

Funding Innovative Research: The Robert Wood Johnson Programs for Political Scientists

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Securing financial support for political science research is difficult and getting harder. University budgets are tight and government sources are drying up. Making matters worse, private foundations have cut back on their funding after the stock market declines of the past three years. Further ratcheting down the support for research, many private foundations are turning to “impact giving,” shifting their grants toward programs that offer the promise of quick, measurable real-world impacts.

One of the few bright spots in the consistently dreary news on support for political science research is the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s programs for young and more established political scientists. If you don’t know about these programs or have heard about them and haven’t applied, you may be making a mistake—a costly one.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (the largest foundation devoted exclusively to health and health care) made an unusual calculation about a dozen years ago: health care represents one-seventh of the economy and yet those who were card carrying political scientists and studied health policy and politics could fit in a conference room (and a small one at that). The Foundation (or RWJF for the *au courant*) decided that generating innovative analysis to explain critical puzzles in health policy—from the failure of National Health Insurance to the

difficulties in containing national health care expenditures—required a significant expansion in political science research and investment in human capital within the discipline.

Don’t stop reading, even if you’ve never studied health care policy and politics. RWJF realizes the need to recruit political scientists with diverse academic backgrounds who have no significant experience in health policy or politics. The Foundation’s objective is not to seduce political scientists away from the profession; just the opposite. Its aim is to encourage the most promising and accomplished researchers to remain or become leaders within political science and to use health policy and politics as one of their main sites of research.

RWJF launched in 1992 two programs—Scholars in Health Policy Research and the Investigator Awards in Health Policy Research—that represent one of the most ambitious and effective efforts by a private foundation to encourage new research ever seen in the political science profession. To date, the Foundation has supported the education and development of 117 Scholars and has presented Investigator Awards to 118 individuals involved in 95 different research projects. In both programs, political science is one of three social science disciplines targeted for particular attention; economics and sociology are the other two.

The purpose of the Foundation’s funding is extraordinarily broad and enabling: build long-term intellectual capacity in the analysis of public policy and, specifically, the policy and politics of health and health care. The Investigator Awards and Scholars Programs do not insist on projects targeted to narrow topics using a predetermined methodological approach. Rather, the aims of these programs are to recruit new blood, broaden the range of topics, avoid the slide into narrow methodological disputes, and introduce clearer vision to increasingly hermetic and self-referential debates within the orbits of health policy and political science research. In a remarkable move, the Foundation has defined success (as David Colby noted in a recent RWJF Anthology) as “creat[ing] public intellectuals whose

works are read by a broad audience and whose influence extends beyond a narrow academic readership.”

Here are some brief details (more information on both programs can be found at www.RWJF.org).

Scholars in Health Policy Research Program (see also: www.healthpolicyscholars.org)

The Scholars Program is geared toward encouraging recent Ph.D.s and junior faculty to conduct research on health policy and politics. The Program admits up to 12 scholars a year for a two-year fellowship at one of three universities—University of California at Berkeley in collaboration with the University of California-San Francisco, University of Michigan, and Harvard University. In addition to some research support and standard university resources, each Scholar admitted in the fall of 2004 will receive a stipend of \$71,000 for the first year and \$74,000 for the second year. Prior work in health and health policy is not a requirement for selection given the Foundation’s commitment to reaching out to a broader range of researchers. Scholars as diverse as Daniel Carpenter (Harvard University) and Cathy Cohen (University of Chicago) have published prominent books and articles based on their participation in the Program; both were selected as Scholars without a notable background in health care.

Investigator Awards in Health Policy Research (see also www.ihhpcpar.rutgers.edu/rwjf)

The Investigator Awards Program institutionalized a more *ad hoc* RWJF initiative in the 1970s and 1980s called the “Great Men” Awards. The Investigator Program awards about 10 grants a year that range up to \$275,000 for a three-year period. The purpose of the Award is to encourage accomplished scholars of all ranks to take risks and do innovative work on issues of first-order importance that recast major debates among political scientists with clear policy implications. Grant funds are primarily intended as salary support for the principal investigator—support

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can be used to fund course releases and travel as well as the collection and analysis of different kinds of evidence. Recipients of the Awards have included longstanding analysts of health and health policy like Theodore Marmor (Yale University), James Morone (Brown University), and Deborah Stone (Dartmouth College), as well as scholars who have come more recently to health policy such as Theda Skocpol (Harvard

University) and Richard Hall (University of Michigan).

The Scholars and Investigator Awards programs offer not only generous and remarkably open-ended funding, but also *entrée* into vibrant intellectual communities through annual meetings and networks with a diverse group of scholars, foundations, and policy makers. In addition, the Scholars Program provides the opportunity for mentoring and joint re-

search with senior scholars. The Investigator Awards Program funds “cluster” projects that bring together interdisciplinary groups around a common topic. For instance, I am co-editing a volume with Jim Morone and Larry Brown on the politics of inequality (*Healthy, Wealthy, and Fair*, Oxford University Press, forthcoming); its contributors include political scientists, economists, and sociologists.