think that sort of alignment helps counter the ... this is one organization wielding their power to change somebody's agenda, but again when it's multiple groups I think that just counters that argument, and I think it's important when you can counter that argument of one organization trying to change the world.

For many informants, collaboration provides funders a wider reach. One foundation official stated, “We typically partner with foundations to advance wide-scale initiatives that involves many potential grantees.” This was echoed by a number of grant recipients. One policy informant stated, “So, it’s all about driving high yield approaches and in which you demand later through collaborative advocacy or collaborative work among different stakeholder groups.” Numerous respondents noted that collaboration requires funders to find “the right alignment and opportunity to engage the other funding partners, in a way that contributes to their mission.” In other words, the goal is to “ultimately maximizing either the impact of the field or the capacity of the grantee,” as the same respondent noted. Another informant echoed similar sentiments,

referencing Kresge, Hewlett, and USA Funds as frequent collaborations, since they “fall more in the issue-specific realm.”

Moreover, several philanthropic informants noted that they collaborate due to capacity limits. In particular, foundation officials may have an idea for a project or proposal but not the capacity to launch or manage it. Thus, officials regularly reach out to colleagues for support. As this foundation leader described,

So sometimes, what we do, let’s say, we have a conversation and we decide we want to have a co-funded program, like Credit When It’s Due, and we actually design a program and an RFP and in that particular case, Lumina managed the RFP because they had more capacity and staff than we did. But we sort of designed some of the questions and the selection process, and we added, you know, we put money into it as a group and then we sold it, you know, we had a threshold of what we thought were successful states and then we looked for potential donors who might then pick up states that otherwise would go unfunded because we didn’t have enough money.

While many foundations have converged in their grantmaking strategies, frequently around completion, they also work on “different parts of the puzzle.” As one source explains,

You know, foundations focused on different parts of the puzzle, whether its workforce and job training for hard-to-serve adults, you know, like where Kellogg and others have been where, or general broad scale high school and post-secondary attainment policies and practices. You know, the collective activities have attributed all forces, you know, similar targets of helping more people achieve higher levels of education skill and succeed at earning some and gaining employment.

Indeed, one grant recipient noted that funding an array of intermediaries also addresses different parts of a broader goal. One policy informant described this dynamic: “Lumina funded each one of us very generously to build up our capacity to do whichever piece of the puzzle. We had the policy work, the institutional change works, the mobilization work, the research work. We were all funded very generously.”

### **Formal and Informal Collaborative Efforts**

I also found evidence that collaboration occurs both informally and formally (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018). One foundation official noted that they “share a lot of the same grantees, particularly in policy advocacy” with other funders. Therefore, they “want to be as collaborative as we can because it really is good stewardship.” Indeed, several foundations informants explained that they meet regularly through conferences, convenings, and working groups. One foundation leader, when asked about the process behind collaborations, responded,

...the great thing about the network of colleagues that we have at the other organizations is that we have developed great professional relationships but also good friendships as well. And so, we can pick up the phone and call each other or for example with [name redacted] and [foundation], he and I have a standing meeting every six weeks, where we just update each other...

Respondents noted that informally comparing notes is very common in philanthropy, where they “just update each other on these areas of high-level issues within our perspective portfolios,” as the same official explained. A number of interviewees stressed that while many of these discussions are informal, they can become highly formalized, particularly at the executive level. “And if there is something that we share that we think more and further conversation or that might lead to a more formal collaboration, that’s when the conversation goes the next level

and we might think about how we reduce it to writing, whether or not we might need to get a memorandum of understanding in place to clarify to test forward,” as the same executive stated.

The following statement details this dynamic:

...if there are multiple funders at a project we're trying to do alignment where all of our phone calls and all of our reports are together with all of the funders, so that as a group we can learn about the status of the project, the challenges of the project, look for opportunities to help, and really have an understanding of what the other funders are trying to do, and how each of our contributions are supporting the project, and not creating additional burden on the grantees. Additional burden meaning instead of them spending three hours in a month talking to three different funders and answering the same questions and providing the same update and using each funders individual format, we're really looking for opportunities where we can collapse that down to one hour, where they can provide their update to all of the funders at the same time.

Not surprisingly, many noted the influence of Gates and Lumina as promoters of collaborations. These two foundations work closely. I asked several Lumina informants about their key partners in the realm of philanthropy, with many referencing Gates as a key collaborator. As one Lumina official noted,

One for sure is the Gates Foundation, also at that time is in DC. We work with them on a variety of issues. But I don't know if that's more so my colleagues, the five of us that are in DC is work, you know, moved them plus they have staff at the Gates Foundations that we knew in our own lives like it. Yeah, we go there, see the policy workings off the Gates Foundation, which used to be [name redacted] on the hill. I used to work with her in the Department of Education which is where she was the [redacted].

Similarly, many Gates officials expressed an equally close relationship with Lumina staff. When I asked the same question to a Gates official, they replied, “So, most prominently and not surprisingly would be [the] Lumina Foundation. We also are more engaged with USA Funds, which is also based in Indianapolis. We cofunded work with Kresge and with the Hewlett Foundation out of California.” However, as this quote reveals, Gates, Lumina, and Kresge are not the only foundations with close relationships. In fact, a number of informants cited several professional connections throughout the field who often cofund with one another. One Lumina informant described some of these engagements:

Bill and Melinda Gates have a substantial post-secondary education division. We worked with them quite a bit. We worked with lots of foundations that focus on workforce development, like the Joyce Foundation out of Chicago. We also have worked with Skillman. We worked a lot with the Kresge Foundation ... We have worked alongside with Ford Foundation. ...way back in the day with Lumina’s probably largest ever investments on Achieving the Dream, which is a community college accounts initiative and that was a Lumina-Ford endeavor. We worked with USA fund, which is a foundation also located here in Indianapolis that works a lot in postsecondary and a little bit in K-12. We used to work with Kellogg which does mission-related investing work.... We have relationships with Kauffman again, with that workforce development angle.

### **Social Investors**

In several cases, foundations are collaborating to establish and support entirely new organizations, such as Achieving the Dream, Complete College America, the University Innovation Alliance (UIA). In fact, one reoccurring theme emerging from the interview data was the concept of contemporary foundations operating as venture capitalists. One policy informant

noted that major foundations are functioning how “venture capital might in another industry.” Likewise, a former foundation official agreed with this argument, suggesting that contemporary philanthropists identify “less as charities and more as investment vehicles.” Several informants compared this strategy to venture capital, but “not with the intention of personal return on investment but with the intention of changing some specific aspect of social life.” One foundation informant agreed with this assessment, noting,

Social investing does not prioritize financial return but it’s not entirely neutral about financial return, I mean we’d certainly like to see a tiny bit of that but we can deal with it if we don’t see growth but we want to invest our portfolio in something that could produce a business model that ultimately is going to get people into and through college with a quality degree.

A feature of this social investment ethos is launching entirely new programs and even organizations. According to one intermediary leader, “MDC was the organization that got the grant from Lumina Foundation back in 2003 to start creating Achieving the Dream...” One interviewee, a director at a newer foundation, contended that one of their tactics is based on “incubating and helping launch a few different new organizations...” One source explained this strategy in the following manner: “Instead of having seven different organizations responsible and jointly making decisions, there would be one organization that was totally focused on that one issue.” This grantmaking strategy received media attention on March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2017, in *Inside Higher Ed*, where Paul Fain (2017) describes a new DC-based advocacy group called Higher Learning Advocates, supported by Lumina to advance federal policies around completion. When I asked informants about this trend, one grant recipient argued,

You know, in other cases, I think it's interesting that you see that the philanthropic role kind of occupy a little bit of the role that like venture capital might in another industry, so you know that would be like providing a startup funding for, you know, a new program to try something and really see if it actually works. What my understanding is like College for America, the Southern New Hampshire thing kind of got off the ground with support from I think it was Gates...

As with Lumina and Gates, older foundations are engaging in similar investment practices. One director at an older foundation, regarding policy advocacy grants, stated, "...Generally speaking, we only fund advocacy for a few organizations that basically if they didn't exist, we would have to create them..." Indeed, older foundations such as Kresge are actively involved in field-building efforts, working alongside other funders in creating entirely new nonprofit organizations that can advocate for specific outcome-based policies and practices.

Not only do foundations launch entirely new organizations, but they are also investing in social actors that share a similar social investor's ethos, even individuals. One philanthropy interviewee noted that they are "...interested in meeting socially minded venture capitalists, who are investing in education technology and investing in products that can help us boost attainment and not do harm." Certainly, this is a growing trend among strategic philanthropists, who are seeing "social investments folks" as "new target of ours," as the same respondent contended.

Part of this social investor ethos is prescriptive grant agreements. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that foundations such as Gates are defining "strategic goals from the outset, work closely with grantees, and expect measurable results from investments" (Grose, 2013). I found similar observations in grantee interviews. One informant, who received grants from multiple foundations, noted that "...there are other program officers who are much more

perspective about, you know, where it's more like contract work like I want this thing done..." A philanthropy official from a newer foundation agreed with this statement, noting, "At our foundation, we negotiate that and structure that into the grant agreement... This is like the contracts in the business world, and we are not interested at Lumina in holding on to all the intellectual property..." These findings mirror the work of Tompkins-Stange (2016), who demonstrates that the newer philanthropists in K-12 education are employing a prescriptive grantmaking when managing grantees.

### **Issue Alignment across Sectoral Boundaries**

Several interviewees noted that funding collaboratives are effective ways for promoting greater issue alignment and enrolling other entities into the cause. Several informants, for example, highlighted this point: "... We identified the key stakeholders who had to be part of it and brought them into the process." Undeniably, foundations frequently work with other funders or IOs who are not necessarily focused on completion and bring them into similar field-building projects. This source explained that when an external entity was brought in for a potential collaboration, they usually "ran a process where we discussed policy strategy, priorities based on new analysis of where we are, how we're doing, and also what are the effective approaches to move forward." In other words, cofunding and collaborations are strategies not only for channeling investments toward completion but also for creating greater issue alignment among other foundations and policy groups. This grant recipient believed that the Kellogg Foundation, an older foundation, became involved in completion reform in the following manner:

Kellogg has got a longer history than many of our funders that we have at [redacted]. But we were able to bring Kellogg into funding for [redacted] early on. In fact, they came on board and supported some colleges in Michigan and then more recently, they've invested

in a working student success network initiative, which was a three-year initiative with five funders. It was about building up a student support base for low-income students and students who had families, who were supporting kids and/or dependent members of their family. Kellogg has invested in higher ed before, but they had invested primarily on leadership development and they came along and kind of joined the wave of investing in [redacted] colleges. That's one of the older foundations that got into a new area.

This process extends to smaller, more regionally focused funders. Several foundation sources noted that by working with smaller, more locally based foundations, they can spread their agendas to local communities, a trend found in K–12 philanthropy (Ferrare & Reynolds, 2016). One foundation official described this strategy in the following manner:

And, you know, the idea with that work was really about creating these partnerships where you know, you get community organizations, other non-profits, local institutions of higher education, the mayoral offices, local political offices, the K-12 systems, you get them together in a room and basically get them aligned around a single goal that has a sort of an attainment focus to it. That is created specifically for your region, right. So that money, two hundred thousand dollars is actually not all that much money to do this kind of work, and so it really was about getting other philanthropies, other local community-based organizations and philanthropies also interested in this, too. And just literally putting the money out there so there will be an opportunity to get these different disparate groups together to really coordinate around a single goal and get some sort of actions toward that goal.

This comment highlights the importance of working with not only foundations but also postsecondary institutions, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and K–12 public

schools. In fact, collaborations across different fields allow policy goals to become increasingly embedded within wider networks. Interviewees frequently stated that foundations want their projects to be replicated or picked up by other funders or government agencies. In particular, several informants shared stories about how this process is becoming more common in higher education philanthropy, in addition to becoming a preferred strategy for sustaining momentum beyond the duration of a grant. One policymaker described this dynamic in the following manner:

I think they do best when they're not spending their own money to fund projects and programs that disappear when their own funding disappears but to spend their money to brain research information and then to support policy, development processes with policymakers that change the way they, the real money, the public dollars are spent in education prior to this. ...You should be moving from spending, doing it yourself and hoping someone will replicate it to create conditions where a context in which real money can be re-erected or new money appropriated to help more people get a higher education degree.

Accordingly, several sources stressed that although philanthropic investments represent large sums, they are dwarfed when compared to public expenditures (Greene, 2005; Reckhow, 2013). One former foundation official highlighted this argument to me, noting, "If I were running the dissertation on philanthropy, I would want to come back to the fact that foundations, actually the amount of money they put into things, is relatively small compared to the whole investment structure for a college or university or for a system of higher ed."

Several informants suggested that it is not necessarily about money but about sparking interest around specific policy concerns or proposals. Hall and Thomas (2012) argue, "Being

‘where the action is’ may be an important impetus for foundation collaboration” (p. 26). I found evidence for this notion. Collaborating with national foundations signals prestige to the rest of the sector, particularly for smaller and more regionally focused funders. One former philanthropy official noted that “foundations want to be known for where their work is conducted rather than being a second or third level collaborator, they want to be...known for what they do.”

### **Scaling Reforms and Shared Grantee Networks**

Diffusing policy ideas through networks is a central strategy in scaling educational reforms across the sector. Kezar (2014) contends that “...a few funders such as the Lumina Foundation and the National Science Foundation...are beginning to examine the potential of networks for creating broader and scaled-up changes” (p. 115–16). In fact, several interviewees described the importance of sharing data and best practices through grantee networks, with many including knowledge-sharing outcomes into grant agreements. In particular, philanthropic-sponsored networks allow grantees and foundation officials to share data, information, and scientific reports for best practices regarding institutional transformation strategies. As such, these grant investments provide informal communicative channels between program officers and their grant recipients, with many grantees reporting regular check-ins with their foundation representatives. Through grant investments, philanthropic organizations can construct and sustain informal partnerships and communication channels through intermediaries, who can connect an array of social actors.

Several sources described a trend in funding systems that includes a network of colleges and universities. Unlike traditional advocacy groups, this strategy relies on working through “systems” that connect a number of postsecondary institutions around a common goal. One foundation official discusses his experiences with funding such projects, stating,

...I have made grants to institutions directly to lead innovations, for example, in adaptive learning, and so those institutions received a grant from the foundation to essentially scale a certain innovation or implement a certain innovation, undertake rigorous research, measure the results from that research and share that evidence and feedback... publicly with the field.

These types of investments involve scaling reforms. One philanthropy respondent elaborated by stating, its “about scale, a lot of times we’re thinking about how we can work with institutions, not just for one institution’s own development, but sort of institutions leading to systems change.” For many foundation officials, this strategy of “working with groups of institutions” is “more effective.” In other words, collaborative networks “...transform institutions to think differently in the way they do the day to day business.” One philanthropy leader involved in college completion reform provided the following rationale for funding such systems:

I think that one of the reasons that has happened is because we as funders have realized that change is going to come through scaling. Change is going to come, not at the initiative, by initiative, institution by institution level, but it's really going to come at the system level. Reform at the system level takes a huge amount of resources, and often more resources than any one funder can bring to bear. So I think as we all sort of come to that understanding of the need for system level reform, has pretty much almost forced I would say just resource needs, forced us to come together and collaborate with respect to the amount of funding that's necessary to execute the goal that we have of transformative change.

One example is the UIA, a consortium of 11 public universities relying on data sharing and best practices to promote system-wide change. One foundation official, who provided startup funding

to the UIA, noted, “We work with the University Innovation Alliance, which was trying to get public universities to focus on student’s success, 11 public universities to share data, and use big data to do that.” Several investors regard the UIA as a networked system grounded upon organizational transformation. One Gates informant highlighted this point, stating,

We work with associations, we work with... the UIA, like those kinds of consortia... We’re thinking about the power of networks and how do we harness change amongst a group of network institutions to enact that change at scale and leverage the power of networks.

Speaking to the newly formed UIA in 2014, Michael Crow, UIA’s Chair and the president of Arizona State University, echoed this sentiment: “There is a lot of talk about disruption in higher education. We think that the real disruption will come through collaboration” (para. 3). Many of these collaboratives have a wide reach, operating outside of their grantee networks. One leader described inviting other leaders to showcase what their networks have accomplished:

And we invited twelve campuses from outside the [redacted] ... we didn't advertise this because the lists that people based on physical or regional, or if they were apart from the collaborative ... so our strategy is not, "Hey everyone, join the Alliance." Ours is "We know we have something positive here. We want to actually be sure it really works. But while we are gathering together, let's use whatever we can in a way that doesn't disrupt or change things. But let's use this to spread some light around and see who else can benefit."

Moreover, at times, grantees lead the convening efforts. For example, they sometimes sponsor venues to share lessons learned, inviting potential and current funders, grantees, policymakers,

institutional leaders, and possible partners. One leader engaged in networked collaborations provided the following overview:

...We hold our convenings that are just [redacted]-only...they're about a hundred people, there's a team from each campus coming together. We invite our funders to come to that to observe. We don't introduce them. They just kind of interact. And we evolved over time to finally hold a convening. We invited any campus in the country, including all of the grantees of our shared funders. And that was the [redacted] national summit.

Such events allow grantees and foundation officials to share data, information, and technical reports regarding institutional transformation strategies. As the same source contends, "...We designed this event in a way that was scaling our model and trying to expose others to it. And then at that event, we raised some money from one of our funders to fund some collaborative that would form at that event..."

Another example of a networked consortium is the Frontier Set, established in 2017 by the Gates Foundation as a collaborative of "29 colleges and universities and two state systems [that] is currently engaged in a multi-year effort to develop, execute, and share institutional redesign strategies..." (Gates Foundation, 2017, para. 5). The Frontier Set brings together colleges and universities, advocacy organizations, membership associations, and think tanks to share "practical and actionable knowledge and evidence focusing not only on the 'what' of change but also the 'how'" (Gates Foundation, 2017, para. 7). Such interorganizational collaboratives sponsored by philanthropists represent an underlying trend in higher education policymaking. As with the UIA, several Frontier Set members highlighted the importance of networks for organizational change. One interviewee, a leader at a membership organization,

argues that this strategy intends to “...transform institutions and use past solutions that Gates has developed with these other two grant initiatives to increase student success...”

Unlike the UIA, however, the Frontier Set relies on external intermediaries to assist with its institutional change efforts. One Frontier Set member stated,

...we're an intermediary between the foundation and the institutions, really. Every organization is an intermediary to their membership. For us, we are the conveners of our six different institutions through Frontier Set. We will be the conveners for our future cohorts to do our center for student success. We know our members and I think every institution that works with their own institutions will know their members as well. I think our approach to be an intermediary is that we work with our institutions where they are.

As with the UIA and the Frontier Set, foundations frequently invoke the power of networks in framing policy proposals, diffusing ideas, and providing technical assistance across multiple universities and colleges. While a number of philanthropic-sponsored consortia in higher education exist, what differentiates the UIA and the Frontier Set is that these systems are “taking the idea of a consortia to another level,” because “there are a very few of them that are performance-driven or so tightly aligned to a shared mission of access and success,” as one source argued. Overall, these institutional networks can “maximize student outcomes and student performance with as few resources as possible.”

### **Grantee Information Sharing**

Increasingly, philanthropists make grant investments intended to facilitate knowledge transfer within the broader field of higher education policy. Ford provided this grant to one nonprofit: “For Strive Together to act as national co-intermediary to create networks, convene stakeholders and educate policymakers around college completion in the Corridors of College

Success strategy” (2014, \$250,000). One leader at a regional funding agency described how information sharing is put into grant agreements:

Sometimes of course you can't agree on what you're going to share, because you haven't loaned it yet, but most national funders, you go into a project, again, through that scaling lens and thinking about the only way things can scale is if you share the knowledge that you've learned. That could be through papers, that could be through conferences or convenings that could be through the production of a play book. It could be through more specific policy play in terms of supporting outreach to federal or state agencies with the information. The dissemination strategy can differ depending on the work that's being done, but it's definitely a part of the grant work.

For many foundations, dissemination is a crucial function of their advocacy work. The same informant stated that “regardless of the grantee, a funder is going to have a desire to think about how that information and learnings can be shared. Maybe the learnings don’t have to be shared by the specific grantee, but the funder might work with another organization to help disseminate the results.” In fact, many foundations are identifying as “brokers of information” and “consensus builders.” As one philanthropic respondent said,

We can convene people to come around the table that may have very different perspectives on an issue, whether it is around teaching and learning or whether it’s around how to close equity gaps, or even something as technical as rewriting student financial aid. And we can build that big tent where people will come to whether or not we are giving them grants and really promote that exchange of ideas and that drive or movement towards a consensus to say, you know, is there really a shared sense of which

way we should go on student aid or on data? So, there is a real convening power in the consensus building function that we can and often are called upon to fill.

Beyond sponsoring formal venues, foundations also rely upon their networks of grantees to spread policy ideas. One policy entrepreneur contended that “completion success network supported by philanthropy help institutions learn from each other, learn from best practice nationally.” Another foundation respondent agreed with this sentiment, noting that philanthropists are actively working to bring in grantees to transmit ideas: “We bring grantees together to inform each other. We have other conferences that are held in which they participate.” Several respondents cited foundations as frequently convening “all of their intermediaries...regularly, at least once a quarter,” as one grant recipient noted. During these events, a “cohort of grantees” are convened “to talk about their progress,” to “serve as peer learning networks,” and to share “best practices” regarding “institutional transformation,” as the same interviewee noted. Referencing the UIA, this philanthropic leader described this process of knowledge sharing in the following manner:

...the University Innovation Alliance for example, we have a grant that we're co-funding with the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation around completion grants, and part of that work includes convening the 11 institutions, bringing them together along with the funders and the evaluator, where we're all in a room at the same time talking about the project, learning from each other, so those are convenings of grantee evaluator and funder happen regularly.

As such, within these broader philanthropy networks exist subnetworks. One grant recipient stated, “It’s like a sub-convener in some way, because Gates convenes all of the solution networks and the solution areas and those that are acting as intermediaries between the

institutions they're working with, the 23 institutions, but at the same time, there's also sub-convenings." Although referencing Gates's strategy, this informant also noted that other funders engage in similar behaviors: "I think Lumina does similar work but more so on the policy end."

### **Brokers in Shared Grantee Networks**

Interviews data suggests that grantees are in regular contact with one other another due to shared funding relationships. Often, these networked relationships require grantees to act as brokers or boundary spanners to connect two otherwise unlinked actors (Hall & Thomas, 2012; Ness, 2010; Ness & Gándara, 2014). Indeed, networks provide formal and informal platforms to diffuse and direct academic innovations across sectors. In the context of higher education philanthropy, formal networks could be part of grant agreements that include information sharing that are highly organized and centrally determined. In contrast, informal networks emerge when information flows among grantees due to shared funding ties. This can occur through communications initiated by funders, grantees, or members of a broad-based coalitions.

As such, grantees have the opportunity to learn about new policy proposals and solutions based on these shared funding connections. In fact, grantees have the potential to broker relationships with other grantees based on these shared funders. Brokerage arises when social actors function as conduits between two otherwise unconnected groups (Burt, 1995, 2005). Actors who bridge these connections in particular are at a strategic advantage due to their network positions (Burt, 1995, 2005; Fernandez & Gould, 1994; Gould & Fernandez, 1989). Therefore, by emphasizing the informal links based on shared funding ties, grantees can play a brokerage role in knowledge sharing (Hall & Thomas, 2012; Kelly & James, 2015; Miller & Morphew, 2017; Ness, Tandberg, & McLendon, 2015).

The Gould-Fernandez (1989) brokerage test provides a means for identifying the brokerage roles of grantees in philanthropic-sponsored networks (see Figure 10). This addresses entities that can cut across formal field boundaries in higher education based on their organizational types. Overall, the most representative brokers are coordinators (41%) (brokers connecting two actors from their own subgroups), followed by gatekeepers or representatives (entities that transmit or restrict information to and from external actors) (27%), liaisons (external brokers who connect two actors from two outside groups) (20%), and consultants (external actors who connect two nodes from the same subgroup) (12%). As such, nearly 70 percent of grantees fall within the “insider” category (coordinators, representatives, gatekeepers), and 32 percent fall within the “outsider” group (consultants and liaisons).

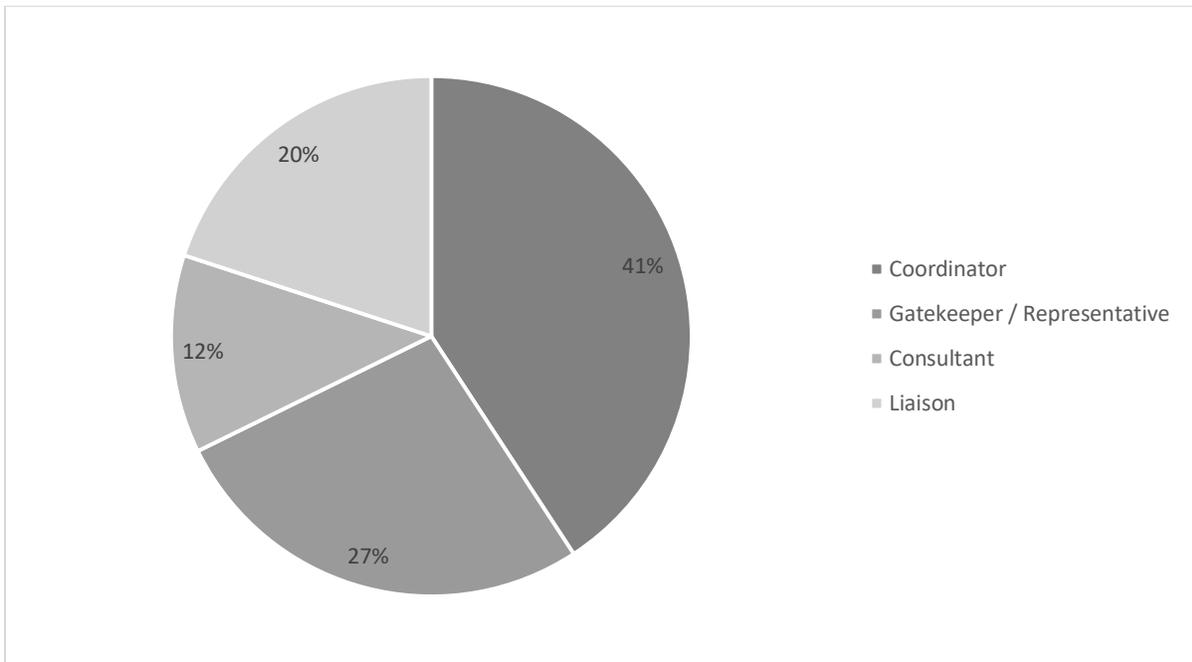


Figure 10. *Brokerage profiles of aggregated shared grantee networks.*

I also examined the brokerage profiles of the organizational types represented. I found that colleges and universities are highly represented in the coordinator and gatekeeper or representative roles (see Figure 11). In contrast, government agencies, membership

organizations, nonprofits, and think tanks all fall within the consultant and liaison roles (see Figure 11). These externally oriented brokers can “get a lot of coverage,” as one source noted. Likewise, one philanthropy respondent identified these intermediary types as “influential” and regularly “arm[ing] them with information...” to “mobilize people by promoting guides and frameworks and tool-kits.”

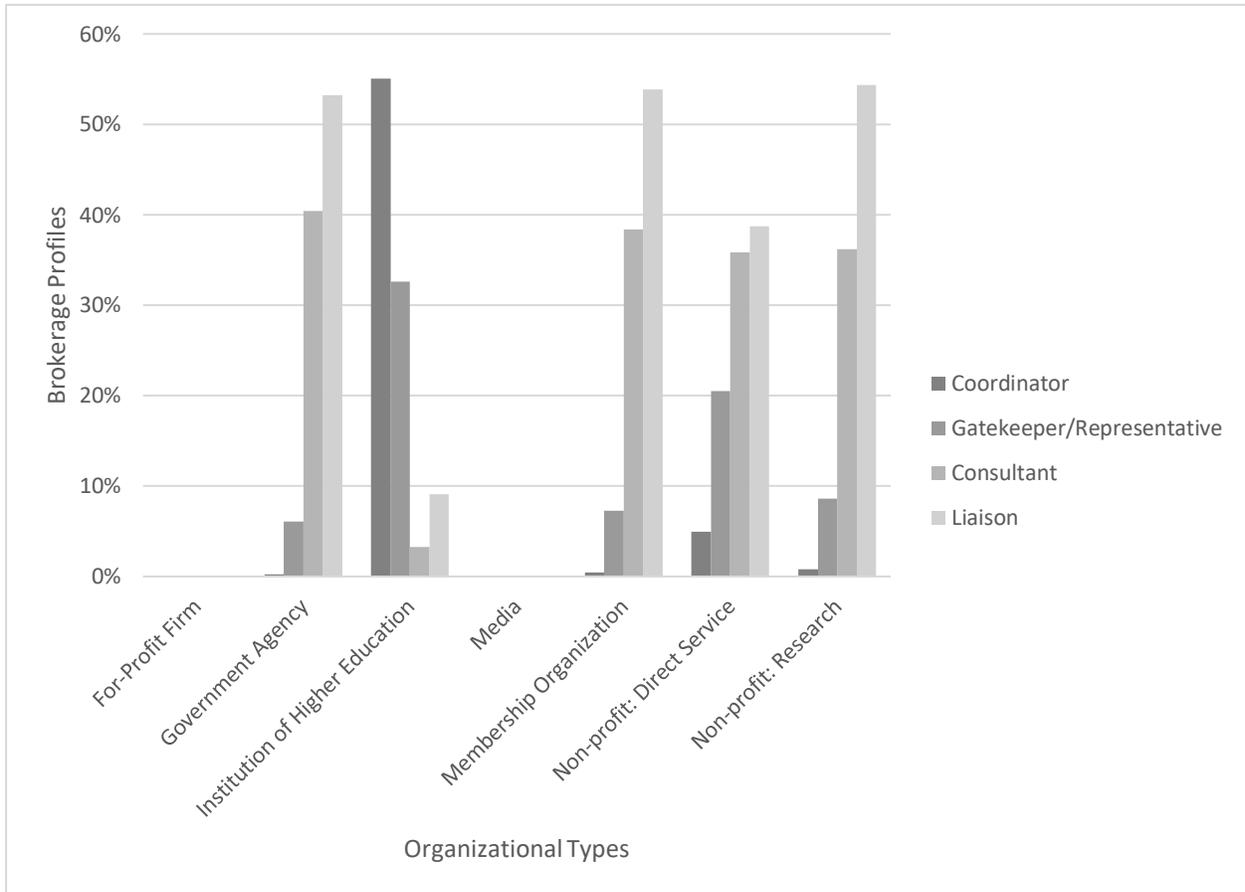


Figure 11. *Brokerage profiles of organizational types.*

### Externally Oriented Brokers

Outsiders are also important for philanthropists seeking to influence multiple fields. Indeed, organizations that can cut across traditional sectoral lines are important for broadcasting and embedding similar policy agendas beyond one field. According to one source, “...Their role is to make the world a better place and do it transcending government or any other kind of siloed

approach...where the shortcoming of government and/or any other influence might fall short.” Indeed, many foundation strategies are based on bypassing these traditional field boundaries in higher education as a form of coalition building.

I have provided a selection of grantees that scored high as outsiders (consultants and liaisons) and that are also frequently mentioned by informants (see Tables 11–14). Government agencies such as the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education and the University System of Georgia tend to function as consultants and liaisons (see Table 11). Similarly (and not surprisingly), advocacy organizations such as the Aspen Institute, Complete College America, and Excelencia in Education all score high as consultants and liaisons (see Table 12). Moreover, a breakdown of granting purposes for each one of these entities is included in Figure 12.

*Table 11. Selected Grantees, Brokerage Statistics of Government Agencies*

<i>Government Agency</i>	Coord	G/Rep	Const.	L
Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education	0%	6%	35%	52%
University System of Georgia	0%	5%	41%	48%

*Notes.* Grants extracted and analyzing using the Foundation Center Directory Online. Grants analyzed are filtered for “higher education.”

Table 12. *Selected Grantees, Brokerage Statistics of Advocacy Nonprofits*

<i>Advocacy Nonprofit</i>	Coord	G/Rep	Conslt.	L
Aspen Institute	1%	7%	35%	34%
Complete College America	3%	14%	35%	34%
Excelencia in Education	4%	18%	28%	31%

*Notes.* Grants extracted and analyzing using the Foundation Center Directory Online. Grants analyzed are filtered for “higher education.”

Table 13. *Selected Grantees, Brokerage Statistics of Membership Organizations*

<i>Membership Organization</i>	Coord	G/Rep	Conslt.	L
Achieving the Dream	0%	7%	35%	51%
Association of American Colleges and Universities	0%	6%	38%	49%
American Association of Community Colleges	1%	7%	39%	46%

*Notes.* Grants extracted and analyzed using the Foundation Center Directory Online. Grants analyzed are filtered for “higher education.”

Table 14. *Selected Grantees, Brokerage Statistics of Think Tanks*

<i>Think Tank</i>	Coord	G/Rep	Conslt.	L
Center for American Progress	1%	9%	27%	53%
New America Foundation	1%	8%	35%	48%
Institute for Higher Education Policy	1%	8%	32%	52%

*Notes.* Grants extracted and analyzed using the Foundation Center Directory Online. Grants analyzed are filtered for “higher education.”

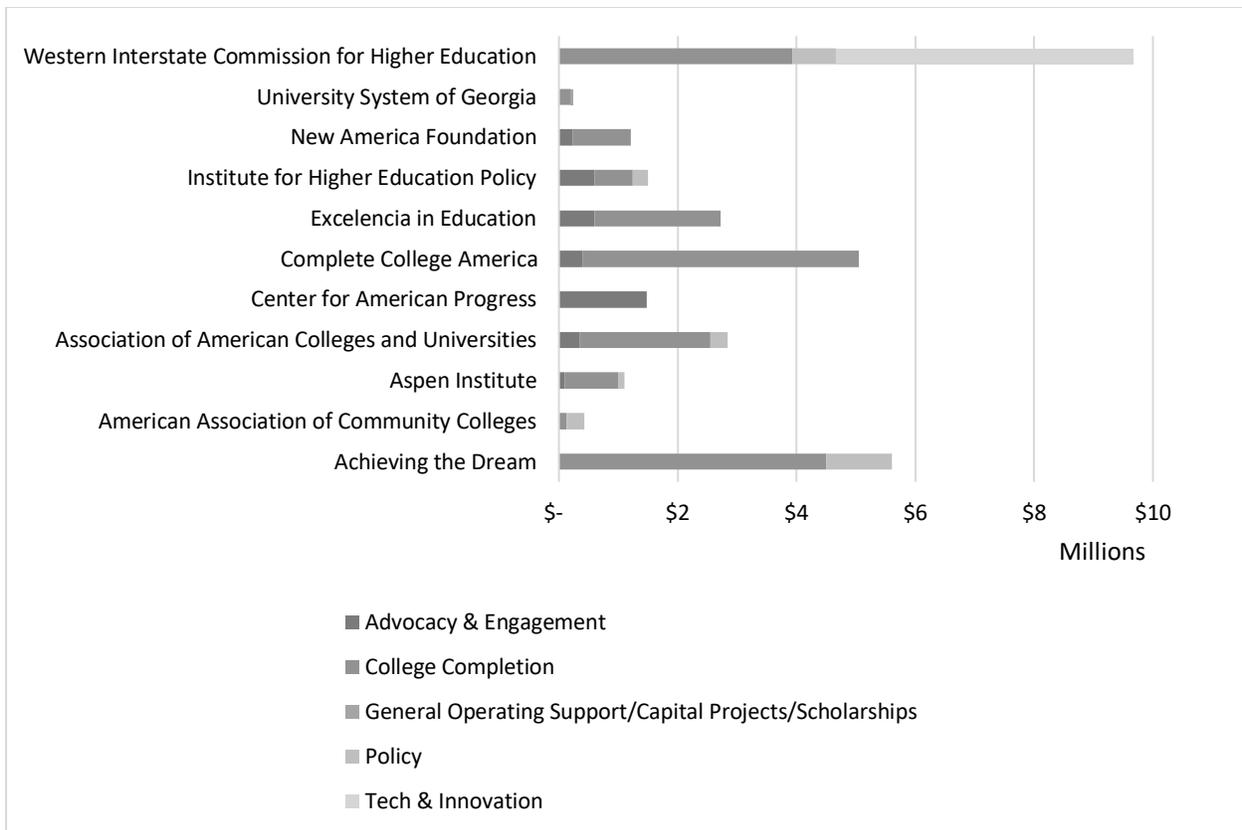


Figure 12. *Selected grantees, grant coded purposes disaggregated, 2014.*

Advocacy organizations that cut across traditional field boundaries have attracted media attention. In 2013, *The Chronicle* noted the liaison role Complete College America plays in postsecondary policy, writing, “Complete College America has persuaded 32 states, plus the District of Columbia, to join an alliance whose members pledge to ‘develop and implement aggressive state and campus-level action plans’ to meet college-completion goals” (Mangan, 2013). As of 2017, Complete College America had expanded to 40 states and has worked regularly with policymakers and institutions to push the needle on college completion. As one philanthropic official stated,

....it’s a state policy organization that works at the state level, but also importantly at the institutional level to identify, elevate, and demystify things, policies and practices at the institutions that are disproportionately impactful for the students that we mentioned

before. They're a great organization, I love working with them and I like how clear the things are.

Likewise, membership organizations such as Achieving the Dream, the American Association of Community Colleges, and the Association of American Colleges and Universities all score high as outsiders. Sources noted that foundations rely on membership organizations to “act as intermediaries between large bodies of the people that they represent,” since they “are very effective at broadcasting,” as one philanthropy respondent contended. Likewise, think tanks such as the Center for American Progress, the Institute for Higher Education Policy, and New American Foundation are highly represented in the liaison profile, hovering at the 50 percent mark. When drawing on the coding scheme and combining these portfolios together (see Figure 13), over 60 percent of grant amounts are directed to college completion. This is followed by technology and innovation grants (16%), advocacy and engagement (12%), policy (9%), and general operating support, capital projects, and scholarships (0.16%) (see Figure 13).

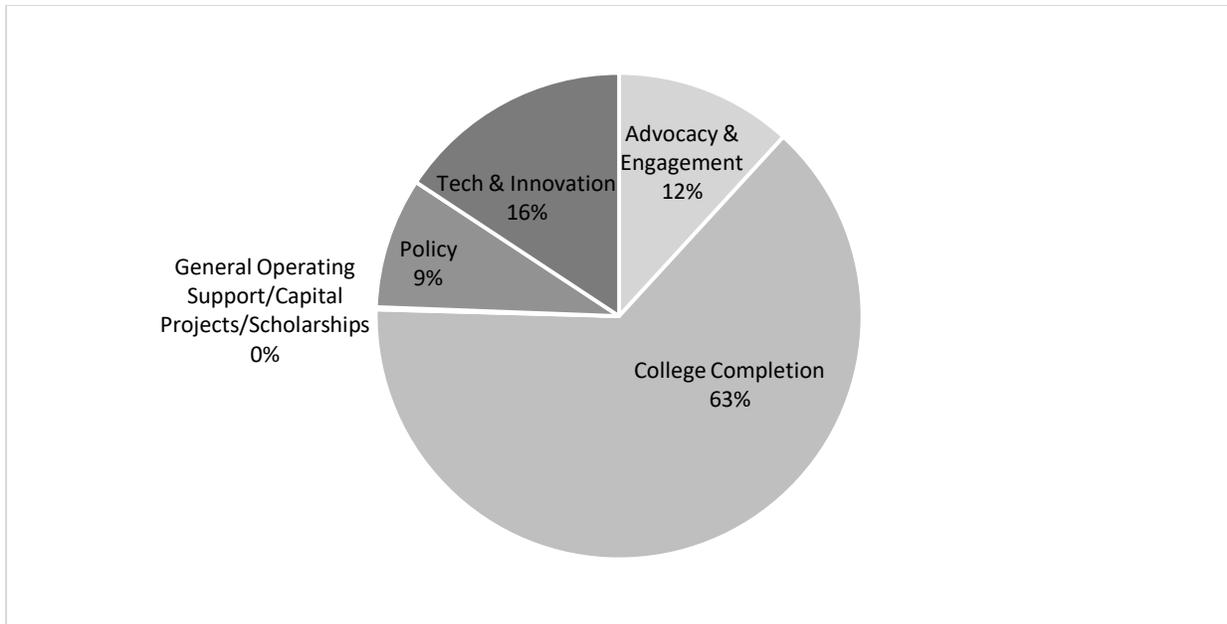


Figure 13. *Selected grantees, grant coded purposes collapsed, 2014.*

Foundations identify themselves as knowledge brokers, actively drawing upon their networks of grantees to promote policy ideas and solutions. For policy promotion, foundations tend to work with entities that can broker connections between the same subgroup, with many informants referencing university-based collaboratives as preferred ways to share redesign strategies around student success. Foundations rely on externally oriented intermediaries—government, membership entities, advocacy nonprofits, and think tanks—to broadcast and transmit policy proposals and solutions across subfields, thus ensuring that multiple actors are reinforcing similar policy proposals, typically around college completion. Moreover, these externally focused grantees can elevate specific notions about higher education reform, channeling greater collective support. Overall, I found evidence that grantees who cut across formal field boundaries are the most impactful social actors for knowledge transfer. Moreover, these externally focused grantees can elevate specific notions about higher education reform, channeling greater collective support around these causes. Externally oriented brokers comprise

a smaller proportion of grantees; however, they still act as influential policy actors in higher education.

## **CHAPTER 6: FIELD-LEVEL CHANGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION PHILANTHROPY**

Higher education grantmaking has shifted away from the traditional fund model of philanthropy to one that emphasizes policy advocacy and systems change. In fact, several policy informants revealed that Gates and Lumina were central in driving the conversation away from postsecondary access and toward college completion (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018). One interviewee with experience in DC policymaking noted that “it’s been going on for a while,” where “college completion, in general, has always been top of mind for foundations.” In particular, I found a high frequency of informants crediting the newer philanthropists for creating a policy environment conducive to completion. One former Obama official observed, “I think Lumina has been a big player in this stage that has really helped shape the conversations around completion, you know, President Obama talked about the 2020 goal, which would have been impossible were it not for Lumina’s 2025 goal...” Likewise, one policy researcher agreed with this assessment, noting that this “was not a trivial accomplishment. The Gates Foundation did have a role in helping to shift the conversation from access to success.” Other leaders in philanthropy concurred with this assessment: “To your point about how they impacted, I think that Lumina in particular, I think by establishing their big goal, I think that was really impactful, because it focused attention on the need to increase the number of individuals in the country with a degree. So, I think the fact that they put a stake in the ground and said this is our big goal and we’re working toward it was really impactful in terms of drawing attention to the issue.”

### **Incumbent Vulnerability**

Fligstein and McAdams (2012) note that challengers wait for “incumbent vulnerability” when maneuvering for strategic power (p. 14). In 2009, college completion gained national attention due to President Obama’s first State of the Union Address to Congress. According to

one Gates official, this speech provided “a sense of legitimacy and urgency around it [college completion].” Several informants cited this speech as elevating completion to being an overarching policy priority in higher education: “When the President of the United States takes that thing into the bully pulpit, I think it certainly puts more weight behind it,” as the same Gates official noted.

At the time, discussion was growing regarding the crisis of higher education, with many citing affordability and job placement concerns (Kelly & James, 2015). Respondents from Gates and Lumina both shared these views. In a 2013 op-ed entitled “Change is Coming,” Daniel Greenstein, the former director of the postsecondary success strategy at the Gates Foundation, warned of a “tipping point” in higher education,

That college you have your eye on for your teenager? It may be going out of business.

Your alma mater, too.... higher education is at a tipping point, and that it will soon look nothing like it does today, except perhaps at a few ivy-covered, well-endowed institutions.

Several foundation sources echoed this sentiment. One philanthropic informant, when I asked how completion became such a dominant issue for the newer philanthropists, responded by describing “a growing disenchantment between the public and employers and higher education,” where “the discourse around higher education in the last five years is dramatically different from I would say ten or fifteen or twenty, thirty years ago.” Indeed, several interviewees from the newer organizations cited this growing disillusionment, which requires “a market-driven strategy” to change course, as this Gates leader explained. The same official highlighted some of the pressures that make reform possible:

It assumes that higher education, colleges, and universities are so much pressure, financial pressure, political pressure, consumer pressure, really driven mostly by crises, that if solutions come along that enable them to be responsive to those pressures, to deliver more affordable education, they will adopt those solutions, right?

Policy informants frequently cited Gates's and Lumina's strategies as being "decidedly more hands-on" and more willing to challenge established norms in postsecondary philanthropy, as one former Obama official described it. One grant recipient discussed Gates's strategy:

The Gates Foundation has more resources than a lot of other foundations have, most of the foundations in fact. They are such a big complex organization. They're a young foundation. They have had a lot of internal things that they've had to figure out. This had a lot of turnover and change. They came in with a philosophy that they knew how to fix things and they would come in. They started at the high school level, and they just started coming, and saying, 'This is a model you're going to follow. We're going to fund that, our way or the highway.'

To address these growing concerns, the newer philanthropists began to challenge the sector, pushing for specific reforms that addressed the rising pressures in higher education. "I think Gates and Lumina are more willing...to take on Higher Education and sort of push on it a little bit and sort to say it's not good enough..." according to the one source.

### **Field-building Projects in Higher Education**

When the completion agenda was initially introduced, Gates and Lumina launched a series of initiatives, programs, and organizations that advocated for policy change intended to incentivize outcomes (Hall & Thomas, 2012). One grant recipient referenced the emergence of Complete College America as a defining moment in higher education: "In 2009, there was

already talk of a ‘college completion movement.’ Complete College America was really coming online at that point and becoming a larger voice, and the Achieving the Dream, the national organization focused on community college success, was really starting to grow.” Complete College America and Achieving the Dream both received startup support from philanthropy. For the newer philanthropists, investing in intermediaries was an effective strategy for policy engagement (Kelly & James, 2015).

For many sources, Gates and Lumina are credited for galvanizing the field around completion. One policy respondent argued, “So I think you had kind of the policy environment shifting dramatically to start talking about college completion issues and then you had philanthropic funding to sort of free up time and bring in personnel that could grapple with that issue.” Several informants suggested that if it were not for philanthropic dollars, the policy community would not have been able to focus on completion as intensely as it has:

...if those organizations that are currently major funders of higher education policy deciders didn't think that that issue mattered anymore, I don't think that the kind of nonprofit community could sustain itself at the size that it does right now, you know? It's obviously a risk but I think that the foundations feel that is an important policy and it's worth tackling.

Indeed, the intermediaries founded by the newer philanthropists were crucial in this policy environment shift. One intermediary, Achieving the Dream, was created through a Lumina grant and has experienced significant success as an independent nonprofit. One source detailed the organization's role:

Achieving the Dream, I think was one of the major players in those days that helped switch the conversation from one that was mostly about how to do more outreach to

populations that maybe weren't yet taking advantage of Higher Ed. In addition to start paying attention to whether or not those folks actually got credentials and start addressing this issue... Now, our conversation is shifting and we're starting to talk, and we start seeing other people in the field talk more about; what besides completion is important.

We're trying to get people to say, to feel responsibility for what happens after completion. Similarly, Complete College America is another entity that is described as not only successful but as impactful at advocating for state policies for completion reform. One intermediary leader assessed its influence in the following manner:

Complete College America was one of the big entities that was created initially by the Gates Foundation, and then they've subsequently got another foundation investments as well as the investments from states. They were created to work at the state level and to create a sense of urgency in the Governor's Office for investing in strategies that would help students stay in college and complete. So, they've had a tremendous influence on the conversation.

Unlike traditional grantmaking, this form of investment is based on shifting policy discussions and raising awareness of completion, typically by establishing entirely new advocacy organizations that can target state and federal policymakers as well as institutional leaders in higher education, or by making high-leverage investments. Nonetheless, these policy strategies are not uniform across funders. As the same informant noted,

In philanthropy, to be honest, I think they've been kind of a mixed in their views about what to do. Under one level, there's a number of philanthropic organizations that want to invest in policy because they see that as a stronger level for change. They see where if you get whole states or whole governments changing the way things are supposed to be

done, then theoretically, everybody is going to be following suit and then you're going to make a lot of changes across a lot of higher ed institutions.

Moreover, several interviewees discussed pushback from older, more traditional grantmakers. According to Fligstein and McAdams (2012), incumbents, who are bounded by traditional field norms, are more conservative than contenders. Accordingly, a number of informants cited apprehension from the older philanthropists regarding policy advocacy. One interviewee, a leader at a DC think tank, highlighted this point: “There was some trepidation about a foundation engaging in extensive policy advocacy because it’s something that was not done by the kind of the old school foundations.” In fact, Robelen (2010), of Grantmakers for Education, contends that “[m]ost grantmakers traditionally have eschewed engaging in the policy arena...whether because they thought it was inappropriate, illegal, or too risky to their reputation” (para. 13). Unlike the old school foundations, the newer philanthropists are more willing to “shake the system,” as one official explained. For the newer foundations, there were “all kinds of external signals that the status quo should not be the status quo,” as the same source contended. This is consistent with the K–12 research that demonstrates that newer funders are more willing to challenge established norms in education (Hess & Henig, 2015; Reckhow, 2013; Reckhow & Snyder, 2014; Snyder, 2015).

### **Overlapping Strategies**

Despite this initial unease, several foundations have begun to adopt the policy advocacy strategies introduced by Gates and Lumina (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018). According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, “The Gates approach is not singular but rather reflects broader changes within philanthropy” (Gose, 2013). One foundation grantee who worked with multiple funders agreed with this interpretation, stating, “I also think that they’ve followed in some ways

Lumina’s leadership role in having a broader definition of college ....” Similarly, one source from an older foundation echoed these claims, noting that “other foundations took notice of is the need to get much more focused in their grantmaking; much more intentional, much more deliberate, and much more strategic. That’s one way in which they [Lumina and Gates] have affected them.” Drawing on Lumina’s strategic model, one official from an older foundation described an “increasing interests throughout the foundation to look at how we might fund advocacy and policy.”

To examine this empirically, building upon the findings of Haddad and Reckhow (2018), I investigated the advocacy–policy and completion trends of the older funders, excluding Lumina and Gates from the analysis to determine whether older foundations are emulating the advocacy strategies introduced by these newer philanthropists. According to the grant data in Figure 14, in 2004, completion purposes represented only \$16 million in higher education directed grants. However, these purposes increased in 2006, spiking significantly after the completion agenda gained national prominence and representing over \$50 million in 2010. Similarly, older foundations increased their advocacy–policy spending over the same time frame. In particular, in 2004, advocacy and policy purposes represented nearly \$14 million. By 2008, this increased to \$21.7 million, and by the time the completion agenda was introduced, it represented over \$30 million in higher education grants. Overall, older foundations are emulating the strategies introduced by the advocacy philanthropists, funding more grants around policy advocacy and completion.

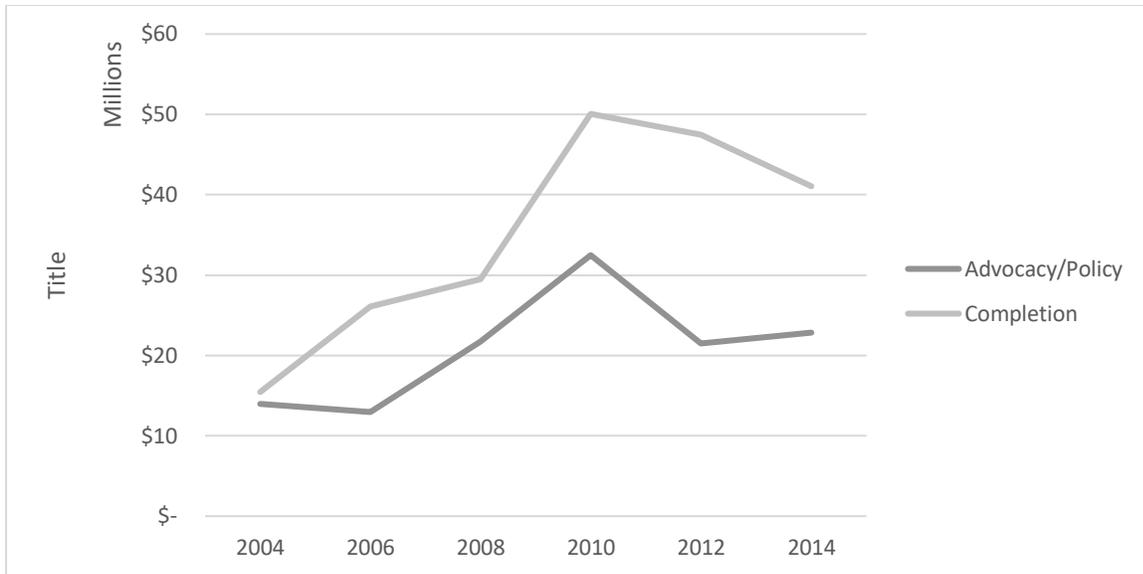


Figure 14. *Old foundations, advocacy/policy and completion grants.*

One strategy newer philanthropist employ is funding external entities to promote reforms. According to one philanthropy source who frequently collaborates with the advocacy foundations,

And then they did, both the Gates Foundation and Lumina did help seed a number of those intermediaries that we talked about that have really grown over time. You're looking at Achieving the Dream, Jobs for the Future, Complete College America to really help move the field to intermediaries where you can do that constant iteration and learning and scaling rather than funding one idea or one institution at a time.

I wished to compare funding strategies between the older foundation and the newer philanthropists to determine whether older funders were employing similar grantmaking strategies as Gates and Lumina regarding investing in intermediaries. Therefore, I drew upon the grant dataset and examined funding trends for intermediaries, as illustrated in Figure 15.

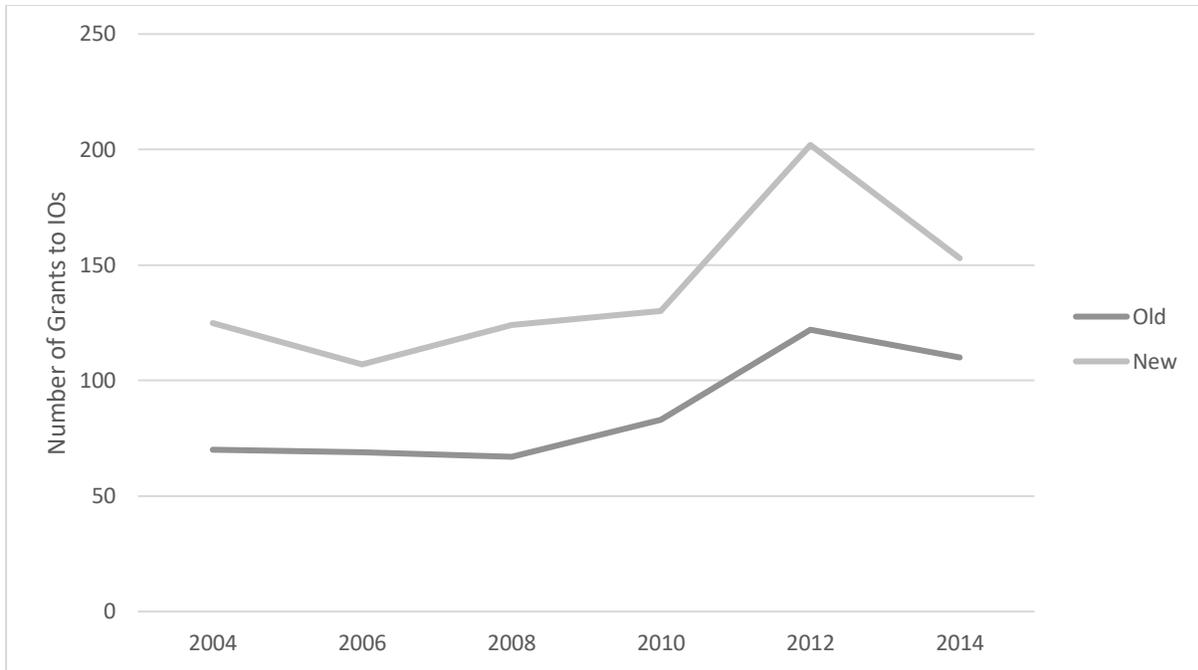


Figure 15. *Old and new funding trends of intermediaries.*

I found that early on, the newer philanthropists provided a substantial amount of grants to intermediaries. For example, the newer philanthropists gave 125 grants to intermediaries, while the older funders only gave 70 grants (collectively) to external entities. Over a ten-year span, Gates and Lumina provided a high frequency of grants to intermediaries. However, by 2012, the older foundations began to fund more intermediaries, with 122 in 2012, representing nearly a 60 percent increase from 2014. Overall, this suggests that older founders have followed suit, increasingly funding more intermediaries than in the past.

To examine this differently, I drew upon granting data to examine the level of convergent grantmaking among the two groups, following the analytical strategy of Snyder (2015). Table 15 provides the proportion of convergent grantmaking (one grantee receiving grants from two or more funders) among older and newer foundations (Snyder, 2015). In particular, older foundations that shared more than two funders in 2004 represented only 12.9 percent of total grants directed to IOs (excluding colleges and universities), with nearly \$3.5 million of total

funding (see Table 15). Such organizations included American Association for Higher Education (\$69,000), Council for Aid to Education (\$700,000), and the National Academy of Sciences (\$95,000), all very traditional and older higher education IOs. In the same year, the newer foundations had the same levels of convergence as the traditional foundations (see Table 15). In particular, 13.3 percent of overall funding went toward IOs (again, excluding colleges and universities) (see Table 15). The newer foundations also funded tradition IOs, such as American Council on Education (41,000) and the United Negro College Fund (\$2 million), as well as organizations involved in college completion, such as College Success Foundation (\$95,000) and Jobs for the Future (\$3.6 million).

*Table 15. Percent of Convergent Grants toward Intermediary Organizations*

	Old Foundations		New Foundations	
	2004	2014	2004	2014
More than one funder	13%	21%	13%	47%

*Notes.* Grants extracted and analyzed using the Foundation Center Directory Online. Grants examined are filtered for IOs, excluding colleges and universities.

By 2014, shared funding among older foundations increased to over 20 percent, representing \$8,518,500 in intermediary-directed funding. In 2014, grantees that received funding from multiple funders included completed-reform organizations such as Achieving the Dream (\$2.6 million), Gateway to College National Network (\$975,000), and Jobs for the Future (\$550,000). An example of such grants is a \$1.5 million Kellogg Grant for Achieving the Dream to “[i]ncrease economic stability and college retention, completion, and credentials for low income college students through scaling and expanding the bundled services model at select community colleges across several states.”

In the same year, the newer foundations provided 47 percent of intermediary-directed grants to recipients that shared more than one funder, representing nearly \$40 million. Similarly, the newer entrants also increasingly cofunded the same grantees, including intermediaries such as Achieving the Dream (\$3 million), Complete College America (\$4.55 million), and the Institute for College Access and Success (\$1.55 million). Priorities that comprised a substantial amount of grants were focused on college completion and advocacy purposes. An example of such a grant is a Lumina investment to Complete College America “[t]o mobilize post-secondary institutions in Georgia, Indiana, and Tennessee to adopt the guided pathways model to increase student credential completion” (\$400,000, 2014). Overall, these figures demonstrate that older foundations are emulating the collaborative efforts of the newer funders.

To visualize convergence in another way, I create a series of social networks, provided below. This data is limited to recipients who received grants from multiple foundations (both newer and older). Links represent a grantee with shared funders, and the larger nodes represent grant amounts (Snyder, 2015). For 2004, the grantee network for the newer funders was twice as large (dollar amounts) when compared to the older foundations, even though the former only included two foundations (see Figures 16 and 17). In particular, the 2004 grantee network for the older foundations represented \$3,481,725, while the grantee network for the newer funders was \$6,435,628.00.

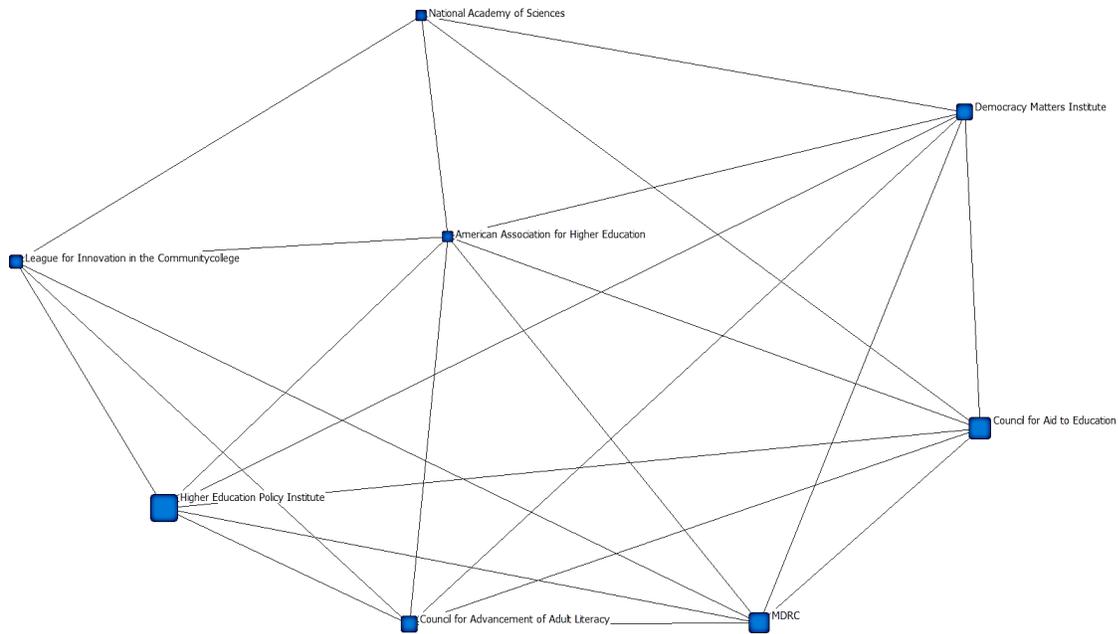


Figure 16. *Intermediary organization recipient network for older funders, 2004.*

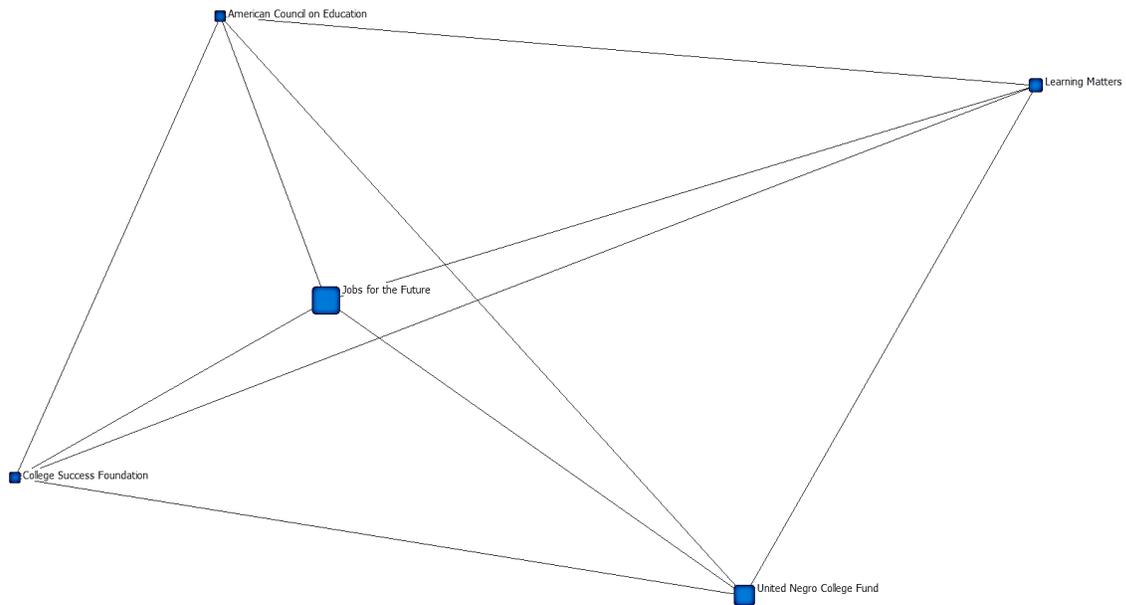


Figure 17. *Intermediary organization recipient network for newer funders, 2004.*

The grantee networks for 2014 are denser and represent more funding ties with intermediaries. Not only was there an increase in convergent grantmaking among both older and newer

foundations (21% and 46.8%), but both networks were also larger, representing \$8.5 million for the old funders and nearly \$40 million for the new entrants (see Figures 18 and 19). The 2014 grantee networks of the older foundations demonstrate some overlap in strategies with the advocacy philanthropists (see Figure 18). In particular, many entities that were actively involved in policy advocacy and college completion are represented in the older grantee network (see Figure 18). As with the grantee network of the older funders, a number of entities involved in policy advocacy and reform linked to the college completion agenda were represented in the new funder network (see Figure 19).

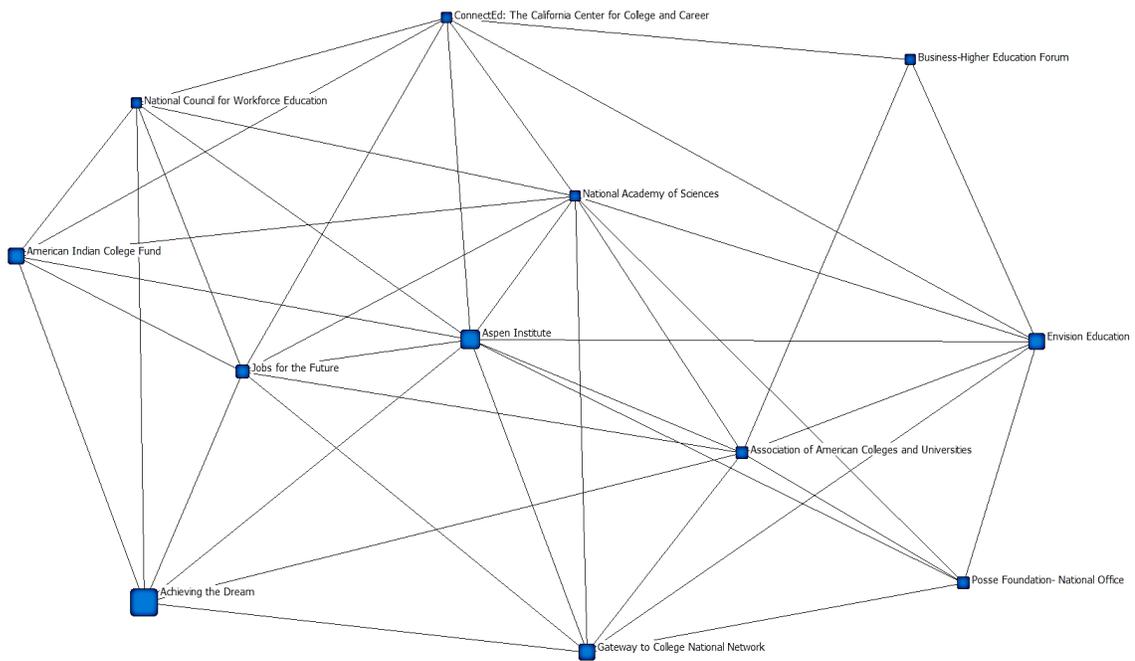


Figure 18. *Intermediary organization recipient network for older funders, 2014.*

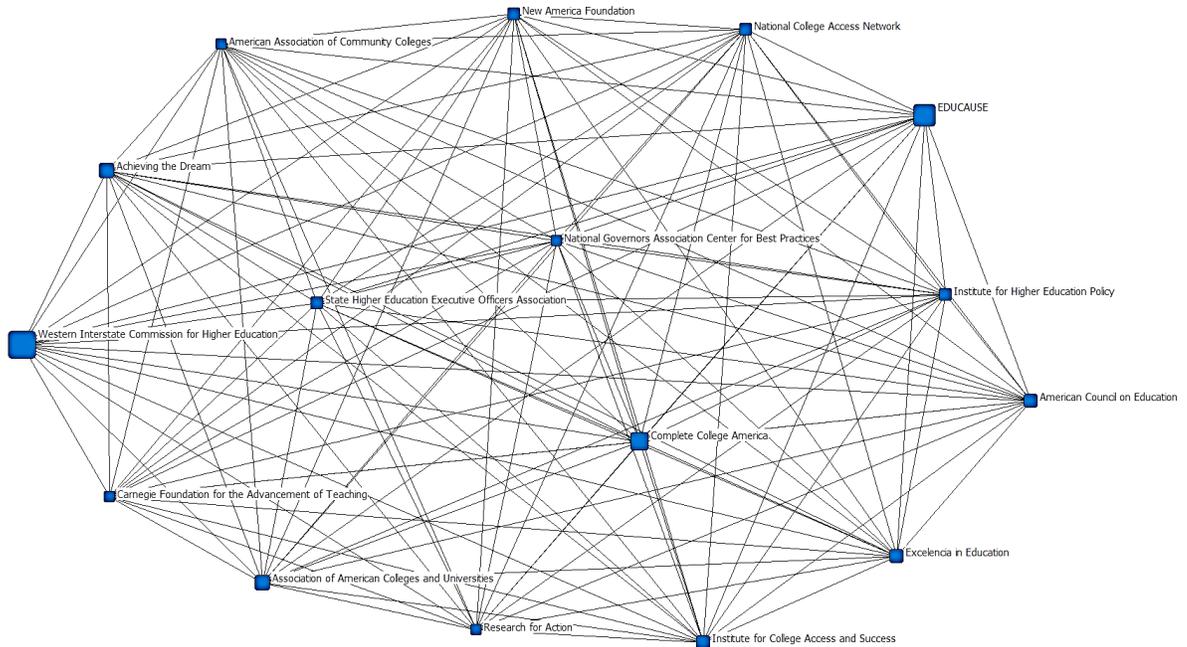


Figure 19. *Intermediary organization recipient network for newer funders, 2014.*

The final social network analysis includes both groups of foundations to assess field-level interactions, focusing on the denser networks (2014). In Figure 20, the 2014 network represented over \$60 million, and all nodes have shared at least two grants from two different foundations. Red squares denote that that at least one older funder was cofunding with at least one newer funder. In other words, if Gates (a newer foundation) cofunded with Kresge or Ford (older foundations), or vice versa, then the node would be coded red. Conversely, the blue nodes represent cofunding by similar funders. For example, if one grant recipient only received investments from Gates and Lumina, they would be coded as blue. This social network analysis reveals that a high level of cofunding occurred between the two groups (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018). In total, 22 grant recipients received at least one grant from one older and one newer foundation, representing nearly 60 percent of total shared funding. According to this analysis, the intermediaries that received the most funding included the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, EDUCAUSE, Achieving the Dream, Complete College America, and Jobs for

the Future. Overall, this demonstrates that the field of philanthropy is converging around similar funding priorities, primarily organizations active in policy advocacy and completion reform.

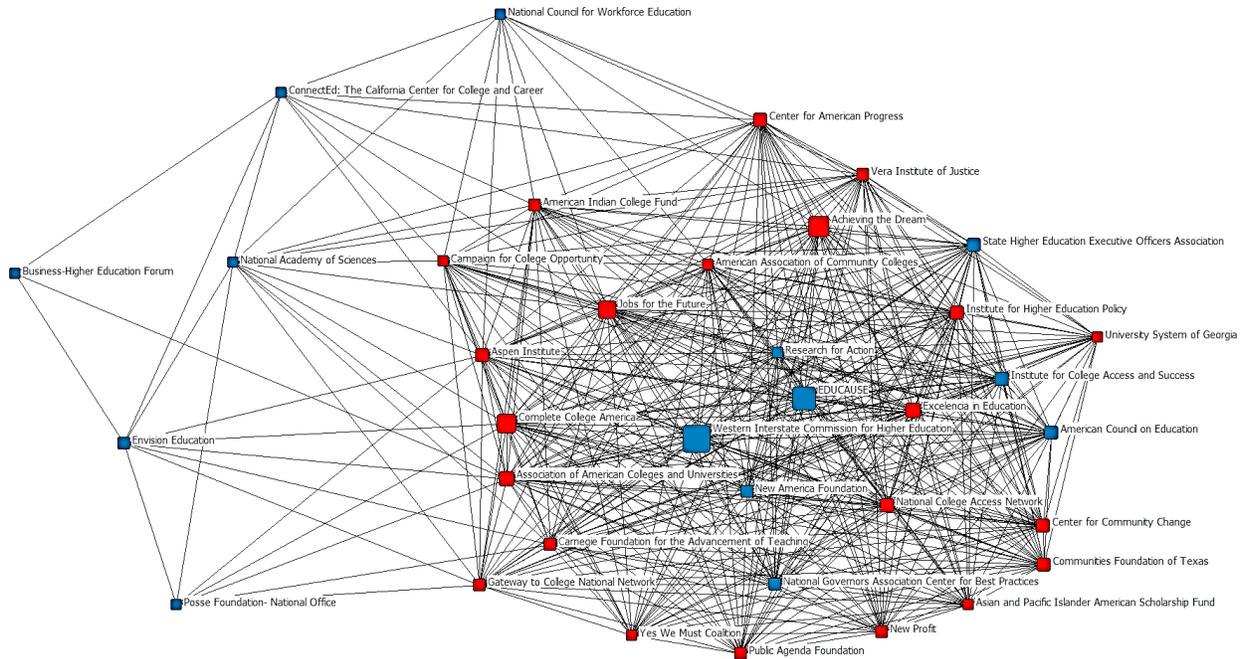


Figure 20. *Intermediary organization recipient network for new and old funders.*

In Table 16, centrality measures for degree, closeness, Eigenvector, and betweenness were calculated. Using betweenness to rank IOs (a centrality measures that measures the shortest path), the AACU, Aspen Institute, CFAT, CCA, Gateway to College National Network, and Jobs for the Future ranked the highest. All of these entities are national policy actors involved in college completion reform.

Table 16. *Centrality Measures, Figure 20*

Intermediary	Degree	Closeness	Eigenvector	Between
Association of American Colleges and Universities	34	37	0.19	38.18
Aspen Institute	34	37	0.19	20.05
Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching	33	38	0.19	13.01
Complete College America	33	38	0.19	13.01
Gateway to College National Network	30	41	0.17	10.91
Jobs for the Future	33	38	0.19	10.62
Vera Institute of Justice	30	41	0.17	8.83
Center for American Progress	30	41	0.17	8.83
American Indian College Fund	28	43	0.16	7.11
Campaign for College Opportunity	28	43	0.16	7.11
ConnectEd: The California Center for College and Career	11	60	0.04	5.26
Achieving the Dream	31	40	0.19	3.94
American Association of Community Colleges	31	40	0.19	3.94
National Academy of Sciences	15	56	0.07	3.91
Envision Education	10	61	0.04	3.53
Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education	30	41	0.19	0.89
American Council on Education	30	41	0.19	0.89
EDUCAUSE	30	41	0.19	0.89
Excelencia in Education	30	41	0.19	0.89
Institute for College Access and Success	30	41	0.19	0.89
Institute for Higher Education Policy	30	41	0.19	0.89
National College Access Network	30	41	0.19	0.89
National Governors Association Center for Best Practices	30	41	0.19	0.89

Table 16 (cont'd)

New America Foundation	30	41	0.19	0.89
Research for Action	30	41	0.19	0.89
State Higher Education Executive Officers Association	30	41	0.19	0.89
National Council for Workforce Education	11	60	0.06	0.47
Asian and Pacific Islander American Scholarship Fund	28	43	0.18	0.43
Center for Community Change	28	43	0.18	0.43
Communities Foundation of Texas	28	43	0.18	0.43
New Profit	28	43	0.18	0.43
Public Agenda Foundation	27	44	0.17	0.35
Yes We Must Coalition	27	44	0.17	0.35
Business-Higher Education Forum	4	67	0.01	0.11
University System of Georgia	24	47	0.15	0.00
Posse Foundation–National Office	8	63	0.04	0.00

*Notes.* Data collected and analyzed by the author using foundations' PF-990 tax filings extracted from the Foundation Center Online. Represents higher education-filtered grants and raw scores.

### **Grant Purposes and Strategic Differences**

The social network analyses presented provides evidence that major foundations are converging toward intermediaries, particularly at the national level. Variations in grantmaking trends offer insight into the changing field of higher education philanthropy. However, this does little to investigate relationships between granting purposes and organizational types. To explore strategies in a different way, I drew upon a mixed-effects logistic regression, allowing me to model fixed effects and random effects in the grant dataset (Bates et al., 2015; Klopott, 2015;

McLean et al., 1991). This model explores the relationship between funding purposes, organizational types, and strategic differences between foundations.

Table 17. *Fixed Effect Estimates*

	Coefficient	Odds Ratio	Standard Error	Z-Value	P-Value
(Intercept)	-3.201	0.041	0.494	-6.474	<0.001
Grant Purposes					
Adv & Engagement	4.125	61.879	0.524	7.872	0.000
Cost-Effectiveness	3.987	53.890	0.761	5.237	0.000
Curriculum Dev	0.910	2.483	0.829	1.097	0.273
Faculty Dev	-1.376	0.253	2.765	-0.497	0.619
Financial Aid	5.955	385.797	1.859	3.203	0.001
Non-Higher Ed	0.185	1.203	0.518	0.357	0.721
Policy	3.373	29.157	0.526	6.407	0.000
College Completion	3.235	25.417	0.455	7.113	0.000
Tech & Innovation	2.439	11.460	0.456	5.354	0.000
Year Authorized 2006	-0.215	0.807	0.166	-1.296	0.195
Year Authorized 2008	-0.066	0.936	0.164	-0.399	0.690
Year Authorized 2010	-0.087	0.916	0.162	-0.538	0.591
Year Authorized 2012	0.146	1.157	0.154	0.945	0.345
Year Authorized 2014	-0.300	0.741	0.155	-1.928	0.054

*Notes.* Overall model is significant (Chi-square=1251.4 df 68, P<0.001). Reference group; capital projects, general operating support, and scholarships; year, 2004.

Fixed effect estimates from the model are displayed in Table 17. Estimates of the random effects are available in the appendix. The results in Table 17 demonstrate that when compared to capital projects, general operating support, and scholarship coded purposes, grants directed to

advocacy and engagement (OR=61.879,  $P<0.001$ ), policy (OR=29.157,  $P<0.001$ ), and college completion (OR=25.417,  $P<0.001$ ) are all statistically significant and more likely to go to intermediaries than colleges or universities, when holding the effect of grant year constant. For grant years, investments in 2014 were less likely to go to intermediaries than 2004 (OR=0.741,  $P=0.054$ ), when controlling for the effect of grant purpose (see Table 17). For traditional philanthropic purposes, the odds of an intermediary getting a grant in 2004 was 0.041.

To explore where the field of philanthropy stood comparatively, random plots assessed differences in the effect of advocacy and engagement grants, policy grants, and college completion grants across funders. In particular, these are examined, since they are intended to influence or impact higher education policy (Kelly & James, 2015). Advocacy and engagement investments are intended to influence public opinion or public will. An example is a \$100,000 Lumina grant to the Institute for Higher Education Policy “[t]o support the MSI-Models of Success Program by adding a communications firm for grantee communications efforts.” One Lumina official explained, “We have identified these are people who are influential, these are people we’re watching....” These dissemination efforts are intended to raise awareness on policy issues.

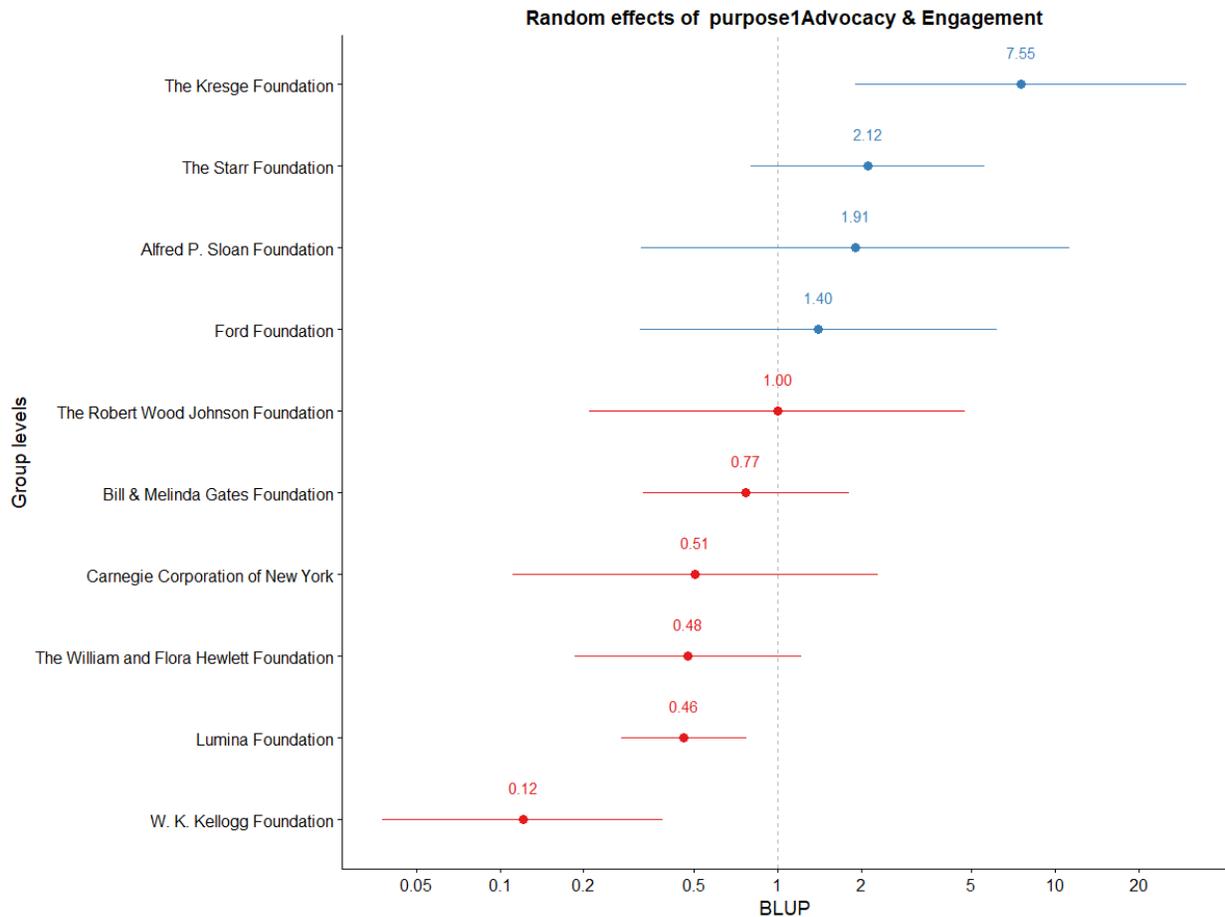


Figure 21. *Random effects of advocacy and engagement purposes.*

Overall, foundations have higher odds of funding for advocacy and engagement grants in relation to the baseline (see Table 17). The random effects plots demonstrate that Kresge has significantly higher odds of investing in intermediaries for such purposes when compared to the average (see Figure 21). On the other end, Kellogg and Lumina have lower odds of investing in intermediaries for similar purposes when compared to the baseline (see Figure 21). Overall, this demonstrates that strategic differences exist, particularly between older (Kellogg and Kresge) and newer foundations (Lumina) when investing in advocacy and engagement grants.

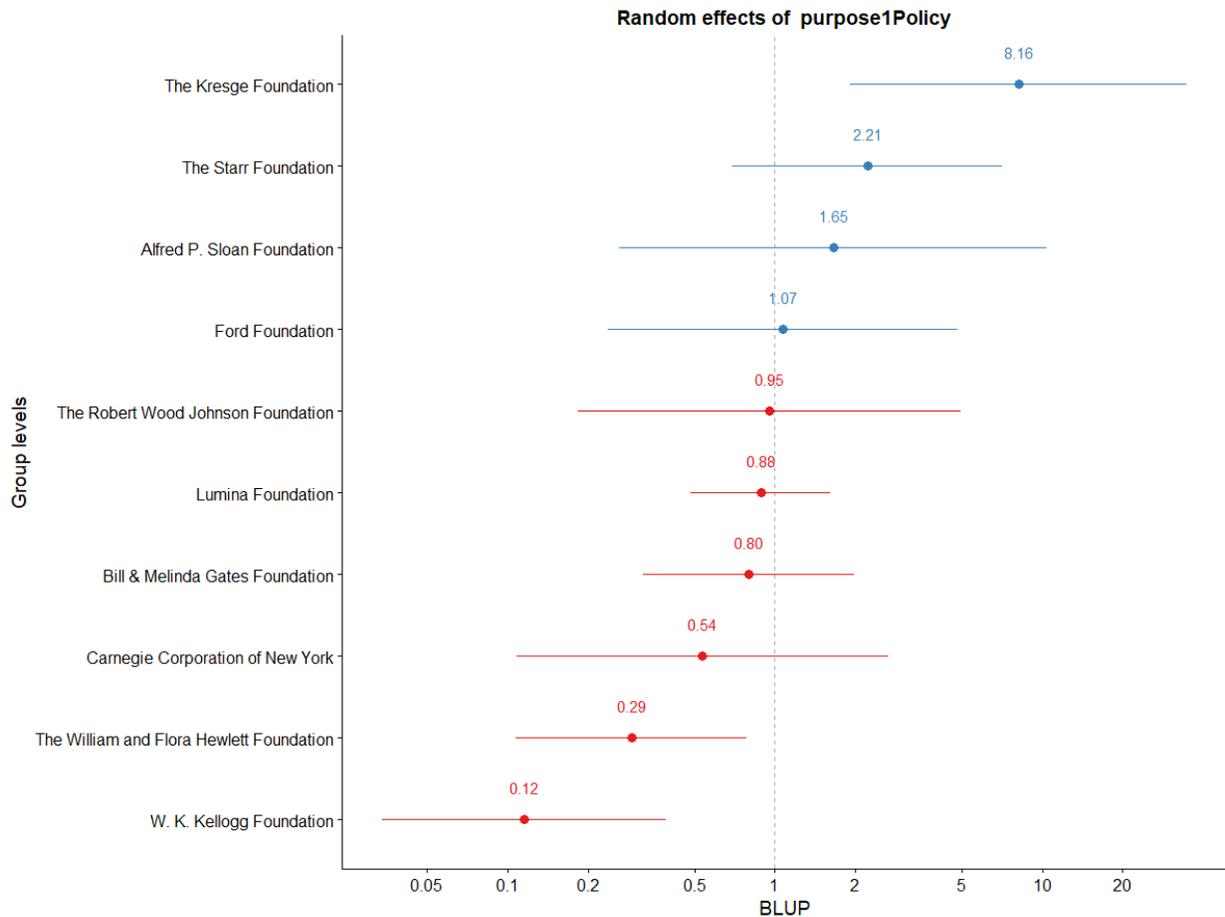


Figure 22. *Random effects of policy purposes.*

Philanthropic organizations also have higher odds of funding intermediaries for policy grants when compared to the baseline (see Table 17). In particular, based on the random effects plots, Kresge again has higher odds of investing in intermediary organization for policy purposes when compared to the other funders in the sample (see Figure 22). On the other end, Kellogg and Hewlett have lower odds of investing in intermediaries for similar purposes when compared to the baseline (see Figure 22). This demonstrates that there are strategic differences when investing in intermediary-directed policy grants. Completion emphasizes the attainment agenda more explicitly than advocacy and policy purposes. For instance, a \$300,000 Kresge grant was directed to Achieving the Dream “[t]o improve student success rates at ten community colleges

in Michigan by supporting the continuation of a comprehensive suite of institutional change services.”

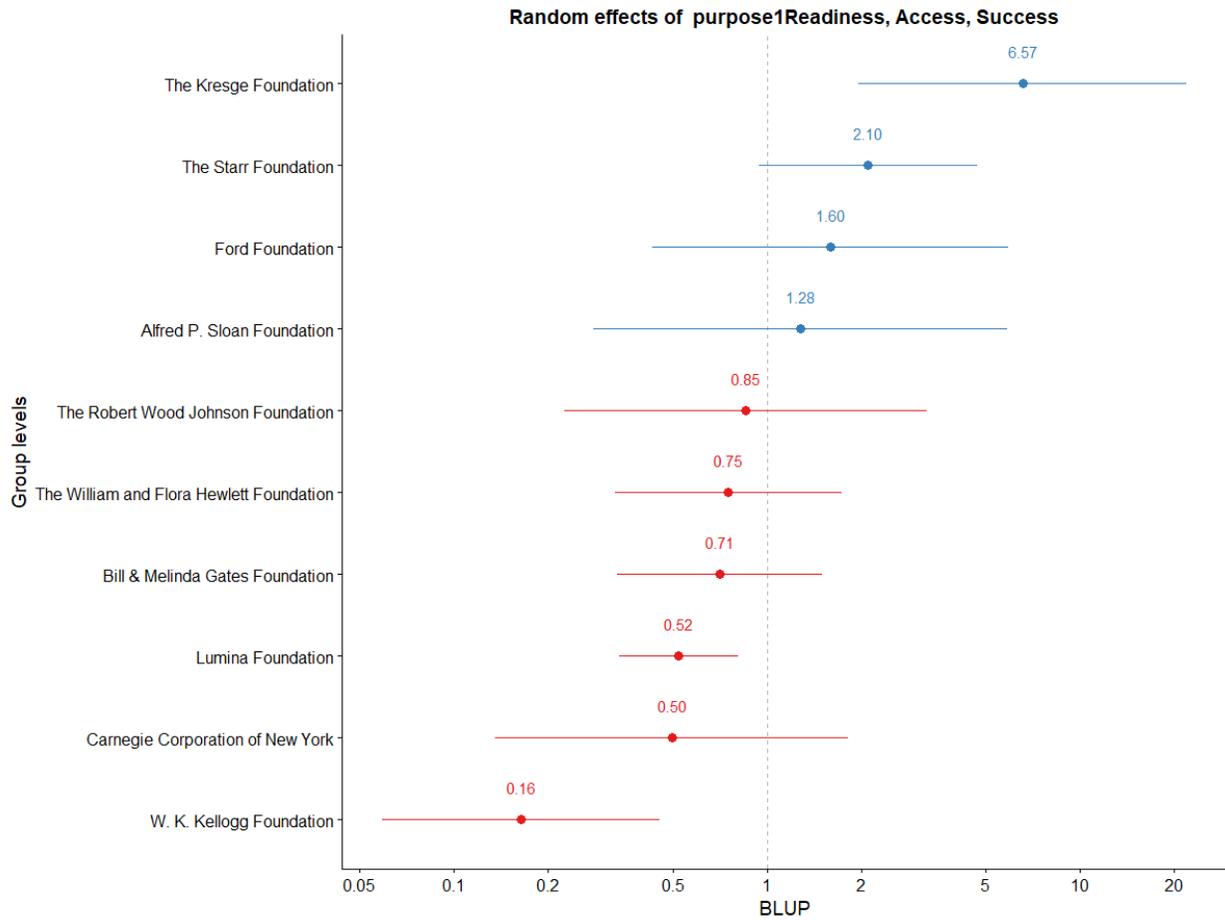


Figure 23. *Random effects of college completion purposes.*

Philanthropic organizations also have higher odds of funding intermediaries for college completion grants (Readiness, Access, Success) when compared to the baseline (see Table 17). As with advocacy–engagement and policy grants, Kresge again has higher odds of investing in intermediary organizations for completion purposes when compared to the baseline. On the other end, Kellogg and Lumina have lower odds of investing in intermediaries for college completion purposes when compared to the baseline. While foundations do leverage their relationships with intermediaries for policy promotion and systemic change, they also target universities and

colleges to promote institutional reforms. As such, this varies based on the foundation and the granting type.

### **New Philosophies in Higher Education Grantmaking**

One reoccurring theme in the qualitative data is an increasing reliance on data and measurable outcomes when assessing success. One informant from an older foundation noted the newer foundations' "new philosophies" that privileges quantifiable metrics over holistic measurements. As this informant from an older funder noted,

I think the shift is about the new players at the foundation and a new philosophy. So the days of the philosophy that I came in to the foundation, you know, people have ideas, they'll come to you, you can find — and then — it's much more intentional, direct, you know, this is what that we're not waiting for — that people will have the ideas as we need to help also generate the ideas out there about what we want. Tell them and then solicitations much more of call for proposals now than in the past. But if you go look at their website, and I hope you will, they're really focusing down their support.

One aspect to this cultural shift is the influence of newer foundations, where data, metrics, and evaluations have become central tools to assessing impact. As one informant from an older philanthropy suggested, "Also I think this process [of evaluations] that began in the nineties in earnest of closer, a more sophisticated analysis of outcomes has had a huge influence on smaller and new foundations, because the research suggest that younger people creating foundations, think of them less as charities and more as investment vehicles, not with the intention of personal return on investment but with the intention of changing some specific aspect of social life." As this high-level Lumina official contends, "All of us have metrics that are related to goal 2025 and in terms of our internal accountability, we'll judge it based on our metrics which are based on

goal 2025.” Similarly, according to a high-ranking Gate informant, their foundation also relies on a similar approach:

And we have a whole array of those things and then we also work on you know what are the enabling environments that encourage colleges to adopt those solutions, right, and that’s really where that policy work comes in, on the enabling environments, because you know, at the end of the day, policy is all about money and metrics, money and measurement, right? So and it’s both at the state and federal level, how is money flowing to the institution, at the federal level through students, federal financial aid and other title funds, entitlement funds.

Indeed, as one grant recipient stated, “A lot of the foundations are influenced by numbers. They need to be able to say that they’re impacting large numbers of students. So they have to look for places to invest where they can get some numbers because that’s what their board is after.”

Traditionally, foundations did not focus solely on evaluation for assessing their philanthropic impact (although there were cases when they did). Rather, foundations would fund an array of projects and initiatives and wait to see what developed, referred to by one informant as the “flower blooming” model. As this informant from an older funder noted,

They [newer funders] judge their decisions on the basis of efficacy, well this is something that the major foundations adopted maybe 20, 25 years ago, along with the tools needed to measure investments that are made in very complex problems that may take a very long time to show results and all of that work has been very influential in the new foundations, taking on things and measuring them more carefully and anticipating real change with the use of metrics and accountability mechanisms that were not in use in the

1950s and 60s and 70s in the major foundation. So, their influence has been important but indirect.

In fact, this indirect influence has impacted the strategic approaches of many of the older foundations. As one informant from an older funder noted, “That’s what their data has gone, to strategic effect. Although we would have said during the days that we’re being strategic, too. We had a mission, you know, we had—yeah, but they were—they’re talking about strategic philanthropy.” The newer entrants have been key proselytizers of using data and metrics in higher education philanthropy, therefore promoting a cultural shift in the field.

### **Prestige and Legitimacy**

Hall and Thomas (2012) find that the “modern foundations such as Lumina and Gates are defining what it means to be an influential higher education foundation in the twenty-first century” (p. 2). Similarly, several interviewees described Lumina and Gates’s effectiveness as a rationale for following their lead. “So, I would say that these younger foundations have had a great voice because they have been really effective,” as one executive at an older foundation stated. In fact, Gates and Lumina are described as being “on the cutting edge,” as one source explained. Other respondents noted that Lumina established itself as a leader despite its endowment being relatively small compared to other foundations, citing its sole focus on higher education issues. One interviewee noted,

[higher education] is the only thing that Lumina focuses on, so their president Jamie Merisotis is just a very, a very well-respected player and I think they have really lead a charge in defining the movement, I think people really look to Lumina foundation for definitional what we think of as completion. How do we measure completion? What is college which is, you know, you’ve probably heard me say a couple of times already,

post-secondary educational attainment, we use those two terms interchangeably, but they've, they've really lead the charge and so I would say they are the, you know, perhaps the biggest player in this arena.

One executive from an older foundation agreed with this statement, noting that “Lumina and Gates are huge voices” in higher education, which “means that a lot of people will understandably want to listen.” Indeed, one grant recipient noted,

The Jamie Mariesotis's of the world do go to those conversations. They're leading the conversation. They're driving the conversation, so are their program officers, I think, who have the opportunity to do more things than some of these other newer places might have. It's just a sense I have. I don't know. I know a little bit about Kresge's board. They're pretty progressive thinking, but a lot of these boards are made up of people who come from the business world and have a particular lens that they're looking at this. It gets back to this idea of: What is the return on investment? And how many widgets or students or colleges? Or whatever the metric is they're measuring.

According to Teles (2008), “[E]ffective patrons need to share with the groups they fund an underlying strategic vision...” (p. 20). Several foundation informants cited Merisotis's underlying vision on completion and policy change: “He really had a vision that Lumina would be more engaged in federal policy,” which “was a direct influence of his leadership and his vision for Lumina being more active and a thought leader in federal policy conversations,” as one Lumina employee stated. One former Kellogg director and former Lumina consultant agreed with this statement, noting, “So when Jamie came in, he focused it down to the whole issue of the big bodacious goal...of increasing the participation of U.S. citizens ... with degrees to 60

percent by 2025, which became the driving focus. ...” As such, this vision has seeped into the higher education and policy community.

Indeed, Reckhow and Tompkins-Stange (2018) note, “Foundations that fund a wide variety of interest groups can catalyze a field around a common issue position, by both igniting a new area of focus and amplifying an existing area through strategic investments” (p. 261). Several sources cited the newer foundations and the advocacy organizations they supported as central in catalyzing the field around completion. Gates and Lumina both use strategic action to promote completion as a preferred policy strategy, with many referencing Mr. Merisotis’s social skills for navigating complex political environments. Several informants from both Gates and Lumina acknowledged that the field frames have changed, making prospects for outcomes-based reforms more likely. One reason several sources cited was the 2025 goal: “So, I think that’s kind of the urgency on the foundation side, but you also have to take into consideration that the timepiece is of essence,” as one source contended.

Together, I have shown the similarities and differences between advocacy philanthropists and traditional funders and changes within the field of higher education philanthropy. In particular, longitudinal trends demonstrate that older funders were more likely to draw on the grantmaking strategies of the newer funders, similar to the findings of Haddad and Reckhow (2018). While there is much convergence in strategies, crucial differences still exist between groups. Many older foundations, for example, are more willing to take a back seat, focusing on their roles as capacity builders and conveners of higher education, a trend found in K–12 research (Tompkins-Stange, 2016). Nevertheless, these funders still provide significant grants for college completion purposes. While the tactics may differ, they have still been influenced by the dominance of college completion and have provided large investments for these purposes,

following the lead of the advocacy philanthropists. Accordingly, the newer foundations, along with their grantees, are “building the urgency for reform,” as one foundation official noted. Overall, the newer philanthropists have shifted the field frames in postsecondary education to focus on outcomes-based policies and college completion. One Gates official noted, “...[T]he fact that higher education reform is now part of the national political discourse does make it, yeah, it makes it possible. This would be super hard if nobody was talking about it.”

## CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study has been to systematically investigate the policy involvement of major foundations in higher education. The analysis has revealed that nongovernmental actors regularly work to shape and influence policies and practices in higher education. Increasingly, scholarly outlets are noticing the policy activities of nonstate actors, including philanthropists. For example, Barnhardt (2017) argues, “Despite the challenge in tightly or causally linking foundations’ agendas to subsequent specific outcomes, it is appropriate to conclude that foundations’ social agendas have indeed shaped the field of higher education in dramatic ways” (p. 232). Rather than being disinterested patrons, philanthropic organizations resemble interest groups, mobilizing policymakers, business representatives, and institutional leaders around college completion. My analysis has revealed that major postsecondary funders are mirroring many of the reform strategies found in K–12 philanthropy (Ferrare & Reynolds, 2016; Reckhow, 2013; Reckhow & Snyder, 2014; Tompkins-Stange, 2016), where philanthropic organizations rely upon intermediary groups to shape and influence public policies and practices through high-leverage strategies. Moreover, over the span of a decade, I found greater issue alignment around funding strategies across fields in higher education. In particular, major foundations have galvanized a field of policy actors, including advocacy groups, think tanks, public officials, private businesses, institutional leaders, and other funders, around outcome-based policies. I discuss major themes derived from my qualitative and quantitative analysis below.

### **Increasing Trends for High-leverage Philanthropy**

Since 2009, major funders have increasingly dedicated a greater proportion of their higher education portfolios to high-leverage purposes with an emphasis on college completion. Moreover, the grant analysis has demonstrated that the field of higher education philanthropy is

converging around this high-leverage strategy, where funding strategies have shifted since the introduction of the college completion agenda. For example, funders are less concerned with institutional building efforts—such as capital grants and general operating support—and are increasingly focusing on high-leverage strategies linked to policy advocacy and technology and innovation. Foundation officials argue that high-leverage investments yield the greatest return on social investments. From this perspective, foundations can leverage relatively limited grant dollars to produce the greatest social impact. Indeed, many foundations, such as Kresge, are involved in infrastructure building around completion, particularly in states without higher education coordinating bodies. This is most evident with the Student Success Centers established by Kresge across the country.

Foundations point to projected labor shortages as rationales for this high-leverage strategy. In particular, high-leverage grants are designed to promote initiatives that hold colleges and universities accountable to degree production and student success (Dougherty & Natow, 2015; Hillman et al., 2015). Nonetheless, foundations have not completely abandoned low-leverage grantmaking, such as capital grants and general operating support. In fact, philanthropists still provide substantial support for such purposes; however, a greater proportion of grants are being directed toward high-leverage investments.

### **Growing Support to Noninstitutional Entities**

I have also found evidence that philanthropists are relying on external constituencies that can challenge the status quo, such as advocacy nonprofits and think tanks (Gándara et al., 2017; Honig, 2004; Lubienski et al., 2011; Miller & Morphew, 2017; Scott & Jabbar, 2014). These noninstitutional entities act as boundary-spanners, advocating on behalf of major funders. As Hall and Thomas (2012) note,

These higher education policy organizations take on a number of different roles in the foundation initiative and grantmaking process; they produce policy reports, conduct research projects, put on conferences and summits, and engage in various implementation activities such as providing consultations, setting up data systems, and writing and editing legislation. (p. 19)

Indeed, these strategies allow philanthropists to forge strategic partnerships across traditional field boundaries, diffusing policy initiatives across multiple sectors. They also allow foundations to create informal governing networks that promote greater institutional harmonization around completion policies and practices, as represented by the UIA and the Frontier Set. With philanthropic support, these systems are shaping the higher education institutional landscape by directly targeting a collection of universities and colleges.

Moreover, my findings have demonstrated that foundations are organizing broad-based coalitions around degree production that are targeting state and federal policymakers. Several policy respondents, for example, cited the importance of philanthropic investments in “efforts to organize coalitions to advance agendas to improve post-secondary education attainment.” Indeed, advocacy organizations and think tanks receive a sizable portion of advocacy, policy, and completion grants for such goals. For many foundations, these entities function as political actors that can mobilize diverse constituencies around specific goals. As one policy expert stated, philanthropic funding

...has led me to focus a lot of energy on how we can increase educational attainment and higher education attainment and work with the governors, legislators, the higher education, business leaders, philanthropy, on developing and promoting agendas to help more people achieve higher education success as the central driver of economic activity.

Moreover, the most influential IOs in the college completion agenda are those created and supported by major philanthropists. In fact, interview sources discussed the importance of advocacy organizations such as Achieving the Dream and Complete College America in shifting higher education policy discourse and influencing the field's norms in the process. What makes these newer intermediaries effective is that they are single-purpose advocacy groups, dedicated to singular issues, typically around the college completion agenda.

### **Network Builders**

I have also found evidence that philanthropic foundations are building networked coalitions grounded on college completion. By applying social network analysis (Biancani & McFarland, 2013), I have identified a growing trend of convergent grantmaking in higher education philanthropy, with a greater number of funders providing support to reform-oriented entities. In particular, I have found that over the course of a decade, foundations increasingly cofunded intermediaries that can frame policy discussions, provide action-oriented research, and consult legislators on key issues. Interview data has also revealed that this form of collaboration is intended to produce the greatest impact with limited funding. Furthermore, many national funders encourage purposeful collaborations across the field of higher education philanthropy, where several sources argued that this new form of collaboration is a donor-driven strategy.

I have also found evidence that collaboration occurs in a variety of ways. For example, many of the interview informants noted that collaboration happens informally—through email, conferences, events, phone calls, or meetings—or formally, through reoccurring meetings and visits, particularly at the highest leadership levels, where foundation leaders are in regular contact with one another. These exchanges allow foundation leaders to share updates on their portfolios and the status of grants, as well as discuss key concerns (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018).

Although informants did not mention a single individual pushing the field toward collaborative grantmaking (many did, however, reference the collective influence of Gates and Lumina), in 2009, *The Chronicle* argued that Lumina’s CEO and President Mr. Merisotis is responsible for “deepened Lumina’s relationships with other philanthropies” (Hebel, 2009, May 1, para. 3). *The Chronicle* further added, “He and officials of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Ford Foundation are discussing, for instance, how the groups might collaborate to help the nation meet President Obama’s 2020 goal for higher education” (Hebel, 2009, May 1, para. 3).

Generally, the interview data and the social network analysis have revealed that since 2009, philanthropic foundations have become more collaborative in higher education philanthropy to promote systems change. Through grant investments, philanthropic organizations can construct and sustain informal partnerships and communication channels through intermediaries who can connect an array of social actors through knowledge sharing, convenings, informal meetings, and cofunding opportunities (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018).

### **Knowledge Sharing Across Fields**

Major postsecondary foundations frequently fund intermediaries to act as knowledge brokers. In higher education, philanthropic organizations increasingly rely on informal networks for policy promotion and organizational change. Diffusing policy ideas is a central strategy in scaling educational reform across higher education. In fact, several interviewees described the importance of sharing data and best practices through grantee networks, with many writing knowledge-sharing strategies into grant agreements. In particular, philanthropy-sponsored networks allow grantees and foundation officials to share data, information, and scientific reports for best practices regarding institutional transformation strategies. As such, these grant investments provide an informal communicative channel between program officers and their grant recipients,

with many grantees reporting regular check-ins with their foundation representatives. One policy respondent, a leader at a national membership association, described the frequency of these meetings: “We meet with our program officer every week to do a check-in. So, every Friday, one o’clock, we are on the phone with our program officer...” Moreover, I have also found evidence that major foundations regularly sponsor events to convene grantees, whether through conferences, working groups, presentations, or other networking events. In addition, several informants noted that foundations even push for collaboration among grantees.

Accordingly, I have found that foundations regularly rely on grantees who can function as brokers linking a diverse group of policy actors across subfields. The most represented liaisons are think tanks, advocacy groups, membership organizations, and government agencies. Interview data provides evidence that foundations invest in entities that can cut across these formal boundaries and broadcast ideas to diverse groups. This strategy is based on targeting multiple institutions at once by scaling policy ideas from one sector to another. Overall, this demonstrates that philanthropic grants are used by major funders to promote knowledge sharing within grantee networks. By emphasizing the informal, and at times hidden, communicative channels supported by philanthropists, these findings reveal that networks sustained through shared grantees allow reformers to formulate, transfer and promote policy ideas within and across diverse fields.

### **The Field of Higher Education Philanthropy**

In Bartley’s (2007) view, funders do advocate for “a particular model of social order and attempt to build new arenas of social life...” (p. 231). Through this analysis, I have found that the organizational field of higher education philanthropy has shifted its focus from postsecondary access to college completion. College completion has dominated the elite higher education discourse in the last decade, with many sources referencing the newer foundations for channeling

investments and legitimacy for these granting purposes. In particular, foundations have driven the cultivation of ideas and galvanized policy groups around outcome-based policies in higher education. Furthermore, contemporary foundations have been influential in shaping field dynamics in postsecondary philanthropy. Several policy informants, including former Obama officials, for example, cited the newer foundations—Gates and Lumina—as central policy actors in shifting the discourse from access toward completion.

Investments from Gates and Lumina also allow policy researchers and advocates to focus on outcome-oriented policies. This has not only ignited interest around completion but also created lasting support across the broader policy community. As Teles (2008) notes, “A regime is most likely to endure when it can make its ideas seem natural, appropriate, and commonsensical, consigning its opponents to the extremes” (p. 16). Accordingly, many older foundations are increasingly funding intermediaries and researchers for completion-oriented projects. Moreover, the field of higher education philanthropy has also changed. Several interview informants claimed that older funders are embracing many of the strategies introduced by the advocacy philanthropists, such as policy advocacy–engagement. One interviewee, a former Obama official, stated, “So it’s like the idea sort of came from the field and Lumina helped to make that happen...and then other foundations started focusing on completion.” Indeed, evidence reveals that over the course of a decade, foundations have increasingly cofunded completion-oriented initiatives with Gates and Lumina, in addition to funding similar purposes relating to policy advocacy and research (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018).

According to Fligstein and McAdams (2012), incumbents are always more conservative when compared to challengers, and changes always “come from an invader or challenger group” (p. 18). According to Kelly and James (2015), “...Gates and others have employed a more

aggressive strategy to reshape American higher education through changes in public policy” (p. 86). In fact, many interview participants suspected that the completion agenda would not have become such an overarching issue if not for elite patronage. By invoking the challenger–incumbent framework, I have found evidence that the newer foundations introduced a new field frame in higher education philanthropy, with many traditional funders following suit (Haddad & Reckhow, 2018).

Together, these findings contribute to the growing literature on foundations and intermediaries. Rather than focusing on traditional policymaking mechanisms related to state characteristics, my study has emphasized private actors and their roles in the public policymaking process (e.g., Miller & Morphew, 2017). Philanthropic foundations have engaged with IOs to promote college completion in novel ways. My grant analysis and interviews have revealed that the power of organized philanthropy stems from not only its (admittedly substantial) investments but also its capacity to confer prestige and amplify voices in policy networks (Reckhow & Snyder, 2014). As a result, philanthropic foundations should be understood not as disinterested patrons in higher education but rather as influential policy actors.

### **Literature Gaps**

I have identified several literature gaps regarding the policy activities of major funders in higher education. For example, future research still must be conducted to examine the impact of major funders on nonmajor foundations in higher education. For example, throughout the interviews, I found a recurring theme that major foundations are engaging with smaller and more regionally focused funders around completion and reorienting them to focus on completion. In a study on nonmajor foundations in K–12 education, Ferrare and Reynolds (2016) find that major foundations are spreading their agendas to smaller and more regionally focused philanthropists.

They also find that nonmajor foundations are also converging around college readiness and enrichment organizations, which represent more total funding than other organizations sampled (Ferrare & Reynolds, 2016). They argue that “future research should examine these college readiness and student enrichment organizations in more detail, and whether foundations have been changing their support for such organizations over time” (Ferrare & Reynolds, p. 163). In terms of higher education, interviewees frequently cited examples of major funders working with local foundations to implement place-based projects. However, no existing analysis examines whether major foundations’ agendas have spread to nonmajor funders. Such an analysis would illuminate the roles of smaller and more regionally focused foundations on higher education policymaking.

Moreover, I have found evidence that foundations fund research intermediaries to advance their agendas and diffuse ideas at the state and federal levels. However, philanthropic-funded think tanks are underexamined in the higher education policy literature (Ness & Gándara, 2014). The existing literature focuses heavily on how information is used by policymakers (Ness, 2010), with little attention on the role of elite patronage on policy diffusion. Many informants were quick to note the importance of foundation funding for their policy research, with the goal of having policymakers adopt these proposals and use them to craft policies. However, little research has examined how funders use intermediaries to diffuse policy ideas.

Recent empirical research in K–12 education demonstrates that foundation-funded interest groups are increasingly invited to provide Congressional testimony regarding teacher quality and value-added evaluations (Reckhow & Tompkins-Stange, 2015, 2018). Reckhow and Tompkins-Stange (2018) find that Gates and Broad, rather than promoting top-down change, amplify specific policy groups based on shared policy goals. Similar phenomena are occurring in

higher education. Interview data reveals that action-oriented research is a high priority for postsecondary funders. Moreover, many research informants discussed the informal assumption that research should be used to inform lawmakers. However, no empirical research has assessed how foundation-funded research is entering the policy arena. Examining how policymakers rely on such research would extend this area of work.

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