

## Case 84

### College and Beyond Database

*Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, 1994*

Scott Kohler

*Background.* The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has a long history of “supporting research in higher education.”<sup>1265</sup> Among the many manifestations of this interest is a long trail of Mellon-supported literature examining a host of higher education issues and challenges. However, according to the Foundation’s president, William G. Bowen, “it is entirely possible that the creation of the College and Beyond database will prove to be the most lasting contribution of the Foundation to research in higher education.”<sup>1266</sup>

*Strategy.* The Mellon Foundation created the database to which Bowen refers over a period of almost four years, stretching from late 1994 into 1997. According to Bowen, “it was created to serve a range of scholarly objectives since those of us who created it thought that we needed to know more about outcomes in higher education generally.”<sup>1267</sup> To that end, the Foundation approached the presidents of more than two dozen academically selective colleges and universities to ask for their cooperation. Specifically, the Foundation asked each school to release a broad set of data about several classes of graduates. The database would collate such information as the students’ high school grades, test scores, family background at the time they applied, as well as collegiate performance indicators, such as undergraduate grade point average, graduation status (whether the student graduated and, if so, in how long), major field of study, and whether each student had participated in varsity athletics, or any other time-intensive extracurricular activity.<sup>1268</sup>

The presidents agreed, and, in the initial phase, the Mellon Foundation assembled data sets on the classes that had matriculated in 1951, 1976, and 1989 at each college or university. One stipulation, however, was that the resulting database was to be “restricted access”: no information could be released that would identify any individual students or which school any data point had attended. So the data were meant to be broad samples of three generations at a cohort representative of the most academically selective corner of the higher education market.

The Foundation also made a grant to the Mathematica Policy Research group to do a survey of its sample population. Mathematica gathered data from “many of these same matriculants” on their post-college experience.

This encompassed a range of questions, including subjects’ salary and job field, as well as their perceptions of the time spent in college. This survey data encompassed the second component of the C & B database, supplementing the “in college” information released by the twenty-eight participating colleges and universities. The final component of the C & B database would be linked records from other databases. The Foundation obtained, for example, permission to include data from the Educational Testing Service (ETS)’s SAT student questionnaires, as well as surveys of “pre-collegiate aspirations” conducted in 1976 and 1989.<sup>1269</sup>

*Outcomes.* The College and Beyond database has been a major resource for scholars researching higher education. It now contains data from over 90,000 former students at thirty-four participating institutions. These include four of the best public universities in the nation, several women’s colleges, and a number of the most selective private institutions in the United States.

The database was the basis on which Bowen, who is also the former president of Princeton University, along with former Harvard President Derek Bok, wrote their landmark defense of affirmative action, *The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions*. Published in 1998, *The Shape of the River* has had a major impact on the debate over race-based admission policies, and was hailed, even by a critical reviewer in the *Washington Times*,

as “an important and controversial book that should be read by anyone interested in the affirmative-action debate.”<sup>1210</sup> Bowen has since published two other highly influential studies using the database. *The Game of Life*, co-authored by James L. Shulman, and *Reclaiming the Game*, written with Sarah A. Levin, are studies of the consequences—for academically selective institutions—of the culture of sport pervasive on most college campuses, and, in particular, of the policy of athletic admissions.

*Impact.* But the College and Beyond database has been used by other researchers as well. It is a tremendous resource, facilitating a wide range of scholarship by providing data that no author would likely be able to collect on his own. Many works have been published studying higher education with the data gathered and assembled by the Mellon Foundation. By persuading colleges and universities to make available the data, and then funding follow-up surveys to track outcomes, the Foundation has given current and future researchers the ability to more comprehensively describe the higher education field. And the database will allow those who would change the field to learn from a substantial body of evidence that would not otherwise be available.

## Notes

1205. William G. Bowen and Derek Bok, *The Shape of the River* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

1206. William G. Bowen, “President’s Statement,” Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, *Annual Report*, 1997.

1207. Interview with William G. Bowen, *Frontline*. Available from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/sats/interviews/>.

1208. Bowen, *Shape of the River*.

1209. William G. Bowen, “President’s Statement,” Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, *Annual Report*, 1997.

1210. Martin Morse Wooster, “Sustenance for the Affirmative,” *Washington Times*, 1/1/2000.