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The mission of Chicago Philanthropy is to increase the understanding and awareness of the contributions of nonprofits and philanthropic organizations in the northern-Illinois, northern-Indiana region.

interview

John E. Hughes, Chairman of The Coleman Foundation.

After 20 Years of Funding Entrepreneurship Awareness Programs at Colleges and Universities, Has the Coleman Foundation Accomplished its Goal?

Kathleen Carpenter

The \$220 million **Coleman Foundation** has maintained its focus for twenty years on a limited number of specific programs: housing and education; cancer research, care and treatment, and its most high-profile program, entrepreneurship awareness and education.

The man who shaped Coleman's entrepreneurship programs is its chairman, **John E. Hughes**, himself a successful entrepreneur, now retired after a career that included the leadership of **Fannie May Candies** on the near West Side of Chicago.



John Hughes

The Coleman Foundation started with \$25 million in 1981 and has given away roughly \$80 million since then - much of it to bring the gospel of entrepreneurship to college campuses across the country. Hughes planned it that way. Now he has the satisfaction of seeing a world full of dot com entrepreneurs and others who have chosen entrepreneurship as a career and life option. Is the Coleman Foundation's mission accomplished?

CP: So, John, it seems like everyone is an entrepreneur these days. Do you feel that the Coleman Foundation has achieved what it set out to do? Will the foundation change direction now?

Hughes: We have indeed achieved a certain level of awareness. On the academic side, when you look back twenty years and see where formal education was then, and where it is now with regard to this topic, we can see real progress. Schools that resisted our ideas, like **Notre Dame, the University of Chicago, Washington University**, have accepted them. But we don't want to stop. We do, however, think the delivery has to change, because we don't see the pace of progress we would like through post-secondary education where our emphasis has been. We're not saying we won, but we're thinking about where we go from here. I attended a conference where three top entrepreneurship instructors delivered papers on the theme, 'entrepreneurship has won, where do we go from here?' We're trying to answer that with a change of direction in programs — becoming bolder with our programs — speaking out more in certain areas — trying to get others more involved as far as delivery, and expanding networks.

CP: How many schools has the foundation funded? And do you try to track the students to see if any entrepreneurs emerge directly from your programs?

Hughes: We've given \$1 million or more to eight schools to endow professorships in entrepreneurship, for instance, **DePaul, Beloit, the University of Illinois**. We've provided substantial funding to something like 300 colleges and universities, plus community programs, secondary and grammar schools. It's true that we've brought this to the attention of many students over the years and a certain percentage of them are now self-employed. The number isn't important. Not all students are going to become entrepreneurs and we don't expect them to, but we think the exposure gives them a better appreciation for the other side of the street, and that has value in labor relations and management.

CP: Do you think the interest in entrepreneurship will continue?

Hughes: Yes, I think so. What we did was take something that already was happening and focus on it and identify it more. Self-employment was caused by many reasons over history - discrimination, for instance, which is still a motivating factor.

CP: You mentioned making changes - becoming bolder with your programs, trying to get others more involved in delivery. How will you do that?

Hughes: In academia there is no room for growth for Coleman's senior tenured faculty beyond a named professorship. None of these people set out to become entrepreneurship educators, but they have acquired a great deal of experience and education in the area. So they also ask, where do we go from here? One change we are making is to put money directly in the control of our post-secondary entrepreneurship educators, rather than give it to their schools to control. We'll make a commitment of a million a year for four years for the eight core members to sit down as a board and divide among themselves. It will be exciting to see where that money goes, for instance, we've always encouraged faculty to get involved in community development.

CP: Will you be keeping the cancer research, care and cure programs?

Hughes: Yes, and we plan to go to the cancer institutions and medical chairs and replicate the program I just mentioned. There we know less about

the subject. We'll give the chair or department head the same offer - what do you need? -equipment, teaching aids? We just finished a retreat where we talked about whether we should be changing programs rather than directions in programs. What we're doing is changing directions within programs.

CP: It sounds like after some soul-searching, you and the rest of the board feel you are still on track with this foundation.

Hughes: I think the main thing achieved at the retreat is that, in effect, the stewardship of the foundation is being transferred to Michael (**Michael Hennessy, president of the Coleman Foundation**). It has been happening gradually because of his youth and the growth of the foundation. When I took over in 1981, with the size of assets we had, I was just starting these programs; now he has mature programs and ten times the assets. We have to ask ourselves, do we simply practice maintenance on these or do we still focus on change. Now Michael comes into his own, and the next decade should be his decisions and his programs, ones that reflect his own passions. He is enthusiastic about these current programs but he may not have the same passion for self-employment that I have. He has a different background and other interests, and we've given him our support to know it is okay to explore rather than be expected to continue decisions we made in 1995, the last time we looked closely at our programs. **CP**

[Read more on the Coleman Foundation...](#)

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