



WHAT WE'RE LEARNING:

Revitalizing Academic Institutions in Countries in Transition

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OVERVIEW

A Focus on Creating New Vibrancy in the Social Sciences

When the Ford Foundation opened its Moscow office in early 1996, higher education and scholarship were among the top priorities. Early grants focused on the social sciences because these disciplines, severely hampered under the Soviet system, would be essential to developing and understanding the new democracy in Russia. From 1996 through 2005, Ford invested more than \$25 million in higher education and scholarship in Russia through three initiatives designed to strengthen academic innovation and create strong academic communities of scholars. Ford was not alone in these efforts. Many other donors decided to focus support on the development of a vibrant civil society in Russia, with an emphasis on institutions of higher education.

How We Got Started

Building Scholarship Through New Institutes, Research and Journals

The Ford program—Building Professional Academic Communities—encompassed three distinct initiatives:

- The largest initiative was designed to build scholarship and scholarly networks in economics, sociology, political science, gender studies and the humanities. It also supported two new postgraduate institutes of higher education, the European University at St. Petersburg and the New Economic School in Moscow.
- The second initiative focused on research and analysis of social policy by supporting research competitions and creation of the Independent Institute for Social Policy in Moscow.
- The third initiative responded to the rapid changes in Russian higher education by supporting a new journal, University Management, and a series of studies on higher education policy.

During this same period, the foundation expanded its International Fellowships Program to Russia. The program offered access to graduate and postgraduate study anywhere in the world to students from marginalized groups, based upon their scholarly potential, leadership record and commitment to social justice ideals.

What We Learned

The Power of Networks Can Help Break Academic Inertia

The investment in scholars and scholarly research had an enormous impact in the early years since the Soviet collapse. During this critical period, Ford and other foundations' grantees fostered new ways of thinking and learning and built academic networks in which merit became the primary criterion for success. The scholarly networks involved hundreds of people across Russia, expanding from Moscow and St. Petersburg to such regions as the Volga, the Urals and Siberia.

Ford emphasized support for networks for two reasons: They create communities that exist independently of specific institutions, and they develop their own institutions through collective research projects or peer-reviewed journals. This kind of network “logic” accelerated the shift away from centralization in the Russian state system of higher education. Formal and informal networks of academic scholars and research micro-communities emerged and multiplied, supported by the parallel and overlapping programs supported by Ford and other foundations. Over time, these networks began to offer an alternative to the old Soviet patronage system—as scholars who rose on merit brought their peers along, also measured by ability and distinguished by merit.

Success in building academic communities in the social sciences varied, depending on discipline:

In sociology, Ford made many achievements possible: teaching the next generation; developing new journals; and supporting a Center for Sociological Education where more than 1,000 teachers from the regions received high-level training. Another significant first was a conference held in 2000 for Russian sociologists that drew more than 1,000 participants.

In economics, the successes centered on building faculty at the New Economics School in Moscow, where professors came to hold internationally recognized advanced degrees and wrote papers with colleagues at leading American and European universities.

In gender studies, the foundation’s support conferred new symbolic meaning on the subject introducing it into Russia’s social science university curriculums. Grants led to the creation of gender studies courses at the European University in St. Petersburg and summer school courses at the Center for Gender Studies in Moscow. Gender is now considered a legitimate topic on the academic agenda.

In Building Academic Disciplines, Success Varied by Discipline

The Ford initiative did not achieve uniform success across all academic disciplines. The success in sociology resulted, in part, from good timing. During the late 1980s and early 1990s a dramatic shift was already underway, from the highly ideological approach to sociology toward a more analytical approach. Ford’s support of networks proved to be prescient, cultivating latent academic appetite and connecting a new network of scholars, especially in the regions.

Building networks in political science proved to be less successful. The American form of political science, which emphasizes analysis and advancement of theories, found no counterpart in Russian “politology,” which relies less on data and more on opinion and philosophy. More time was needed to create the academic discipline of political science in Russia, and the work undertaken has fewer lasting results than in other disciplines.

Balancing Support Among Individuals, Networks and Institutions Is Complex

As Ford and other foundations supported people seeking to influence or transform the state system of higher education more directly, a significant debate surfaced about the relative benefits of an institutional approach versus individual and network approaches. Important questions were raised for consideration.

Is it worthwhile to fund individuals, and networks of individuals, to help people adapt to the unreformed environments in which they work? Or is it better to try to reform the environments through partnerships with the state? Some say it is too difficult to grow the new forms within the old system. Others say that the only way to move beyond demonstration projects and seek broad systemic impact is to enter the mainstream and become a partner with government.

Our Work Today

Current Trends in Russian Higher Education

Russia now has more than 1,000 institutions of higher learning, up from 700 in 1991, and about 350 are private. Higher education in many parts of Russia continues to be challenged by unreformed management and governance structures. Many state universities still suffer from poor incentive structures, outmoded management styles and limited possibilities for genuine research. With all these flaws, the state university system accounts for the majority of students and determines standards and control over diplomas, including those granted by private institutions.

Reformers appear to be making some progress, however. In 2003, Russia signed onto the Bologna Process, launched in 1999 by education ministers from 29 countries. The Bologna Process commits signatory nations to create a European Higher Education Area by 2010, with transferability of credits and degrees. Russia does not want to be excluded from this international opportunity. It remains to be seen whether the Russian Education Ministry will adopt a more European regulatory role or maintain its traditional role of centralized managerial and ideological control.

The challenge in Russian higher education appears to be one of patience—waiting for networks to evolve into systems of advancement that reward merit and for the inevitable generational shift of scholarship and leadership.

In 2005, as program priorities shifted, Ford ended the higher education and scholarship program in Russia. Given its work in higher education worldwide, Ford decided that an assessment of this initiative would be a useful way to share lessons learned with staff and with other donors and practitioners in the field. The foundation also hoped that an assessment would stimulate discussion among stakeholders in higher education in Russia about how best to support scholars and scholarly institutions.

How This Evaluation Was Conducted

The evaluation, conducted from January to June 2006, involved multiple site visits, interviews inside and outside Russia, archival research at Ford's offices in New York City, readings of social science scholarship and some public discussion of preliminary findings.