**Big-Time Foundations Leave Their Mark on Education Policy—Research by Sarah Reckhow**

In recent years, charitable foundations have taken an interest in national education initiatives and issues in unprecedented ways, transforming the educational policy landscape. For example, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Eli and Edith Broad Foundation have exerted influence on national education policy decisions by offering substantial funding and research-based evidence to organizations that work toward and advocate for reforms such as teacher evaluation. Assistant Professors Sarah Reckhow at Michigan State University and Megan Tompkins-Stange at the University of Michigan examined whether the Gates and Broad foundations are influencing education policy decisions in ways that live up to their reputations, and how they came to be regarded as influential by the education policy community.

In order to explore the kind of impact that the Gates and Broad foundations are having on public education policy, Reckhow and Tompkins-Stange looked at grants relating to teacher quality that were awarded by these two foundations. Specifically, they assessed who the foundations were funding and what those groups were doing in order to win those grants. The study focused on advocacy for teacher quality measures because there is a great deal of publicly-available documentation on the subject. The authors analyzed grant distributions, Congressional testimony, and interviews with foundation officials from 2010-2012. In total, 96 Congressional hearings on teacher quality were analyzed, including 470 non-governmental witnesses.

**A Pattern of Influence**

Reckhow and Tompkins-Stange found that the Broad and Gates foundations are indeed having an impact on the advocacy work in which their grantees engage. The researchers discovered a distinct pattern of the foundations shifting their funding focus away from local groups toward national advocacy organizations and from discrete projects toward national reform efforts. After refocusing their efforts, the foundations pursued two strategies to achieve their policy advocacy goals: they attempted to build close relationships with U.S. Department of Education officials, and they funded nationally-recognized organizations that were all doing the same types of advocacy work around teacher quality. Access to officials was available because several former Gates grantees and foundation officials received appointments in the Obama administration. The foundations also funded studies that supported their teacher quality advocacy agenda. Congressional testimony by grantees rose over this period of time, and many of the research items cited in those hearings were cited by multiple grantees. In the words of the authors, this combination of grantee practices “contributed to a watershed shift in education policy” in which foundation funding focused and accelerated the advocacy work of the grant recipients.

**What It Means to You**

Education policy makers should be aware of the growing influence of education-focused philanthropy and not assume that it comes with no strings attached to it. This is a difficult balancing act during a time of limited resources and tight education budgets. Funding of research and advocacy that happens outside the public, democratic process raises questions about the
transparency, accountability, and one-dimensional focus of those efforts. Policy makers should ensure a diversity of perspectives in debates about educational reform, especially on such high-stakes issues as teacher quality.

This study also raises important points for researchers to consider when pursuing funding and embarking upon new projects. As the number of political actors in the realm of education policy swells, so too will the demand for research that supports their views. Reckhow and Tompkins-Stange illustrate the increasingly blurred lines between research and advocacy work, a dynamic that is influencing the types of policies that are prioritized on the national stage. Researchers should strive to ensure that their work remains as objective and unbiased as possible, which requires vigilance about where funding comes from and for what purposes it might be used.