

March 16, 2023

Interview with Erica Carere and Liz Allison

Citation:

"Interview with Erica Carere and Liz Allison", March 16, 2023, Wilson Center Digital Archive, <https://digitalarchive.umd.edu/document/301084>

Summary:

The interview discusses the Stanton Foundation's work in funding nuclear security research, particularly through their Stanton Nuclear Security Fellows Program. The foundation aims to support young researchers who can influence policy in this area, without pushing any specific policy agenda themselves. They fund a range of academic institutions and think tanks, looking for a critical mass of senior experts to mentor the next generation. While they primarily fund US-based organizations, they have also expanded to support some non-US institutions. This document summary was generated by an artificial intelligence language model and was reviewed by a Wilson Center staff member.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY)

Original Language:

English

Contents:

Transcript - English

Michal Onderco: So thank you very much for being part of my project, I really appreciate that. I want to start with a very general question which I asked every interviewee, which is: how did you get into working on philanthropy related to nuclear weapons?

Erica Carere: Do you want me to handle that one Liz?

Liz Allison: Yeah, go ahead.

Erica Carere: Well, as you know, the foundation is called the Stanton Foundation. So this was founded by Frank Stanton, the former president of CBS. And given that it's his money, all the money is spent on topics or concerns that were relevant to him during his lifetime. And so nuclear security was one of those. And that is basically why, so it's donor intent. It basically dictates where the money is spent.

Michal Onderco: And what appealed to you to work in an institution that works on nuclear security? Is it the philanthropic part, or was it the nuclear part? Or both?

Erica Carere: Me personally?

Michal Onderco: Yes.

Erica Carere: So my background is in mechanical engineering and economics. I don't have a nuclear background, but I do have a technical background. And growing up, the Cold War was obviously a very concerning topic. So I think that attracted me to the nuclear security field. And giving grants for better research, better information, more informed people working on these topics is always a good thing.

Michal Onderco: How about you Mrs. Allison?

Liz Allison: Well, as Erica mentioned, I just want to underscore two things. I don't have much to add to what Erica has said about... I do not have a technical background, so we were very fortunate to find someone like Erica, who could speak nuclear engineering as the need arose. I'm an economist by training. And I have no formal background in nuclear security. But I was a good friend of Frank Stanton. And he became interested in nuclear security when Dwight Eisenhower, then President, created a group of business leaders, government leaders and others to be ready to deal with the aftermath of a nuclear attack on the US. And Frank Stanton was to be the communication tsar. And that was partly because he was president of the widest network, but from a very early age and had a very strong interest in technology, engineering, etc. He could fix anything. And so, the idea was, well, if you had to get to the top of that tower, and re-cable lines to keep communication going, he'd be just the man to lead the engineering party.

Michal Onderco: So the Stanton Foundation has this very interesting position, because you're funding primarily academic research and academic work on nuclear security. And that makes Stanton different from other funders who also fund a lot of civil society activities. Why did you decide to be focused on the academic research?

Erica Carere: Well, I'm not sure we... go ahead.

Liz Allison: I wouldn't say we are.

Michal Onderco: Why? Okay, so explain.

Liz Allison: Erica, why don't you talk about the Fellows Program? Because I think we look at that certainly our largest total funding, and we look as, hopefully, our most during contribution.

Erica Carere: So we have what's called the Stanton Nuclear Security Fellows Program, which has been around now for I think we're in our 13th, year, maybe 14th. So we fund fellows at various institutions, some academic, but also think tanks like RAND, CFR, Carnegie, I think that's it. And then also Stanford, Harvard, Texas A&M, MIT. And so that program is basically trying to generate young people who are interested in doing research in nuclear security, and will continue to do work in the nuclear security area. And the idea is not to push them into academics, but to encourage them to do the research and then branch out into government positions, think tanks, or academic positions. So we don't stress the academic part, it is just that a lot of what we're trying to do is create the next generation of thought leaders. And one way to do that is to fund people who are currently doing academic research in the area.

Michal Onderco: And you already mentioned the words impact and legacy. How do you think about impact in terms of what constitutes impact in your thinking?

Erica Carere: Well, the main stress we have for the research that's done in the nuclear security area is to have a policy related impact. So we want young researchers, basically anyone we fund to generate work and , publish work that will influence the policy realm. So I would say that's how we measure impact.

Michal Onderco: And when you say it influences the policy realm, does it mean changing the policy completely or sort of providing more insight so that more informed policy can be made?

Erica Carere: I would say more informed. We don't take any particular position on an issue. It's more just being more informed.

Michal Onderco: I mean, you listed a long list of institutions that you fund. What were your criteria when you were choosing these institutions? Was it academic excellence? Because you mentioned a lot of universities which are ranked at the top. And also, many of these think tanks that you mentioned, are really amongst the top think tanks in D.C., or were there other criteria that you were interested in?

Liz Allison: I think what Erica and I talked about most was a critical mass of senior researchers. Because you don't get to be good at doing policy or research without considerable mentoring. And there are some places that are very good, and very good people, but there are only one or two of them. So if that person goes on leave, takes a job as an Assistant Secretary of Defense, then the young fellows are sort of stuck. So we looked for a critical mass. That gave us a big bias in... there are many excellent, small institutions. But we weren't going to go anywhere where you could take up two people and there was no program left.

Michal Onderco: You mentioned that there might be people who go into senior government positions. Is it also your goal that your future grantees would be the people who might take up these positions in the government?

Erica Carere: Yes.

Michal Onderco: You mentioned this Fellow Program, and when I was at Stanford, Stanton Fellows were sort of... there was a lot of mentorship and advice for them, there was a lot of working with them. Are you also involved in how, for example, the institutions choose these people? And what kinds of training they give them? And not necessarily what the content is, but what kind of... whether it's

media training, or research or policy advisor, or whatever else. Or do leave a lot of autonomy to the grantees?

Erica Carere: We provide general structure, I'd say, but they have a lot of autonomy. We don't...they pick the fellows, we don't have any say in that. Except to say you can pick up to three fellows this year, whatever number it might be. But then in terms of the actual program, what we do is we say: "every fellow has to basically present a research plan in October at a seminar, and they're going to receive feedback from their mentors, as well as the other mentors." And the goal of that is really to make sure that all the fellows are on the right track, in terms of having a solid research plan for the entire year. But then we're pretty much hands off until we get the final report saying: "this fellow has accomplished this, this, this and this. And here's some things that they've published within their year."

Michal Onderco: And do you have any sort of... preference is probably a bad word. Are the majority of fellows social scientists and humanities people? Or do you also have fellows who come from, for example, a natural science background?

Erica Carere: Yeah, we don't... I mean, we do, like at Texas A&M, that's really an engineering program; at MIT, nuclear engineering, we're trying to promote more engineers. In terms of the background, we don't have a preference. Would you say that is accurate?

Liz Allison: I agree, we don't have a preference.

Erica Carere: Just more focused on a solid research plan.

Michal Onderco: Many of my friends did the Stanton Fellowship, and many of them use it then to write sort of excellent academic work. But I imagine that if you have fellows, let's say, in think tanks in D.C., the outputs are different. Are your expectations about what institutions are supposed to produce, do they vary from institution to institution? Or from institution type to institution type?

Erica Carere: I mean, obviously, places like RAND, they generate a lot more internal documentation or Carnegie's a lot more internal. So yes, I would say our expectations are different in terms of what the fellows produce, as opposed to at Stanford, or Harvard, or elsewhere.

Michal Onderco: And you said that you this year that you have the 13th year of fellows. Would you say that the program has been successful? Or is it too early to say in sort of delivering this impact that you mentioned?

Erica Carere: It's something that we grapple with every year, I'd say. But overall, yes, we think it's been very successful. I mean, a lot of the fellows have become tenured professors, a lot of them are working at, you know, think tanks around the world and are professors around the world. Obviously, there's a small percentage that kind of drop off, or choose a different career path. But that's to be expected. But overall, I'd say it's been very successful.

Michal Onderco: And are you also successful in this goal of providing more informed policy debate. So would you say there are Stanton fellows who are already influencing the policy debate in the United States? Or is it too early?

Erica Carere: No, there definitely are. I mean, one of our star fellows Vipin Narang is currently working in the government influencing policy. But I also feel like any time you pick up a book, or, I don't know, a

current article, there's always a Stanton Fellow's name on it. Like you see a lot of the same names cropping up over and over.

Michal Onderco: And so, you mentioned that the pin is a star fellow. So in ideal world, fellows would sort of have this. So important, if I understand correctly, what makes him really successful is that he's not only a tenured professor, he also works in government. Am I right? Correct. Yeah. What do you think makes for a good grantee? Or what do you think makes for a good fellow? Is it the scientific expertise? Or is there also something that the person needs extra to really be a good...?

Erica Carere: Well, we always like people who work in the nuclear security area as defined by the Foundation. And don't use it as something that's a way to expand some other type of research interest. So that's a key requirement, and it has to match with the what the Stanton Foundation defines as nuclear security. In terms of extra, I'm not sure. I mean, we always like people who report on time, and meet their deadlines, and that type of thing.

Liz Allison: We like people who have an interest in policy.

Erica Carere: Yes.

Erica Carere: As opposed to simply becoming famous academics.

Michal Onderco: And how do you evaluate that in those early days? I mean, if someone gets a fellowship as a postdoc, they're maybe 30- to 35-year-old.

Erica Carere: Younger.

Michal Onderco: Okay, so how do you evaluate that at this age?

Erica Carere: Well, that's really the institution in making the choice for that candidate. And then we evaluate once the fellow has graduated and moved on.

Michal Onderco: But that sounds to me like something that is really difficult to evaluate, right?

Erica Carere: Yes, but we hope these institutions have that expertise.

Liz Allison: What I'm feeling is: well, if Scott Sagan and Barry Posen can't guess that, we certainly can't.

Michal Onderco: So I spoke to Grant Officers from different foundations, also the bigger ones like Ford and MacArthur, and one of the things that I always ask them is how do they see or whether they even cooperate with other funders and other foundations. So I'm also going to ask you: do you cooperate and coordinate with other funders and other foundations?

Erica Carere: No.

Michal Onderco: That was a very short answer.

Erica Carere: Well, in nuclear security, we don't. In other areas we do.

Liz Allison: In other areas, yeah. I think the only exception to that would be... we were very sad when McCarthy left the field, when Hewlett left the field. Erica still has grantees, Erica, we did get in touch with Hewlett and with the program officer and say: obviously this is an institutional decision, not your decision. And I'm sure you love all your programs. But give us the two or three that you're going to stop funding that you think it is just heartbreaking that you stop funding. So as people leave the field, we try to talk to them and pick up... Isn't that how you got Brazil?

Erica Carere: Yes. So that's Getulio Vargas Foundation.

Liz Allison: We would collaborate more if there were more people in the field.

Michal Onderco: And so you don't have cooperation with for example Ploughshares, who is now one of the remaining major...

Erica Carere: No.

Michal Onderco: Okay, and is it because there was little overlap in your programmatic priorities? Or is it more because they are sort of big and also focused on other things?

Erica Carere: I think it's more that we know our programs, and we know our goals and our missions, and I'm not sure they line up with Ploughshares.

Liz Allison: For example, we know Sam Nunn well, and think very highly of him. But we don't work with them, because as Erica said a couple minutes ago, we don't have we don't advocate specific policies. We want good research done, and one of the things about genuine research is you just never know where it will come up. And so we it would be hard for us to work with an organization that already had its policy choices well defined indeed, up in neon lights above its front door.

Michal Onderco: Does it ever happen to you that you find something and the result is something completely different than you expected at the beginning? Not in terms of like they don't deliver what they promise, but the content is something that surprises the writers even.

Erica Carere: Surprises the writers? You mean, like they've accomplished their goals, but the result is completely different.

Michal Onderco: Yeah, so they accomplish their goals. So, let's say very often people writing these grant proposals that they're going to read the book, and the book is going to be on something. But then the conclusions are such that it's surprising not only... because if the conclusions of the paper cannot be expected at the beginning, then the findings might come out in completely different way than they were originally thought, right? So does that happen?

Erica Carere: I would say to date no. But it could increasingly, or potentially, happen with the Former Fellows Funding project, the one that we gave you a grant through. Because most of our programs are fellowships where you're supporting someone who's in the nuclear security field or funding new courses in nuclear security, we generally know how it's going to end up. So those things are pretty straightforward, and you know kind of where it's going to go. But with this program we started three years ago, where we're funding tenure track professors or the equivalent at think tanks it is different. A lot of people are planning to write a book, but we haven't gotten enough results or final projects turned in yet to know if there are any surprising results. But I would say that that's potentially possible with that program.

Michal Onderco: Why did you decide to start this new program that is more uncertain?

Erica Carere: Mostly because we thought there was a need to fund these types of academics or the equivalent at think tanks. You know, tenured professors are tenured. We have a Fellowship Program for the postdocs, pre-doc's and junior faculty, but nothing for in between.

Michal Onderco: And one of the things that is also very different about this is that you're also funding non-American institutions because your fellowship programs are based in the US. And now I had a look at the grantees and I would say half of them or maybe even outside of the US Why did you decide to go outside of the US? Because even the Ford Foundation doesn't give grants outside... or the Carnegie Corporation. If Carnegie Corporation gives grants to an institution it needs to go via American institution. So why did you decide to actually take that leap?

Erica Carere: Well, I think it's not just the US problem.

Liz Allison: And I think, also one of the things, or one of the points you made at the time, Erica, was that, even then, and probably more so now, there are many places in the world that do not like taking advice from Americans. We understand why that's the case. But if they had no experts of their own, then their choices are really bad. So we wanted more homegrown expertise in places that we thought nuclear issues would be important.

Michal Onderco: Do you have any countries where you say that they are priority funding for you? Or do you sort of look with an open mind whatever comes?

Erica Carere: Well, there's countries we've looked into, like we've considered funding in Japan, but we just couldn't find any viable partner. So the trick is finding a country where there's a viable partner, who already , has people doing research in the area. And is a place where we think our money will make a difference. But that's certainly not true in all countries.

Michal Onderco: So you, for example, support two projects in Germany, and one in Hamburg and one in Berlin, if I'm correct.

Erica Carere: Right.

Michal Onderco: And so, these would be good examples of institutions where there is already this critical mass that you mentioned at the beginning, right?

Erica Carere: Right.

Michal Onderco: Do you have the same expectations about the impact and about making a difference about these foreign recipients? And also in the smaller grants, then you have from the fellows?

Erica Carere: So yes, we want some policy impact, it may not be as significant or different, or whatever it might be. But yes.

Michal Onderco: You have been in the field for 13 years, if you look at the field, how it develops, do you have any observations on how the field is developing and where it's going?

Erica Carere: Well, I would say, unfortunately, world circumstances are generating more interest in nuclear security. When I first started working in this, it would have been very hard to go into Germany 10 years ago. And it's not necessarily that easy now, but it's easier. So I would say just world circumstances have made it a topic of interest again.

Liz Allison: Agreed. It's amazing what a threat of one small tactical nuclear weapon in Ukraine will do to interest in these issues in German academic institutions.

Michal Onderco: I mean, you supported this project on Germany and nuclear weapons in Hamburg. And I found it interesting, because they invited me to a workshop that they were organizing, and I

found it interesting that they had the this sort of very broad cross section of people sort of looking at nuclear weapons from different angles. I found that very productive.

Erica Carere: Good, we like the feedback.

Michal Onderco: You will probably receive a report from it, but I really found it very well spent three days. Perhaps my last question for you is: if you look at the, at the relative position of Stanton vis a vis these other actors, other funders, whether it's Carnegie Corporation, Ploughshare, there is LongView , are also others, of course, research funding and other funding that comes from DoD, academic institutions, from the Department of Energy. What do you think, especially when it comes to these grants for tenure track researchers, what do you think, is the particular edge that Stanton carries? What distinguishes you from others?

Erica Carere: I would say the focus on policy distinguishes us. And I think the fact that we don't guide the research in any way.

Michal Onderco: When I speak to Grant Officers from bigger foundations, they often tell me that they are very hands-on with the grantees... I don't want to use the word micromanagers. But very often they tell me grantees invite us for visits, but then also, the foundations often provide a lot of guidance advice. They support grantees in developing the proposals, but they also do get hands-on when it comes to, for example, fostering diversity among the grantees, also promoting new ideas. Would you say that Stanton is also this very hands-on active funder? Or are you sort of taking a more hands-off approach?

Erica Carere: More hands-off.

Michal Onderco: Hands-off? Okay.

Erica Carere: One of the things Liz likes to say is "we walk with the willing".

Liz Allison: The other thing we sometimes say is, and remember, Boston is one of the epicenters of the venture capital world, we sometimes say "our core competence is writing a check." These days, we don't recommend in checks, we send wires. But we choose institutions with expertise. And...

Erica Carere: And people.

Liz Allison: Yeah.

Michal Onderco: Okay, well, thank you very much for finding the time for me.