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IDEAS & OPINIONS FROM EMORY UNIVERSITY

America's Tradition of Philanthropy and Higher Education: Building Community, Pursuing the Moral Life

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During the past several years, it has been my good fortune to visit a number of countries in Asia, Europe, Africa, and South America in an effort to expand Emory's international programs and outreach. I learned a great deal not only about these countries and cultures but about America as well. One of my strongest impressions is of the unique strength that comes from our long history of volunteerism and private philanthropy. This tradition builds community in our culture and promotes the pursuit of the moral life -- not some doctrinaire morality, but the moral life that raises questions and seeks answers about what really matters, what is of value and what is not, what sustains life and gives meaning.

This has great meaning for those whose mission it is to encourage giving to institutions of higher education. After all, part of the work of our institutions is to build community and to help students seek an understanding of the moral life. But philanthropy towards our institutions also makes us a vehicle for achieving these goals -- strengthening community and helping others to pursue the moral life. In doing so, we do something almost uniquely American.

To this day, the great majority of charitable giving worldwide takes place in North America; the non-profit sector is a huge piece of the American economy and way of life. Americans gave an estimated \$212 billion to charity in 2001, according to Giving USA, and 70 percent of American households contribute to charity each year, according to a 1999 Independent Sector national survey.

For 1.6 million charities, nonprofit organizations, and religious congregations in the United States, giving and volunteering is at the heart of citizen action and central to their operations. American society as a whole -- and higher education in particular -- benefits from the financial support, commitment, skills, and enthusiasm of those who give and volunteer.

This topic is of such importance that the White House, citing philanthropy as "one of our deepest core values...a form of citizenship that strengthens communities and civil society," convened a conference on philanthropy in 1999. It highlighted the unique American tradition of giving, focused on the diverse and changing face of philanthropy and explored how we can sustain and expand this tradition for future generations.

The typical pattern of philanthropy around the globe emphasizes giving to one's family and acquaintances. The most interesting feature of U.S. philanthropy is that much of it involves giving to organizations that help people we don't know, often people far away. And we like the idea that our charitable contributions can help people beyond our lifetimes—such as

future students at our alma maters.

While giving strengthens communities in our culture, raising money in itself is a community effort; it takes the cooperation of many to make it happen.

The reasons for specific gifts are varied. However, I have come to believe that the most important aspect of fundraising is stewardship. I mean that in two senses: how we treat donors after they give, and, in doing so, how we make sure they understand their role in the stewardship of the institution that is the subject of their generosity. Relationships with donors need to be genuine; we need to connect meaningfully to donors' caring about an institution and its mission, and their passion for giving as an expression of their pursuit of the moral life.

To connect with the passion of donors, fundraisers need to be passionate as well. They must care deeply about their institution and their own professional standards. Fundraisers must rise above their own petty needs and understand the needs of the community they serve.

Loyalty to the institution and to its efforts to build community and create the good life improves the continuity of our relationships with donors and our stewardship efforts with donors.

However, one of my saddest observations about the fundraising profession is the high turnover rate among staff. It's estimated that the average tenure for a university fundraiser is 1.7 years. It's hard to develop relationships or commitment if you're moving on every 1.7 years.

At Emory, we've taken steps to foster loyalty and improve retention rates among our fundraising staff. We have created a Retention Committee that is developing activities and programs that will, I hope, help staff members become truly invested in our community and Emory as an institution. This will improve the continuity of our relationships and our stewardship efforts with donors and make us more effective advocates for Emory.

The tradition of philanthropy in America requires people who have a deep sense of caring and a deep sense of compassion for one another and for all those we serve. Whatever religious or value system we embrace, compassion and loving one another are the very essence of seeking the moral life. This applies both to those who give and to those who ask.

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