Case 1

Rockefeller University
(Formerly the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research), 1901
Scott Kohler

Background. In the final years of the nineteenth century, John D. Rockefeller began seriously to discuss, with his philanthropic advisor Frederick T. Gates, and his son, John D. Rockefeller Jr., the possibility of funding a new institution of medical research. Over the next three years, Rockefeller’s attorney, Starr Murphy, met with leading medical professionals in an effort better to understand the needs of the field. After Rockefeller Sr.’s three-year-old grandson, John Rockefeller McCormick, died in 1901 of scarlet fever, Gates and John D. Rockefeller Jr. persuaded him to create the Rockefeller Institute of Medical Research. Rockefeller Jr. later said of Gates, “. . . the institute was conceived in his own mind; it was the child of his own brain.” And along the same lines, he recalled, “Gates was the brilliant dreamer and orator. I was the salesman—the go-between with Father at the opportune moment.”

Strategy. In 1901, Rockefeller committed $200,000 over the next ten years for construction of the Institute. Committed to assembling the best possible researchers, Rockefeller, and the Institute’s first board chairman, William H. Welch—himself a noted pathologist and the first dean of the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine—recruited Simon Flexner to run the Institute. With Flexner on board, Rockefeller supplemented his initial donation in June 1902 with an additional $1 million, also to be distributed over the next ten years. The Institute grew slowly at first: a deliberate move by Rockefeller, who was not eager to repeat the difficulties caused by the University of Chicago’s rapid growth a few years earlier. To encourage Flexner and the rest of the RIMR’s staff to work hard, Rockefeller remained deliberately vague as to how much future support the Institute could expect from him.

The Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research was the first institute of biomedical research in the United States. Its truest predecessors were such celebrated European research facilities as the Koch and Pasteur Institutes of Germany and France, respectively. Recalling a letter he had sent encouraging Rockefeller Sr. to create the Institute, Gates reflected:

I enumerated [to Rockefeller] the infectious diseases and pointed out how few of the germs had yet been discovered and how great the field of discovery, how few specifics had yet been found and how appalling was the unremedied suffering. I pointed to the Koch Institute in Berlin and at greater length to the Pasteur Institute in Paris.... I pointed out, as I remember the fact, that the results in dollars or francs of Pasteur’s discoveries about anthrax and on the diseases of fermentation has saved for the French nation a sum far in excess of the entire cost of the Franco-German war.

The Institute was organized around several distinct laboratories, each one run by a distinguished leader in his field of medical research. In his classic biography of Rockefeller Sr., Ron Chernow writes:

That Rockefeller placed scientists, not lay trustees, in charge of the expenditures was thought revolutionary. This was the Institute’s secret formula: gather great minds, liberate them from petty cares, and let them chase intellectual chimeras without pressure or meddling.

The Institute’s first public triumph came in 1907, when its researchers—led by Dr. Flexner—developed a serum to cure cerebrospinal meningitis, which was just then sweeping through the
streets of New York. The serum—which the RIMR distributed free of charge until the New York Board of Health took over the task in 1911—saved hundreds, if not thousands, of lives, and earned the Institute wide acclaim. In recognition of its success, Rockefeller donated to it an additional $2.6 million, which he then followed, later that year, with $8 million for the construction of Rockefeller Hospital, “the first center for clinical research in the United States.” The Hospital enabled RIMR researchers “to bridge the gap between science and the bedside, studying diseases both in the laboratory and as they manifested in patients.”

Outcomes. By the mid-1950s, the Institute’s approach to research was widely emulated, and, seeking continually to stay ahead of the curve, it “expanded its mission to include education, admitting its first class of graduate students.” In 1965, the RIMR formally changed its name to Rockefeller University, a graduate institution pairing a well-funded, highly distinguished faculty with a very small, select cadre of graduate researchers. Since the early 1970s, Rockefeller University has also forged partnerships with several hospitals in New York, including Cornell University Medical College, the Sloan-Kettering Institute, and the Aaron Diamond AIDS Research Center.

Very soon after its creation, the Rockefeller Institute of Medical Research joined the ranks of the world’s elite centers of biomedical research. Today, Rockefeller University remains at the leading edge of progress in a wide range of medical areas. Its seventy-four laboratories study such conditions as addiction, Alzheimer’s, diabetes, heart disease, and many others. The first RIMR scientist to be awarded the Nobel Prize was Alexis Carrel, who in 1912 became the first American ever to receive the prize for medicine. Since then, Rockefeller University has been directly associated with twenty-three Nobel laureates and nineteen recipients of the prestigious Lasker Award. Its current faculty includes five MacArthur Fellows; twelve winners of the National Medal of Science, the most important award given in the United States for science; and thirty-three elected members of the National Academy of Sciences. Among the many significant breakthroughs achieved by these and other distinguished Rockefeller researchers are the following:

- The discovery of new ways to freeze blood, which led during World War I to the creation of the first blood bank
- The discovery that DNA double-helixes are the building blocks of heredity
- Proving the connection between cholesterol and heart disease
- The invention of drugs to treat sleeping sickness
- The introduction of methadone as a tool to help manage heroin addiction

And this is only a small sample.

Impact. According to Chernow, “[n]one of the titan [Rockefeller]’s other philanthropies was perhaps such an unqualified success.” And for Winston Churchill, the creation of the Rockefeller Institute was John D. Rockefeller’s crowning benefaction. Shortly before Rockefeller died, Churchill praised him, saying:

When history passes its final verdict on John D. Rockefeller, it may well be that his endowment of research will be recognized as a milestone in the progress of the race. For the first time, science was given its head; longer term experiment on a large scale has been made practicable, and those who undertake it are freed from the shadow of financial disaster. Science today owes as much to the rich men of generosity and discernment as the art of the Renaissance owes to the patronage of Popes and Princes. Of these rich men, John D. Rockefeller is the supreme type."
Even today—more than a century after its founding—Rockefeller University continues to study, to innovate, and to “make practicable” the great experiment set in motion by Rockefeller and his far-seeing advisers.

Notes

4 Ibid.
6 Berliner, *A System of Scientific Medicine*.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid. See also the case study of the Diamond Foundation’s creation of the Aaron Diamond AIDS Research Center.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Available from http://www.rockefeller.edu. See also Wooster, “The Donors are In: What Gates Can Learn from Rockefeller about Global Health.”
16 Ibid.