Good Ventures/GiveWell notes from March 2012 meeting with Paul Brest, President of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

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Holden described the first two legs of the GiveWell Labs investigation: 1) basic research and 2) meta-research.

Part of the GiveWell Labs approach, Holden said, includes reviewing the available history of philanthropy in order to identify its biggest successes and failures and looking for patterns. One of Holden's major sources for this has been the Casebook for The Foundation. Paul cautioned against relying too heavily on conclusions drawn from this exercise because of the incompleteness of the record of philanthropic successes and failures. He referred particularly to the danger of "selection on the dependent variable," where one draws conclusions from successes but not from failures, which are much less frequently documented. Paul also drew a contrast between the level of "intentionality" with which we're approaching the exercise, and the possibly lower level of intentionality that the philanthropists behind some of the historical success stories exhibited at the outset of those projects. For instance, some believe that conservative foundations did not set out with the intention of creating the conservative intellectual movement when they began pouring funding into conservative think tanks, etc. Paul recommended a book by Teles on the giving of conservative foundations, presumably: http://press.princeton.edu/titles/8643.html

Paul said "the biggest barrier to good philanthropy" is that "we're not a sector." In other words, that most philanthropists are off working on their own projects and interests and, presumably, are not coordinating, collaborating and learning from each other to the extent that they could be.

Paul challenged the notion that GiveWell is fully "sector-agnostic," as it claims, asking whether GiveWell would (for example) consider funding research into Byzantine art. GiveWell responded that its focus is on human empowerment and that it is sector-agnostic within that goal. Holden laid out GiveWell's tentative "promising sectors" for GiveWell Labs, which include funding basic research, funding attempts to improve the general operations of the research community, and funding to prevent or mitigate global catastrophic risks. Paul's take was that each of the areas that Holden mentioned seems to be "upstream" and "high risk," and that GiveWell will have to be "very patient," since results could be years in the making. He said that a major challenge would be finding donors with the requisite patience and willingness to work on such "upstream" causes.

GiveWell identified some of the abovementioned "promising sectors" by comparing the fields in which philanthropy has historically been successful with the fields in which philanthropy is primarily working today and looking for discrepencies. Paul said he hadn't previously thought about approaching the question of where to focus one's philanthropy in this methodical, sector-agnostic way -- and that he finds the prospect "very exciting."

When Holden asked Paul to name problems that philanthropy would be well-suited to tackle but that philanthropists are overlooking for whatever reason, he said:

- Areas in technology where there's no for-profit or government interest (for example, technology whose main benefits pertain to climate change)
- Drug development for orphan diseases

Paul said he'd think more about the question.

When asked what other resources he'd recommend on the history of philanthropy, Paul said that enough had not been written on the topic. He said that before The Foundation, people in the field often cited The Big Foundations by Waldemar A. Nielsen, written in the 60s, which largely was a critique of large foundations. He also recommended a book that recently came out by Philip Zunz. He took us by the Hewlett Foundation's library to look at the books they have on the topic.

Holden asked how the Hewlett Foundation came to start working on climate change, even though that was not part of the foundation's original program areas and mandate.

Paul said Hewlett became interested in energy at a time when California energy prices spiked, leading to rolling brownouts. Hewlett decided to find out who was doing research on energy and electricity. The program director for environment wasn't interested in that issue, so Paul worked directly with a program officer interested in the field. When the program director position in environment opened up, Hewlett sought out someone who could blend Hewlett's traditional focus on Western U.S. environmental conversation with energy & climate change; they settled on Hal Harvey.

Paul praised the "intentionality" with which we are approaching the question of focus area, but he added that "intentionality occurs within a context of a fair amount of serendipity."

He recommended speaking with Matt Bannick, managing partner of Omidiyar Network, who he said is thinking about some of the same issues from a different vantage point.

Next question: How is Hewlett's program staff structured, and what do program officers do all day long? How do you find and train them, in particular for brand new areas of interest for the foundation, such as climate change?

Paul said each program has a program director and program officers. Program directors are responsible for developing strategies with Paul and managing grantmaking and evaluation. Program officers work with program directors on this, but focus on grantmaking.

Paul recommended reading his piece "Beyond the Grant Dollars" for more information, and he mentioned that Jen Ratay in the philanthropy program is launching a new training program at Hewlett for program officers.

Program directors are primarily responsible for strategic planning. This includes talking to practictioners, academics, etc., developing logic models and developing and assessing evaluation plans.

The core work of program officers is due diligence, Paul said. They find grantees who are sufficiently aligned with the foundation's goals. They assess the capacity of grantees in the field and work with grantees to develop their capacity. They know a lot about how organizations work. They are good at reading financials, site visits and identifying grantees' strengths and weaknesses. They do this throughout the grant and assist grantees in strenghtening their capacities in needed areas. They also perform the many other functions described in Beyond the Grant Dollars.

As an aside, Paul mentioned that generally "you don't learn a lot from one-off grants" compared with coordinated grantmaking. This was in reference to his experience with the President's "special projects" fund at Hewlett.

On hiring program officers, Paul said Hewlett doesn't always choose people with grantmaking experience. Dana Schmidt, a program officer in global education, for instance, came to Hewlett right after college, first as a one-year fellow. "We have hired a lot of one-year fellows just on the intuition of their adding value," Paul said.

Hewlett also doesn't necessarily require pre-existing field expertise. A strong staffer can get up to speed on a new domain in a reasonable period of time.

Paul's advice for exploring a new field, such as meta-research:

Talk to many people in the field -- more than 10, fewer than 100 -- to learn what the possibilities are. Ask for referrals. Talk to everyone who is relevant.

Develop a logic model, including intermediate and final outcomes. Consider how you'll measure and evaluate from the outset.

Specific goals tend to lend themselves to particular grantees. One gets a good sense of who the possible grantees are in the landscaping/survey process.

Develop a strategic plan, including how the foundation is going to know year by year how it's doing, how grantees fit into its plan, what metrics to collect.

Program officers spend their time reading reports, reading grantee financials, meeting with grantees, meeting with other people in the field, strengthening grantees through capacity building grants (usually to hire a consultant to work on a specific issue) or working with grantees themselves on capacity building, Paul said.

Program staff investigating a completely new area for the foundation spend a lot of time in the field and talking to.

Paul recommended talking to Barbara Chow about the development of Hewlett's "deeper learning" strategy, as an example.

Paul said learning/landscaping before grantmaking is wise, but that Hewlett also begins grantmaking before the learning process about a new field is over.

Part of the program director's job is managing a small administrative unit and being networked in with the important people in the field.

For a typical program staff size at Hewlett, consider the Education Program, which has one program director, four program officers and three program assistants.

One issue on which Paul wishes he'd made more progress during his tenure: "We continue to ask for more information [from grantees] than we use." He likes to tell program officers: "Don't kill what you can't eat."

Later, Paul said GiveWell Labs was the most exciting new idea he'd heard in some time.