

Networking a City

The Barr Fellows Network is changing the way work gets done in Boston's large and entrenched social sector.

BY MARIANNE HUGHES & DIDI GOLDENHAR

BOSTON IS A CITY HISTORICALLY beset by politics and turf issues that extend to its large nonprofit sector. With one of the higher concentrations of 501(c)(3) organizations in the United States—more than 4,600 in a population of less than 620,000—the pressure to compete for influence and limited funding has often pitted the city's nonprofit leaders against one another. “There has been a great deal of competition, coupled with not enough resources,” says Celina Miranda, a senior program officer at the Richard & Susan Smith Family Foundation. “All of this leads to divide and conquer.”

In 2004 the Barr Foundation, which supports education and the arts in Boston and diverse climate change initiatives through its \$1.1 billion anonymous endowment, began to address these patterns of competition and mistrust. The first executive director, Marion Kane, brought a systems thinking perspective to grantmaking. Pat Brandes, then the foundation's strategic advisor, was creating a sabbatical program for seasoned nonprofit executive directors. Together they hypothesized that by recognizing talented leaders in Boston and connecting them in meaningful ways, a more collaborative culture might emerge. The foundation launched the Barr Fellowship in 2005.

That year and every other year since, 12 executive directors have received a surprise phone call from the foundation. Selected from among hundreds of talented nonprofit leaders, the fellows are invited to join a program that includes a three-month sabbatical (with a flexible \$40,000 grant to support the organization during fellows' absence), group travel to the global south, executive coaching, two retreats annually for three years, and the opportunity to join a diverse network of peers committed to a better Boston.

The foundation set three goals for the Barr Fellows Network. The immediate and simplest goals were to recognize and rejuvenate seasoned executive directors and to enhance distributed leadership at their organizations. Pat Brandes, now the Barr

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Foundation's executive director, remembers reading the many forecasts about the impending retirement of the baby boomer generation of executive directors. Reports by CompassPoint, Bridgespan, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation projected a huge leadership

gap in the sector. For Brandes, what complicated the picture was the knowledge that most nonprofit executives were neither inclined nor financially able to retire; they were likely to stay in their positions even if they were burned out.

At the time, sabbaticals for nonprofit professionals were rare, although the Durfee Foundation and the California Wellness Foundation had launched programs with promising results. Brandes hypothesized that Boston leaders would benefit from the time and space to rest and rejuvenate—and so would their organizations and the city. “While many people were talking about the leadership pipeline or how to recruit executives from the private sector,” says Brandes, “no one was talking about how to replenish our elders and harvest their wisdom. These people were my peers. I knew they would want to keep contributing as activists. The idea was to honor these leaders and cultivate their next act.”

The more complex goal would be to catalyze a network of place-based nonprofit leaders. In recent years, the social sector has come to embrace networks that leverage multiple connections across disciplines, as an alternative to solutions relying on single institutions or issue silos. But in 2004, these ideas were just beginning to take hold. Barr Foundation executives noted, from their own experience and by studying other collective initiatives, that the greatest barrier to social impact often resides at the individual level. Leaders who experience themselves as separate and different from others rather than interdependent could not collaborate well or engage effectively in networks. In this way, the Barr Fellowship was designed to nurture individual relationships.

After eight years, the Barr Fellows Network has been the force behind an unexpected series of cooperative efforts among leaders of local nonprofits. It also has confirmed that social change networks are animated not by organizations, but by people. The foundation and its partner in this effort, the Interaction Institute for Social Change (IISC), thus shun centralized goals and top-down strategies and have encouraged Barr Fellows to identify and solve problems themselves. The network now numbers 48 fellows. As personal relationships have evolved within and across the first four cohorts, turf-bound competition has given way to what *The Boston Globe* has called “a web of collaboration rippling through the nonprofit community with increasing effect.”

Gladys Vega
Chelsea Collaborative



Omwale Moses
Young People's Project



Aaron Gornstein
Citizen's Housing and Planning Association



Madeleine Steczynski
ZUMIX



David Shapiro
Mass Mentoring Partnership



Juan Leyton
Neighbor to Neighbor Massachusetts



Jenny Amory
Teen Voices



Elmer Freeman
Center for Community Health, Education, Research and Service, Inc.



Elaine Ng
Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center



Shaumba-Yandje Dibinga
OrigiNation



Christine Poff
Franklin Park Coalition



Jean Marc Jean-Baptiste
Haitian American Public Health Initiative



Every other year since 2005, 12 executive directors from Boston nonprofits have become Barr Fellows, affording them a sabbatical and entree into a powerful social change network.

REJUVENATE LEADERS, NURTURE RELATIONSHIPS

In May 2010, 24 leaders from Boston nonprofits formed a circle in the shade of palm trees at a lodge in the state of Chiapas, Mexico. Many in this group didn't know each other, or if they did, relationships were distant. A few were outright hostile. Yet as they gathered to reflect on their five days together as Barr Fellows, their words were full of shared hopes for their city back home.

Chiapas is home to mountainous terrain, perennial rainforests, and one of Mexico's largest indigenous populations. The region's history of oppression culminated in the Zapatista uprising of 1994 when 3,000 Indians declared war on the government. The rebellion quickly transformed into a nonviolent movement, capturing worldwide attention. The Boston group's itinerary had included meetings with the Zapatistas and local activists as well as walks through the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas. In the evenings, there were shared meals, music, and conversations that ran deep into the night.

On this last day, the discussion centered on the Zapatistas, who had built schools and clinics and were governing 32 municipalities with no assistance from the Mexican government and despite threats from paramilitary groups. "I see their courage for taking another way, and my intention is to operate from that place of courage," said Mariama White-Hammond, executive director of Project HIP-HOP, which develops youth leadership. The fellows also spoke of their newfound respect and affection for each other and of how they might pool their collective resources. As Lyndia Downie, executive director of the Pine Street Inn, a comprehensive agency for homeless men and women, reflected, "I'm not sure I buy all this network theory, but I sure do love the people in this fellowship."

Like academic sabbaticals, the Barr Fellowship has been designed to offer respite from institutional routines and responsibilities. But its key component is a disruptive experience, a learning journey. The foundation has taken fellows to Haiti, Brazil, rural Zimbabwe, and Johannesburg. Fellows are often skeptical and sometimes anxious upon starting their journey. Many do not know each other or have avoided each other because of ideological or turf issues. For two weeks, in a foreign and often challenging environment, they room together and step away from their roles and cell phones. By doing so, they break from their usual postures and adopt new perspectives.

The fellows meet with indigenous leaders and activists, learning about social change in situations of extreme poverty and political risk, which reframes their own US-based nonprofit experience. This leads to self-reflection and conversations about their work and why it matters. These experiences also make possible friendships that once seemed unimaginable. As IISC facilitator Gibrán Rivera explains, "Relationships mediated by organizational identities are often limited to the formal and transactional. The learning journey breaks through this layer to a deeper, more human connection." Following the trip, the fellows spend the remainder of their three-month sabbaticals as they wish, with one caveat: They may not contact the office. Before returning to work, they gather for a retreat to share their learning and prepare to return to work. The foundation then brings each cohort together for semiannual retreats for three years, to renew connections and tap into their collective assets.

From the inaugural 2005 cohort, it was clear to Barr Foundation

staff that the simplest goals of the sabbatical program would be successful. The leaders returned to their organizations with renewed vigor and vision, ready to maximize their tenure or plan for orderly leadership succession. The positive effects extended to their organizations, such as more distributed leadership among staff and board. The more complex goal of cultivating a place-based network would require more design. By 2007, the first two cohorts were tightly knit. Now the foundation needed to build connection among cohorts.

A NETWORK WITH NO EXPECTATIONS

Early on, the Barr Foundation partnered with IISC, a Boston-based nonprofit with international experience in network building and stakeholder collaborations—from peace agreements in Northern Ireland to road maps for early education in Springfield, Mass. The partnership was steeped in a shared interest in testing network theory, then still nascent in the US nonprofit sector.

The foundation had applied network theory to its own grant-making initiatives, applying the ideas and research of Duncan Watts's *Six Degrees: The Science of a Connected Age*, which focuses on collective dynamics and network structure, and Albert-László Barabási's *Linked: How Everything Is Connected to Everything Else and What It Means for Business, Science, and Everyday Life*, which describes a continuous evolution of networks in living organisms, corporations, and the World Wide Web. For the Fellows Network, the foundation and IISC drew upon nomenclature developed by Peter Plastrik and Madeleine Taylor in *Net Gains* and hypothesized that the network would be stronger if the fellows could interact as a *connectivity network* in a loosely structured environment, without expectations about what would be accomplished. They would not be facilitated as an *alignment network* in which members share a vision. Nor would they be convened as an *action network* in which people mobilize toward common goals and collective action. The foundation and IISC would support the fellows as a connectivity network by creating venues for relationship building and learning, but the entities would not direct the agenda.

The Barr Fellows Network also drew upon a seminal paper by leading practitioners Valdis Krebs and June Holley, whose *Building Smart Communities Through Network Weaving* argues that healthy networks move from a centralized hub to connected clusters. Krebs and Holley caution that innovation comes from the periphery. This is the problem with old boys' clubs. Though they are recognized as valuable sources of social capital, the homogeneity of such networks limits their potential for new ideas. The Barr Fellows Network would need to be intentional about reaching out to the margins and reinforcing its diversity, to avoid becoming elitist or insular. The "new social science of love" described by Michael Edwards, then a veteran Ford Foundation program officer, also resonated for strengthening ties among mission-driven leaders.

Starting at the 2005 retreat, when the first fellowship cohort returned from sabbatical, the goals of the network became the subject of much debate. Some fellows wanted an organic approach to collaboration. Others pushed for alignment around one issue—advocacy for a green city or launching a broad-based urban dialogue about racism. Some argued that without action goals, they were

“wasting the precious resource” represented by the network.

The foundation and IISC listened but pushed back, underscoring the principles of a connectivity network and trusting that action would emerge organically. In that early phase, fellows were more connected to the foundation than to each other. So the foundation and IISC created conditions during retreats and alumni learning journeys to deepen relationships. The fellows learned about the resiliency of networks with distributed leadership vs. the fragility of centralized organizations, as described by Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom in *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations*. They discussed the dynamics of their own possible “emergence” in the context of Steve Johnson’s *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software*, where emergence is the ability of low-level components to self-organize into sophisticated, higher-level systems. Nonetheless, as Mossik Hacobian, then executive director of Urban Edge, recalled of those early debates, “I’m a goal-oriented Mr. Fix-It and wanted to have a specific focus. We wanted to see quicker results in Boston. I was skeptical about this grand theory of emergence.”

The network entailed risk for everyone involved. For the non-profit leaders, the fellowship propelled them into uncomfortable relationships across race, class, ethnicity, and politics. For IISC, the risk was to facilitate a network without clear goals and a sequence of tangible action steps. For Brandes, supporting emergence required patience and detachment from the more typical metrics of success. “We are all acting countercultural to trends in our sector,” says Brandes. “Control has been replaced by trust. Leaders are crossing boundaries and self-organizing in ways that are meaningful to them. This is critical learning for our multiracial, multiethnic society.”

THE MARGARITA MUÑIZ ACADEMY

Starting in 2006, fellows began to visit each other’s organizations and neighborhoods and call on one another for advice, eventually moving into clusters that could collaborate for specific purposes. One example was the cluster of fellows that formed around the Margarita Muñiz Academy, Boston’s first bilingual high school.

Margarita Muñiz was a pioneer in dual language education. In 1982, she launched and led for nearly three decades the Rafael Hernandez School to teach elementary students in both Spanish and English. For years, Muñiz had been sharing her dream of a bilingual high school with her friends and colleagues Diana Lam and Meg Campbell. Both had seen their children flourish at the Hernandez School and saw the potential for a bilingual high school to serve English language learners and to promote Latino leadership and culture for Boston’s fastest growing demographic. But all three women were running schools of their own and could not imagine how to surmount the obstacles of creating a new school in Boston.

In 2007, Muñiz was awarded a Barr Fellowship. On her sabbatical journey to South Africa, she roomed with Linda Nathan, director of the Boston Arts Academy, with whom she had taught many years before. Throughout the trip, they talked about Margarita’s plans for

In supporting cooperative efforts among leaders of Boston nonprofits, the Barr Foundation has confirmed that social change networks are animated not by organizations, but by people.

the bilingual high school. The idea remained an abstraction until 2009, when Campbell, executive director and co-founder of Codman Academy Charter Public School, became a fellow herself and clicked with her roommate Vanessa Calderón-Rosado on their journey to Brazil. As CEO of Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción (IBA), a Latino community-building organization, Calderon-Rosado was captivated by the idea of a bilingual high school and understood the important role she could play to affirm its legitimacy. “I jumped at the chance to be part of it,” she said.

Over the next two years, the women strategized for the nascent Margarita Muñiz Academy, with Calderon-Rosado chairing the board and IBA serving as fiscal agent. During the Barr alumni trip to Chiapas in 2010, other fellows nourished the vision. Jesse Solomon, then executive director of the Boston Teacher Residency, gave advice about curriculum and collective bargaining. As a member of the Boston School Committee, Claudio Martinez, executive director of Hyde Square Task Force, pledged to help shepherd the school proposal through the bureaucratic labyrinth. Their work was

intensified by the news that Muñiz had been diagnosed with cancer.

Campbell later said, “The fellowship gave me so much. I felt like I’d won the lottery. It made complete sense to give back, especially to honor Margarita’s legacy. But I couldn’t do it alone. If the fellows had said the school was too hard or not right for the Latino community, I would not have gone forward. But they encouraged us to keep going.”

One obstacle remained. A highly qualified candidate had been identified as the school leader, but the district could not fund the position during the planning process. At this point, the Barr Foundation agreed to provide the interim salary, in what Brandes describes as “support of work coming out of small clusters that was in line with the foundation’s K-12 strategy.”

On Nov. 15, 2011, the Boston School Committee approved the Margarita Muñiz Academy as Boston’s first two-way bilingual high school. Two days later, Muñiz succumbed to cancer. In her final days, fellows Campbell and Nathan were at her bedside. So, too, was the photograph of her 2007 fellows journey to Africa. A week earlier, she said, “This is the story of a collaboration based on the solid rock of friendship, idealism, and respect.” The Margarita Muñiz Academy opens its doors in fall 2012.

THE BOSTON PROMISE INITIATIVE

In 2010, another Barr Fellows Network cluster was activated to develop Boston’s application for a Promise Neighborhood initiative. The goal of the federal program, modeled on the Harlem Children’s Zone, was to “significantly improve the educational and developmental outcomes of children and youth in the nation’s most distressed communities.” For the first round of planning grants, the Obama administration invited cities to submit applications linking families, schools, and nonprofits to promote high achievement for all children, from birth through college.

John Barros, executive director of the Dudley Square Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) and a 2007 Barr Fellow, led the

effort for the city of Boston. DSNI is a community-based planning and organizing nonprofit formed in 1984 by residents of Roxbury and Dorchester, neighborhoods then devastated by arson, disinvestment, and neglect. DSNI has since become a collaborative effort of more than 3,000 residents, businesses, nonprofits, and faith-based institutions.

To develop the application, Barros needed to build alignment among scores of stakeholders, including state and city agencies, cultural and educational institutions, resident-based initiatives, social service agencies, and philanthropies. Barros reached out to Louis Casagrande, former director of the Boston Children’s Museum and his roommate on the 2007 fellowship journey. Could he secure buy-in from the city’s major cultural institutions? Casagrande immediately placed the calls. “I could speak to my colleagues about John from personal experience,” he says. “I had spent quality time at DSNI and understood its credibility in the community.”

More than a dozen fellows across three fellowship cohorts participated as key influencers, including Jorge Martinez of Project R.I.G.H.T., a neighborhood stabilization and economic development agency, and Sister Margaret Leonard, whose Project Hope moves families out of poverty. Because of his experience on fellowship journeys and retreats, Barros brought IISC into the planning process to facilitate stakeholder engagement and to manage the logistics and communications. The result was a \$500,000 federal planning grant for the Boston Promise Initiative (BPI). Of 339 applications, 21 grants were awarded, with Boston one of only three to earn a perfect score. Having catalyzed a network hub, DSNI reached out to a wider circle of fellows for the next phase of federal grants.

In December 2011, DSNI learned that Boston was not chosen for the initial round of federal implementation grants. Yet Barros and his colleagues, within and outside the Barr Fellows Network, are moving forward with a five-year plan for the Dudley Village Campus, a model for resident-driven community transformation and student achievement. Says Barros, “I’ve done organizing all my life, but I’ve come out of this fellowship with a new understanding of what relationships

really mean. I’m a better organizer for this experience. The power of this network is a set of deep relationships that will make Boston a better place.” DSNI is planning to resubmit for a Promise Neighborhood implementation grant in June 2012. And fellows are now collaborating on multiple BPI working groups devoted to housing, parenting, family health, and the environment. As Sister Margaret remarked of the process, “The support of a multitude of partners has moved us to another level of neighborhood revitalization.”

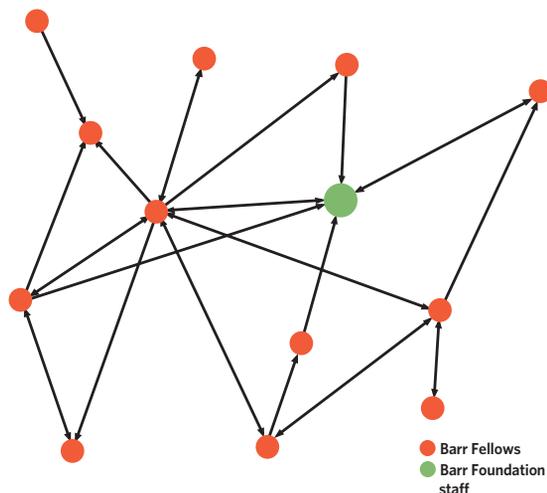
SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS

Since launching its fellowship program in 2005, the Barr Foundation has been studying the network’s evolution, with assistance from its internal and external evaluators. At regular intervals, fellows have completed online surveys and been interviewed by evaluators, to elicit information about network behaviors—how fellows connect with each other and hold each other accountable—and network effects, such as how resources are shared or aligned for influence at a greater scale. One of the findings is a shift from a hub-and-spoke network with foundation staff as a main hub, to a multi-cluster network where people connect ideas and resources, provide personal support, and take joint action from various hubs without intensive involvement of foundation staff. (See “Barr Fellows Network Development” below.)

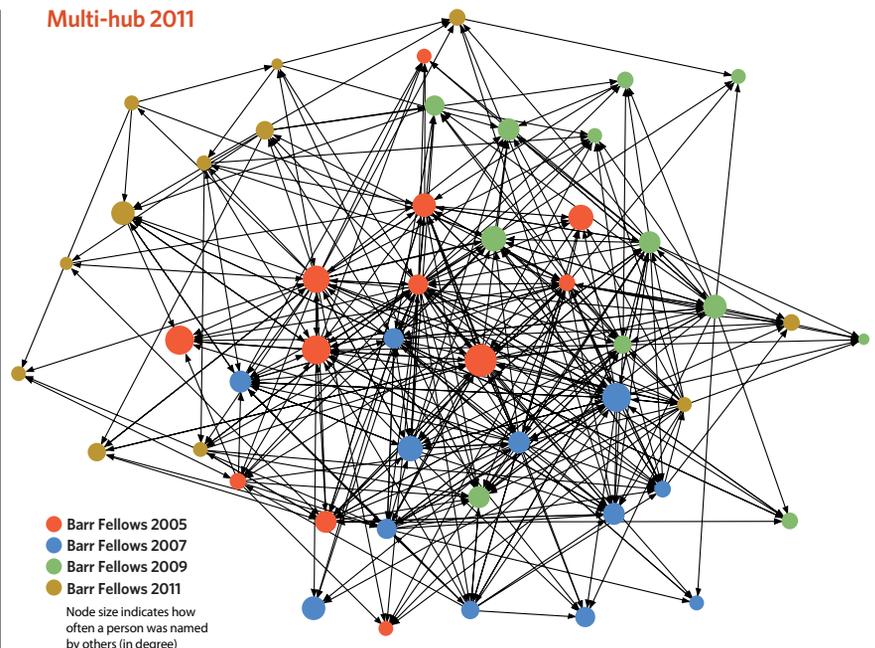
The fellows report how they have moved beyond ego, turf, and ideology to generate collective courage and hold each other accountable. Jorge Martinez says, “Before we would sit on opposite sides of the room. The sense now is that we look after each other.” The fellows also have seen their influence grow. For example, three fellows—Barros, Campbell, and Claudio Martinez—now serve on the seven-member Boston School Committee, the governing body of the city’s public schools. Most recently, 2011 fellow Aaron Gornstein, executive director of the Citizens’ Housing and Planning Association, was named undersecretary for the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development by Gov. Deval Patrick. This kind of recognition furthers the fellows’ identity

Barr Fellows Network Development

Hub and Spoke 2005



Multi-hub 2011



as leaders, especially those who saw themselves at the margins of influence. Many have said that network membership gives them the audacity to take risks and move in new leadership directions.

Claudio Martinez, executive director of the Hyde Square Task Force, which works on youth leadership, is a prime example. Since 2005, when he was named a Barr Fellow, he has expanded his influence. He now serves as a trustee for the Boston Foundation and the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, where he advocates for grassroots, community-based leadership. On the Boston School Committee, where he recently was reappointed for a second term, Martinez brings his voice as a Latino leader to champion changes for English language learners.

Fellows in more traditional or established institutions also have been emboldened. Since retiring from the Boston Children's Museum after his sabbatical, Casagrande has become special assistant to the CEO at the Bromley-Heath Public Housing Project, far from Boston's downtown cultural center. Casagrande credits the network with motivating him to accept the job and helping him to secure a \$5 million grant from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. "The backing of fellows and their communities allowed me to quarterback that complex grant in a few months," says Casagrande. "A former museum director could not do that, but a Barr Fellow could. It would have taken me five more years to build the credibility and relationships."

In turn, the network has exerted a boomerang effect on the Barr Foundation, making it more knowledgeable about and sensitive to what's happening in Boston. Trustee Barbara Hostetter explains, "I always assumed, as I sat in elegant conference rooms and private dining rooms at the top of the financial district, that this was where the city leadership resided—until I met our first Barr Fellows. Then I understood who was really running the city. The fellowship recognizes their talent and commitment, and they have brought our work at the foundation to a new level."

EIGHT YEARS, 48 FELLOWS

At eight years and 48 fellows, the foundation's goals are being reached. Fellows are self-organizing and collaborating across issues, organizations, and neighborhoods. For some, the power of the network is in its collective capacity to influence the city of Boston. As 2007 fellow Meizhu Lui remarks, "While each of us is focused on one issue, we now have a broader sense of how our issues intertwine. The fellowship has increased local connectivity so that we can better address the root causes of poverty and inequality." For others, the network is about the energy they get from relationships. Hacopian, who freely admits to his early skepticism, says, "I have been fortunate with a lot of chance things in my life, including being with this motley group of people who are graced, intentional, and loving."

The foundation is beginning to synthesize the lessons learned about creating a place-based connectivity network of social change leaders. Lessons include:

Prepare to invest in sabbaticals and disruption. The costs of the sabbatical include a flexible \$40,000 grant to support the organization during the sabbatical and modest sums for fellows to access executive coaching. The major expense applies to the design and logistics of the group journeys: In 2011, the two-week trip of 12

fellows to Haiti cost \$100,000, including airfare, lodging, and IISC planning and facilitation. Although the trips to the global south are by no means luxurious, they require careful planning and insurance for risky situations like political unrest, disease, and other conditions brought about by extreme poverty.

Select from a broad base and be flexible. Fellows are selected through nomination and several rounds of vetting, with the foundation encouraging diversity in race, ethnicity, gender, and sector. For the first cohort, nomination was limited to older executive directors. Starting in 2007, the criteria expanded to include younger, albeit seasoned, executive directors, and the foundation witnessed the benefits of intergenerational cohorts. Another lesson relates to temperament. Leaders who depend on hierarchy and positional authority are less likely to have a transformative experience or benefit much from this type of network.

Engage a network knowledge partner and assess early and often. As thought partner to the foundation, IISC brought knowledge of both network theory and collaboration. IISC was charged with creating conditions and disruptive experiences, whereby leaders would connect to each other in authentic relationships. Claire Reinelt of the Leadership Learning Community, which tracks and analyzes the network's evolution, credits IISC's tools and provocative questions for eliciting meaningful conversation and facilitating cluster groups in the early stages of development. The foundation's investment in evaluation and mapping also has been critical in enabling the staff to make assessments of the fellowship program.

Recognize that the funder-grantee relationship is complex. The power imbalance between funder and grantee has been acknowledged and discussed with every cohort. Barr Fellows do not gain preferential access to foundation grants, although some organizations whose work is aligned with the foundation's strategies are already grantees. Regardless of their financial relationship, most fellows say that they feel connected to the foundation as partners for social change. Still, tensions have surfaced at times around expectations that were not satisfied. The foundation has invested in some network collaborations, such as the Boston Promise Initiative and the Margarita Muñiz Academy, which line up with existing strategies. Yet the foundation has aimed not to overplay its role, focusing on emergence and connection among fellows rather than pushing for or funding tangible initiatives and outcomes.

In the end, the primary learning from the Barr Fellowship Network is about the return on relationships. The trust and respect among Boston social change leaders has proved to be a currency for social change. As Casagrande remarks, "We've done one-off projects on a limited scale, affecting hundreds of people. Now we're starting to do work affecting thousands of people, and we're seeing the payoff in the investment of time, money, and resources to build this network. It's taken that long to have real impact. It doesn't happen overnight." Brandes and the Barr Foundation are not afraid of slow change. "We have faith in these people," she says. "We believe that by nurturing the well-being of mission-driven leaders and paying close attention to network health, we can transform the DNA of our sector in Boston. In so doing, we can carry forward Martin Luther King's wisdom that 'love is mankind's most potent weapon for personal and social transformation.'" ■