

ABSTRACT

European Research Network On Philanthropy
8th International Conference Copenhagen, July 13-14, 2017

‘Don’t look at me’: anonymity, philanthropy and UK universities

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 Keywords: philanthropy, anonymity
 Topic: Strategies for philanthropy
 Research method: Qualitative
 Geographical focus: Single country (European)
 Type of article: Research article

Abstract:

Anonymity in giving is becoming increasingly unacceptable. Not only have the last few years seen an implicit imperative to publicise and capitalise on donor identity, creating a form of ‘hey look at me’; philanthropic role modelling (Karlan and McConnell, 2014) but donor invisibility is also having major governance implications across fund-seeking institutions. For example, the latest England and Wales Charity Commission guidance to trustees on charity fundraising (2016:6.6) incorporates within its consideration of ‘suspicious donations’, the arrival of ‘large’ anonymous gifts.

Yet, anonymity in giving is unlikely to disappear. Donors, including those guided by faith and secular values, continue unnamed and (publicly) unrecognised giving. Pragmatically, such giving protects from unbidden requests and criticisms if funding contentious causes, or seeking hidden policy influence (Boyd and Field, 2016).

Following Skopek’s (2015:725) definition of anonymity as ‘the condition of being unidentified at a given time and place’; and building on the literature on anonymous giving norms (e.g. Lambarraa and Reinder, 2012), the paper examines the following questions: Why and where is anonymity in philanthropy being sustained? How is anonymous giving treated in major institutions receiving gifts, where transparency demands dominate? To what extent is the public good served by anonymity in giving?

The work forms part of a wider study of the content of UK universities' philanthropy disclosures arising from Freedom of Information requests in the period 2014-16. While balancing of external demands for public openness with those of prioritising privacy for their philanthropists provides strategic tensions for some beneficiary organisations, it remains unheard-of luxury and untested governance challenge for others. Relating these findings to questions of philanthropy and public good (e.g. Jung and Harrow, 2016), the paper reflects on anonymity in giving's alternative futures and its place in the task of theorising philanthropy.

Most important references:

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