

Barbara Chow: From Public Policy to Philanthropy



Taking a leadership role at the [William and Flora Hewlett Foundation](#) was a natural outgrowth of Barbara Chow's 25-year public policy career. "My work had always been about resource allocation, making decisions around the use of money to advance social purpose," Chow said in a recent interview. "That's how I always thought of what I did in government. In many ways, philanthropy was a natural, next-step culmination of that work."

Chow joined the Menlo Park, CA-based foundation as its education program director in the fall of 2008, coming from a role as policy director for the House Budget Committee. Before that, she worked during both terms of the Clinton Administration in a range of roles including White House liaison to Congress, program associate director for the Office of Management and Budget, and deputy director of the White House Domestic Policy Council. She also served on the presidential transition teams for both President-elect Clinton in 1992 and President-elect Obama in 2008.

Interestingly, although the budgeting and evaluation skills Chow developed during her government career gave her a wealth of experience to bring to bear in her role in philanthropy, she found that as she looked for a position, the difference in the scale of the two sectors initially made it difficult for some search firms to categorize her candidacy. In one early meeting with a search firm, Chow explained that in her last job she had been responsible for education, labor, and income maintenance programs, which includes the multi-billion-dollar Social Security program. The recruiter wrote down that Chow had overseen a budget totaling "hundreds of billions of dollars." "I had some small influence over much larger sums of money than I do in the nonprofit sector," Chow reflected, laughing. "But I can't control Social Security! The amount of control you exercise is actually a lot less in the government than it is in philanthropy."

Chow did have some foundation experience before joining Hewlett: She was executive director of the [National Geographic Education Foundation](#) and vice president for education and children's programs at National Geographic from 2001 to 2007. But, as she explained, National Geographic was mostly an operating foundation with a focus on programs; Hewlett's strategic grant making and emphasis on outcome-focused giving is truly a close fit with Chow's self-described "lifelong obsession with budget issues."

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Ultimately, Chow says that her career shift has allowed her to have a bigger impact and put more of her ideas into action more quickly than she could in her government career, where proposals can take several years to make it through the federal review and budget process—if they survive at all. “It’s quicker [in the philanthropic sector] and, this is almost a cliché, but the philanthropic sector is a lot more innovative and risk-taking,” Chow said. “As much as you might want to innovate, it’s hard to do that with taxpayer dollars because you need a certain amount of evidence around an educational intervention or something that would justify spending public dollars. And that constrains almost immediately what you’re able to do. We do a lot of quantitative analysis here [at Hewlett] to try to make it more transparent and to benchmark against others, and we honor and respect evidence, but you’re much more able to take chances.”

Her mission at the Hewlett Foundation, one of the nation’s largest private foundations, is roughly the same as it was in government: to determine how resources can advance particular social causes. But she says the atmosphere at Hewlett is strikingly different. For example, Chow initially was skeptical of Hewlett’s process wherein the staff would all peer review each other’s written proposals and project reports. In the political world, she says, people would have typically viewed such a process as an opportunity to shoot down someone else’s ideas or to favorably position their own. But at Hewlett, Chow says all the peer comments are given in the spirit of “How do I help a colleague make this sentence stronger or this idea better?” and the collaborative process results in a stronger, better product.

That spirit of cooperation permeates the entire philanthropic community, according to Chow. “Philanthropies don’t really compete with each other,” she said. “The fact that two foundations are working on something and it succeeds only makes us both stronger. There’s no need for our name to be out in front or somebody else’s name to be out in front. To me, that’s the biggest difference between the sectors.”

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