'Replication' May Be the Sincerest Form of Philanthropy

By THOMAS E. BACKER

IN HER BOOK Postcards from the Edge, the actress Carrie Fisher writes that “instant gratification isn’t nearly fast enough for me.” Americans are prone to search for the quick fix. That this search almost always proves fruitless does not seem to deter us much.

In the non-profit world, everyone is hoping to find the magic bullet by spreading successful model programs throughout the country. It is a smart philanthropic investment to concentrate on ways to reproduce good programs, rather than devoting so much effort to creating hundreds of new ways to solve problems. But it is shortsighted to think that those investments will provide easy or quick solutions to our nation’s most vexing health, education, and social-service difficulties.

“Replication” is the buzz word that is often used to describe the process by which programs are transferred to new locations from their original settings. It has become popular with private-foundation leaders and government officials—many of whom want to stretch their dollars as far as possible. While the idea is not new, it has taken on a growing urgency, given the seriousness of problems facing Americans and the tight budgets at all levels of government.

Some grant-making organizations, such as the American Foundation for AIDS Research, are establishing special programs that will help spread effective programs across the country. The Pew Charitable Trusts recently provided a start-up grant to create a nonprofit that will show charities how to reproduce programs that have been developed by other organizations. Last fall leaders of foundations and non-profits gathered in Washington for a pioneering national conference on this topic, coordinated by the California Association of Nonprofits and supported by the David and Lucile Packard and Charles Stewart Mott Foundations (The Chronicle, September 21).

The difficulty with national organizations deciding where model programs should be reproduced is obvious. People in local communities are likely to be resistant if they feel that outsiders have picked one program to be the solution for widely varying local problems.

Leaders of social-service organizations and community groups know that exact duplication of a program—the McDonald’s franchise approach—does not always work. Unfortunately, all too many grant makers are afraid to tinker with a program that has received good reviews in one place. They fear that making even small changes will ruin a program—while not realizing that they need to allow local organizations to have some flexibility in adapting programs to meet the needs of their own communities.

But numerous other challenges also exist:

➤ Programs are too often transferred to other settings before they have been carefully evaluated. A program not only has to be proved effective, it also has to be analyzed to determine whether it is ready to be used in another location.

Good methods exist to determine how well a program may be received in a new community. Lawrence Green, formerly of the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and now at the University of British Columbia, has even developed a computer-software program for “social reconnaissance” that measures whether a community is ready to change in response to an influx of foundation grants for the reproduction of a particular program.

➤ Grant makers must examine the relative effectiveness of different approaches to reproducing model programs. How does replication fit with a grant maker’s continuing communication and evaluation activities? What strategies work in what settings and at what costs?

The Exxon Education Foundation’s IMPACT project to improve college teaching is an example of how relatively small amounts of money can be used to spread good pro-
grams. Information about six innovative college-teaching programs developed by Exxon grantees was sent across the country to any faculty member who requested it. Exxon held workshops for professors who wanted to learn more and offered modest financial support to those who planned to try some of the innovative ideas.

- Foundations must overcome their reluctance to discuss failures and be willing to share the problems in reproducing programs as well as the successes. Looking at unsuccessful efforts follows the wisdom of the philosopher Joseph Campbell: "Dig where you stumble, that's where the treasure is."

For instance, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation successfully spread its Project STAR, which aims to prevent drug abuse in middle schools, from Kansas City to other Missouri locations, Kansas, and Indianapolis in the late 1980's. The program's reproduction in the District of Columbia has been much more challenging, especially in promoting "ownership" of the program in the local community. The foundation is now exploring whether an evaluation might determine what worked and what did not. It is clear that one reason the Washington effort faced such difficulties is that the public schools have far different problems now than they did in the 1980's. While drug abuse was the prime concern then, violence is now the biggest worry. What's more, many competing drug-abuse-prevention programs now exist; many of those programs had not even been created when attempts to spread Project STAR were begun.

- Grant makers need to find a variety of ways to spread innovative ideas. Press conferences, newsletters, and other communications efforts can lead to change and often set the stage for broader use of research findings, model programs, or new technologies. Several foundations, including the W. K. Kellogg and Robert Wood Johnson Foundations, provide "dissemination grants" to spread information about the lessons and results of successful programs. The Kauffman Foundation recently decided to make one of its top priorities the distribution of information about the successes and failures of the programs it supports so that people in local communities can decide whether to adopt them. It will back up that decision with the staff members and money needed to make change happen.

- Research findings show that even the most effective programs can fail when they are tried elsewhere because insufficient attention was paid to the human dynamics of change. People need to see that they will have a direct benefit from making a change. If their fears about new programs are not assuaged, it is highly likely that they will resist innovation.

- People who want to reproduce model programs don't get much support from their bosses or their organizations. The non-profit world needs to develop ways to make it easier for programs to be spread effectively. Foundations and charities both need to be able to obtain information and technical support about the most effective ways to reproduce programs. More important, the culture of philanthropy needs to change. As the Pew Trusts' Michael Rubinger has noted: "We tend to put a premium on innovation, less so on replication. It's not sexy."

That means that the incentive structure must be changed. Foundation program officers, for instance, must be rewarded for their efforts to promote replication. The importance of spreading good programs could also be emphasized through training programs for foundation staff and board members and studies by academic centers on philanthropy.

- Most efforts to spread effective programs start at the top, with attempts to persuade non-profit executives and community leaders to adopt model programs. But change is more likely when information about good programs is made available to grassroots groups, so that enthusiasm can bubble up from the bottom. As Peter Goldmark, president of the Rockefeller Foundation, said in a recent speech: "We will have to create partnerships open to the many rather than just a privileged few—partnerships that will foster teamwork in small groups at the bottom rather than at the top."

Successful replication requires the same values that govern the best-managed non-profits: concern for program excellence, an emphasis on getting involvement from those who will have to live with the program, and a willingness to commit resources to the long haul, rather than searching for the elusive magic bullet. Why, in an era of scarce resources, isn't the non-profit world doing more to build on the ideas that we know work?

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