

A Brief Overview of Funding in the Field of Consciousness

Executive Summary

Sherry Consulting

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Sherry*Consulting

Sherry Consulting was engaged to do a field scan of the funder landscape in the field of consciousness, with a particular emphasis on funders in the United States and their key areas of interest, lessons learned and observations on the field. Over an initial 10-week project period beginning in December 2019, we conducted research on a broad range of institutions and centers and conducted 20 interviews. After completing our initial findings in February 2020, we conducted a limited set of follow-on interviews with select funders and also undertook a preliminary look at how the rise of COVID-19 was impacting this space.¹ Randall Mays, who commissioned the work, agreed to share a public version of the report which we now share with an extensive appendix. We note that this report is neither a comprehensive overview of all funders, nor global in nature, and it is certainly not a study of the field of consciousness per se. Rather, it is designed to share insights from analysis of some of the major funding players in the field and offer suggestions and recommendations for potential next steps.

Our report begins with an overview of the legacy and newer funder landscape, focusing on a handful of major legacy foundations, principally the work of the combined Fetzer foundations and the Templeton foundations. This research confirmed the importance of long-term, focused funding for academic research and dissemination of research findings for the broader public as integral to field-building. We then turned to the work of a number of newer foundations in the field, with particular emphasis on the work of Tiny Blue Dot as a major funder, but also referencing other foundations like Emerald Gate, Evolve, 1440 Foundation and others. These newer foundations bring new philosophies and areas of focus and demonstrate the growing interest and evolving approaches in the space. We heard consistently from many funders about the need for clarity about philanthropic goals, funding research to prove scientific validity of various theories, and the importance of focus and long-term engagements.

Our report also highlights various donor and investment collaboratives we were able to interview, including Synergos and the Bridge Builders Collaborative, amongst others, and some other observations about newer donor behavior from other sources. We also highlight the importance of various academic centers and organizations, and some emerging areas of interest in the space, including psychedelics.

What emerged overall from the report was evidence of a desire to engage in more in-depth assessments of funder investments to date, provide opportunities for funder dialogue and exchange, and create opportunities for sharing due diligence and exploring possible partnerships.

¹ Given the evolving nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, we offer this preliminary look on COVID-19's impact on the field as a snapshot of a moment in time, rather than a conclusive analysis.

The following are some of the key findings and takeaways in our report:

1. Considerable philanthropic investment over many years has helped create the building blocks for the modern interest in consciousness. Legacy funders who have made ongoing, multi-year investments in academic research and institutions, media and storytelling, and seminal field-building efforts have created the foundation for bringing the field of consciousness into the mainstream.
2. At the same time, basic research into neuroscience and the neurological underpinnings of consciousness is still in its infancy. There are still many competing theories and avenues of research, and only focused, long-term funding and research will help winnow those theories and enable major breakthroughs that will be necessary to move scientific understanding forward. Getting researchers to collaborate and distill leading theories while abandoning others with little evidentiary basis is a predictably difficult challenge.
3. The challenge of shared language and shared goals is robust in this field. Consciousness means many different things to different players, and without shared language, it's extremely difficult to achieve clarity and alignment around shared goals.
4. A lack of common language and clarity about goals, outcomes, and impact also impedes collaboration. Funders have historically not cooperated much in this field and there are few instances of shared case studies or assessments of the efficacy of different funding strategies across the field. While there have been many conferences and convenings over the years, we heard repeatedly that there's been little space to share lessons learned and critical analyses of funding successes or failures.
5. Many funders are drawn to the field for personal reasons and their personal journey is a primary motivation and guide for their work. The deeply personal nature of this work for many funders, and at times a resistance toward developing a more precise theory of change, presents challenges for rigorous analysis of the efficiency and effectiveness of funding.
6. The rise of interest in this field, coupled with newer dynamics at play with COVID-19, have created even more opportunity and pressure to collaborate than previously existed. As interest in the field grows, funders recognize that collaboration is necessary to maximize outcomes, and they are increasingly open to data-driven analyses, case studies of best practices and lessons learned, and other ways to share knowledge.
7. Funders who have been investing philanthropically in this field for some time, including Bruce Fetzer and Dawid Potgieter, almost uniformly underscore the importance of clear focus, long-term investment horizons, identifying promising ideas and researchers that need dedicated funding to advance their work, investing in those who are deeply committed and inherently collaborative, and bringing the fruits of their research into the mainstream through investing in communication and media. This vision is echoed by many newer funders as well, including Jeff Walker, Jason Yotopoulos, and Tiny Blue Dot.
8. In order to have a clear focus, funders should be explicit about their mission and goals, whether they be to fund essential research, find applications that ameliorate major health conditions worldwide, advance open science, create commercial enterprises, share intellectual property, or other goals.

9. Fundamental research is a critical first step in a pipeline to de-risk venture investment in the field, ensuring investment with the opportunity to scale is grounded in valid theories and contributing to the overall health of the ecosystem.
10. Venture investment provides an avenue for scaling tangible, real-world solutions emerging from philanthropic and academic work, and the opportunity for venture is well recognized. Identifying and supporting the right talent for these investments and adapting business models to changing economic and cultural realities will be essential.
11. Going forward, many funders expressed an interest in self-reflection, a discussion of where systems-level work may proceed, and the importance of regular exchanges between established institutional funders and newer entrants, both of whom bring critical assets and perspectives to the field.
12. Both legacy and newer funders expressed genuine interest during our interviews to exchange ideas and find opportunities for collaborative due diligence and co-funding. In particular, there is a strong interest in creating opportunities for a small group funder dialogue and exchange of ideas, opportunities and lessons-learned in a private setting.

Most interviewees agreed we are at both the early stages of understanding the neurological underpinnings of consciousness and at a uniquely cataclysmic time where the needs for meaningful investments are greater than ever. We recommend that interested funders consider convening a small gathering to discuss and debate these findings and explore opportunities for future collaboration and field building.