

ON GIVING: Scenarios for Public Discussion

The following six scenarios are fictional stories inspired by real-life events. Each can be used to spark discussion about a broad range of issues related to the world of philanthropy.

Each scenario, or story is followed by core questions for discussion.

Scenario A: Giving Shelter

Homelessness is not only an issue for those who are “down and out.” The number of homeless college students is on the rise. McLendon College created a housing fund for its homeless students. The fund operated in a unique way: The college encouraged every student who had enough income to use a tax credit to reduce their tax obligation. Students were asked to donate to the housing fund. Since its inception, the housing fund has grown to a level where it can support housing costs for 36 students.

Core Questions:

- 1) What institutions, individuals or entities are ultimately responsible for making sure that students have housing?
- 2) What are some possible ways to ensure that students have their basic needs taken care of?
- 3) Should students be expected to cover costs for their peers?

Tags: homelessness, student life, social responsibility, tax policy, housing, giving.

Scenario B: A Question of Trust

The Rogers Family Trust was designed as a nonpartisan, nonprofit resource to help states craft legislation to serve the needs of all citizens. To carry out its mission, it set up “legislative units” at local universities. These units were to produce balance reports on various policy issues. Over the years, however, the university faculties developed minds of their own. They abandoned any claim to neutrality or objectivity and pursued their own narrow agendas.

Discussion Questions

1. Is it possible to maintain the original intent of a philanthropic enterprise as time goes on and leaders change?
2. Should philanthropy-funded programs that change their focus over time lose their tax-exempt status?
3. Is it possible to craft policies completely divorced from politics?

TAGS: philanthropy, tax-exempt status, nonpartisan, neutrality,

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Scenario C: Social Climbing

The Rise to the Top Foundation was the place to be for the social elite of the community. The organization raised funds to support young people in the community who wanted to attend an elite university. When one of the major donors to the Foundation passed away, his wife Pilar was selected to serve in his place. She advocated for Alejandro, a working-class Latinex student who balanced school with work to help to support his family. The board refused to give him the award but gave him a lesser prize. They also refused to renew Pilar's seat on the board when her term was up.

Four years later, Alejandro was invited for a special ceremony for the Rise to the Top foundation. Alejandro did not attend. He had a prior obligation to attend a ceremony at the White House honoring his selection as one of the 30 Rhodes Scholars from across America. He was a first student selected from his community and the Rise to the Top Foundation.

Core Questions

- 1) What is the connection between philanthropy and the social elite in your community?
- 2) How can the field better include the perspectives of the working-class, women and people of color in decision-making roles?

TAGS: diversity, women, people of color, inclusion, social elite

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Scenario D: Breaking the Mold

Gina was an incredibly successful entrepreneur. Over her 30-year career, she created a number of new ventures. Now that she divested herself of all business interests, she set about to give back to the community at large. She approached her new endeavor as she would with the startup of any new venture. Gina toured a number of well-known nonprofits. She wasn't impressed by what she saw. She found them bureaucratic, stodgy and lacked imagination. Gina was excited about applying her experiences breaking the mold in the business world to her new career in giving.

She invited some of her colleagues to envision what breaking the mold might look like. "I want each of you to give me an idea of how we can create an organization that achieves the following:"

- Gina's money would be seed money, catalysts for efforts that will eventually take on lives of their own.
- Use technology to identify the root cause of real needs
- Has the flexibility to adjust to needs as they are identified by calling on social networks to identify service providers.
- Initiates support for programs and providers rather than responding to requests for funding.

Core Questions

1. How would you imagine the organization that Gina envisions?
2. How can traditional models of nonprofits be converted into the more innovative models envisioned in these possibilities?
3. How might these new models of nonprofits become more likely to broaden the base of giving?

TAGS: Entrepreneurship, catalyst, venture philanthropy, innovation, technology, giving,

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Scenario E: Atonement

The Riverdale Community Hospital was at a crossroads in its 125-year history. The hospital was on the verge of losing its accreditation. This would mean that most services would be discontinued, and the hospital would become a shell of its former existence. The problem was money to rehabilitate the hospital; The money simply didn't exist. The Diamond Charitable Trust created by the wealthy plumbing supply entrepreneur Willard Diamond, pledged a major gift to build a new hospital.

Diamond's company was criticized for its methods for making profits. He refused to grant pensions or healthcare benefits to his employees. His products caused lead and chrome contamination leading his employees to suffer high rates of cancer deaths. Gloria Connor was chair of Riverdale Community Hospital's Board of Trustees. What kept creeping into her consciousness was the long, lingering death of her father from cancer. He was an employee at Diamond's factory for 30 years. As she pondered the gift, she wondered: "Is this a charitable gift or a wish for atonement from the grave?"

Core Questions

1. Should we be concerned about the source of funds when the use of those funds results in benefits for the public good?
2. How should we think of charities whose funding came from activities which wouldn't be acceptable by today's ethical/moral standards?
3. Should ethically or morally-challenges be considered in allowing tax benefits?

TAGS: Ethics, philanthropy, dirty money, charity, health,