

# **THINK SMALL, OHIO!**

**Remarks by William Schambra**

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IT'S A privilege to be with you all here in Columbus this morning.

I spent quite a bit of time in Ohio one summer ten years ago, while I was living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and working for the Bradley Foundation.

The time had come for that timeless parental ritual: driving my daughter Emily around to various colleges for her inspection. And that could only mean a tour of Ohio. For, of course, very few states in the union have such a rich and diverse selection of small, intimate liberal arts colleges.

We visited Wooster; we visited Hiram. But I knew from the way her eyes lit up when we stepped onto the campus of Antioch College in Yellow Springs that she had found her home. You can imagine the delight of my liberal friends when they learned about this.

So, for the next several years, I dutifully played the role of sexist, racist, imperialist pig. Aaron might be inclined to point out that I'm still playing that role. [Aaron Dorfman, who shared the podium with Schambra, is executive director of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy.]

But our daughter had struggled with the one-size-fits-all approach of high school, so I was grateful to Antioch for proving to her that there was a college just for her.

Indeed in Ohio there is probably a college suited to every young man or woman, no matter the range or degree of skills or temperament. That's the kind of possibility that American civil society opens up.

The early settlers brought with them to Ohio a vast range of institutions and beliefs, and each small town they founded soon sprouted a college reflecting those, often religious, beliefs: Hiram was established by the Disciples of Christ; Wooster by the Presbyterians; Antioch by the Christian Connection (believe it or not.)

The religious underpinnings may have faded, but the diversity of colleges and their principles and communities remains, beckoning to those who may have otherwise concluded that they were so different, so peculiar, that they belonged nowhere.

Now, this great flourishing of idiosyncratic local beliefs and the small institutions they inspired was not universally admired. Back in Wisconsin, John Bascom, one of the early presidents of the University of Wisconsin, thought that Ohio represented a great waste of energy and resources – there were simply too many colleges going too many different ways. He bemoaned what he called Ohio’s “rambling, halting voluntaryism.”

Far better was Michigan’s approach, he argued, where higher education was in the hands of large, powerful, centralized publicly funded universities, teaching the latest in scientific knowledge about how to manage agriculture, industry, and public affairs, and creating a more unified state, without all the cacophony of opinions and institutions that plagued Ohio.

At the same time that this discussion about higher education was going on, another, very similar discussion about philanthropy was underway.

There, too, the Bascom view was given prominent voice. The founders of the first large, modern foundations at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century maintained that old-fashioned charity, built around small, local, intimate, often religious associations, was hopelessly outdated. It was too diverse, too confusing, too wasteful, too duplicative, too limited, too parochial.

Far better was the path blazed by Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Russell Sage: large, centralized, institutions that didn’t just put band-aids on immediate, concrete problems, but rather sought to penetrate scientifically to the uniform, root cause of those problems.

Now, I thought about all this when I was speaking to Ruth McCambridge the other day. Ruth is the editor of the *Nonprofit Quarterly*, a terrific journal especially for nonprofit and foundation practitioners.

I told her I was going to be with you all today, and I asked her, what are people saying about the way foundations are responding to the current economic problems afflicting so many nonprofits and those they serve?

This was her response. The big foundations, she noted, have become ever more remote and isolated from the immediate emergencies facing everyday Americans. They are more and more wrapped up in devising grand social experiments based on elaborate and elegant theories of change and logic models.

They aren’t spending much time listening to grantees, but are rather in “buying” mode. They’re able to pick and choose among the largest and most sophisticated nonprofits that are eager to carry out philanthropy’s engineering schemes.

With some notable exceptions, they’re hovering above problems, unwilling to allow everyday circumstances to compromise their finely tuned, professionally drafted, five-year strategic plans.

By contrast, she said, the smaller foundations around the country are struggling in good faith to respond immediately and directly to the problems before them. They are much more attentive to

diverse and unique local conditions, willing to adapt their operations to the needs of their grantees.

They are more willing to be flexible, putting aside formal grant requirements to suit the urgent requirements of local nonprofits. They are less detached and remote, grappling earnestly and effectively with the problems of their own communities.

In other words, in this time of economic crisis, the John Bascom approach really isn't addressing the problems before us, whereas the Ohio approach – the small, diverse, localized approach, with its “rambling, halting voluntarism” – is doing a pretty good job.

If I read the statistics right about philanthropy in Ohio today – namely, that you not only have a respectable percentage of America's foundations, but furthermore, that most of them are smaller private or community foundations -- I would say that you're more than ever positioned to live into the Ohio legacy of local flexibility and responsiveness.

That won't be easy, because the dominant discourse in philanthropy today reflects the bias of the “Bigs.”

If you listen carefully, if you examine closely the advice being doled out by the big philanthropy associations and the leading professionals, it all points *away* from the small, modest, unique response to the problem immediately before you.

It points *toward* consolidation and centralization and acceptance of the leadership of the largest foundations in the field. The dominant message of the field is: pool your efforts behind the big national foundation coming to town trolling big dollars for a replication of a program that worked somewhere else with an entirely different set of circumstances. Coordinate your responses; collaborate; partner. And compel your grantees to do the same.

If you want to be a cutting-edge, sophisticated grantmaker today, you're told, you've got to insist that your grantees develop complex logic models and theories of change, and that they come up with elaborate and involved metrics for measuring outcomes.

I would advise you to ignore that advice and take precisely the opposite path. You can provide immediate relief for your hard-pressed grantees in these tough times simply by dropping all the airy and abstract babble about metrics and models and mergers.

You can understand that your grantees are struggling every day just to keep their doors open. They don't need to come downtown for yet another two-hour meeting to “fine-tune” the logic model in their application so that it passes muster with your planning and evaluation department.

They don't need a bureaucratic paperwork burden from applications and reporting that we've come to expect from government, but that is absolutely disgraceful when it's imposed by the sector that's supposed to be flexible and adaptive.

As Bill Somerville suggests in his terrific *Grassroots Philanthropy*, take it upon *yourself* to find out if your grantees are doing a good job, by spending most of your time away from headquarters and out in the field, visiting nonprofits, and talking directly to those they serve.

You can learn most of what you need to know about effective grantmaking from wise local community elders, who know precisely which groups are the real thing and which are in it mainly for the money, and will tell you, if only you're willing to ask.

I urge you to ignore the counsel of the "Bigs," when they tell you that you can only make a difference by getting past superficial and local conditions and going after the underlying root causes.

Remember, the notion that we can solve problems once and for all by getting to their root causes has been around for over a century now, enunciated by John D. Rockefeller himself.

By the standards of measurement so dear to the big foundations themselves, what measurable outcomes can we point to that suggest this approach has ever worked?

As the founders of Antioch, Hiram and Wooster understood, the glory of American civil society is that it's widespread and diverse and particular enough to find a place for everyone, no matter how idiosyncratic his or her abilities or needs.

Smaller institutions are especially valuable because they can come to know intimately what is needed in order to attend to those widely divergent needs.

So it is with foundations, and so it can be with Ohio's proud array of smaller philanthropies. Don't let anyone tell you that because you're focusing your limited resources on groups that are in your own backyard, because you're using good common sense to choose grantees rather than complicated metrics, you're not doing sophisticated grantmaking.

Ignore the voice of John Bascom, and live into Ohio's own noble tradition of "rambling, halting voluntarism."

*William A. Schambra is the director of Hudson Institute's Bradley Center for Philanthropy and Civic Renewal, which was founded in 2003 to explore the usually unexamined intellectual assumptions underlying the grantmaking practices of America's foundations and provide practical advice and guidance to grantmakers who seek to support smaller, grassroots institutions in the name of civic renewal. For more information on Schambra's work and the work of the Bradley Center, please visit the center's web page at <http://pcr.hudson.org>.*