

The Value of Giving Circles in the Evolution of Community Philanthropy
How community-based philanthropy can be strengthened by forging a bond
between community foundations and Black giving circles in the United States

Akira Barclay
Brooklyn, New York, United States
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Akira J. Barclay
2012 Emerging Leaders Diversity Fellow
Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society
The Graduate Center
City University of New York

INTRODUCTION

Identity-based philanthropy is a movement of philanthropic giving from a community on behalf of a community (where “community” is defined by race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation) that is gaining momentum in communities of color. According to a 2012 study by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Black Americans specifically, have produced the steadiest growth of new identity-based charitable funds over the last four decades.ⁱ While 12 black funds existed in 1970, more than six times that number exist today awarding grants that range from \$1,250 to \$17 million with a median annual grantmaking budget of \$35,000. Judy Belk, a senior vice president for Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors found the surge in Black funds encouraging, but also noted that “much work needs to be done to connect blacks to resources that can help them strategize their philanthropic giving.”ⁱⁱ This sentiment is not new to practitioners in the field of philanthropy or others close to the issue. As more Black Americans become visibly involved in philanthropy, starting foundations and opening donor advised funds, a movement has emerged to encourage them to give more strategically to drive long-term systemic change on persistent issues that affect the Black community.

This project focuses primarily on one group of identity-based charitable funds – Black giving circles and their relationship with community foundations. These giving circles and the education they provide for their members are producing a new population of Black donors who are thinking strategically about how their grants impact the issues their circles were founded to address. The following discussion will outline the impact of giving circle membership on Black American donor behavior and identify specific characteristics unique to this community. While other studies of Black philanthropists

center on the super rich, celebrity and athlete/entertainer donor, *The Value of Giving Circles in the Evolution of Community Philanthropy* helps us learn about everyday Black philanthropists by examining their activity and membership in identity-specific giving circles. Most notably, this study explores ways that community foundations can evolve to connect with these grassroots giving groups through strategic alliances that strengthen community philanthropy.

THE CURRENT STATE OF U.S. PHILANTHROPY

Today most communities in the United States are diverse, and made up of a colorful mosaic of race and ethnicity, age, knowledge, wisdom and experience. Our philanthropic institutions however, are not. The field has acknowledged that it lacks diversity, and that in complex ways the issue hampers foundation's impact on the communities they serve. In 2010, the D5 Coalition was formed to advance philanthropy's diversity, equity, and inclusion. Bob Ross, President of The California Endowment stated it simply when he said, "We need philanthropy to look more like America, so we can better respond to America's issues."ⁱⁱⁱ

While foundations and philanthropy as a sector grapples with issues of diversity, community foundations in particular have been faced with the challenge of increasing competition for donations. The giving vehicles available to donors has swelled to include those offered by commercial banks, financial services firms, universities, online service providers (and as Emmett Carson joked, eventually Wal-Mart)^{iv} who can offer the same options as community foundations at a much lower cost. The threat of being priced out entirely has led to intense examination of how community foundations can thrive into the

future. Additionally, many community foundations are failing to connect with communities of color finding that individuals with wealth are bypassing their institutions to start private foundations on their own. Marybeth Gasman details this phenomenon in a study regarded as the only full scholarly work pertaining specifically to African American family foundations. *A Growing Tradition? Examining the African American Family Foundation* assessed founder motivation and background, geographic location, assets and management, board member and staff composition, goals and donation targets of Black American family foundations. From Gasman’s research, we learn that professional athletes in the National Football League and National Basketball Association predominantly found Black family foundations; followed by musicians, actors, doctors and business owners whose primary motivation for establishing family foundations is the desire to “give back”. The majority of African American family foundations are located in California, New York, Georgia, and Illinois - states with metropolitan cities with large Black populations. The Gasman report also shows that African American family foundations are relatively small (\$320,000 to just over \$5 million) and realize minimal revenue from their assets. These Black family foundations found it preferable to use independent financial consultants over community foundations to manage their assets.^v Research by the Twenty-First Century Foundation indicates that sustaining a private foundation “is difficult and inefficient unless there are large assets (over \$5 million).”^{vi} The respondents to the Gasman study thought by working with independent consultants they would retain more control over their money, a conclusion that Gasman notes is consistent with the research about Black Americans who “lack trust in established organizations”. The National Center for Family Philanthropy includes donor advised

funds through a community foundation in their definition of family foundation, but none of these foundations were included in *A Growing Tradition*. Gasman stated, “Although I attempted to examine donor-advised funds, I was not able to identify any and as such, these foundations are not included”. The absence of donor advised funds in Gasman’s research is significant. Black Americans give 8.6% of their discretionary income to charity. This amounts to \$11 billion, more than any other racial group in the United States. But even in areas where large concentrations of Black Americans live and work, we see very few serving as donor advisors through community foundations. For example, at the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta which serves a 23-county region that is 31.1% Black, only a little over 1% of its donors are from this group.^{vii}

THE CHALLENGE: Failing to Connect with the Black Philanthropic Community

Fighting to maintain relevance and win donations on top of the sector’s issues with diversity have saddled community foundations with a double burden.

Community Foundations of America provides a valuable baseline for exploring the weak connection between community foundations and communities of color. Specifically:

- The internal capacity of staff and Board shape community foundation’s outreach to ethnic and racial communities;
- Strong and sustained institutional commitment is required to build relationships with communities of color;
- Community foundations have a distinct need for more people of color in leadership and as external ambassadors and

- Community foundations must educate donors about the benefits of organized philanthropy.^{viii}

Additionally, in a 2010 independent study of Black donor advised funds, I found the following to be contributing factors in community foundations' failure to significantly connect with Black donors:

- **Community Foundations are not well known or well understood:** Community foundations are not well known or well understood in the Black community. In a query of Black physicians, attorneys, educators, and other professionals looking for ways to formalize their giving, none were aware of community foundations or the services that they provide. For Blacks who are aware of community foundations, the perception of them often ranges from elitist to insignificant. Blacks in the U.S. are largely not aware of community foundation grantmaking in their communities, the impact of those grants or the people who make the grant decisions and as a result, community foundations are not seen as a trusted partner.
- **Foundations need to be clearly defined as distinct from public charities:** The lack of education in communities of color about organized philanthropy and endowment building creates an additional hurdle that community foundations must overcome in order to connect with Black donors. The research referenced above on African American family foundations reveals that musicians, the second largest group of Black American founders of family foundations, tend not to be active with their foundations on a regular basis. Likewise for actors, whose involvement is limited to participation at one or two annual holiday events. For these individuals, "giving back" means using their celebrity to bring attention to

their foundations through fundraising events and publicity campaigns. This pattern of activity is an indicator of an emerging trend where individuals set up foundations to carry out activities that are more appropriate for a public charity. Audrey Jacobs, Director of the Center for Family Philanthropy at the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta said she has observed that these individuals “do not understand the model or tax and other advantages of setting up a donor advised fund”. Additionally noting, the community foundation model is set up to support donors with effective grantmaking, not event planning or fundraising.

- **Relationships with professional advisors may not be sufficient to connect with Black donors:** Community Foundations rely on their relationships with advisors to refer individuals and families who are interested in philanthropy. But Heather Larkin Eason points out that misperceptions about community foundations may exist among some professionals. “Many advisors don’t understand that a community foundation is a neutral type of giving vehicle for a family, and not an end in itself,” she says. “They think that if they bring a community foundation into the discussion, then they are promoting a specific nonprofit or cause”.^{ix} Audrey Jacobs wonders if a different dynamic is at play. At the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta, ninety percent of the foundation’s new donors come through relationships with professional advisors prompting Jacobs to say, “It is an area that needs more research. Are African Americans with wealth working with the same advisors?” Whether it is misperception on the part of the advisor or some other issue creating the disconnect, community foundations will need to complement relationships with

professional advisors with other modes of outreach in order to successfully connect with Black donors.

- **Black Americans who have a direct connection or experience with a community foundation are more likely to use its services:** Black donors with donor advised funds at community foundations tend to have had the benefit of an existing relationship with community foundation staff or Board leadership prior to opening their fund. In some instances, Black donors have even served as Trustees of the community foundations that host their fund. This meaningful engagement affords them familiarity with the institution beyond what the average layperson has and is an important element in developing trust.
- **Connecting Black donors to community foundations will require a long-term, sincere and meaningful effort by community foundation Board leadership and staff:** Cultivating relationships with Black donors involves time commitment that may not have immediate returns. Overcoming a previous lack of commitment to actively pursue Black donors and introducing and educating this audience about organized strategic philanthropy will not happen overnight. At the Omaha Community Foundation, a group of anonymous donors established the African American Unity Fund with the purpose of involving more Blacks in philanthropy and providing support to emerging nonprofits to improve the quality of life for Blacks in Omaha. The group realized that the fund's ability to affect change would be dependent on the grant committee members' involvement in and knowledge of the Black Omaha Community. They chose a well-known and influential member of the African American community to lead the committee,

Douglas County Treasurer, John Ewing. Launching a Black philanthropy initiative or establishing a new Black field of interest fund is one of the most visible and common ways that community foundations have embarked upon building relationships with the Black philanthropic community. Wayne Carmello-Harper, President and CEO of the Community Foundation of Northeast Alabama, shares how the small rural foundation enjoys a strong Black donor base out of their 100 funds. He says of the foundation's relationship with the Black donor community, "Our objectives from inception ha[ve] been to welcome simple and significant wealth and to help area residents understand that wealth has numerous definitions. Overall, donors of color are regularly highlighted in our newsletter and website as leaders in generosity. Likewise, our staff and board are very diverse with a priority in reflecting the whole community, which is the major reason for the inroads into the African American community. Also, the foundation is a very active participant in issues that impact Black Americans such as access to healthcare, early education, public education and environmental racism; therefore, there is a history of long-term relationships, trust and experience as an honest broker."

- **Class and professional background may factor more heavily in the philanthropic behavior of Blacks with wealth:** Focusing on race alone can be a misstep for community foundations seeking to connect with Black donors. Emmett Carson notes, since "wealthy people share an information network that differs from that of others" and have more access to financial advisors, it may be that today, distinctions among groups of people are based much more on class,

than race, which may also be a contributing factor in planning for a philanthropic legacy.”^x Business owners make up the last significant group of Black American family foundations identified in the Gasman study. This finding is consistent with the research on entrepreneurs, which notes that “more than four in 10” have formed their own charity.^{xi} The personal and corporate giving philosophies of entrepreneurs present an opportunity for community foundations to diversify their donor bases. In a recent Harris Interactive study of 146 entrepreneurs, 71 percent indicated, “supporting local charities” as a key criterion for selecting which foundation to support. Even more promising, entrepreneurs tend to be early adopters of strategic giving vehicles. Sixteen percent of entrepreneurs surveyed indicated they use donor advised funds for their personal giving and 29 percent would establish and potentially fund charitable accounts for employees. Building relationships with entrepreneurs makes sense considering that many individuals establish charitable funds with the proceeds from the sale of a business. The Eartha M.M. White Legacy Fund at The Community Foundation in Jacksonville was established to carry on the legacy of entrepreneur and philanthropist Eartha Mary Magdalene White. Jacksonville’s first major Black philanthropy, the \$1.4 million endowed advised fund was established after the sale of the Eartha M.M. White Nursing Home in 2003.

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS: The Renaissance of Collective Giving

Black philanthropy has suffered major casualties in recent years with the demise of venerable Black philanthropic institutions, the National Center for Black Philanthropy and the Twenty-First Century Foundation, which quietly shuttered in late 2011. However,

one of the most positive developments in the current climate of Black philanthropy is the renaissance of collective giving. “Giving circles are a resurgence of an old tradition of generosity and caring that is making an impact all across the country. They provide an opportunity for individuals to join others through collective charitable giving. There is something exciting about people pooling their resources and making joint decisions on how to give grants to improve life in their community. They also include social, educational, and engagement aspects that seem to increase civic participation and their understanding of philanthropy and community issues. These groups leverage their personal time, talents, and treasure to address social issues in their communities using thoughtful giving strategies. “The activities of a giving circle include grantmaking, advocacy and public education as complementary ways to demystify philanthropy by making it accessible to everyday people.”^{xii}

BLACK GIVING CIRCLES: A Snapshot

The Black Benefactors (Washington, DC)



The Black Benefactors is an innovative philanthropic project serving the Washington, DC metropolitan area. Its mission is to encourage philanthropy and community service in the

Black community and the business community in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area; and to enhance the wellbeing of Black children, youth and families. Founded by Tracey Webb in 2005, to be a “vehicle for young and mid-career level professionals to give back using their time, talent and treasure,” The circle officially launched in 2007 with the goals to educate its members about the benefits of collective philanthropy, increase awareness of local needs, make investments in organizations that are directly impacting Black children, youth and families, and create a legacy of giving in the Black community as an effective vehicle for social change. The Black Benefactors achieves these goals through their grantmaking (\$12,000 to date) and using their network of members as potential board members and volunteers for the local nonprofit community. The Black Benefactors’ funding comes primarily from annual membership dues of \$250 per year for individuals and \$2,500 per year for businesses. Matching gifts support is also provided by Freddie Mac Foundation, Hill Snowdon Foundation and W. K. Kellogg Foundation.

A Legacy of Tradition (Raleigh, NC)



A Legacy of Tradition (ALOT) gives financial support to organizations that produce positive outcomes for black men and boys. The giving circle describes itself as being “comprised of ordinary African American men”. Its members are collectively engaged and focused on impacting and bridging the societal gaps faced by Black males in the areas of education, collective giving, and community responsibility.

A LOT examines myriad issues facing economically disadvantaged students. When they learned that African American boys comprise 65% of the suspensions in the Wake County school district, they conducted their own research and as a result were asked to be members of the Economically Disadvantaged Student Performance Task Force for Wake County Schools. The members of ALOT have shown that the impact of giving circles on a community can go far beyond dollars by diversifying the voices and perspectives addressing community needs.

New Generation of African American Philanthropists (Charlotte, NC)



New Generation of African American Philanthropists (NGAAP-Charlotte) is a philanthropic vehicle that promotes collective giving of time, talent and treasure. As a collective group, the members of NGAAP pool their contributions of at least \$365 per year and strategically invest to improve the quality of life for African Americans in the Triangle Region of North Carolina. Through grantmaking, community service, civic engagement and leadership, NGAAP-Charlotte has invested close to \$200,000 to benefit local nonprofit organizations and the broader community. NGAAP-Charlotte launched the Giving Back Project in 2007 to inform and engage more people around Black philanthropy. The initiative aims “to ignite a movement of conscientious philanthropy by empowering a generation to recognize their power and responsibility to give back.” Most notably, NGAAP-Charlotte produced and published *Giving Back: A Tribute to Generations of African American Philanthropists* under the project. Proceeds from sales of the book support the circle’s grantmaking and the stories inspire readers to give.

The existence of giving circles like The Black Benefactors, ALOT and NGAAP-Charlotte present a unique opportunity for community foundations to make headway in many of the key areas identified for making stronger connection to the Black philanthropic community. Strategic partnerships with these groups of organized Black donors have the potential to provide community foundations with the following benefits:

- **Increased visibility:** With the renaissance of collective giving, Giving Circles are becoming increasingly popular in Black communities across the nation. Interest in joining and forming these donor groups is at a high among individuals looking for ways to give back. The August 2011 issue of EBONY Magazine featuring

The Black Benefactors is evidence of giving circles' popularity in the Black community. EBONY is the "premiere magazine destination for African American cultural insight, news and perspective" and a mainstay in African American homes since 1945. Dubbed "The Black Wealth Issue", the August 2011 feature on the Washington, DC based giving circle was entitled, "Where Wealthy Blacks Give. . . and how the rest of us can give too." Senior Editor, Kevin Chappell provided a history of Black giving, how and where African Americans give, and wrote about the power of pooling dollars as a way to have a philanthropic impact. A photo of the giving circle members accompanied the article, and for readers interested in starting or learning more about giving circles, contact information for Darryl Lester, Founder of the Community Investment Network and Hindsight Consulting was provided. In the future similar articles are likely to be featured on giving circles in mainstream publications like EBONY, Jet and Black Enterprise. By being a supportive strategic partner, a community foundation can gain exposure with a wide Black audience that it would not otherwise achieve without the association with the giving circle.

Similarly, NGAAP-Charlotte member Valaida Fullwood, author of *Giving Back* tours the country promoting the book and has garnered numerous accolades including the 2012 McAdam Book Award. With each appearance and book sale, The Foundation for the Carolinas' NGAAP-Charlotte's host receives publicity as well.

- **Direct experiences for Black professionals and entrepreneurs:** Research shows that Black Americans who have had the benefit of a direct experience with

community foundations are the ones most likely to use their services. By forging a strategic partnership with a Black giving circle, a community foundation can position itself to provide specific education about the community foundation model and how its services support donors with effective grantmaking. Black giving circles engage individuals from a range of backgrounds and professions so not all will understand what community foundations do. The strategic partnership would provide a complimentary outreach activity to educating professional advisors and community foundation staff can correct misinformation about community foundations operating programs, planning events or fundraising.

- **Relevance and legitimacy:** Giving circle members are viewed and respected as leaders in their communities. They are revered for their responsiveness to community issues and make the concept of philanthropy and grantmaking more accessible. By partnering and supporting giving circles' initiatives and leaders, community foundations can rehabilitate their image and gain relevance and legitimacy by association.
- **Trust:** Most important in connecting with the Black philanthropic community, trust is needed. A long-term sincere effort has to begin somewhere and what better way to make inroads with a new audience than to be introduced by individuals who already have a history of trust.

These are just four benefits that can be realized by community foundations that take the leap to establish a strategic relationship with Black giving circles as a vehicle to connect with the Black philanthropic community. Unfortunately, not many institutions are currently willing to go this route. As grantmakers, foundations routinely encourage

collaboration amongst grantees that are doing similar work to maximize funding and impact. Still, when it comes to building strategic partnerships with community philanthropists there is much hesitation. Community foundations and giving circles generally want similar outcomes from their grantmaking in Black communities. Culture and approach to fundraising and grantmaking is what differs... and appears to be what keeps the two entities from working collaboratively.

One of the key reasons community foundations cite for their wariness in building partnerships with giving circles is the lack of information about how a giving circle informs a member's philanthropic journey. The institutional sentiment is one that "there is no evidence that random people can be cultivated to create significant funds, so it makes sense to focus on the people most likely to create larger funds."^{xiii} In fact, Angela Eikenberry and Jessica Bearman, authors of *The Impact of Giving Together Giving Circles' Influence on Members' Philanthropic and Civic Behaviors, Knowledge and Attitudes* queried representatives from community foundations that opted not to support giving circles. They found the following factors leading to their decision:

- Lack of staff capacity and institutional readiness
- The organization's existing donor cultivation framework
- The cost of serving a circle and uncertainty of realizing a short or long term "payoff"
- Staff size, the demands of staffing

It appears that community foundations with their focus on the wealthiest segment of the population are dependent on a low-impact, high-yield donor strategy that is not conducive to supporting giving circles.

Community Foundations	Giving Circles
Large Assets (Endowed)	Small Assets
Large initial contribution	Multiple Transactions (checks)
Large Infrequent or 1 time grant	Annual or quarterly grants

This point of view may be shortsighted. Rutnik and Beaudoin-Schwartz’s research suggests that hosting a giving circle brings new faces to philanthropy, significantly enhances a host foundation’s donor prospect list, and raises the host’s visibility^{xiv}, all aspects of value by which community foundations can benefit.

Community Foundations	Black Giving Circles	Potential Benefits of Partnership
Invisible	Recognized by community and mainstream media	Raise profile of CF w/ community, shift “poor cousin” notion w/field
Limited # of Program Officers	Organized groups mobilized to volunteer	CF can add more depth to capacity-building work
Lack Diversity/ Disconnected from communities of color	Engaging AA's from various sectors	Ongoing meaningful relationship

EVOLUTION: True Value of Black Giving Circles

To understand the true value of Black Giving Circles, we must adopt a broader definition of their assets and who is wealthy. In the context of partnering with community foundations and contributing to the overall evolution of community philanthropy, Black Giving Circles have three distinct characteristics that comprise their value: Financial Assets, Social Capital and Time.

Blacks with modest incomes between \$30,000 and \$50,000 give an average of \$528 annually, compared with \$462 donated by Whites in the same income range.^{xv} Beyond the dollars the Black giving circles bring to the community foundations to manage, these organized groups of community philanthropists bring unique knowledge of the geographic area. Many giving circle members have been born and raised and likely still reside in the community where they are making grants. In many cases, these grassroots philanthropists have a deeper historical context for community issues than a community foundation's Program Officers, and are more knowledgeable about the needs and nuances of the area. Likewise, giving circles are becoming more well known in Black communities all over the country because of their responsiveness, influence and impact on pressing issues. Additionally, Black Giving Circles tend to be more hands on with their grantees, giving their time as skills-based volunteers to lend technical assistance and helping build capacity. This kind of support is desperately needed in nonprofit organizations in communities across the country, but is largely an area that community foundations do not fund in a significant manner.

The opportunity exists for community foundations to develop a deeper connection to Black philanthropic community by playing the strategic role as institutional ally to Black giving circles. In terms of giving strategically, survey and interview data from *The Impact of Giving Together* confirm that giving circle members are influenced to think more about their giving and giving plans (beyond the giving circle) as a result of giving circle participation. The study tells us that giving circle members:

- Examine more intensely where, how much, and in what ways their charitable gifts should be made

- Are more likely than non-giving circle members to advance a vision for change
- Conduct research to help decide which organizations to support
- Support general operating expenses in addition to or instead of specific programs
- Check organizational performance data and
- Take into consideration cultural differences, race, class, and/or gender when

making funding decisions.

All of these aspects are indicators of strategic philanthropy that are positively correlated with the length of time and level of engagement in a giving circle.^{xvi} This information is significant for a number of reasons. African Americans have a long history of giving that has been documented “almost from the beginning” characterized by mutual aid to friends before the abolition of slavery in the United States. While existing research has examined the amounts, causes and recipients of Black’s philanthropy; the research has been primarily focused on the wealthiest Black donors, giving to the Black church and philanthropy as a survival mechanism to meet immediate needs.

NEXT STEPS: Recommendations for Community Foundations

- Reassess capacity to engage as a host and partner- Cultivating relationships with Black donors requires strong and sustained institutional commitment. Particularly if your institution is overcoming a previous lack of commitment to actively pursue Black donors the connection will not happen overnight. But those willing to make a long-term sincere effort will realize a healthy Black donor base, the results of a history of relationships, trust and experience as an honest partner. Giving

Circles are organized and self-governed which lessens the load for the community foundation to bear in a partnership.

- Connect with support organizations mobilized to support this work- The Community Investment Network (CIN) is a national network of giving circles that connects and strengthens African Americans and other communities of color to leverage their collective resources to drive social change. CIN facilitates connections between circles with shared values, provides technical assistance, donor education, a unique annual convening and helpful publications on collective giving and community leadership. Similarly, Asians and Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy (AAPIP) advocates for more philanthropic resources from institutions and builds philanthropy within communities of color. Their approach working to leverage the philanthropic capital in Asian communities is relevant for work with Black Americans.
- Include community philanthropists in leadership development and fellowship programming- The Association for Black Foundation Executives (ABFE) selected Lyord Watson, of the Birmingham Change Fund giving circle as part of its 2011-2012 class of Connecting Leaders Fellows. The ABFE Connecting Leaders Fellowship Program is described as “a yearlong experience designed to sharpen the skills and strengthen the leadership capacity of foundation staff, donors, and trustees who are committed to assisting Black communities through philanthropy...” that offers coaching and mentoring to help fellows be more effective change agents in their communities and institutions.

CONCLUSION

In the field of philanthropy when we discuss diversity, or lack of it we remark about how the work of foundations is sometimes not responsive or off the mark in meeting the true needs of a community. This happens too often because no members of the community being served were involved in the process. Building strategic partnerships with giving circles in communities of color is well within the reach of community foundations seeking to connect with the Black philanthropic community. In fact, bridging community foundations and the dynamic movement of Black giving circles presents a major opportunity to break out of isolated and siloed work to evolve and revolutionize the field of community philanthropy for the next century.

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