

Personal Generosity or Corporate Imperialism? Lessons in Educational Philanthropy from the General Education Board

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A person of fantastic wealth and privilege moves into a position of enormous impact on the nation's schools in spite of the fact that person has neither worked in education, nor have any of that person's children attended public schools. Quickly the critics emerge: is not this person only looking out for self and making decisions that will benefit this person's own bottom line? Who is this person to tell teachers what to do? Of course, this constellation describes [former] U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, cabinet member to [former] President Donald Trump; however, it also perfectly describes John D. Rockefeller, Sr.

While DeVos chose to influence schools via the power of political cronyism, Rockefeller chose to influence schools via the power of his own wallet. Founded in 1902 with a personal gift, by 1930 John D. Rockefeller, Sr. had endowed the General Education Board (GEB) with \$129,209,167 in private funds¹ (the equivalent of \$1.98 billion in 2020 dollars²). Throughout its existence and influence, the GEB was managed by a Board of Trustees comprised of a mix of interested businessmen and educators, as well as the John D. Rockefellers Sr, Jr, and, eventually, the III. Throughout its tenure, the Rockefeller family insisted the personal philosophy of John, Sr.—that all people must help themselves—guided its appropriations.³ Then, as now, U.S. citizens raised significant concerns about the purpose and effectiveness of public schooling. Then, as now, those who appeared with apparently generous financial offers to help U.S. public schools were welcomed with open arms. While, in hindsight, scholars have taken a more critical view of 20th-century philanthropists, similar criticism seems to me rather in short supply during the 21st.

Examination of GEB funding, particularly in the U.S. West, can inform contemporary discourse regarding philanthropy and public education. In this article I draw evidence and lessons from the GEB in order to present a critique of what I perceived to be the unexamined acceptance of current

philanthropic efforts affecting U.S. schools. I begin with a brief overview of the GEB and summary of the historical scholarship around its work. I then examine its work historically before using that context critically to examine the present. Ultimately, I set out to remind my readers that, while it is understandable to view philanthropic gifts to U.S. public schools in a positive light, the question “What is in it for the donor?” must always be foregrounded in considering the sociopolitical limits and potential inequities of philanthropy in public education.

“Unwanted Agents”: A Brief History of the GEB

Initially, GEB funds were dedicated to two areas: U.S. Southern education and U.S. general education.⁴ The GEB was intended to serve as clearinghouse both for research and funding “by other interested parties as well,”⁵ thus it was christened the General Education Board rather than the Rockefeller Education Board. The GEB served multiple functions targeted to improve U.S. education: funding positions in state departments of education, providing funds for faculty positions in universities, overhauling medical school education, funding schools serving marginalized populations, providing scholarships for graduate students to study in established universities, providing scholarships for teachers to attend summer institutes, using public schools to spread agrarianism, and conducting and publishing research on contemporary educational trends.⁶

When determining which educational organizations would be awarded funding, early GEB members set straightforward criteria. The GEB developed “quite elaborate forms of financial and statistical tables to be filled out by the institutions”⁷ requesting assistance. Just as significant as what was funded was what the GEB chose not to fund; indeed, taking a “null history” approach reveals much.⁸ Early on, the GEB was closely linked euphemistically to a “Southern mentality”; the Board would do nothing that might offend Southern whites’ racist sensibilities. Unsurprisingly, this deference to “Southern sensibilities” meant that “in the GEB’s first decade of operation, very little money”⁹ was allocated to Southern Black communities. When scant monies were endowed to Black institutions, their use was mandated to follow Hampton-Tuskegee’s educational model: vocational education was funded, liberal arts studies were not. Black-community-serving schools that failed to comply with the GEB’s mandates were required to adapt or were thereafter denied funding.

Schools were required to evidence community support and prove long-term viability, a policy which precluded many state-supported universities from obtaining GEB funds. In the opinion of GEB members, if a school was eligible for state subsidy, that school must not need the GEB’s help.¹⁰ As a result, states with very small populations—and limited numbers of schools—often never received GEB support. The GEB would only fund schools in geographic areas where the Board foresaw future

growth; however, members of the Board were not always accurate in their predictions, and often drew upon moralistic reasoning which clouded economic appraisals.

The mission of the GEB becomes clearer by examining its work in the Southeastern U.S., (increasing the region's tax base via rural school improvement and funding some African-American education); however, when shifting one's gaze westward, the GEB's professed mission and its enactment become even more convoluted. White U.S. Easterners seem confused about the nature of the U.S. West: if a state could be agricultural, as were parts of Texas and Oklahoma, these states' requests were treated following the GEB's Southeastern model. But New Mexico and other parts of Oklahoma appear to have confounded the Board about what industrial education in marginalized populations should be.

GEB Criticism

Even before the GEB formed, critics were taking aim at the Rockefellers' brand of philanthropy. Muckraking journalist and political activist Henry D. Lloyd, in his 1898 scathing critique of Rockefeller and his ilk, *Wealth Against Commonwealth*, argues that charity earned via unscrupulous or immoral means was "nothing less than a return to chattel slavery."¹¹ He further opined that, with the rise of large philanthropies,

Everything withers—even charity. Aristocratic benevolence spends a shrunken stream in comparison with democratic benevolence. ...through the obliteration of old methods of individual competition by the establishment of large corporations and trusts in modern times, the income of such charitable institutions as are supported by the individual gifts of the benevolent has been seriously affected.¹²

Reaction against philanthropic boards was swift. U.S. historian and professor, Judith Sealander, documents a variety of self-serving motives ascribed to men like Rockefeller:

Supposed foundation benevolence, they argued, masked the fright of rich men, determined to maintain an economic and social structure weighted in their favor. Had they been constrained by laws that required fair wages and working conditions and imposed tighter government regulation on business, the men who endowed foundations would never have amassed their immense fortunes in the first place. Foundation programs were crumbs, thrown to distract recipients from necessary social reform. They existed as "premium for insurance against social interference."¹³

Noted historian of education James D. Anderson describes the vocational-only model of funding favored by the GEB as "the ideological antithesis of the educational and social movement begun by ex-slaves."¹⁴ While the GEB

model initially claimed a focus on the training of teachers, it “employed a unique manual labor routine and an ideology of ‘self help’ as the practical and moral foundation of their teacher training process.”¹⁵ The point of the GEB’s ethic was not to impart skill in industry, but rather “to work the prospective teachers long and hard so that they would embody, accept, and preach an ethic of hard toil or the ‘dignity of labor’” that would allow graduates to “teach the children of the South’s distinctive [B]lack laboring class.”¹⁶

Anderson describes GEB funding patterns in the Southeast as: “Any [B]lack institution emphasizing classical liberal education was regarded...as impractical and not geared to prepare [B]lack youth for useful citizenship and productive efficiency.”¹⁷ Anderson characterizes the GEB’s vocational-only approach toward Black communities as a populist stance; white Southerners’ resistance to the GEB’s efforts was a “series of isolated incidents” in which GEB-funded positions were seen as “unwanted agents of Northern philanthropy.”¹⁸ Anderson describes the GEB’s Southern program as spending “most of their time systematizing industrial education where it was practiced; and advocating systematizing industrial education where it was not [yet] installed.”¹⁹

Professors of history Eric Anderson and Alfred Moss deepen historical critique of the GEB in *Dangerous Donations*, evidencing how, because the GEB “acquired immense prestige,”²⁰ its racist agenda for Black Southern education was unquestioningly adopted by many other philanthropic organizations. Widespread adoption of race-based inequities upheld racist ideologies and practices since the GEB heavily favored the vocational-only model for Black communities as opposed to a more classical, liberal-arts-based curriculum, and favored white governance of Black schools: this in spite of the fact the Hampton-Tuskegee educational model was losing favor among educators and philanthropists by the 1930s. Anderson and Moss criticize the GEB for its pattern of funding existing, deficient public schools serving Southern Black students rather than devoting funding towards developing a more effective, independent public school system that challenged white supremacy in the region or funding already-established private schools.²¹

The GEB in the U.S. West

While much ink has been spilled documenting and critiquing the work of the GEB throughout the U.S. Southeast, not nearly as much scholarship considers the U.S. West. Most often when referencing the U.S. West, the GEB is mentioned as an aside or occupies a single line. For example in Victoria-María MacDonald’s historiographical essay she states simply, “Private foundations such as Rockefeller’s General Education Board and the Julius Rosenwald Fund, which had traditionally focused their resources

on the condition of education in the South for Blacks, began to see the needs of Mexican Americans as equally urgent.”²²

One of the few articles that focuses extensively on the U.S. West is historian Lynne Getz’s examination of the GEB in New Mexico. In 1930, two of the GEB’s Southern field agents visited New Mexico and reported on the parallels between Latino communities in the U.S. West and Black communities in the U.S. South. As a result of these field visits, the GEB founded the San José Training School, designed as a statewide demonstration school built on the model of those in the U.S. South, yet this model primarily focused on vocational education. Its founder, University of New Mexico faculty member Lloyd Tierman, was somewhat ahead of his time, implementing literacy-intensive curricula, strong support to teach English, and (in what is now considered best practice) academic instruction in Spanish for all children during grades 1–5. More interestingly, Tierman and his teachers argued that bilingualism should not be seen as students’ educational deficit, but as educational asset. Tierman worked to ensure communities’ cultural traditions were reflected in curricula.

Tierman also followed the GEB’s Southern model by establishing training for teachers in rural areas by bringing them in as “cadets” to the San José Training School. Once schools were established in rural areas, no matter how much Tierman developed academics at San José, ultimately what happened in those schools all came back to the GEB’s vocational core: schools in the program fostered instruction in arts and crafts to both children and adults in tin-work, woodwork, leather-work, spinning, weaving, embroidery, and the preparation of traditional vegetable dyes. Arguably, the GEB was imposing a vocational education model on Latino students in New Mexico. The one acknowledged difference was the lack of focus on developing an industrial model in New Mexico schools as popularized in Southern schools.²³

History in 3-D: Lessons from the GEB

The social reconstructionist educator Theodore Brameld argues for expanded temporal consciousness in educators because he believes “the schools by and large have forgotten that time consists of three dimensions rather than merely two.”²⁴ Brameld discusses how, at the time, schools focused on the past and present but were not concerned for the future; today, scholars in education seem instead to have lost sight of the past. I consequently present here an analysis of the GEB in 3-D: lessons from the past, of the present, and for the future.

What Happened? Lessons from the Past

As argued by historian and intersectional scholar Clif Stratton, “rather than treat colonialism as a process tangential to or apart from public

schooling in the United States, it needs to be understood as a central ideological, narrative, and organizational force in schools at home as well as abroad.²⁵ Stratton documents a racist temporal dichotomy; while in the past public schools were increasingly teaching for “good citizenship,” many educators “preferred that many [people of color] and immigrants not embrace the full meaning of citizenship.”²⁶ Indeed, “authors and school administrators in charge of vetting and adopting textbooks crafted and selected narratives of [racial] hierarchy, empire as national destiny, and patriotism that often masked and almost always reinforced...deep [racial] inequalities and exclusionary school policies.”²⁷

Rockefeller and his sort claimed one of their goals in funding the GEB was to produce “good U.S. citizens”; however, their rhetoric requires problematizing. Stratton argues Rockefellers’ brand of “making ‘good’ citizens was as much about excluding or subordinating certain kinds of people as it was about including, regenerating, and reshaping others.”²⁸ These systematic exclusionary practices become even more onerous when framed by race and colonialism:

Schools within the bounded national space often served as domestic colonial institutions, espoused narratives that projected American power onto both foreign and domestic geographies and populations, and created distinctive paths to citizenship that many native-born and indeed many naturalized whites hoped would strengthen the boundaries of race and nation.²⁹

What Is Happening? Lessons of the Present

How might study of the GEB’s work in the U.S. West inform current discourse regarding contemporary philanthropy? Today both PK–12 and higher education becomes an increasingly corporate endeavor due both to enterprise and philanthropic efforts. The success of U.S. corporations’ infiltration and sway in education only mounts, beginning first with the progressive era of education, and the dawn of neoliberalism’s influence on education influences more still. While some historians identify philanthropy’s influence on public education in the early 20th century as tainted money used for nefarious purposes, fewer historians turn as critical an eye on philanthropy’s current role in U.S. education, unfortunately. American-Canadian filmmaker and legal scholar Joel Bakan³⁰ describes corporations as institutions with a unique structure and set of imperatives that direct the actions of people within them. Corporations exist and are obligated to fulfill their legal mandate to pursue, relentlessly and without exception, profit in the interest of its shareholders, regardless of the inequitable effects on and consequences to humanity and the natural world.

Paradoxically, in the U.S. corporations are legally recognized as persons, most recently upheld and interpreted via the 2010 *Citizens United*

v. Federal Election Commission decision.³¹ Bakan characterizes corporations as sociopaths since persons who pursue their own interests above all others are, by definition, considered sociopathic. Corporations relentlessly serve only their own interests and put material gain (profit) as their only priority. Even public good works (i.e., environmental awareness, school support) are designed to increase the corporate bottom line (i.e., better public relations, increased sales). Bakan writes, “Most people would find [the corporation’s] ‘personality’ abhorrent, even psychopathic, in a human being, yet curiously we accept it in society’s most powerful institution.”³²

Corporate monopolists and industrial robber barons still exist and still practice “philanthropy,” while their influence wends its way into every person’s everyday while typing Windows software, shopping on amazon, and checking Facebook from iPhones. This fact gives rise to the question of why so many U.S. citizens entrust contemporary educational philanthropy to the likes of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, of the Microsoft empire, a monopolistic corporation in the vein of the Rockefeller empire? More specifically, why do so many in the U.S. entrust classrooms to Google Classroom, in spite of numerous consumer privacy issues in their history?

Worse, educational philanthropy funds models it likes, affording places to keep like-minded people together. In her book *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*, scholar of government and politics Liliana Mason argues that part of why citizens in the contemporary U.S. have become so divided is they have formed mega-identities. In short, the past’s citizens treated their various social-identity categories (race, political ideology, religion) as separate entities. Because many people were members of multiple social organizations (e.g., fraternal clubs or recreational sports leagues), they were frequently exposed to people with different ideologies and characteristics; thus people developed cross-cutting social cleavages.³³ As community-based social gathering spots decline and opportunities to surround oneself exclusively with those of identical ideologies abound, individuals begin to lose their ability to identify with, humanize, and empathize with those of different ilk. Mason argues when groups “grow more socially homogenous, their members are quicker to anger and tend toward intolerance.”³⁴

What Should Happen? Looking to the Future

The third dimension of course is the future; what does an examination of the GEB in the U.S. West advise about what should happen in education’s future? Past president of WICHE, David A. Longanecker, explains the 21st century brought several significant challenges to higher education in the U.S. West. He notes that while U.S. Westerners can “look back with pride” on what has been accomplished,

...the great challenge for the states and institutions at the beginning of the twenty-first century is to meet the needs of a changing population of students—to provide them with the ever-evolving career and life skills necessary to participate effectively in the global community with its insatiable demand for intellectual resources of higher-order skills.³⁵

His explanation does not apply just to higher education, but education writ large, PK–16; it does not simply apply to schools of the U.S. West, but nationwide.

So, imagining a new model and ethics of educational philanthropy, how could educational philanthropy take up principles that demonstrate a learning from the past and a desire to prove itself to be humane and healthy rather than, in Bakan’s phrase, sociopathic? Philanthropies could be held to standards that avoid the mistakes of the past: first, there cannot be “one best system”—philanthropic organizations will be called upon to provide some mechanism for local control. Second, while centralized decision making in a philanthropic organization may be necessary in some sense, that organization should rely on the work of experts and consult research from variety of voices, particularly those deeply connected to the needs of marginalized students and communities.

Contemporary philanthropies could look at some of the best elements of what the GEB did in funding higher education and update/modify to fit the current century by avoiding replication of funding. As in the past in Rockefeller funded schools, Carnegie libraries, Rosenwald buildings and Jeanes teachers, monies should be spread across the full curriculum. Such philanthropies should endow open-access scholarship, since, if education is truly a right, scholarship should be available to every teacher, administrator, school board member, and parent so all stakeholders know what is best practice.

Philanthropic organizations could endow positions in colleges of education, programs that promote strong intercultural education, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges, and Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), and allow those institutions to determine what areas are most in need of funding. Scholarships can fund post-baccalaureate paths to teaching, studying the best programs long-term (not just those which have the best corporate friends) and replicate where applicable; and, finally, fund study abroad and international study opportunities.

The recent shutdown of the nation’s public schools to reduce the spread of SARS-CoV-2 starkly reveals funding gaps and logistical challenges, so philanthropic organizations are confronted with fertile ground for their giving. Philanthropies could provide greater funding for vocational education as well as provide updated/relevant curricular materials to schools/districts

most in need, allowing those sites to determine for themselves what is of most use. Foundations could focus funding on healthy meal programs, particularly package meals/open meal centers in “off times” for students in poverty who live in food deserts as well as provide infrastructure to those with “digital divide” issues. Finally, perhaps educational foundations could explore development of an equitable, inclusive national system of standards of entry to professions.

Of course, this work should not be limited to philanthropic foundations; indeed, all agencies and organizations involved in U.S. education would benefit from consideration of equitable, inclusive educational foci. However, if philanthropies seek to transcend their corporate-based, imperialistic pasts and sociopathic presents, they would be well-advised to lead with their humanity.

Endnotes

- ¹ *General Education Board Review and Final Report 1902–1964* (New York, NY: General Education Board, 1964), 81.
- ² Currency conversion calculated July, 2020, <https://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/uscompare/>
- ³ Raymond Fosdick, *Adventure in Giving: The Story of the General Education Board* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1962), 22.
- ⁴ General Education Board: Purpose and Program (n.d.), (Box 15, Folder 145, FA324, Series O), Rockefeller Family Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, NY.
- ⁵ Fosdick, *Adventure in Giving*, 9.
- ⁶ For a full list of appropriations of the GEB, see *General Education Board Review and Final Report*, “Appendix II: Summary of Appropriations From Date of the Board’s Founding in 1902 to December 31, 1964,” 82–83.
- ⁷ Starr Murphy and Wallace Buttrick Memorandum, (October 10, 1905), (Box 15, Folder 149: General Education Board Memoranda 1905, FA324, Series O), Rockefeller Family Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, NY.
- ⁸ For more on a null history approach see Edward Janak, “What Do You Mean It’s Not There? Doing Null History”, *The American Archivist* 83, no. 1 (2020): 57–76.
- ⁹ Peter M. Ascoli, *Julius Rosenwald: The Man Who Built Sears, Roebuck and Advanced the Cause of Black Education in the American South* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 136.

- ¹⁰ The specific language in the organization's bylaws states that the GEB "does not entertain requests...to contribute to local or official educational institutions in any manner which would replace, obviate, or render unnecessary support received through normal channels." General Education Board: Purpose and Program (n.d.), (Box 15, Folder 145, FA324, Series O), Rockefeller Family Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, .
- ¹¹ Henry Demarest Lloyd, *Wealth Against Commonwealth* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1898), 502.
- ¹² Lloyd, *Wealth Against Commonwealth*, 502–503.
- ¹³ Judith Sealander, *Private Wealth and Public Life: Foundation Philanthropy and the Reshaping of American Social Policy from the Progressive Era to the New Deal* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 4.
- ¹⁴ James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 34.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 133.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ James D. Anderson, "Northern Foundations and the Shaping of Southern Black Rural Education 1902–1935," *History of Education Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (1978): 383. This point is also made by Edward Berman who writes the GEB "provides another illustration of the manner in which those who controlled the early foundations attempted to utilize them to impose upon society a particular construct." Edward Berman, *The Influence of the Carnegie, Ford, and Rockefeller Foundations on American Foreign Policy* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1984), 20–22.
- ²⁰ James D. Anderson and Alfred Moss, *Dangerous Donations: Northern Philanthropy and Southern Black Education 1902–1930* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 5.
- ²¹ This criticism of the GEB's long-term strategy is detailed in Chapter 4, "The General Education Board's Choices", Anderson and Moss, *Dangerous Donations*, 85–107.
- ²² Victoria-María MacDonald, "Hispanic, Latino, Chicano, or 'Other?': Deconstructing the Relationship between Historians and Hispanic-American Educational History," *History of Education Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2001), 374.
- ²³ Lynne M. Getz, "Extending the Helping Hand to Hispanics: The Role of the General Education Board in New Mexico in the 1930s." *Teacher's College Record* 93, no. 3 (1992): 500–516. The shift in approach

- from the Southeast to New Mexico is largely due to the GEB's support of the work of Dr. George I. Sánchez and his pioneering efforts in education. Educators in the U.S. West such as Sánchez convinced the GEB that arts and crafts were a legitimate vocation for children in the region. A full description of how educators such as Sánchez and others like him were able to disrupt and subvert the GEB model in the U.S. West, see Edward Janak, "Bridgers and Brokers: Collective Biography in the Study of the General Education Board in the U.S. West," *Vita Scholastica: The Journal of Educational Biography* 35, no. 1 (2018), 5–24.
- ²⁴ Theodore Brameld, *Design for America: An Educational Exploration of the Future of Democracy* (New York, NY: Hinds, Hayden & Eldredge Inc., 1945), 1–2.
- ²⁵ Clif Stratton, *Education for Empire: American Schools, Race, and the Paths of Good Citizenship* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2016), 7.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 9.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 3.
- ²⁹ Ibid. The notion of Rockefeller Boards (including the GEB) using "children as a means to reshape and reform the social fabric" is fully explored in Theresa Richardson, "Refiguring Schools as Child Welfare Agencies: Rockefeller Boards and the New Program in General Education at the Secondary Level," *American Educational History Journal* 32, no. 2 (2005): 122–130. See also Anderson and Moss, *Dangerous Donations*, 89–90.
- ³⁰ Joel Bakan, *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2005), 1–2.
- ³¹ *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, 558 U.S. 310 (2010).
- ³² Ibid., 28.
- ³³ Liliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 7.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 6–7.
- ³⁵ David A. Longanecker, "Where Do We Go from Here: The Policy Nexus Between the West and the Federal Government," [Afterward] in *Public Policy Challenges Facing Higher Education in the American West*, eds. Lester F. Goodchild, Richard W. Jonsen, Patty Limerick, and David A. Longanecker (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 188.

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