Lessons Learned from the 2014 Bush Fellowship Selection Process

Part of the Bush Foundation Learning Paper Series

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For the past year, the Bush Foundation has worked with an external evaluation team from Wilder Research to incorporate evaluative methodologies into all facets of the Bush Fellowship program.

In 2014, the Foundation made a number of changes to enhance the Bush Fellowship program’s flexibility, selectivity and visibility. Wilder surveyed the 2014 Bush Fellowship semi-finalist and finalist candidates, and selection committee members to evaluate the impact of the changes to the selection process. This Learning Paper shares insights gleaned from this survey.

We look forward to sharing future learning papers on the impact the Fellowship program has on our Fellows and the impact our Fellows have on their communities and the region.

Background

The Bush Foundation has a long history of investing in individuals to think bigger and think differently. Since 1966, the Foundation has awarded nearly $80 million in fellowship funds to 2,200 individuals through three past programs – Bush Leadership Fellows, Bush Medical Fellows, and Bush Artist Fellows – and the current Bush Fellows program which aims to inspire, equip and connect leaders to more effectively lead change in their communities.

The changes to the Bush Fellowship selection process discussed and evaluated in this paper were undertaken as part of our efforts to enhance the program’s flexibility, selectivity and visibility.

Flexibility

The hallmark of the Bush Fellowship has been the flexibility it gives participants to pursue their leadership development aspirations and goals, as they define them. We heard feedback that an earlier decision to remove academic credentialing as an option in the fellowship was limiting the aspirations of some applicants, particularly candidates from communities of color. As such, we reintroduced the option of using Fellowship funds to pay for academic degrees. We also expanded the maximum amount from $80,000 to $100,000 to provide additional options and we combined quarterly leadership development seminars into a single required retreat, supplemented by a number of optional experiential and educational opportunities for Fellows.

Selectivity

We wanted our recruiting to be more proactive, strategic, and vigorous to grow the quantity and quality of our candidate pool particularly where data showed the pool was underrepresented, such as corporate/non-profit and South Dakota applicants. We strengthened our proactive outreach to former Bush Fellow alumni and expanded our marketing and communications activity in both segments.

We also noted that the Bush Fellowship application process created barriers to participation for candidates who opted not to explore a Fellowship based on the time required to submit an initial application. Therefore we returned to a two-stage application process, making the first application a lower barrier to entry. For example, applicants no longer have to provide reference letters with the initial application. In addition, we made two changes to increase rigor of the process: we added phone interviews with semi-finalists and spoke directly to all three references.

Visibility

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What worked well

We experienced a nearly 200% increase in the number of overall applicants from 2013 to 2014 (394 total), with the majority of new applicants coming from the Twin Cities. We believe this increase reflected the combination of:

- targeted and intensive outreach to Bush Fellow alumni
- sourcing of promising prospects identified by Foundation staff
- changes to our program including a simplified application and reintroduction of a degree option

Overall, semi-finalist and finalist candidates for the Fellowship felt the application process was a valuable experience. Though a small number of people were ultimately awarded Fellowships from the large pool of applicants, 70% of respondents rated it as a “great experience” with 67% stating “they learned a lot” from the process of applying.

One respondent shared, “Because the process is so thorough, as you advance through the various rounds of applications and interviews, you deeply convince yourself of the importance of your work and of your abilities to make a difference. Whether you’re ultimately selected as a Fellow or not, it sort of burns into your consciousness a need to do something, whatever your something is.”

And another shared, “while not selected as a Bush Fellow, the process broadened my thinking tremendously. It helped me to become strategic about my plans for improving things in the state and region. I have developed new relationships, am continuing to build upon my leadership strengths and will look for opportunities to broaden my network to effect change.”

Overall, the following percentage of semi-finalists and finalists found the process of applying helped them “a lot” in these specific areas: “developing strategies for building leadership skills” (56%), “identifying your personal strengths and weaknesses related to leadership” (64%), “developing clear goals for improving your community” (74%), “broadening and/or strengthening your network” (46%), and “increasing your beliefs about what you can accomplish” (67%).

Semi-Finalists, Finalists and selectors appreciated the information they received and expressed a desire for even more. Semi-finalists and Finalists appreciated the variety of ways they were able to share their information with Bush Foundation, including the two-stage application process, the interviews, and providing references. Finalists greatly appreciated the Bush Foundation Leadership staff’s passion about the Fellowship, the time staff members devoted to communicating with Finalists, and the feedback interviewers provided on finalists’ applications.
Public announcement strategy produced enhanced visibility and buzz in the community. We recorded video interviews with all 2014 Bush Fellowship finalists so that we could produce an announcement video in coordination with a new 2014 Bush Fellows website, social media outreach and press release campaign. (Note: we received feedback that the video interview component produced additional stress for finalists and we will re-evaluate the role of incorporating video interviews 2015 program.) There was a significant increase in traffic to the Bush Foundation website and qualitative feedback shared by 2014 Fellows that they were inundated with positive communication following our announcement.

What didn’t work well.

Confusion about selection criteria. To support our aims of offering a more flexible Fellowship program that meets our aim of inspiring, connecting and equipping Fellows to lead change, we made a shift in the program this year from “project-centric” program to a “person-centric” program. That is, while we continue to believe the projects or programs that Fellows participate in while in the Fellowship are important, we are most interested in Fellows’ potential to impact their communities over the long term. Our selection criteria centers on the person, plan and here/his potential for greater leadership impact, and it’s clear that not all applicants fully comprehended this. We can improve how effectively we inform the community, applicants, reviewers and interviewers about what we’re seeking in our Bush Fellowship applicants.

Selection committee preparation. Reviewers and interviewers encouraged staff to provide additional training and better communication regarding selection criteria, process and meeting preparation at each stage of the process. We will incorporate their feedback into our 2015 program planning and training process.

The Fellowship applicant pool did not represent the geographic diversity of our region. While we had a significant increase in the total number of Fellowship applicants, we did not experience an increase in the number of applicants from Greater Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota and the 23 Native Nations sharing the geography for the 2014 Bush Fellowship program. We will partner more intentionally with other organizations and our Bush Fellow alumni in these regions to help us identify and cultivate applicants for our 2015 program.

What’s next?

More connectivity with Bush Fellow alumni. Our Leadership and Engagement team is currently conducting 2015 Bush Fellowship recruitment and selection work and will be incorporating this feedback into all facets of our outreach. We also plan to focus in 2015 on better connecting Bush Fellow alumni with each other, with current Fellows, and with the Bush Foundation. We will document those efforts in a future paper, including an overview of the recent bushCONNECT event that brought together 1,000+ attendees, including several hundred Bush Fellow alumni.

Reflect the cultural, ethnic, geographic and professional diversity of our funding region in our interview and selection committees. We received some feedback that corporate, public sector, rural and cultural/ethnic voices were underrepresented in our selection process. It may be impossible to construct a selection committee that is absolutely representative of the region we serve, but that does not stop us from trying. The 2014 Bush Fellowship selection committee was diverse in many ways.

That said, we have been and will always be intentional in identifying and addressing experience and perspective gaps in our process. We will also be strengthening our training and education work with interview and selection committees for the 2015 program.

Ongoing assessment. We will continue to meet weekly with the Wilder Research evaluation team to incorporate evaluative methodologies and processes in our work and to design strategies to measure the individual and community impact of the Fellowships. These learnings and insights will be shared in future learning papers.

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About Bush Foundation Learning Papers

The Bush Foundation launched this series of Learning Papers to share what we are learning as we invest in great ideas and the people that power them. Unless otherwise noted, Learning Papers are written by the staff who worked directly on the projects covered therein. We will write and publish occasional papers when we have lessons that we think could help others do their work better or help our community in a broader way. Sources of insight may come from an external evaluation, internal process review, or other forms. We always welcome feedback.

Please send to info@BushFoundation.org.