Hewlett Cyber Initiative

Summative Evaluation
Executive Summary

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Prepared for
The William & Flora
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Prepared by
Informing Change

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INTRODUCTION

Beginning in summer 2022, the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation commissioned Informing Change to conduct a final summative evaluation of its 10-year Cyber Initiative. This executive summary is intended to emphasize the Initiative's design and its contributions to the cyber policy field, as well as learnings and reflections relevant to foundations, grantmakers, or others interested in supporting cyber-related topic areas or similarly-designed initiatives. The full report, *Findings from the Hewlett Cyber Initiative Summative Evaluation*, offers greater context, nuance, and insight regarding these and other findings, details our research methods, and provides a selection of vignettes that illustrate grantee successes. We strongly encourage readers to peruse the full report.

The **Cyber Initiative** comprised a **10-year, $163.6 million series of investments** by the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation to help build and strengthen an emerging cyber policy field. Its goal was to catalyze a field of multidisciplinary experts capable of contributing to balanced and informed policy debates, both domestically and internationally. The time-bound initiative began in 2014, will sunset at the end of 2023, and has awarded 344 grants to date, both within and outside of the United States.

$157 million over 344 grants Cyber Initiative and Organizational Effectiveness Grants	**$6.6 million** over 74 contracts in additional Direct Charitable Activities (DCA)

The Cyber Initiative was launched after a small team at Hewlett identified three important gaps the Initiative hoped to address:

1. The government and private industry invested heavily in cybersecurity, but without a clear framework or governance plan. This reactive approach limited holistic and strategic policy thinking about how to deal with cyber threats.

2. While individuals with expertise in technology (tech) or policy existed, few, if any, held expertise in both areas, resulting in a lack of multidisciplinary knowledge to support the future of the field.

3. Those few individuals with both sufficient technological understanding and skills, interest, and networks to effectively inform public policy lacked a cohesive, collaborative community in which to develop shared vocabularies and priorities. In some cases, there appeared to be animosity or distrust between communities of technology experts and those of policy experts.

Hewlett opted for a broad framing of "cyber policy" to **"include not only traditional notions of computer and information security, but also the full range of related policy issues, such as Internet governance, net neutrality, encryption, surveillance, and privacy."**[1] This provided more flexibility for potential grantees to see themselves as part of the work and continue focusing on their areas of expertise in cyber-related subfields.

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[1] Hewlett Foundation. (2017, November). *Program Budget Memo: Cyber Initiative.* Unpublished internal document.

Hewlett refined its approach during the first few years to solidify the Initiative's three core pillars: supporting the development and sustainability of (1) strong institutions, (2) a talent pipeline, and (3) a translation and communications infrastructure, with an underlying push across all three pillars to increase the field's geographical, ideological, and gender diversity.

Methods

The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach, including a **desk review** of internal reports and memos, external field scans, and prior evaluation studies; **grantee and survey data** collected by Camber Collective; and **interviews** with Foundation staff and a sampling of Initiative grantees, supporting consultants, and Hewlett's peer funders. It sought to answer questions regarding how and to what extent the Initiative achieved its goals; factors contributing to or thwarting its success; in what ways the Initiative increased the visibility of cyber topics; and lessons that could inform future grantmaking by Hewlett and other funders who may enter the field.

FINDINGS

Hewlett's Contributions to Key Changes in Field

Interviewees agree Hewlett was consistently successful at meeting the needs of the moment. Grantees, experts, and peer funders variously describe **Hewlett as supporting, shaping, accelerating, and adding intentionality and awareness to the growth of the cyber field**. This includes bridging silos between issue areas and between policy and technology, increasing multidisciplinary expertise and research, and creating conditions in which cyber issues are communicated more effectively to policymakers and the public. The evidence strongly supports most grantees' assessment that the Foundation has had significant impacts on the cyber policy arena, largely by:

1. Choosing to catalyze the field in a horizontal manner by funding organizations working across the cyber domain rather than focusing on specific issues or policy outcomes;
2. Being one of few funders and among the largest financial contributors to the space; and
3. Networking and supporting or engaging in other "beyond the grant dollars" activities.

> "Hewlett enabled a response [to the inevitable growth of the field] that has been a lot more productive and a lot more open and encompassing and inclusive and I think it accelerated an ability to address [cyber] issues."
>
> – FIELD EXPERT

As one peer funder put it, Hewlett has worked toward the "creation of systemic assets to solve systemic problems and to create an awareness bridge" between them. These assets include graduates with a multidisciplinary cyber skillset, research by a diverse array of organizations, and communication resources including education for journalists. The Foundation also supported a talent pipeline emphasizing cross-disciplinary training in policy, technology, and other relevant domains. And, because Hewlett intended to build something lasting, Initiative staff implemented several capacity-building and fundraising strategies to help grantees prepare for the Foundation's long-planned exit from the field.

Academic Institutions Building a Multidisciplinary Talent Pipeline

The Foundation's investments in academic institutions launched the Initiative, with one-time grants of $15 million each to the **Massachusetts Institute of Technology**, **Stanford University**, and the **University of California, Berkeley** as the Initiative's "**anchor academic institutions.**" These formed the centerpiece of Hewlett's goal to create a talent pipeline from which future cyber professionals could emerge. The closing bookend on these anchor investments came in 2022 and 2023 with grants of $5–$6 million each to four minority-serving institutions (**MSIs**): Florida A&M University, Florida International University, Spelman College, and Turtle Mountain Community College.

Interviewees agree the increase in academic programs focused on multidisciplinary cyber policy was, at least in part, due to the Initiative's investments. **Cyber program enrollment at grantee institutions is up and others have established their own cyber programs.** Many interviewees were confident these established academic centers, programs, and departments will endure after Hewlett exits the field.

> "[This Initiative] has really encouraged the building up of the field of cyber studies. That's the most powerful impact and was most needed."
>
> – GRANTEE

Despite some structural challenges (e.g., still-low demand for graduates with expertise in cyber policy), interviewees agree **Hewlett's investments are leaving the talent pipeline in a much stronger place than it was pre-Initiative.** Increased enrollments have led to more graduates annually, reduced gaps in personnel qualified for cyber policy jobs, and created and supported a diversity of perspectives informing the field.

> "The need to continue to build the [talent] pipeline and help people actually get jobs is something that could use more emphasis. But there's definitely a cyber pipeline I didn't use to see."
>
> – FIELD EXPERT

Think Tanks Informing Cyber Policy

When the Initiative was renewed in 2017, a strand of grantmaking focused on think tanks shifted from a strategy of "spread bets" across many grantees to "larger, longer, and more flexible grants to a smaller number of grantees."[2] This included establishing a set of "**anchor think tanks**" (mirroring the anchor university grantees) including the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, R Street Institute, the Center for Security and Emerging Technology at Georgetown, and the CyberPeace Institute. These and other Initiative-funded think tanks have made impacts in both the talent pipeline and communications infrastructure.

It is difficult to fully capture the extent to which grantees have contributed to cyber policy given how much information exchange happens informally, confidentially, or both. Still, grantees and experts say **Initiative funding directly seeded or otherwise helped create new cyber think tank entities that could hire and support researchers who** investigate emerging cyber developments like AI and machine learning and go on to hold government positions or otherwise **inform public policy** through their research, congressional testimony, and participation in conferences and other policy-related meetings.

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[2] Hewlett Foundation (2022). Request for Proposals: Cyber Initiative Summative Evaluation.

> "There's a substantial base of thought leadership in cybersecurity now from multiple parts of the spectrum and from different angles, both domestically and internationally … There's a lot more capability in the field."
>
> – FIELD EXPERT

Translation and Communication: Bridging Cyber Knowledge Gaps

Interviewees praised the effectiveness of Hewlett's contributions to translation and communication in the cyber field, particularly given these represented a small share of total spending. **More accurate, accessible, and understandable information is now available to decision-makers and members of the public without deep background or expertise in cyber subject matter**. Journalists have improved their understanding of and increased their substantive reporting about cyber issues thanks to training and professional development opportunities supported by the Initiative and other funders.

Interviewees' assessment of whether and to what degree these improvements in communication have led to increased understanding of cyber issues among policymakers and the public is mixed. **Communication advances have helped address both a need and an appetite within the government for expertise on cyber policy issues**, though the need for well-informed journalists and other translators only continues to grow.

> "[There are] certainly more reporters now who have an understanding of the field and can report it accurately. I still think there are far too few."
>
> – GRANTEE

Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion (DEI): Taking Early Steps in Cyber

Early on, the Cyber Initiative team was attentive to diversity in terms of gender, geographic location, and political viewpoint. In 2020, the Hewlett Foundation launched a racial justice initiative, created, and hired a new Chief of Equity and Culture, and intentionally foregrounded other racial justice and DEI efforts already underway at the Foundation. **Initiative staff later expanded investments to include "minority-serving institutions" (MSIs) of higher education**.

Grantees think expansively about diversity and its dimensions (e.g., class and caste, formal education level, geographic location, age, political ideology, disability and neurodiversity, academic discipline, race, and gender) **and appreciated the Foundation's attention to it.** Interviewees believed in the potential MSIs have for diversifying the talent pipeline, but some expressed their wish that MSI grants had been awarded sooner so those grantees could have benefited from the same beyond-the-grant opportunities enjoyed by earlier grantees. Overall, **assessments of the effectiveness of the Foundation's later-stage incorporation of race-related DEI tactics were mixed.**

The State of the Field in 2023

Compared to the start of the Initiative, the cyber field in which grantees operate is now stronger and better connected. However, ongoing financial support as Hewlett exits will be critical to keeping up momentum and growth in the field.

LESSONS & REFLECTIONS

Overall, grantees expressed immense gratitude and appreciation for Hewlett's overarching grantmaking approach, and **many credited the Cyber Initiative with significantly advancing their work**.

> "To the extent we've done anything, that was all because of Hewlett. We wouldn't have started in the field, number one. Number two, they gave us enough resources that I could hire people, often [bringing] them into the field and [telling] them they can learn how the outside world works without the pressure of having to go out and immediately raise money for their work."
>
> – GRANTEE

We also offer the following lessons and reflections surfaced during the summative evaluation:

- **Hewlett staff engaged with grantees in ways that created an environment of trust and partnership.** Many grantees noted feeling a sense of independence and viewed Foundation staff as trusting supporters.

- **The Foundation's approach to grantmaking allowed grantees the freedom to do what they do best.** Grantees commented that the benefits and flexibility offered by unrestricted funds allowed them to remain nimble and do what was most relevant and needed in their projects and programs.

- **DEI objectives and efforts require thoughtful integration into the DNA of an Initiative from the start.** While diversity was a cross-cutting theme throughout the Initiative's lifespan—focusing largely on geography, political ideology, and gender from the outset, and expanding to include race in later years— grantees nevertheless noted it as an area for improvement.

- **It made sense for Hewlett to take the lead in building something that could attract future funders.** Few foundations are willing to take financial risks on portfolios where impacts are uncertain and difficult to measure. This would seem to support Hewlett's approach of initially entering the cyber policy space as a near-sole funder.

- However, **it may be worth exploring whether more collaborative funding approaches can better set up grantees for post-funding sustainability.** Some interviewees argued other funders would have been more likely to participate if they had been approached by Hewlett as partners early in the work. They surmised that the Initiative's large early investments may have disincentivized other funders from engaging because they might have perceived their own entry into the space to be unnecessary.

- **More proactive, concrete communication to grantees about how much and what forms of capacity-building support were feasible** from each consultant may have helped increase the uptake and utility of Hewlett's technical assistance offerings.

- **There is much room to support, and a continued need for, multidisciplinary research exchanges.** Grantees widely agree such exchange is crucial for urgent cyber policy problems in rapidly changing contexts. **Designing high-quality convenings are a good way to do this**, as are funding conference travel and helping scholars and other experts connect and network with one another.

- Grantees observe that **the division between tech and policy experts persists**, despite some real successes in narrowing it. Ongoing and intentional investments to continue reducing disciplinary and sector fragmentation will be essential for continued progress in this area.

CONCLUSION

There have been substantial gains in the cyber field. Regardless of whether they are due to the direct or indirect contributions of the Cyber Initiative, **these gains are a cause for celebration and showcase exciting and necessary areas for future investment.** Private industry, government, academia, and the public have a greater awareness of the benefits and threats associated with cyber technology, and there are now more and better-informed players in policymaking. Communication about cyber and cyber-related issues has improved, and there is yet more room to grow.

The talent pipeline and university-based multidisciplinary academic programs are well-positioned to continue beyond the Initiative, and many opportunities exist to continue investing in a broader set of institutions to diversify and strengthen the field. However, **it remains unclear whether Initiative-funded think tanks (and other non-academic civil society organizations) have the funding necessary to ensure their longevity after Hewlett departs.**

While there is still more work to be done in building a comprehensive field-wide body of policy-relevant knowledge and experience across cyber-related disciplines, **Hewlett exits the Cyber Initiative leaving behind a richer and more collaborative field of experts** to clearly define the problems in need of solutions. Given the complexity of cyber-related issues and the innumerable ways they intersect with a variety of areas (e.g., health, education, climate, arts) **there are many opportunities for other funders to support and have great impact in this ever-evolving field.** They need not possess deep technical expertise to enter and engage the cyber space successfully—and the need for support is present and urgent.