

# RETHINK PHILANTHROPY

Currently, much of the work focused on black male achievement is funded by philanthropy. Yet as Rahsaan Harris states, “Philanthropy is for innovation, soft leadership, and creating a spark”; it cannot single-handedly move an issue forward. Loren Harris adds, “This field has been particularly and acutely subject to waves of waning philanthropic interest.” Taking the fatherhood field as an example, Joe Jones notes that funders have come and gone over the years, with Annie E. Casey Foundation being one of the only foundations to make a consistent commitment over the years. Jones states simply, “One foundation in no way can sustain a field.”

Given the nature of philanthropic funding in black male achievement, there is consensus that other forms of support must be tapped. At the same time, there are also things that can be done differently within traditional philanthropy to support organizations more effectively.

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## LONGER FUNDING COMMITMENTS AND GENERAL SUPPORT FUNDING

One of the primary challenges of philanthropic funding is that it tends to be based on short grantmaking cycles, even though foundation presidents like Emmett Carson recognize the work as “a long-haul effort” that requires a long-term vision. Open Society Foundations’

Campaign for Black Male Achievement began in 2008 as a three-year initiative, but the Foundation staked its commitment by lifting the term limit and increasing funding. In 2013, the California Endowment announced its Sons and Brothers initiative as a seven-year endeavor, unusual in the world of philanthropy.

Past initiatives have faded out as foundation strategies shifted. To avoid this, the Skillman Foundation made the decision to view its work with black and brown boys as an integral part of its overall strategy. “Our goal was not to do something highly specialized around this that would start and go away,” explains Skillman Foundation CEO Tonya Allen. “Rather, we wanted to make sure that it was embedded in our grantmaking for the long haul.”

Susan Taylor Batten, CEO of ABFE, characterizes such efforts as transformational philanthropy. “Ultimately, we have to find ways to ‘hard wire’ a race and gender lens into all investments rather than setting up special projects that are time-limited. The latter is important, but one of our goals is to change the sector so investments in black male achievement are not dependent on a particular leader.”

In addition, many espouse the need for more general support funding. According to Foundation Center research, 87 percent of grant dollars for black males supports specific programs, while only 11 percent is directed for general operating support. Sheena Wright of the United Way of New York City describes this as a “recipe for disaster.” She adds that to thrive, organizations in the field must be “fiscally healthy, have the right technology and infrastructure, and [be able to invest in] human capital to move from stability to strength to sustainability.”

## PERMANENT ENDOWED FUNDING

Loren Harris, who led the Ford Foundation’s work on black men and boys, advocates for permanent funds dedicated to black male achievement in order to ensure that “there are resources to support all the work at every level at which it needs to be done. This has to happen over time; it’s not going to happen in three-to-five-year interventions. Patient funding over time is what’s needed.” Many agree that such funds would help the field sustain its work beyond “flavor-of-the-month” philanthropic investments.

## BEYOND TRADITIONAL PHILANTHROPY

Stephen DeBerry, founder of Bronze Investments, argues that endowed funding is not the only model. Foundations in the United States are required to spend only 5 percent of their financial capital; the remaining 95 percent is invested to preserve and grow that capital. DeBerry notes, “We ignore the 95 percent of assets flowing in the philanthropic economy that we could be tapping. It would give philanthropy 20 times more dollar resources to do its work.”

DeBerry raises the concern that these investments are usually managed by those with little understanding of the social issues that foundations tackle. For example, a foundation might support black male achievement through its grantmaking, but if its investment portfolio supports private prison companies, then that foundation is impeding its mission.

Moreover, grants may not be the right type or only source of funding for some organizations. Observes Decker Ngongang of Echoing Green, “Tight timeframes from grant funding make it harder to collaborate and create impact around your theory of change.” Trabian Shorters goes further, describing foundation funding as “blood money based on the story of our demise. If you don’t tell the story of our demise you don’t get the money. That all by itself is a problem. But here’s the rub. If you tell the story of our demise for too long, you won’t get the money because you’re ineffective. It’s a lose/lose proposition. Conversely, if you were to focus on helping people grow their assets, everyone benefits and there’s always reason to invest in greater growth.”

As an impact investor, DeBerry invests in institutions and products that align social impact with strong financial returns. “We only talk about the work from a grant perspective; we’d make a lot more progress if we also had conversations about funding for-profit companies that drive mission.” He cites examples like LendUp, an alternative to payday lending, offering short-term loans with lower interest rates and the opportunity for individuals to build credit as they pay back their loans.

Philanthropic advisors who work with high-net-worth individuals are a constituency to target in order to help move dollars to social enterprises and local organizations. In addition, other nontraditional philanthropic models, such as giving circles and benefit corporations, can help promote the sustainability of the work.

## RESOURCES



### Grantmaking With a Racial Equity Lens

*GrantCraft*

Report explores how a racial equity lens can increase a foundation’s effectiveness.



### The Impacts of Giving Together: Giving Circles as a Civic Engagement Strategy

Report examines black male-focused giving circles as a tool for catalyzing civic engagement.

For additional resources, visit: [bmafunders.org/beloved-community](https://bmafunders.org/beloved-community)