Philanthropy and Social Impact: A Research Symposium
A Special Update from The Center on Philanthropy & Public Policy

The USC Center on Philanthropy & Public Policy hosted nearly 65 scholars from across North America for an academic symposium on March 14-16 examining how philanthropy, nonprofits and social innovation can advance social impact.

Center Director James M. Ferris and USC Executive Vice Provost and Center Fellow Elizabeth Graddy organized the symposium to take stock of the intellectual developments around philanthropy and social change exploring what has been learned over the last two decades, where the research gaps are most prominent, and what are the more promising avenues for future research.

These questions were posed to prominent scholars across three plenaries: Scaling Impact: Philanthropic Strategy; Working Together: Organizations, Partnerships, and Networks; and Creating Change: Social Movements and Community Engagement. Some of the notable points made in each plenary are shared below.

Scaling Impact: Philanthropic Strategy

(*From left: Peter Frumkin, Jack Meyers, Shena Ashley and James Ferris*)

Much has been made about the intergenerational transfer of wealth and its impact on philanthropy, but less on how dollars that find their way into philanthropy will shape

philanthropy itself, the broader nonprofit sector and the communities it serves. That is why understanding philanthropic strategy is critical: it provides a frame for donors to be more intentional in their giving. The opening panel, featuring Shena Ashley, Vice President of the Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy at the Urban Institute, Peter Frumkin, University of Pennsylvania, and Jack Meyers, President of Rockefeller Archive Center, examined both the current state of philanthropic strategy and key challenges and opportunities to its study.

While some wealthy individuals in the last century started foundations because they wanted to be more strategic about their giving, highlighted by the fast, early professionalization of foundations like Rockefeller, Carnegie and Ford, the historical records of those foundations haven't been analyzed enough from the perspective of strategy and scaling.

Even so, beyond these large, legacy foundations, the broader donor community has only started to focus on "grand" strategies for impact and scaling in the last twenty years. Moreover, much of the scholarship related to philanthropic strategy, to the extent it exists at all, has been too process-oriented. This is in part attributable to the reliance by foundations on external strategy consultants and a ceding of ground by scholars who have had trouble not only in gathering the right data but also in finding outlets and avenues to publish their academic work. The biggest challenge for scholars studying philanthropy and social change, however, is how to quantify social impact and disentangle the influence that philanthropy may or may not have from other variables.

On a more hopeful note, the study of philanthropic strategy has improved, most notably through the collection and analysis of Form 990 data, which has made the inner-workings of foundations slightly less opaque. While such data only provides a narrow view of the decisions made by foundations, some of this data could be further revealed by the troves of archival information on grants that will soon become available.

Watch a video of the session here.

Working Together: Organizations, Partnerships, and Networks

(*From left: Elizabeth Graddy, Christine Beckman, Tina Dacin and Michelle Shumate*)

There has been an increasing emphasis in the field of philanthropy on the power of collaboration and network to create a bigger impact. Tina Dacin, Queen's University, Christine Beckman, University of Southern California and Michelle Shumate, Northwestern University, discussed how best philanthropy could best support networks and what research strategies could help scholars better understand their impacts.

Foundations can help orchestrate networks in a directive manner, helping to pick network partners and provide instruction on approaches, or they can be more open and patient in their approach. Available research suggests that the more effective and lasting networks tend to be those that have the freedom and flexibility that allows the organizations in the networks to come together on their own terms. Philanthropy can therefore help to support such networks by providing general operating support and longer-term, dedicated funding that allows these networks to grow more naturally.

Yet, studying the social impact of networks and collaboration, let alone the more indirect role of philanthropy, can be difficult, time-consuming and costly. It's therefore critical for researchers to consider different levels of analysis, but particularly by studying outcomes at the community level. At times, this may call for researchers to embed themselves in community for longer periods of time. In research interviews, for example, interview subjects tend not to share the same stories or information in the first interview that they will share after repeated interviews, underscoring the importance of gaining community trust.

Scholars also need to be more innovative in developing their research designs and not just study a topic because the data is available. As well, they need to be cognizant that their presence might affect network behavior. Unobtrusive measures, like studying what children in low-income communities are doing on a Saturday night or observing the number of visitors each evening to a neighborhood Starbucks, can help to address such concerns and provide valuable insights about impact that might not otherwise be revealed.

Watch a video of the session here.

Creating Change: Social Movements and Community Engagement

(From left: Nicole Esparza, Brayden King, Patricia Strach, and Edward Walker)

Successful social movements over the decades, from the Civil Rights Movement to the more recent success of "Me Too," have led to lasting social changes. Philanthropy's role in helping to move from "moments" to "movements" was a key topic for the third plenary panel, which featured Brayden King, Northwestern University, Patricia Strach, State University of New York and Edward Walker, UCLA.

Foundations have played important roles in many historical movements, but their approaches differ and have sometimes shifted over time. The Ford Foundation, for example, carefully selected a small set of organizations in the Civil Right Movements to help organize it, but is now more focused on funding a broader base of organizations to sprout social movements from the ground up, such as their work on net neutrality and racial equity.

Research shows that building movements is best done by investing in organizational infrastructure. They are not crowds of people getting excited about something, but a coordinated action that can mobilize resources at the local level toward a social gain. Many movements have failed because they didn't figure out how build or sustain the local infrastructure.

At the same time, philanthropy's role in developing social movements can be problematic. For instance, to what extent does philanthropic funding for social movements bind people and organizations to the ideals of the funder and how does that affect their authenticity as grassroots movements, either perceived or real?

The panel reminded the audience that while foundations are well-positioned to catalyze social movements, the greatest levers for change tend to happen through government. They admonished foundations to think more about how to make changes that are lasting and meaningful and that are accepted by the people in the community. One way to do this is by building up more democratic institutions and encouraging and engaging people to participate more fully in the public policy making process.

Watch a video of the session here.

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In addition to the three plenaries, thirty-four scholars presented their original research in connection with plenary themes in 12 paper panel sessions. Papers ranged from "Framing 'Impact:' Strategic Philanthropy, Evidence-based Policy, and the Growth of Human Service RCTs" to "The Spillover Effects of Social Movement Coalitions on Entrepreneurial Entry into Emerging Markets for Socially Beneficial Products" to the "Intermediary Roles of Foundations in the Policy Process: Building Coalitions of Interest," with the work spanning issues as diverse as cities, immigration, Native American philanthropy, impact investing and medical science research. The full program, which includes the papers presented at the symposium, can be found on The Center's website.

The event served as a launching point for The Center's 20th anniversary activities and the Sol Price School's 90th anniversary.

The Center on Philanthropy & Public Policy promotes more effective philanthropy and strengthens the nonprofit sector through research that informs philanthropic decision-making and public policy to advance community problem solving. The Center is a part of the USC Sol Price School of Public Policy, which works to improve the quality of life for people and their communities, here and abroad.

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