

JUNE  
2007

Research Brief

Center for Urban  
ECONOMICS

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# The Place-Based Strategic Philanthropy Model

by

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The Center for Urban Economics is a joint project of the J. McDonald Williams Institute and the UTD School of Economic, Political and Policy Sciences

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## Introduction

Place-based strategic philanthropy is a relatively new and still evolving model that is attractive to corporate, community, and private foundations. This paper defines the model and addresses its main strengths and weaknesses in comparison to more traditional program-based models of giving. The primary conclusion of this paper is that by focusing on particular places, foundations are often able to more closely align their strategic intent with measurable outcomes. In other words, a place-based model is an attractive approach for foundations that are particularly interested in maximizing the total value of their gifts.

## Defining Strategic Philanthropy

According to the Random House College Dictionary, the word *philanthropy* means, “affection for mankind, especially as manifested in donations of money, property, or work to needy persons or to socially useful purposes.” Philanthropy is more than simply caring about needy persons or socially useful purposes—it involves action or “donations” to such people or purposes. *Strategic philanthropy* is less well defined but is generally understood to mean that the donations of the philanthropist are consistent with some understood intention or “strategy.” The idea is that the philanthropy is directed by a desire to satisfy or maximize a specific objective of the organization. This, of course, implies that the foundation must adopt a strategy before it

can pursue strategic philanthropy and that it is willing to evaluate its effectiveness in light of the strategy. *Place-based philanthropy* focuses on a specific geographic area—for example, a central city, an arts district, or a specific neighborhood—and seeks to “provide opportunities for those living in that target area to have greater involvement in the foundation’s priority-setting and decision-making process” (Backer, Miller, and Bleeg, 2004, p. 1). Therefore, the *place-based strategic philanthropy* model entails directing philanthropic acts and giving toward a particular geographic place in such a way as to maximize the impact of the donations in satisfying the objectives of the foundation.

## The Traditional Model

Traditional philanthropy—in contrast to place-based philanthropy—is aimed at particular issues or problems. For example, the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation was created to “end breast cancer forever.” The Komen Foundation not only funds basic research on breast cancer but also funds awareness campaigns, like *Race for the Cure*, in an attempt to reduce breast cancer death rates through early testing and information about the disease ([www.komen.org](http://www.komen.org)). Using a similar approach, The American Heart Association, The American Kidney Foundation, and The American Cancer Society all disseminate information, provide basic services to individuals and communities, and fund research that specifically targets their causes. For donors, traditional foundations offer programs

and objectives that are generally well-defined. Their “siloe” approach has the benefit of reducing coordination costs within the organization and potentially realizing specialization economies.

With a single and well-defined objective, traditional foundations have experienced some success in addressing major social and health problems. The Parent Teacher Association (PTA) works at the school level to bring parents and teachers together toward the common goal of educating their children. The PTA has a voice and a presence whenever there is a question of legislation or policy that concerns education or children ([www.pta.org](http://www.pta.org)). Similarly, the American Cancer Society has been highly successful in receiving support from the government for its anti-smoking campaigns ([www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)). Moreover, many traditional foundations are now considered trusted sources of information for the public. In fact, the American Heart Association’s largest expenditure is spreading awareness and providing information to the public about the dangers of obesity and the symptoms of heart disease, heart attacks, and strokes ([www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org)).

## The Strategic Philanthropy Model

For corporations, the act of giving has historically served the purpose of increasing brand image and goodwill for the company—but corporations also have an obligation to shareholders to increase profits and expand equity. The notion of strategic philanthropy allows corporate foundations to directly engage both purposes. Rather than give to a variety of unrelated good causes, the strategic model suggests that a foundation tie its donations to good causes that also augment

the value of the firm. One of the most obvious and noticeable forms of strategic philanthropy is cause-related marketing (Phillips, 2000). Cause-related marketing consciously directs donations to visibly support a cause that is of interest to a key target audience. An example would be Avon’s support of the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure. Avon’s target demographic is women and Race for the Cure spreads breast cancer awareness to women. By becoming a sponsor of Race for the Cure, Avon creates a brand image with its target demographic, and also benefits from the “free” advertising as a sponsor (Porter and Kramer, 2002).

Another type of strategic philanthropy is in-kind giving or the donation of nonmonetary services or products. If Apple donates computer labs to graphic design schools across the country, when graphic design artists graduate they will already be familiar with Apple’s systems and will most likely invest in an Apple computer for themselves. By donating to a specific target demographic, a corporation can anticipate brand recognition and an expanded client base in the future (Reder, 1995). In other words, a donation today will increase a corporation’s client base tomorrow. Similarly, “venture” philanthropists view philanthropy as a long term investment. For example, DreamWorks SKG, the California-based film production company, recently embarked on an education program to teach low-income students and high school graduates in Los Angeles the trade skills necessary to prepare them to work in the entertainment industry. This program not only increases the education and income level of the Los Angeles area but also provides a pool of well-trained interns and future staff for DreamWorks Corporation (Porter and Kramer, 2002).

Without a model of strategic philanthropy, many corporations simply wait to be contacted and then provide small amounts of philanthropic support across many organizations. The move toward strategic philanthropy emphasizes the importance of the gifts to make a difference without betraying stockholders.

## The Place-Based Model

Departing from a more traditional philanthropic role, several foundations support place-based strategies that focus on improving specific communities rather than a specific issue or cause. Frequently, these foundations function solely as a grantor, funding organizations already present in the community that are working to resolve issues sympathetic to the foundation's goals. For example, the John S. & James L. Knight Foundation, which operates in the 26 communities where its newspaper first ran, has a Communities Program that provides funds for organizations that improve and support education, the well-being of children and families, housing and community development, economic development, civic participation, and art and culture within the community ([www.knightfdn.org](http://www.knightfdn.org)). The Daisy Marquis Jones Foundation, focusing on Yates and Monroe counties in New York and especially the city of Rochester, is a supporter of groups that work to enhance healthcare, assist children, families, and senior citizens, and foster collaboration among agencies and individuals. In addition, the foundation looks for agencies that have measurable outcomes and tries to form long-term commitments to the community. Another New York foundation, the Community Foundation of the Capital Region, seeks to unify the organizations it funds in order to maximize the

charitable impact of the organizations on the community they serve ([www.cfc.org](http://www.cfc.org)).

Apart from grants, several place-based foundations provide different types of technical assistance to the communities they support. For instance, the Northwest Area Foundation operates three programs that provide assistance to communities in an effort to permanently reduce poverty within those communities. Each program educates leaders and citizens on how to identify the assets available to low-income families, increase economic opportunity and the capacity to reduce poverty, and offer an atmosphere of inclusive decision-making that leaves no one underrepresented. These programs focus on communities with small populations over an extended period of time, basing their work on the idea that reducing geographic size while increasing the length of time that the foundation spends in the area will yield better demonstrations on how to reduce poverty, which can then be shared with other communities ([www.nwaf.org](http://www.nwaf.org)). The Steans Family Foundation is another example of a place-based philanthropic foundation that provides technical assistance in addition to grants. The foundation is concentrated in North Lawndale in the Chicago area, and supports education and youth development, skills training and employment, family and community asset construction, healthcare, housing and economic development, and leadership training. The foundation plays several other roles in addition to acting as a grantor to organizations that reflect its criteria. It serves as a "capacity expander," providing advice on tools needed for expanding institutional capacity; a "community advocate," working to intercede on the behalf of the community and bring in outside agencies; a "convener/networker," encouraging continual

collaboration between residents and leaders, institutions, and individuals; and as a “resource assistant,” providing references and resources to community organizations, allowing them to utilize the professional help available ([www.steansfamilyfoundation.org](http://www.steansfamilyfoundation.org)).

Place-based foundations may also provide direct services on top of the aforementioned resources. The Marie C. and Joseph C. Wilson Foundation, for example, is dedicated to improving the community of Rochester, New York. Upon its creation, its operations were limited to grants to the University of Rochester and funds for those with diabetes, cancer and Alzheimer’s disease; however, in 2002, it constructed Wilson Commencement Park, a direct service in the form of a transitional housing program for low-income families. Beyond donations and assistance to other organizations, the foundation collaborated with government and private agencies to create its own set of services for the community ([www.mcjcwilsonfoundation.org](http://www.mcjcwilsonfoundation.org)). The Annie E. Casey Foundation is perhaps the most well-known place-based foundation; through the Place-Based Philanthropy Initiative, the foundation offers three direct service programs that account for over a fifth of its annual budget. The first is Family Services which provides foster care and adoption support, advocates for family unification and community relations, supplies life skills training, and education programs for teen parents. The second is the foundation’s Youth Opportunities Initiative which helps youth leaving foster care find employment, healthcare, and housing. The third, School-to-Career Partnerships, similarly focuses on youth leaving foster care, but provides them with opportunities for higher education, employment connections, and life skills training ([www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org)).

The place-based approach to philanthropy has several benefits that make it an interesting alternative to the traditional philanthropic model, especially for locally-minded private and community foundations (see Figure 1). Delfin and Tang (2006) note that by focusing on a specific geographic area, the foundation can get a handle on the ways in which social ills are interconnected. For example, the Annie E. Casey Foundation found that “children’s success is inextricably connected to the strength and resourcefulness of their families” ([aecf.org](http://aecf.org)). Thus, the foundation has been able to ascertain the connection between family life and a child’s success. The emphasis on the adoption of a geographic place by place-based philanthropy, in and of itself, is another advantage because it provides time to seek cooperation from other organizations and allows the community to decide the “pace of the efforts” (Sojourner, et al 2004). The John S. & James L. Knight Foundation actually funds residents who propose projects to improve the community ([www.knightfdn.org](http://www.knightfdn.org)). Thus, the community has a voice in how the foundation fosters change. The collaboration inherent in place-based philanthropy also provides for a more cost-effective approach to engaging in philanthropy. Foundations can offer to match any grants made by their partners in the community “effectively improving the return on a larger pool of philanthropic resources” (Porter and Kramer, 1999), or provide the funds necessary for federal matching grants. The Steans Family Foundation, for example, provided the necessary funds to bring AmeriCorps to its community.

In addition, revitalization of a specific area, or “cluster” as Porter and Kramer define it, has a financial appeal. By working within a community, foundations can build up development,

increase productivity, provide an atmosphere for innovation, and “foster the formation of new businesses” (Porter and Kramer, 2002). Finally, by working in a specific place, place-based philanthropy allows a foundation to focus its “attention inside rather than beyond the community,” making the outcomes of its programs easier to observe and react to (Sojourner, et al 2004). A place-based foundation can then develop strategies that support the programs that work and oppose the ones that do not, ensuring its own efficiency (Porter and Kramer, 1999).

There are several inherent costs of place-based philanthropy, which are summarized in Figure 1. First, collaboration may be a costly endeavor because relationships between foundations, service providers, and local governments are

difficult to initialize as well as to maintain over long periods of time (Delfin and Tang, 2006). In addition, each organization that a foundation partners with will bring in its own agenda and requirements that can complicate the implementation of projects and programs. Furthermore, place-based philanthropists must deny funds to otherwise interesting proposals in order to stay focused on their area. This can pose political difficulties insofar as “so many organizations clamor for their help, every grant seems to do some good, and there is so little accountability for results”—success is dependent on a foundation’s ability to select the best grantees (Porter and Kramer, 1999). Moreover, many foundations may wish to avoid the appearance that they are being too strategic in their selection process (Delfin and Tang, 2006).

**Figure 1. Cost/Benefit Comparison of Place-Based and Traditional Philanthropy**

	Benefits	Costs
<i>Place-based Philanthropy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Considers how social ills are interconnected</li> <li>✓ Allows for community input and collaboration from other organizations</li> <li>✓ Collaboration with other donors can be more cost-effective</li> <li>✓ Revitalization of a specific “cluster” has significant financial appeal</li> <li>✓ Outcomes may be easier to observe</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ Can be difficult to initialize and maintain relationships between entities</li> <li>✗ Differing and possibly competing agendas can complicate implementation</li> <li>✗ Can be politically difficult for donors to turn down projects that don’t fit the place-based criteria</li> <li>✗ Many foundations want to avoid the appearance of being “too strategic” in their selections</li> </ul>
<i>Traditional Philanthropy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Reduces the coordination costs</li> <li>✓ Programs and objectives are well-defined</li> <li>✓ Specialization of subject matter offers the unique opportunity to be trusted source of information</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ Can be difficult to observe and measure results</li> <li>✗ Benefits may be too diffuse</li> <li>✗ Spreading of donations across many areas may not have as much of a dramatic or noticeable effect as more concentrated efforts</li> <li>✗ Targeting only one social ill in one area leaves many others unaddressed</li> </ul>

Substantial collaboration with other organizations is essential for a place-based foundation to be effective. First, private organizations, such as businesses that have an economic interest in the target area, can help revitalize the community. For example, a place-based foundation interested in providing affordable housing to a community could fund a real estate development company, allowing it to expand its own enterprises while stipulating that the business should have a certain proportion of housing set aside for low-income families. The result would be the greater availability of affordable housing and the potential for economic prosperity within the community. Second, other philanthropic foundations can be persuaded to provide donations for experimental projects if the place-based foundation or the organization receiving the funds can demonstrate past success. Through a collaborative effort, foundations can be integral in jump-starting the revitalization of the community and eventually draw in contributions from businesses (Willis, 2004). Finally, place-based foundations can collaborate with nonprofit organizations with similar goals that are already working in the community. By providing an objective evaluation of their strengths and weaknesses, as well as an incentive to measure performance, foundations can increase the efficiency of local nonprofits thereby empowering those organizations and improving the community itself (Porter and Kramer, 1999).

Collaboration with the government is also important for the success of place-based philanthropy. Government can regulate businesses' ventures by stipulating that a certain percentage should reflect community needs (Willis, 2004). One example is the Community Reinvestment Act, which "is intended to

encourage depository institutions to help meet the credit needs of the communities in which they operate" (FFIEC Community Reinvestment Act, nd). A place-based foundation can provide information to and influence public officials, who in turn can pass legislation directed at the facilitation of community development. Moreover, coordination with city agencies with similar goals can help reduce procedural obstacles to revitalization (Willis, 2004). If a foundation works without the support of the government, time-consuming and expensive legal issues are more likely to arise.

## Applying the Place-Based Strategic Philanthropy Model

As described previously, no precise paradigm for the place-based strategic model exists. However, there are several common characteristics of existing models that define the salient elements of place-based strategic philanthropy. In particular, the model requires a commitment to:

- Strategy
- Place
- Multidimensionality

**Strategy.** The foundation must initially agree on a strategic intent for the philanthropy. For a corporate foundation this is relatively easy because the overall business strategy will likely guide the foundation's thinking. It is natural to assume that Texas Instruments' TI Foundation's interest in mathematics education is consistent with the corporation's intentions for calculators and its need for qualified engineers in the future.

For a private or community foundation, the articulation of a strategy will constitute a major

activity, insofar as the planning that goes into the development of the strategy is as demanding as its execution. Expressions such as “For the Good of the City” are not effective statements of strategy. *Instead, the foundation must formulate a strategy that defines the way in which the philanthropy will be evaluated.* Interestingly, an expression such as “For the Greatest Good of the City” defines a strategy that, at least theoretically, provides direction for evaluating the philanthropy. It implies an optimization of the foundations resources—a serious consideration of benefits weighed against the opportunity costs of the donations. The obvious problem with it, however, is that “Good” is too vague.

Concern for optimizing the impact of a foundation's resources is growing. For example, one of the guiding principles of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is that “[d]elivering results with the resources we have been given is of the utmost importance—and we seek and share information about those results” ([www.gatesfoundation.org](http://www.gatesfoundation.org)). The widely publicized gift to their foundation by Warren Buffett is generally regarded as confirmation that the Gates Foundation has received convincing results to demonstrate sufficient success in this area. What any foundation must realize, however, is that a commitment to such a strategy requires the complementary commitment to serious evaluation.

The strategy also defines the time horizon. Generally, foundations are set up to make long term donations. The donors, however, may be impatient. It is important, therefore, to define a strategy (and, corresponding evaluation) that is consistent with donor expectations, setting benchmarks that are appropriate for the time horizon.

**Place.** One of the main reasons that place-based philanthropy is becoming more popular is that it gives a spatial context for defining the outcomes. This makes the articulation of the strategy more concrete. By adopting a place, a workforce-readiness strategy, for instance, translates into preschool reading programs, day care programs, dropout prevention, mentorship, etc. *in the area that has been adopted.* Moreover, the spatial context frames the evaluation. The outcomes, while potentially numerous, are bound to the place, easing the enumeration of the effects. Likewise, comparing the adopted area to other, similar areas which have not experienced the foundation’s strategies can bolster a demonstration of the effects.

A second reason for the growing interest in place is the recognition that so many of the social problems ordinarily addressed by foundations are interrelated and generated by concentrations of poverty. Social capital, collective efficacy, safety, educational outcomes, health, and civic engagement are interrelated and tied to neighborhood conditions. It hardly makes sense to pursue healthy outcomes without considerable attention to the spatial context. For example, Jetter and Cassidy (2006) compared the prices and availability of food in neighborhoods served by small grocery stores with those served by mainline full service chain grocery stores. They found limited access to healthier foods and a greater cost for healthier diets in neighborhoods served by smaller grocery stores. Feather (2003) estimated that improving access to larger grocery stores would increase the welfare of food stamp recipients by up to \$1.4 billion per year (in 2005 dollars). Zenk et al. (2005) analyzed the food consumption of a sample of African American women living in an

area of eastside Detroit with no supermarkets, and found that those who shopped at supermarket and specialty stores consumed more fruits and vegetables than those who shopped at independent grocers. They concluded that the pattern of few supermarkets in low-income areas can have negative implications for dietary quality. This simple relationship between health outcomes and neighborhood environment is why the place-based model makes so much sense. Without a spatial context, it is impractical to effectively direct resources toward such problems.

Both of these reasons suggest that the definition of place is critical for a foundation. It must be concise enough to “activate” the strategy, while being broad enough to generate meaningful results. A place could be defined as a single house or an entire city. One is clearly too small and the other too large. Census tracts and zip codes have the benefit of being tied to essential data but they often fail to capture “the neighborhood” as residents would define it. The optimal space would allow the activities of the foundation to capitalize on the synergies that arise as neighborhoods start to improve, thereby leveraging donations. But a precise definition for such a place will always be challenging. The foundation can look for neighborhood definitions from complementary organizations—for example, a university hospital may have a clinic with a particular service area or a city may have a target area for development, perhaps defined by a tax increment financing policy. These provide some initial spatial definitions that satisfy both the need for measurability and the need for significant impacts.

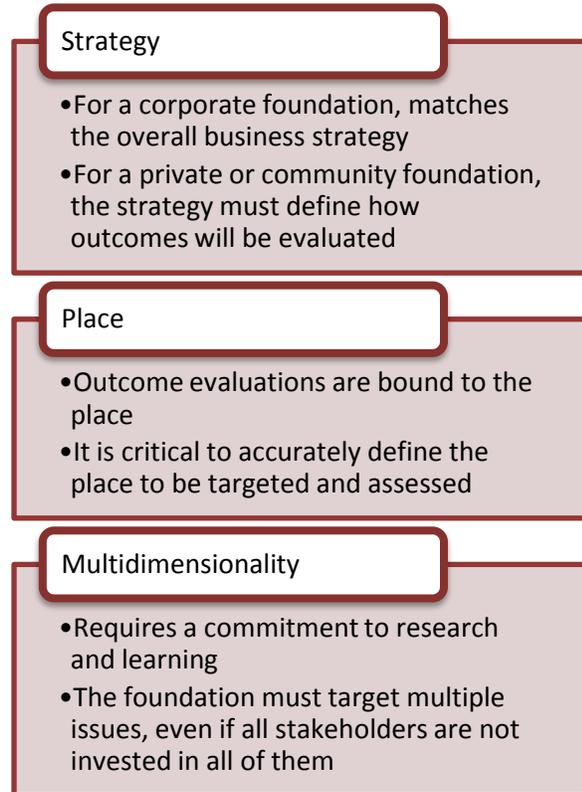
**Multidimensionality.** In committing to the place-based model, the foundation is also

committing to multidimensional thinking. This can be more complex. Traditional boards tend to specialize so as to support the main issue of the foundation. For example, Komen's focus on breast cancer allows the foundation to concentrate on research and awareness. Efforts by one part of the organization can be directed to cultivating relationships with NIH and medical schools, or even individual researchers, while the other part focuses on marketing and public relations. A place-based foundation, on the other hand, will need to engage in a host of programmatic issues. It is unlikely that the board will be able to thoroughly grasp all of the issues or develop significant relationships with all of the stakeholders. If a strategy provides an approach and place provides a spatial context, neither will effectively limit the scope of the issues that need to be managed.

It follows, then, that the commitment to multidimensionality requires a commitment to research and learning. The foundation will need strong partners with sufficient knowledge of the community so that it can effectively evaluate the impact of its donations. Larger foundations may even develop their own research group, partner with a local university, or engage consultants who can provide the requisite information and intellectual capital. But working with “agents of knowledge” subjects the foundation to other pitfalls—poor controls over the quality of the information, lack of responsiveness to the foundation’s strategy, and conflicts of interest among the agents. As use of the place-based model expands, perhaps the one factor that can mitigate these potential pitfalls is coordination and information sharing with other place-based foundations. In other words, for the next several years, place-based foundations will

need to learn from each other and direct information agents to develop standards and protocols for the types of information that will allow the foundation to gauge performance.

**Fig. 1-2 Characteristics of Effective Place-Based Foundations**



## Conclusion

Philanthropy should benefit society. To achieve the greatest benefit, society must continually direct philanthropy to the areas with greatest social return. The place-based strategic philanthropy model offers the potential to reap large social rewards because it leverages donations through spatial relationships that exist at the neighborhood level. This paper suggests that the social value of a dollar spent strategically and in coordination with other assets in a particular place could easily exceed the social value of a dollar spent through a philanthropic organization following a traditional model.

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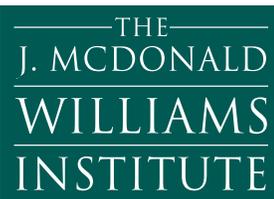
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The Center for Urban Economics is dedicated to providing innovative research on the economic landscape unique to urban environments. The Center believes that cities suffer from unique economic challenges which require unique economic solutions and policies. When properly understood, even poorer areas of central cities are overflowing with economic potential. However, accurate data and specific, place-based analysis can be hard to come by. The Center for Urban Economics, a joint effort between The J. McDonald Williams Institute and the UTD School of Economic, Political and Policy Sciences, exists to fill this information gap.



The J. McDonald Williams Institute, established in 2005 as the research arm of the Foundation for Community Empowerment,

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FCE, the Foundation for Community Empowerment, was founded in 1995 by J. McDonald "Don" Williams, Chairman

Emeritus of the Tramell Crow Company. FCE is a catalyst for the revitalization of low-income neighborhoods in Dallas through the empowerment of individuals, community- and faith-based organizations, and entire communities. FCE seeks to build bridges of opportunity, to foster relationships, and to facilitate investments of money, time, people, and resources in order to analyze, mobilize, and transform Dallas.

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