

## Open Letter on The Emergence of Philanthropic Studies

Robert L. Payton

This essay appears in its original letter form. It is a brief discussion of the difficulties of passing on the core ideas and energy of those who developed philanthropy as an academic field of study.

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Dear Ellen:

You asked me to reflect on the emergence and development of philanthropy over the past twenty or thirty years. Thanks for the question: I'll sketch some ideas that have recently lain half-dormant and yet troubling in some ways.

The key notion is what I think of as *the social entropy of ideas*. Untutored as I am in physics, I still rashly use my sense of the word entropy to identify a common social problem: the way new ideas and visions lose their excitement and energy over time. Let me use a favorite example:

Daniel Bell's history of the idea of general education tells of a phenomenon that I not only observed but participated in. For a few decades there was a general education movement that changed the face of undergraduate education nationwide. The educated person should also be able to think effectively about contemporary civilization. Some highly respected intellectuals at places like Columbia and Chicago led the way; the bible of the movement was Harvard's General Education in a Free Society, published in 1945. Sections of the chapter on the theory of general education in that book reveal its ambitions: Areas of Knowledge, Traits of Mind, and the Good Man [*sic*] and the Citizen.

The core principle was that education should be comprehensive and balanced: the educated person should know something about science, something about literature, something about math, something about history. Over time those became “distribution requirements,” and a student’s course load would typically show math, English, history, physics, and biology, with some other subjects deemed essential, over the first two years of study, after which the assumption was that the student would specialize or major in something. As the requirements became increasingly rigid they also reflected a change in the culture. Those who taught general education courses were soon a successor generation to those who had dreamed up the idea in the first place. The successor generation had not for the most part engaged directly in the exhilarating discussions and debates of the first generation. The focus had shifted from philosophy to practice, from innovation to administration.

By the 1960s the lack of intellectual engagement in the core ideas made the philosophy of general education vulnerable to criticism from students, especially those bright students who resented the one-size-fits-all approach. “Citizenship” was out of favor with the young and they were ripe for protest on the spectrum of issues that mark the era – civil rights, Vietnam, feminism. Discussions of the curriculum were political protest meetings. As a college president in those days I presided over some unforgettable moments: for example, when the chair of modern languages appealed to his colleagues not to drop the language requirement because “*We will lose our jobs!*” and when the stereotypical radical student (dressed in the Army fatigues that were the fashion of the time) made a speech of Ciceronian eloquence to protest the speech requirement that prevented him from taking a philosophy course.

I thought back to The Purposes of Higher Education that Huston Smith wrote in behalf of a distinguished faculty committee at Washington

University in the 1950s. The earlier sense of general and liberal education was dead -- a cluster of ideas as unappealing as a bouquet of wilted flowers.

We haven't ever recovered from that collapse, and instead have turned undergraduate education into vocational training. The liberal arts are largely service courses for students who want learn how to do marketing in order to get a job. The capture of the intellectual life of the campus by marketplace values is complete. As a voice for the liberal arts I feel like a quixotic subversive – subversive because I criticize the dominant culture as shallow and exploitative, and quixotic because not many people care about it. *The social entropy or perhaps the half-life of the idea of general education was less than a generation.*

Let me offer a second example: civil rights. My simplistic summary will at least be briefer.

The high points of the civil rights movement would include a number of memorable moments, from Rosa Parks on the bus to the small group at the lunch counter, from “the letter from a Birmingham jail” to Federal troops in Little Rock. For those of us who lived through it, watched it, and in various less dramatic and inspiring ways took part in it, the civil rights movement has to be a period of enormous social energy and excitement. This was no academic exercise; this affected where academics went to dinner, which students sat in their classes, what words they would use in polite conversation. The claims of civil rights activists also affected the banks and the military and the churches and the veterans social clubs and residential real estate values.

Fast-forward if you will to the recent attack on affirmative action in higher education. The contrast in the spirit of the 1990s and the spirit of the

1960s could not be greater. The successor generation gradually assumed its place. In those decades the spirit of the civil rights movement gave way to the implementation of civil rights legislation and administration. The spirit of civil rights and the task of making the ideas of racial equality work on a day-to-day basis seemed no longer connected. Advocates of civil rights were now ideologues, and ideologues rose to oppose them. Political correctness – better described as groupthink – prevailed on both sides.

In the process we may have lost the vision of civil rights as we seem to have lost the vision of general education.

There is another important truth of organizational life that I was given in a talk by the then-CEO of a large corporation who was also chair of a university board of trustees. He made a distinction between “growth industries” and “mature industries.” Growth industries are about innovation and new markets; mature industries are about cutting costs. The two phases of industrial life call for different people: “leaders” in the former case, “managers” in the latter. The first generation of a movement is made up of leaders and the successor generation of managers. Because we fail to draw the successor generation into the spirit and discourse of the innovation stage they may never have a sense of the energy of the core idea. I think we don’t know how to do that, which is why I am trying to promote the Successor Generation Project I told you about.

I bring these thoughts to my reflection on the emergence of the three sector idea that became the most important contribution of the Filer Commission. That was 25 years ago. The commission’s report made a reasonably large splash in what at the time a very small pool of people. The report helped some of us begin to pull unconnected strands together for the first time: foundations, non-profits, business corporations,

professional societies, volunteers, lobbyists, trade associations, and a hundred other categories.

If there was a vision of what we were about it came first from John D. Rockefeller II and from John Gardner. Rockefeller first put his finger on the idea of a third sector parallel to government and the marketplace, and Gardner gave us Independent Sector. Gardner and Brian O'Connell saw a world in which it was possible for many diverse voices to express themselves in one room, even around one table. Their case was simple: organized philanthropy in America is vast in scale and grand in scope.

In my words, the subject was both *important and interesting*. If the activity of philanthropy is even approximately as extensive and as vital as it appeared, then it must be a *subject* to be studied and taught. We could no longer teach it "by example," as the then-president of Brown University once told me. The volumes of the Filer Commission's report indicated a wide range of intellectual possibilities, but my own efforts to find the place of philanthropy in higher education turned up no more than scattered scholars of little influence, no journals, no place in the scholarly meetings, no place in the curriculum. The vision some of us tried to articulate was the vision of a field of study, a field that I named *philanthropics* (to no effect at all) to bring out the analogy to *politics* and *economics*.

The trips I took around the country in the late 1970s until the late 1980s were missionary ventures. I was exhilarated by the links to philanthropy that I found in almost every subject I explored, just as my prejudice of its interest and importance was confirmed every day in every newspaper, magazine, and journal I scanned in my search. I was also confirmed by the response I found from sociologists and philosophers and economists and professors of literature and anthropology and even the history of

science. Those “conversions,” if you will, countered the suspicious and sometimes snide insinuations that I was merely a new skill for the university administration in its endless and insatiable search for money.

When the Center on Philanthropy was formed in 1987 there was no subject that was agreed upon, no faculty that had ever studied the subject as a subject, no courses or degrees or programs beyond (at Indiana) The Fund Raising School. In little more than a decade that has grown into a faculty of 65 representing more than two dozen schools and departments, a fistful of master’s degrees and even a couple of doctoral tracks, a growing body of students some of whom – like those competitively-selected students I teach – that rival the best students anywhere.

Some faculty members have re-directed their careers toward the study of some aspect of philanthropy. The field has a handful of journals and newspapers and a growing array of web sites. The membership in the quasi-academic, quasi-professional organizations has grown rapidly and added participants from dozens of countries around the world.

Philanthropy is now seen as universal rather than as “unique to America.”

Among the young people there is still a sense of discovery and frontier and bright future. They manifest the personal values and commitments that have characterized public service and even professionalism at their best.

About a year ago I drafted an essay entitled “Declare Victory and Move

I am the first generation of those who developed philanthropy as an academic field of study; the second generation is now taking over. The growth industry is rapidly becoming a mature industry. Seed money and

venture capital has not yet brought substantial sums of investment capital; endowments are small and centers rely heavily on annual fund raising. University cultures are not welcoming, open, and generous with newcomers: new fields have to buy their way in. Gradually and often reluctantly institutional funds become available and with them, institutional bureaucracy.

As I said when we talked on the phone, my main concern is the survival of philanthropy as a subject grounded in the liberal arts. Philanthropy in higher education is largely dominated by training in nonprofit management, skewed toward the values and approaches of business and public administration. There are three very unequal sectors in the society and their counterparts in the university are similarly unbalanced. Practice dominates; training dominates; action dominates.

Philanthropy is better defined in two phrases that I have borrowed from an anthropologist and a philosopher who used them for other purposes, and two that I claim as my own:

The first is that the study of the history of philanthropy across the world and across the millennia is *the social history of the moral imagination*. The second is that the study of philanthropy draws on *thought, action, and passion*. Neither of those fits easily in a culture dominated by narrow specialization on the one hand and commercialization of everything on the other. I argue that teaching philanthropy means “helping students in their search for meaning, purpose, and hope in their lives,” and teaching about “the good society and the good life, through the study of good works.”

The ideas I find most exciting and energizing are philanthropy and liberal or general education, and the role of philanthropy in the great issues and movements of the time. I am in that sense interested more in leadership

than in management, more in philosophy than practice, in Why more than How. My devotion to the balance called for by general and liberal education reminds me to respect training as well as education.

Philanthropy is about *beneficence* as well as *benevolence*. Who else feels that way, thinks that way?

To what extent has the social variant of the second law of thermodynamics done its work on the vision of philanthropy that emerged in the 1970s? Do I declare victory and move on or merely step aside while a new vision emerges from the confusion?

I'll share this with my students and some others, and may even put it on my "web site under construction" in the hope that it might elicit some broader discussion.

All the best,

Robert L. Payton  
Professor Emeritus of Philanthropic Studies