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Immerse Your Donors In You

Philanthropic training and immersion appears to be an effective way of encouraging donors to contribute more money and spend more time volunteering, according to a recent report published by The Center on Philanthropy and Public Policy at USC.

The findings stem from research examining donor socialization within Social Venture Partners International, an organization aimed at improving communities by enlisting donors to contribute their time as well as their money. The donors – called “partners” – join local “SVP” affiliates by giving \$5,000 or more annually to a pooled fund. Partners also volunteer for the nonprofits they fund and participate in educational and collaborative decision-making activities.

“Becoming a Venture Philanthropist: A Study of the Socialization of Social Venture Partners” was written by Michael Moody, formerly of USC’s School of Policy, Planning, and Development. Among the report’s key findings:

- 70.9 percent of partners said their amount of giving to all causes had increased since joining SVP.
- 68 percent of partners said their amount of volunteering had increased.
- A third of those surveyed said their level of giving and volunteering rose by 50 percent or more.
- More than half of the partners said their levels of giving and volunteering rose by more than 100 percent.

Social Venture Partners’ innovative donor education methods have received interest from other nonprofits interested in boosting higher-end donations and increasing donor engagement. However, to date there has been little scholarly work on the processes of “donor socialization,” the processes through which donors learn to give in a particular way and become a part of an organization’s philanthropic culture. This new research project helps to increase our understanding of how new approaches to giving such as Social Venture Partners are facilitating donor education and learning.

The report was based on 175 responses to web-based survey questions that were collected from 14 SVP affiliates in the US and Canada, as well as in-depth interviews with 18 partners and SVP staff. The research was supported by the California Community Foundation Endowed Research Fund for The Center on Philanthropy and Public Policy at USC.

In addition to increasing how much donors give, involvement with SVP also affected how they give, with 86.3 percent of partners saying they gave in a new way after becoming active in SVP. Partners reported being more “strategic” in their giving, being more results-oriented, more engaged and collaborative, and writing fewer but larger checks.

Social Venture Partners was started in Seattle in 1997 as technology companies and advances created a new form of “dot.com” wealth, and entrepreneurs and others then became interested participating in philanthropic projects. SVP International has now grown to more than twenty affiliates in the United States and Canada.

Previous surveys have found significant effects of SVP engagement on donors but they were created with different research questions and primarily focused on Seattle’s Social Venture Partners affiliate. The Center’s study looks closer at precisely how the programs impact giving and it incorporates data from a broader range of cities.

“This research provides important insights into how individuals come to be more sophisticated and strategic donors through their participation in donor circles and peer networks, as exemplified by SVP,” says Jim Ferris, director of The Center on Philanthropy and Public Policy.

Partners clearly indicated that their involvement with SVP was a factor – in most cases a “significant” or “primary” factor – in changing how much they give and how they give, though the report adds that additional research is necessary to investigate just how these changes come about.

Partners identified two of the SVP activities – serving on the committee that makes collective giving decisions, and volunteering with the organizations they support – as the most beneficial socialization experiences. Formal donor education events also played a key role, but were not as important to partners as these intense engagement experiences.

The report makes the following recommendations for nonprofits, philanthropic advisors, and others who work with donors and who are interested in using more effective donor socialization techniques:

- Create more experiential, interactive venues for learning.
- Provide ample opportunities for both intense and sustained development, but allow for individualization.
- Help donors that have little experience in the nonprofit sector with the translation process.
- Encourage and provide opportunities for peer-to-peer learning among donors.
- Learn about and complement where donors are coming from.

A resource for all those who work with donors interested in new forms of giving, “Becoming a Venture Philanthropist: A Study of the Socialization of Social Venture Partners” is available on The Center for Philanthropy and Public Policy website at: www.usc.edu/schools/sppd/philanthropy/research/publications/papers/

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