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Can Improve the
Quality of Higher
Education**

By Leslie Lenkowsky



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How Philanthropy Can Improve the Quality of Higher Education

by Leslie Lenkowsky

Although it has not been much noted in the philanthropic world or elsewhere, this summer marks the 100th anniversary of the publication of Andrew Carnegie's *Gospel of Wealth*. Extraordinarily influential (and controversial) in its time, it made a powerful case for the duty of the very rich to distribute their "surplus" for the betterment of the poor. What led Carnegie to this conclusion was his fear that society faced an unprecedented and potentially intractable problem. Thanks to the great advances in manufacturing that had occurred in the latter part of the 19th century, most people were able to enjoy a higher standard of living than ever before. However, some continued to live better than others, and a few — those whose talents had contributed the most to economic growth — inevitably reaped spectacular rewards. What worried Carnegie was the possibility that these disparities might foment envy and eventually lead to political or social unrest that would make further progress impossible.

To prevent this, the rich needed to lessen the growing gap between themselves and the rest of society. After rejecting other options, Carnegie hit upon the idea of urging the wealthy to give away what they did not need as the route to both personal and social salvation. Dressing up the Biblical idea of stewardship in industrial clothes, he proposed that the rich should view themselves merely as the custodians of a community's fortune; they were thus responsible for seeing that it was put to the use of all. In a society that subscribed to this belief, to die rich, he wrote, would be to die in disgrace.

For Carnegie, not just any kind of giving would do. Even in his own time, the wealthy supported many different causes, most of which, in his estimation, were worthless. (Citing the authority of his publisher, he contended that "nine hundred and fifty out of every thousand dollars bestowed today upon so-called charity had better be thrown into the sea.") The reason was that the most popular charities fostered dependency rather than motivating their beneficiaries to improve themselves. As a result, far from reducing the gap between rich and poor, they preserved and perhaps even widened it.

Laudable Benefaction. What should the wealthy favor? At the top of Carnegie's list was the founding and expanding of universities. "Perhaps the greatest sum ever given by an individual for any purpose," he wrote, "is the gift of Senator Stanford, who undertakes to establish a complete university upon the Pacific coast..." So laudable was this benefaction, thought Carnegie, that "a thousand years hence," an orator would say of Stanford what Griffith says of Wolsey in *Henry VIII*:

In bestowing, madam,
He was most princely. Ever witness for him
This seat of learning...
though unfinished, yet so famous.

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So excellent in art, and still so rising.
That Christendom shall ever speak his virtue.

Unfortunately, what Carnegie could not have anticipated was the possibility that a thousand years from now, no one – and certainly no one from Stanford University – would be reading Shakespeare.

Fondness for Education. Carnegie is not alone in this. Throughout American history, philanthropists always have had a special fondness for education. Next to religion, it receives a larger share of gifts than any other kind of activity: nearly 10 percent of the total. Foundations and corporations have been especially sympathetic. According to *Giving U.S.A.*, the annual source book on charitable giving, over one-fifth of foundation grants and nearly half of all corporate contributions now go to education.

Not surprisingly, the affection of these donors has been reciprocated. Organized philanthropy, in particular, derives much of its character from its relationship with the world of knowledge. From Mr. Carnegie's handful of "clerks" to today's legions of program officers, a background in education has been a useful starting point for a career in giving. Indeed, the heads of most of the major foundations come from the ranks of university officials. (The new president of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation is the first in a long while to come from the corporate world, and even he spent most of his career on the research and development side, not in marketing or finance.) Scholars typically populate foundation-sponsored study groups, and to no small extent, the measure of a good project is the degree to which it taps their expertise in solving problems. In that sense, whether liberal or conservative in politics, all organized grant making is progressive in its belief that knowledge holds the key to social improvement.

Ideology Replacing Scholarship. As a result, when the state of education suffers, so does philanthropy. And that, of course, is the condition we face today. For reasons that go far beyond the scope of these remarks, the quality of knowledge has become increasingly strained (to use an allusion most students will soon be unable to recognize). Especially in the humanities and social sciences, the two areas most relevant to the work of philanthropy, ideology has gone a long way toward replacing scholarship, and the consequences can be felt from the classroom to the learned societies. When foundations or corporations now seek to enlist the best minds, they are apt to get the politically correct ones instead. Even worse, given where most of those in philanthropy have come from, they might not even be able – or want – to perceive the difference.

In this audience, it goes without saying that these trends have generally not been toward what are usually thought of as conservative ideas. To be sure, more economists now appreciate the virtues of the free market, more sociologists now recognize that the breakup of the black family has affected racial mobility, and more political scientists have concluded that a well-meaning internationalism is usually insufficient as a guide for foreign policy. These are but straws in a westerly wind. On most major campuses, students of Leo Strauss need not apply for tenure, those who find Charles Murray's conclusions worth taking seriously should keep their opinions to themselves, and those who want to lecture on the problem of Communism in Latin America should buy a tomato-and-egg resistant set of clothes. In all the disciplines, left-wing paradigms flourish and are often powerful enough to impose silence or conformity on all but the most foolhardy. Add to that the new totems of race, gender, and sexual preference and you can see why, if he were alive today, Mr. Carnegie might be sorely tempted to revise his list.

Mindless Philanthropy. Or would he? The truth is that philanthropy has been more than an unwitting accomplice in these developments. Foundation grants have fostered some dreadfully influential revisions of the college curriculum and helped advance the careers of scholars who had fashionable views and interests ahead of those who did not. In some cases, philanthropic support was even conditioned upon compliance with certain standards, such as the proportion of fellowship money an institution gave to minorities. But for the most part, the real sins of the grant makers were those of omission. There are lamentably few instances where donors have withheld funds to protest actions at odds with academic freedom or unbiased teaching and research, and most of those involve corporations whose recruiters were barred from campus, or whose business activities were denounced. (Even they are outnumbered by the cases where a company has simply turned the other cheek.) Perhaps a tightfisted, pugnacious Scot like Carnegie might have behaved differently, but if he listened instead to his “clerks” and trustees, he almost certainly would not.

Ten years ago, the Institute for Educational Affairs was created to do something about this form of philanthropy of, by, and for the mindless. The impetus was the warm reception accorded articles and speeches by, among others, Irving Kristol, David Packard, W. Allen Wallis, Charles Wohlstetter, and especially William E. Simon. All of them faulted grant makers – and, in particular, business grant makers – for providing support to organizations that were undermining the very system that had made such generosity possible in the first place. In *A Time for Truth*, Simon (who became our founding chairman) put it this way:

There are few voluntary institutions in America today that are organized to finance intellectuals who fight for economic as well as political liberty. Most private funds – inevitably from business itself – flow ceaselessly to the very institutions which are philosophically committed to the destruction of capitalism. The great corporations of America sustain the major universities, with no regard for the content of their teachings. They sustain the major foundations which nurture the most destructive egalitarian trends. And with their advertising, they sustain the mass media, which today inevitably serve as a national megaphone for every egalitarian crusade. In the last analysis, American business is financing the destruction of both free enterprise and political freedom (pp. 244-45).

Somewhat unexpectedly, in response to this and the other statements came not a flood of protests but an avalanche of letters and calls for help.

Harmony Between Philanthropy and Scholarship. IEA was established to be a vehicle for providing assistance to foundations, corporations, and individual donors who wanted their grants to go to projects that nourished the values and institutions of a free society, especially (though not exclusively) in higher education. We were prepared either to advise and point givers in the right direction or to pool and administer funds on their behalf. We would work closely with other groups, including the small number of conservative foundations then in operation. Our board consisted of an equal number of scholars and writers, on the one hand, and businessmen and philanthropists on the other. In this way, we paid homage to our core belief: that there existed a natural harmony between enlightened philanthropy and enlightening scholarship.

It would be nice to be able to say that, since our founding, this mutuality of interest has reasserted itself. But anyone who has visited, or even worse studied at, a campus recently knows that is not so. Nor is there a great deal of evidence that foundations and corporations

are becoming more selective in their choice of benefactors. Bill Simon could reprise what he wrote about philanthropy a decade ago without much fear of contradiction. Indeed, in a *Wall Street Journal* article last summer, he did.

Stimulating New Courses. Nonetheless, the past decade has not been bereft of accomplishments. Along with others, we at the Institute for Educational Affairs have been able to identify and support a sizable number of scholars, including several younger ones who have earned permanent faculty status as a result of the research our grants permitted them to do. Through judicious use of seed money, we also have succeeded in stimulating the development of new courses for undergraduates and law school students. IEA funding helped launch the Federalist Society, as well as a network of "alternative" student newspapers that now can be found on four dozen campuses. And we have also underwritten some provocative studies on university governance and finance, including the *National Review* article by Allan Bloom that became the forerunner of *The Closing of the American Mind*.

At the same time, we have built up a network of over 170 grant makers. Not all are committed conservatives, but they are at least interested in hearing what conservatives have to say. Moreover, charitable-giving watchers claim that corporate support of higher education has tapered off; last year, in fact, donations from all sources to education declined for the first time in fifteen years. Perhaps this indicates that Mr. Carnegie's priority list is being revised after all.

If none of this amounts to a revolution, it does show there are things philanthropy can do to improve the quality of higher education. And now is a particularly propitious time to undertake them. For all the anger they directed at Bill Bennett when he was Secretary of Education, college and university officials know, according to a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, that his criticisms of them touched a nerve among the American people and are relying on more than public relations to repair the damage. (National Endowment for the Humanities Director Lynne Cheney's upcoming report on the core curriculum should add new fuel to this fire.) With the college-age population declining, applications for admission even to the most prestigious schools have fallen off, creating a buyer's market for higher education. If parents and students take advantage of it, colleges and universities may have even more incentive to get their houses in order.

Coming to Terms with Reality. For those donors and organizations who want to lend a hand, IEA's experience offers a number of lessons. First, it is essential to recognize and respect the nature of the institution. Philanthropic efforts to improve education must start with an appreciation of how colleges and universities actually work, just as understanding the traditions and procedures of Congress is necessary to influence the outcome of a legislative debate. Unlike those in a corporation, college directors and presidents usually have little power; nor do the alumni, unless a school is strapped for cash. Throughout most of higher education, the faculty rules, and unless a grant maker comes to terms with that reality, his efforts are likely to be futile. There is no substitute, in other words, for supporting carefully designed programs of faculty and curriculum development, including those aimed at junior professors. If help is needed in identifying potential participants or topics, it is not hard to find.

Likewise, the authority students possess is more often moral than real. Universities are not democracies and students are not citizens; their votes do not count, despite the now common practice of having pupils grade their teachers. However, organized groups of students can infuse particular causes with the kind of passionate enthusiasm adolescents are

