Spending down? Don’t forget your knowledge!

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On December 31, 2020, the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation concluded operations, following 64 years of grantmaking and a 2009 decision to spend down its assets. Throughout its life, and particularly during the spend-down years, the Foundation invested in knowledge creation. As our operations drew to a close, we preserved much of this work in a Legacy Collection hosted through Candid’s knowledge management platform, IssueLab.

Building and sharing knowledge was a hallmark of the education and environment strategies that animated the Foundation’s 12-year spend down. Like many “systems change” funders, we were working to address entrenched problems of mind-boggling complexity. We knew we could not act—or learn—alone if we wanted to make progress. Solutions only come into focus when social sector actors learn from and with others, especially those closest to the ground.

As our sunset approached, we wondered: What would come of the knowledge we’d produced and supported? During the spend down, we invested more than $80 million in research and evaluation related to our strategic initiatives, and we published a few dozen resources of our own. We worked hard to share knowledge through our website and email distribution, and, more importantly, through our partners. But we knew our website wouldn’t live forever (it is currently expected to remain live for at least one-year post-sunset) and that we wouldn’t be around to support the ongoing knowledge dissemination efforts of our partners.

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After much consideration, we decided against establishing a formal, comprehensive archive of all our records (read more about that here). We felt a responsibility, however, to create a permanent, publicly accessible home for our knowledge products—and that led us to IssueLab. IssueLab is one of the social sector’s largest open repositories, which already makes it a sensible place to store things. Plus, when a resource is added to IssueLab, it also gets disseminated through knowledge aggregators such as WorldCat (the world’s largest library catalog) as well as other Candid properties and partners. When we learned that Candid was launching the Legacy Collection service, specifically designed for organizations that are closing their doors, we knew it was a good fit.

What did it take to actually do it? I spent much of the last year leading the creation of the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation Legacy Collection in close partnership with Lisa Brooks, director of knowledge management systems at Candid. For the benefit of anyone considering a similar undertaking, this piece offers a behind-the-scenes look at the process we worked through, and some of the lessons learned along the way.

Compiling knowledge products.

First things first: What were we going to put in this collection? We knew it would include all self-published works as well as reports from evaluations of our major initiatives. I took responsibility for compiling these resources; in my role as senior evaluation and learning officer, sitting within a team that also held responsibility for communications, I was deeply familiar with these products and knew right where to find them.

But what else? We supported grantees in countless knowledge-building efforts over the years, but we never had a system for gathering and storing the products of their work. The fastest way to find these resources would have been to ask program staff. But we knew staff didn’t have the bandwidth in our final year of operations to track down all of the knowledge products that had been developed with our funding.

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So, we decided to leave it up to staff discretion. Rather than create a Foundation-wide policy about what to include, we invited program staff to identify the resources they felt would be most valuable to highlight—and to submit those resources to me via a shared spreadsheet. I hosted a workshop to orient staff to the Legacy Collection and followed up with written instructions and supporting materials (e.g., draft email copy for reaching out to grantees about the opportunity).

Participation varied, with staff submitting anywhere from 0 to 30 resources. Some expressed a desire to contribute but simply did not have the bandwidth. Others required a little nudging. Many had questions about what was eligible for inclusion, what was worthy of inclusion, how to handle intellectual property, and more. I worked with staff (and in some cases, grantees) one-on-one to navigate their individual circumstances, a process that proved to be more time-consuming than I anticipated.

Lesson learned: Relying on the institutional memory of staff to inventory knowledge products is not an efficient strategy—but it was the best one we had. If we had known years ago that we would be building a Legacy Collection, we could have developed a policy about what would be included and a knowledge management system to support it. For example, we could have collected grantee knowledge products through our grants portal as standard practice, or tagged knowledge-building grants in our database for easy searchability later.

Respecting intellectual property.

As we began to compile knowledge products, one of the tricky things I ran into immediately was the matter of intellectual property. Many of our grantees copyright their work. Copyright law protects against the unauthorized distribution of a knowledge product. This means IssueLab can link to a copyrighted knowledge product, but holding a copy of that knowledge product on its servers without permission can be problematic. Linking to a resource is fine—until that link breaks—so we wanted the contents of our collection to be hosted on IssueLab wherever possible.

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We felt a deep responsibility to ensure that we were treating our grantees—and their intellectual property—with respect. Although our standard grant agreement enables the Foundation to use or publish grant-funded work products at its discretion, we didn’t feel right about including grantees’ knowledge products in the Legacy Collection without their consent. We decided to seek grantee approval for every product we wanted to include. In most cases, grantees were delighted to be featured because they want their work to be as widely disseminated as possible. Still, this process added a layer of work for everyone involved and extended our timeline for finalizing the contents of the collection.

Lesson learned: Copyright often runs counter to our goals in the social sector! Many organizations opt to use open licensing for their work instead (more on our own journey with this below). And some funders encourage their grantees to use open licensing. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation has an excellent tool kit on this subject. If we had put an open knowledge policy in place at the Foundation early in the spend down, we would have been better equipped to build the Legacy Collection and to engage with grantees about the various tools available to support easy, permanent access to their knowledge products.

Building and designing the collection.

While I coordinated with staff internally to gather knowledge products and grantee approvals, I worked with Lisa to process the incoming materials and create the collection.

Importing knowledge products to a collection is not quite as simple as just uploading the files; someone has to manually develop metadata for each record (i.e., data about the file—publication date, author, abstract, etc.). Candid offers several options for document integration, ranging from do-it-yourself to full service. We opted for full service: I provided Lisa with the files, and her team generated the metadata, which saved me a lot of time. I did review and edit the metadata, though, and in a few cases, I had to consult with program staff or grantees to get it right.
As the collection started to come together, Lisa and I began to meet regularly to talk about thorny issues and how to handle specific files, and to make decisions about the customization of the collection. We created pages describing the Foundation and the collection’s treatment of intellectual property, developed a taxonomy for the contents, and configured the search function. It was a true partnership—Lisa has deep expertise in knowledge management, and it was a luxury to have her sound advice and guidance throughout.

Both document integration and design were complicated by the fact that we were adding material to the collection on a rolling basis up until the Foundation closed. Keeping track of it all was a real challenge, with an inventory that ultimately exceeded 200 items. It also meant that Lisa and I had to revisit the metadata and the taxonomy for the collection multiple times.

Lesson learned: The process of building and designing the collection would have been much simpler if I could have just handed our knowledge products over to Candid in a single batch, and then dealt with metadata and design issues all at once. Real life doesn’t work like that. We built our Legacy Collection inventory iteratively over the course of six months. This required careful organization and constant communication with Lisa to keep track of all the moving pieces.

Applying open knowledge practices.

Creation of the Legacy Collection provided an opportunity for us to think deeply about our self-published work and how to make it as freely, easily, and permanently accessible as possible. We benefited immensely from Candid’s thought leadership and resources in this space, and we became advocates for open knowledge. In our final year of operations, we implemented open licensing and digital object identifiers (DOIs) for all of our self-published work.

Prior to 2020, most of our publications made no mention of copyright. I thought this meant they could be distributed and

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An open knowledge policy and procedure for handling and sharing knowledge products funded and/or produced by your organization.

used in any way. But as I later learned from Lisa, original work is automatically protected by copyright when it’s created, even if it’s not marked with a copyright symbol. Without knowing it, we had copyrighted all of our work as “all rights reserved” by default—in direct contradiction to our goals! Since we wanted our resources and lessons learned to be as widely disseminated as possible, we decided to apply Creative Commons licenses to all of our self-published work. Details about the licenses we chose are available here.

Equally important, we wanted this body of work to live on beyond 2020. We don’t know how long its shelf life will be, but as long as folks find it useful, it should be accessible. DOIs make this possible. A DOI provides a unique, permanent, unbreakable link for a digital knowledge product—a real dream for an organization like ours that won’t be around to maintain URLs. I’ve become an evangelist for DOIs and can’t understand why we’re not all using them, especially since Candid provides them for free! DOIs have been ubiquitous in academia for years because they make knowledge products easier to discover and track online. We decided to assign DOIs to all of our publications.
I’m really proud that we implemented open licenses and DOIs, but doing it in our final year of operations was a little tricky. Most of our work was already published by the time we put these decisions into effect, and though not strictly necessary, we made the effort to go back and update each document to include information about its license and DOI. Our communications firm graciously accepted the charge, but for their sake, I wish I’d surfaced the issue earlier.

**Lesson learned: Creative Commons licenses and DOIs are incredibly valuable tools for sharing and preserving knowledge, yet they’re underutilized in the social sector.** They’re especially essential for organizations that are going out of business and won’t be around to field intellectual property inquiries or maintain URLs. Considering that these practices are free and easy to implement, we should all be using them—and the sooner we start, the easier it will be.

Reflecting on what we’ve built. Now that you’ve had a behind-the-scenes tour of what it took to create the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation Legacy Collection, you may be wondering: Was it worth all the trouble? The answer is a resounding YES! Sure, we encountered a few bumps along the way, but the time and resource investments were minimal compared to the benefits of preserving the knowledge we’ve built during our spend down. Contrary to its title, we didn’t create the Legacy Collection to pay homage to the Foundation’s legacy. We did it because we believe that knowledge is power—and that we have a responsibility to make it accessible to all.