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Charlotte L. Williams
Clinton School of Public Service

Sherece West
Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation

Joanna Klak
Clinton School of Public Service

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Community Philanthropy: How the Delta Region Revives, Embraces, and Promotes the Spirit of Giving

Charlotte L. Williams, Dr.P.H., M.P.H., Clinton School of Public Service; Sherece West, Ph.D., Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation; and Joanna Klak, M.P.S., Clinton School of Public Service

Key Points

- Community philanthropy is the giving of time, talent, and treasure that when invested locally is characteristic of positive change and lasting development.
- This article reports on a survey of 31 small Arkansas communities of 5,000 to 15,000 in population using open-ended descriptive questions. Responses were compared across communities to assess variation in giving/fundraising, civic engagement, and leadership.
- Data confirm that giving/fundraising was substantial, particularly in communities with populations of 8,000 or less.
- Findings show that people are giving not only their money, but also their services, time, and skills – especially in times of emergency response. Giving was not restricted to the wealthy but included various levels of generosity.
- The same leaders engage repeatedly, resulting in leadership fatigue.
- Community philanthropy is a viable innovation and, by growing the public will and momentum for its use, it could turn communities into healthy, equitable places where vulnerable families can succeed.

Introduction

Community philanthropy is a relatively new practice within the field that has the potential to transform under-resourced communities, such as those in the Arkansas Delta region, into healthy, equitable places where vulnerable families can

succeed. *Webster's Dictionary* defines “community” as “a group of people loosely or closely associated because of common experiences or traditions.” It defines “philanthropy” as the desire to help mankind. Community philanthropy is the giving of time, talent, and treasure to support the advancement of humankind or well-being (Center on Community Philanthropy at the Clinton School, 2010). It is a practice that helps communities understand the value of what they already give personally, publicly, and privately, and then visualize and build a future that comes from developing and sustaining those assets. Communities use their collective time, talent, and treasure strategically for change. Community philanthropy involves the giving and sharing of resources from within communities that when invested locally are characteristic of positive change and lasting development.

This article explores community philanthropy within the Arkansas Delta. It shows that small communities in the Arkansas Delta are both capable of and actively involved in acts of generosity reflective of community philanthropy. They trade, give, and share forms of economic, social, political, and cultural capital. This study looks at the region's exhibition of a culture of giving and sharing that reflects innovation, generosity, and the potential for leadership development. This premise suggests that the environment in the region is exceptionally ripe for developing and refining community philanthropy.

The Center on Community Philanthropy

The Center on Community Philanthropy is located at the University of Arkansas Clinton School of Public Service in Little Rock. It is a place of learning about philanthropy in its broadest, most expansive way as generosity in a community-focused, agreement-building approach to providing public service; as sharing by joining people to envision and realize the common good; and as promoting the most basic of humanitarian interests through inclusiveness and participatory work. The unique way that the center explores the concept is not like the traditional world of philanthropy that supports the community through outside investment, but rather as the kind of giving and sharing from within that is characteristic of long-lasting development in low-resource rural and urban communities. At the center, the concept of community philanthropy is studied, developed, taught, and spread by incorporating authentic community voices and engaging leaders in communities with the least wealth and opportunity around the Delta region.

The center's early research is on the Arkansas Delta region, an area known for high poverty, low wealth, and poor education outcomes (National Rural Funders Collaborative, 2003). The Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation (WRF) is an Arkansas-based foundation and a strategic partner with the center. Both organizations share a goal to advance research that promotes social and economic equity by engaging diverse people and institutions in the practice of community philanthropy. In collaboration with WRF, the center began work to understand how small communities in Arkansas view philanthropy, civic engagement, and leadership.

What Is Community Philanthropy?

Community philanthropy can best be described as the act of individual citizens and local institutions contributing money or goods (treasure) along with their time and skills to promote the well-being of others and the betterment of the community in which they live and work. Community philanthropy can be expressed in informal and spontaneous ways. It can also be expressed in formal, organized ways, whereby citizens give contributions to local organizations that in turn

use the funds to support projects that improve quality of life (Effective Communities Project, 2005).

Community philanthropy invests in and celebrates human competencies and cultural traditions as assets and uses these resources to foster innovation, risk-taking, and creativity in tackling community problems. Community philanthropy recognizes that solutions to community problems often come from unexpected places and from people traditionally excluded from decision-making.

Community philanthropy invests in and celebrates human competencies and cultural traditions as assets and uses these resources to foster innovation, risk-taking, and creativity in tackling community problems. Community philanthropy recognizes that solutions to community problems often come from unexpected places and from people traditionally excluded from decision-making (Effective Communities Project, 2005). At its core, community philanthropy is the act of neighbors engaging their skills, their technology, and their entrepreneurial spirit to improve life chances for the children and families in their communities. Community philanthropy is not to be confused with community engagement. Community engagement, community organizing, and community involvement are types of activities that contribute to and support community philanthropy.

Community philanthropy is fundamental to sustainable change. Inherent in its definition is the suggestion that the individuals who live in the

community and who will benefit from the philanthropy become the drivers of change through the strategic use of their time, talent, and treasure. This is especially true for small, rural localities where transforming extreme and persistently poor communities into healthy and viable living environments require the collective contributions of the individual, private, and public assets that dwell in those communities.

There must be a public commitment to effective programs and governmental support combined with a shared responsibility across the community to change life outcomes for vulnerable children and families. What is lacking is evidence that small communities have the innovation and generosity necessary to establish community philanthropy as an accepted practice to drive social change. This article shows that small rural communities in the Arkansas Delta are both capable of and actively involved in acts of generosity reflective of community philanthropy.

Enthusiasm for community philanthropy in small, rural communities springs in part from concerns about the loss of manufacturers, the dwindling number of farmers, brain drain, and the decline of state and federal money for rural development. Many communities are searching for ways to survive and prosper.

Challenges and Opportunities for Community Philanthropy in Rural Communities Similar to the Arkansas Delta

Rural communities are facing many challenges, such as population loss and rising rates of poverty (Forum of Regional Associations of Grantmakers, 2006; Hamilton, 2007). There are foundations and other philanthropic entities that provide

much-needed resources to eradicate poverty and create more favorable conditions in rural America (Cohen & Barkhamer, 2004). However, not all of these efforts aimed at poverty alleviation and wealth creation are sustainable. Sustainability requires the commitment of local communities to effectively tackle local problems. It is imperative to grow new local leaders and philanthropists who will be the engines of sustainable social change. Moreover, it is important to create new and alternative forms of philanthropy and civic engagement that will allow ordinary people to be part of the solution (Richardson & Lindsay, 2009). Community philanthropy is a model that may best support long-term systemic change in low-wealth, underresourced communities.

Enthusiasm for community philanthropy in small, rural communities springs in part from concerns about the loss of manufacturers, the dwindling number of farmers, brain drain, and the decline of state and federal money for rural development. Many communities are searching for ways to survive and prosper. They may need to find money locally and persuade residents to give back to their communities financially. A study conducted by the Aspen Institute found that a growing number of small towns and rural counties are establishing community foundations and asking local people for support (Forum of Regional Associations of Grantmakers, 2006).

Although the tradition of giving in rural communities is old, the literature about community philanthropy in rural areas is very limited. Studies like one conducted by the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University on differences between giving patterns in rural and urban America are rare. That study revealed that rural donors contributed 3 percent of their income to charity while urban donors gave only 2.6 percent (Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University, 2010). The fact that the rural donors gave a higher percentage of their income to charity than urban donors demonstrates how important rural giving is and the potential it has to support community philanthropy.

To support change from within, community philanthropy requires giving of treasure in addition to time and talent. There is treasure to support

community philanthropy in rural communities similar to the Arkansas Delta. Reports confirm that local dollars are available and the potential to direct them toward community philanthropy seems promising. *Millionaires in the Millennium: New Estimates of the Forthcoming Wealth Transfer and the Prospects for a Golden Age of Philanthropy* (Havens & Schervish, 1999) provides a metric for estimating the potential for charitable giving to support community philanthropy. The Nebraska Community Foundation used the metric developed in the study and estimates that by 2050, \$94 billion in wealth will be transferred among generations of Nebraskans. Wisconsin's application of the metric predicts an estimated \$687 billion in intergenerational transfer in the next 50 years. In Wisconsin's Trempealeau County, home to 27,000 people, the transfer of wealth in the next 10 years is estimated at \$320 million – an average of more than \$42,000 per household. In “Philanthropy & Rural America,” Steve Gunderson, president and chief executive officer of the Council on Foundations, is quoted as saying:

But imagine: If just 5 percent of the \$320 million in Trempealeau County's generational transfer of wealth were captured by community philanthropy, we would create an endowment of \$16 million. Using the 5 percent payout of private foundations as our guide, this would provide \$800,000 in annual support for local programs.” (Council on Foundations, 2008, p. 10)

Harnessing the wealth to build the treasure aspect for community philanthropy in regions like the Arkansas Delta may be challenging, but it is doable.

Community philanthropy is a viable innovation and, by growing the public will and momentum for its use, it could turn communities into healthy, equitable places where vulnerable families can succeed. It is a practice that has potential to bring positive change in low-wealth areas. When we look to models of community philanthropy, an argument can be made that rural communities are leading the way (Joseph, 1989).

Methods

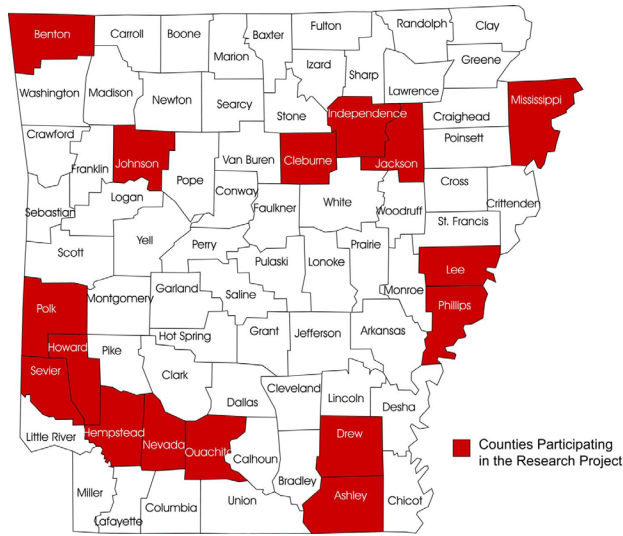
Study Design

The data presented in this article came from a subset of questions developed by the center and the Southern Rural Development Initiative. The questions were included as part of a larger survey designed to gather information from small local governments about their interest in pursuing capital planning grants that was disseminated by the center on behalf of another regional foundation. The philanthropy-specific questions were included to provide baseline data on community philanthropy in the region.

The questions in the survey were devised to identify and describe the different types of capital that one can trade, give, and share when practicing community philanthropy. They explore a type of giving that is not from outside the community like traditional philanthropy. Instead the questions look at giving from within – from one part of the community to another. Survey questions were also motivated in part to fill gaps in the literature on community philanthropy. An example would be the lack of published literature on the emergence and influence of community philanthropy in the Delta region. This article seeks to explore ways in which small communities exhibit a culture of giving and sharing that reflects innovation, generosity, and the potential for leadership development. This premise suggests that the environment in the region is exceptionally ripe for developing and refining community philanthropy. The following survey questions were used to explore community philanthropy in the Arkansas Delta region:

1. How many fundraising events were done for civic purposes in your community this year? Did participation reflect the diversity of the community?
2. Think of your locality's key civic positions that are elected or appointed, or board-oriented (e.g., hospital or local foundation or nonprofit). How many examples are there of leaders who are filling two or three positions?

FIGURE 1 Map of Communities Surveyed



3. What opportunities/occasions occurred in the past year where the involvement of youth was evident in civic and nonprofit leadership?
4. How responsive is your community to emergency appeals when their neighbors are ill or injured?
5. Do you know of any substantial charitable contributions made over the past 10 years by individuals in your community? Did those gifts go to local nonprofits or to nonprofits outside your community (like colleges and universities)?

were able to include descriptive responses when asked.

The response rate was 52 percent. Follow-up calls were made to each nonresponding municipality. Additional surveys were faxed to municipalities that could not locate the originals. Survey data were compiled and coded for major themes. Responses were compared across communities to assess variation in giving/fundraising, civic engagement, and leadership that are used as variables for time, talent, and treasure in examining the concept of community philanthropy. (See Figure 1.)

Respondents and Response Rate

This survey sampled small communities with populations ranging from 5,000 to 15,000 in the Arkansas Delta. Thirty-one localities in the Delta met the size and description criteria. Data were collected from the mayor or town manager, or clerk if the municipality did not have a manager. Local governments were selected to complete the surveys because they represent the entities most likely to document and record town-specific quantitative information about the types of activities that were the subject of this survey. This activity information represents different forms of capital available in communities. Since these government officials collect the information, they

Results

Question 1a: Participation in Fundraising for Civic Purposes

Fundraising is a form of economic capital that one can trade, give, and share as part of community philanthropy. It speaks to the treasure aspect of community philanthropy and the community's collective commitment to building and harnessing treasure. According to the data, there were more than 300 community fundraising events in 2008. Four communities reported more than 30 fundraising events in that year, while eight responded that they hosted fewer than 10 events in 2008.

FIGURE 2 Community Size and Number of Fundraising Events

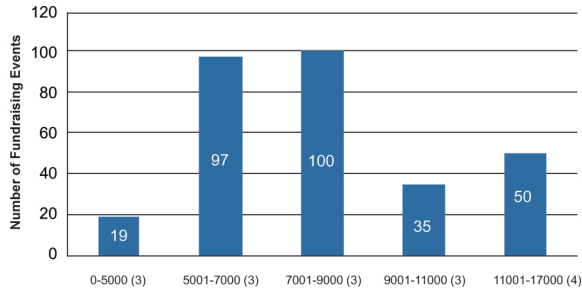
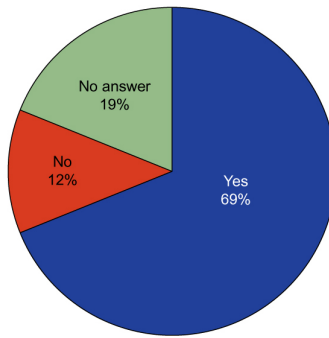


FIGURE 3 Diversity of Fundraising Events



The number of events varied from one to as many as more than 100 per community. Many respondents replied that it was very challenging to estimate the number of fundraising events organized in their community because there were so many fundraising events for the community. (See Figure 2.)

“Every weekend there are at least two or three groups working to raise funds for a multitude of projects and programs.” – Newport, Ark.

Question 1b: Diversity of Participation Among Residents in Fundraising for Civic Purposes

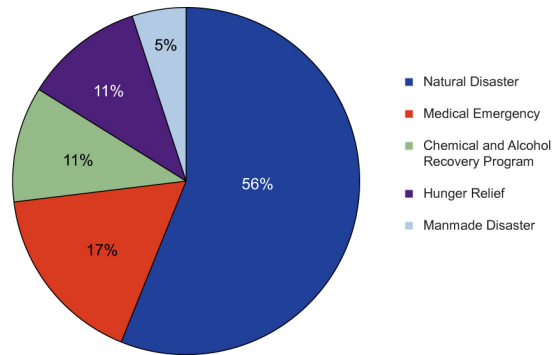
Diversity is a form of cultural and social capital, which provides opportunities for nurturing, companionship, and networking interactions between people. Diverse cultural and social capital informs the talent aspect of community philanthropy. To build community philanthropy a community has to be adept at working across race, class, and

other boundaries to use its talents collectively for change. The respondents emphasized that their communities are diversified and this racial diversification is visible during fundraising gatherings. All but two of the respondents said that the fundraising events included all ethnic groups. Although not asked, many respondents described the way money was raised. The communities were creative in fundraising activities and they used different strategies. Some organized breakfasts, concerts, book drives, or doughnut sales. Two communities hosted more active events (e.g., a golf tournament, a 5K run/walk). (See Figure 3.)

Question 2: Frequency of Leadership Participation

Civic positions that are elected or appointed reflect political capital. These positions are indicative of the relationship of leadership and its use of time and talent to advance community philanthropy. This question measures this relationship

FIGURE 4 Responsiveness to Different Types of Emergency Appeals



by identifying the leaders and giving some indication of the use of their time and talent through the multiple leadership positions they hold within the community.

The respondents reported that there are many individuals in their communities who serve on several boards and are active during many fundraising events. For many respondents, it was difficult to provide an exact number of leaders filling two or three positions and they described the status quo only as “several” or “many.” There was one respondent that identified 20 to 30 local leaders holding two or three positions. Mayors, county judges, chamber executives, and bank presidents and managers are the individuals who were most likely to play an active role in many local events and occupy several positions. Those individuals tend to be involved in at least two to three different boards. A respondent from Crossett, Ark., said: “With Crossett being located in a rural area, this scenario is almost mandatory. That [holding more than one leadership position] trend [is] continuous through most of the other civic/nonprofit/elected positions in our community.”

Smaller rural communities are experiencing a shortage in leadership to fill all of the positions with different people. However, some communities recognized this challenge and they were trying to expose and involve more people to positions of responsibility and influence. Out of 16 communities that provided answers to this question, three developed programs to increase the number of people civically involved. The three

communities were intentionally engaging youth by organizing workshops and events that taught leadership and civic responsibility. One of the examples is the Blytheville Arkansas Leadership Institute, which has 35 young leaders participating in classes. In Newport, Ark., within five years more than 100 young leaders took part in the New Vision Newport Leadership Program. Civic clubs like Rotary, the Lions, and Kiwanis also played an important role in promoting youth involvement.

Question 3: Opportunities/Occasions to Involve Youth in Civic and Nonprofit Leadership

The involvement of youth is another example of cultural capital. Cultural capital is essential to building the talent for supporting community philanthropy. This question provides information on building talent among youth that in the long term ensures a leadership pipeline necessary for community philanthropy to thrive. The 14 respondents to this question replied that the youth in their communities exhibited a positive attitude toward civic involvement. In each of the 14 communities, there were programs specifically for young people, with Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts being the most common. While some respondents provided information on existing youth organizations, some also mentioned special programs for young people. Among those special programs were prevention workshops (anti-drug, anti-alcohol, and anti-tobacco), awareness raising meetings (Internet safety, health-related issues), and leadership development programs. Moreover, according to the survey respondents, young

TABLE 1 Synthesis of Community Responses

Arkansas community	Number of fundraising events (Q1a)	Diversity of participation among residents in fundraising (Q1b)	Frequency of leadership participation (Q2)	Opportunities to involve youth in civic and nonprofit opportunities to involve youth in civic and nonprofit leadership (Q3)	How responsive is your community to emergency appeals? (Q4)	Substantial charitable contributions over 10 years to nonprofits (Q5)	
						Were there any in your community?	Who received the support?
Blytheville	42	Yes	10	Yes	Very	Yes	No answer
Siloam Springs	1	No answer	No answer	No answer	Very	Yes	Local organization
Helena-West Helena	5	Yes	No answer	Yes	Very	Yes	Local organization
Camden	2	Yes	No answer	Yes	Very	No	No answer
Hope	30	Yes	5-10	Yes	Extremely	Yes	Local organization
Batesville	5	Yes	Several	Yes	Very	Yes	Local organization
Monticello	Many	No answer	No answer	Yes	No answer	Yes	Local organization
Clarksville	No answer	No	More than 10	Yes	Very	Yes	No answer
Newport	100	Yes	No answer	Yes	Very	Yes	Local organization
Heber Springs	No answer	Yes	5	Yes	Very	Yes	Local organization
De Queen	2	Yes	No answer	Yes	5-6 times a year	Yes	Local organization
Crossett	20	Yes	Many	Yes	Very	Yes	Local organization
Mena	75	Yes	Many	Yes	Very	Yes	Local organization
Nashville	6	Yes	4	No answer	Very	Yes	No answer
Marianna	3	No	20-30	Yes	Very	No	Outside organization
Prescott	10	No answer	Several	Yes	Always	Yes	Local

people were actively involved in many service activities like city and park clean-up, recycling, and beautification projects. In one community, young people took part in the creation of Spring Park Skate Board Park. Local communities recognized the potential of young people and are trying to utilize their time, talent, and energy for the common good.

“The young people in our community are our greatest resource.” – Mena, Ark.

Question 4: Community Philanthropy in Times of Emergency

The issue of emergency provided insight into whether community philanthropy is stimulated or increased by some urgency appeal. The answers to this question also confirmed that philanthropy is done by all members of the community and not simply the wealthiest. According to the survey respondents, members of the community were very responsive and willing to help their neighbors in need. Individuals, local nonprofit organizations, businesses, and churches were

willing to pool their resources when emergency situations arose. Natural disaster relief (tornadoes, storms, hurricanes) was the most common. People pooled their time, talent, and treasure to help neighbors in their community and those facing emergencies outside of their community.

The communities were particularly responsive to emergency situations that affected individuals. The respondents provided five specific examples where local communities raised money to help people facing medical emergencies. The communities raised \$5,000; \$12,000; and even \$20,000 to support their neighbors in need.

In response to the continuing economic, social, and political decline of the region, it is important that small communities have effective and innovative tools and strategies to establish community philanthropy as an accepted practice to drive social change.

It is worth mentioning that people are giving not only their money and goods but also their services, time, and skills. Especially after tornadoes, people came together and volunteered for clean-up and rebuilding efforts. They were also very active in fundraising activities. From a local band in Newport that played benefit concerts several times a year to a “toy raiser” organized by the city attorney in Heber Springs, Ark., individuals were utilizing their skills and connections to help those in need. Respondents from all communities replied that they are very responsive and willing to support their neighbors in time of need. It seems that the “Southern charm” mentioned by a respondent from Blytheville, Ark., plays an important role here. (See Figure 4.)

“Prescott is a close knit community. They always step up to help others.” – Prescott, Ark.

Question 5: Substantial Charitable Contributions Over 10 Years to Nonprofits

The final question revisits economic capital and community philanthropy by looking at where large gifts of treasure are directed. Fourteen respondents indicated that they were aware of some substantial charitable contributions made over the past 10 years by individuals in their communities. Surveyed communities did not experience “leakage” of large charitable gifts. Eleven of the respondents stated that the donations supported local nonprofits, and one respondent said that the gifts were made to nonprofits outside the community.

Discussion

Residents in the Arkansas Delta region make essential contributions in the form of community philanthropy. They trade, give, and share forms of economic, social, political, and cultural capital. In response to the continuing economic, social, and political decline of the region, it is important that small communities have effective and innovative tools and strategies to establish community philanthropy as an accepted practice to drive social change. Meeting this goal is particularly challenging as the need increases for public and private dollars to spur economic development, build infrastructure, repopulate, reduce poverty, and more in small rural areas. In the Arkansas Delta region, communities with populations of less than 15,000 used their time, talent, and treasure to engage residents, meet the needs of residents particularly in times of crisis, and support and host fundraising activities locally. The continued attention and intent to the giving of time, talent, and treasure – community philanthropy – in small communities is expected to increase.

The findings from this survey can serve as an information tool for foundation leaders, trustees, and funder networks that are looking for ways to assist foundations and giving circles in sustaining small communities. For example, the role of endowed foundations should be to support community philanthropy – philanthropic institutions and communities joining together in collective or collaborative strategies for community change. The results of this survey build upon important previous research and impact future projects that

look at community philanthropy as a practice in small rural communities. This study can also equip foundations with the knowledge of best practices and strategies for building the infrastructure and supports for community philanthropy in small communities.

The research provides additional evidence of the need to understand community philanthropy in rural communities, participation patterns of residents, and its correlation with growing philanthropy. The study raises several important questions for the field of philanthropy:

- To what extent is specific attention paid to cultivating community philanthropy in small communities, or is it occurring organically? Is this a shared vision among small communities? Is this a shared vision among foundation decision-makers who provide funding in these communities?
- What motivates residents of different demographics to engage in community philanthropy? How do the elderly engage? How and what motivates young people to engage?
- What sorts of mentoring, coaching, or professional programs are being employed or need to be employed to build the infrastructure for community philanthropy in small communities?
- How does one establish community philanthropy as a practice in small communities?
- How does community philanthropy drive social change?
- What kinds of grantmaking institutions are more likely to deliberately support small communities in building their community philanthropy infrastructure?
- What factors need to be in place for a small community to embark on a community philanthropy strategy?
- To what extent do a small community's social capital, social networks, and access to decision-making and grantmaking institutions matter for success in creating and sustaining a community philanthropy infrastructure? How do communities cultivate these factors or use them strategically?

Conclusion

The concept of community philanthropy as an understanding and use of the community's full assets and giving culture is an idea whose time has come. Few studies have focused on rural community philanthropy and this study helps fill a void in this area. The qualitative analysis presented in this article makes a unique contribution to the field of philanthropy. The need for community philanthropy is often greatest among small communities that can't wait for some big external grant to come along to initiate change.

The challenge for the field of traditional philanthropy is to recognize community philanthropy as a distinct practice of philanthropy and to support its development broadly through incentives, support of best practice strategies, and long-term investments.

The challenge for individuals in small towns is to see their own communities as effective, generous environments that can collectively use the time, talent, and treasure of their citizens to solve problems locally. The challenge for the field of traditional philanthropy is to recognize community philanthropy as a distinct practice of philanthropy and to support its development broadly through incentives, support of best practice strategies, and long-term investments. The Center on Community Philanthropy and its partners stand ready to align their work with students, practitioners, academics, researchers, funders, and community leaders as community philanthropy continues to grow by producing academically sound knowledge and models in the region.

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- Charlotte L. Williams, Dr.P.H., M.P.H., is an assistant professor at the University of Arkansas Clinton School of Public Service and Director of the Center on Community Philanthropy. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Charlotte L. Williams, University of Arkansas Clinton School of Public Service, 1200 President Clinton Avenue, Little Rock, AR 72201 (email: clwilliams@clintonschool.uasys.edu).*
- Sherece West., Ph.D., is president and chief executive officer of the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation.*
- Joanna Klak, M.P.S., is a graduate of the University of Arkansas Clinton School of Public Service.*
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