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Youth Philanthropy, Building Community, and Giving Back:

*Executive Summary and
Spotlight on Sow Good Now*

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What is Youth Philanthropy?

Since 2015, [The Sillerman Center](#) has engaged in studying and working with the field of [youth philanthropy](#). Broadly defined, youth philanthropy is a model of participatory grantmaking that provides young people money, mentorship, and decision-making power to directly fund nonprofit organizations and support their communities. However, youth philanthropy goes beyond grantmaking. The term “philanthropy” means the love of humankind, which includes learning about and practicing acts of kindness; and that is central to youth philanthropy and [social justice philanthropy](#).¹

Done well, youth philanthropy helps young people develop useful, transferable skills, a sense of efficacy and connection, and a potentially long-lasting inclination for community engagement.

How does youth philanthropy impact young people, their communities, and the broader philanthropic sector?

- Youth philanthropy is a means for young people to take on leadership roles and have their voices heard.
- Youth philanthropy builds community understanding, bridging across communities, and engages young people in a unique and meaningful way.
- Youth philanthropy, for the philanthropic sector as a whole, democratizes philanthropy and leads to stronger philanthropic practice, partnerships, and long-term outcomes as dollars move to where and how they need.

Youth grantmaking programs help make the field of philanthropy more inclusive and equitable. They are an often overlooked, but instructive model of participatory grantmaking and civic engagement in which young people are given power to make key decisions in support of their communities. Our research shows that young philanthropists develop leadership skills and a stronger sense of belonging and purpose in their communities.²

¹We use youth philanthropy and youth grantmaking interchangeably throughout this executive summary.

²See: [Youth Philanthropy Infographic Series - Why Youth Philanthropy Matters](#)

What do young people need to thrive in youth philanthropy programs?

Youth philanthropy programs that are purposefully designed to engage youth of diverse backgrounds can improve the philanthropic sector by making it more proximate, inclusive, and informed by the lived experiences and perspectives of young people.

Based on Sillerman's research, youth philanthropy programs should:

- Be flexible and accessible by meeting young people where they are at in terms of scheduling, understanding of the field, and guidance.
- Provide young people with the right tools, technology, and resources to participate in programs and sustain their participation.
- Provide multi-directional (top-down, bottom-up, and peer-to-peer) leadership development opportunities and allow young people to participate in programming in different ways based on their individual goals and skills.
- Understand and create buy-in from youth philanthropy constituents (youth philanthropists, parents and guardians, teachers, after-school program supporters and staff, etc.).
- Bring together diverse groups of young people, whether based on demographics, geography, various identity traits, or interest areas.

How is youth philanthropy a model for community building, bridging, and belonging?

At Sillerman, we believe that youth philanthropy is an opportunity to build connections, relationships, and community across distinct groups of young people. We also think about youth philanthropy as a potential model of intergroup contact.³ Done well, and under certain conditions, intergroup contact can be a means to “co-create new and varied identities that can knit people together in novel ways, and offer social spaces and experiences that affirm these connections.”⁴ In other words, youth philanthropy, as a model of intergroup contact, is a means to democratize philanthropy and build social cohesion.

³See Wright & Bougie 2007; Tropp 2022

⁴See Powell & Menendian 2024

Ideal intergroup contact conditions⁵ that to lead to positive outcomes for those who participate include:

- Creation of equal status
- Shared goals
- Authority sanction
- Absence of competition
- Opportunity to make friends
- Incentive to participate
- Shared skills and interest
- Provision of a co-created safe space
- Geographically accessible location
- Uncontested leadership across participants
- Repeated interactions or longevity of participation
- Exposure to something new for all participants

These criteria also help support a two-way or reciprocal process that is necessary to create and sustain trust among groups.⁶

Youth philanthropy can lead to attitude and behavioral change for participants and have spillover effects beyond contact groups, thus benefiting young people, their communities, and the field of philanthropy as a whole. This can be done as a form of bridging, which is a manner of connection between people through which they listen to one another's stories. It is "about practices and values that anchor us to the practice of inclusion."⁷ Engaging people from and across diverse backgrounds can be referred to as "bridging social capital."⁸ It is more likely that bridging social capital will create positive impacts, such as inclusion, in contrast to connections among only similar people, which can lead to exclusion. Social connections among diverse people can also build social solidarity in plural societies.⁹ So, through bridging, building a broader network or community benefits young people by creating a strong support system. Youth philanthropy programs that bring together diverse groups of young people advance inclusion and build strong support networks.

⁵See Paluck 2019; Baldassarri and Abascal 2020; Pettigrew 1998; Mousa 2019

⁶See Baldassari and Abascal 2020; Baldassari, Gereke, and Schaub 2024

⁷See powell 2024

⁸See Gelderblom 2018

⁹ibid

Philanthropy By and From the Grassroots

This image was drawn during the 2016 #ShiftThePower symposium. It illustrates the difference between philanthropy “by and from” communities and philanthropy “to or for” communities. With the latter presenting at least three important democratic challenges: power concentrated in the hands of the wealthy or elites (Dula et al., 2025); decline in ownership or responsibility to address social issues as a collective (Hwang & Powell, 2009); and loss of care and connection, or social cohesion (Putnam, 2000).¹⁰ Youth philanthropy is a means to create this power shift towards community and the grassroots.



¹⁰See Democratizing Philanthropy Initiative's [Draft Position Paper](#), 2025

Youth Philanthropy Spotlight:

Sow Good Now

Year Founded: 2018

President: Mary Fischer-Nassib

Website: <https://sowgoodnow.org/>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/sowgoodnow/>

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/sowgoodnow/>

Mission: Grow the next generation of philanthropic athletes by building community, teaching and practicing philanthropy, and sharing impact.

Sow Good Now (SGN) was founded in 2018 with a mission to grow the next generation of philanthropic athletes by building community, teaching and practicing philanthropy, and sharing impact. Philanthropic athletes are youth-aged athletes who come together to practice a sport and work towards a shared goal: youth philanthropy. SGN establishes four-year commitments with two groups of young people to hold once-a-year 4-hour GiveBack events consisting of a sports clinic and giving program.

GiveBacks have three pillars: build community, teach philanthropy, and inspire impact. GiveBacks integrate these pillars, as Mary Fischer-Nassib, SGN's President, stated, so that young people can "go out in the world and leverage the skills that they just learned." SGN selects distinct groups of young people to participate in GiveBacks. They seek groups that are within a 15-mile distance from each other so as to make programming more accessible in terms of transportation. However, this does not preclude vast demographic and socioeconomic differences. The two groups also differ in terms of age. The older group of participants are high school- or college-aged and part of organized sports teams at their school or through a club team. The younger group of participants, ranging in age from approximately 7-14 years old, are part of community-based youth development organizations, from local schools, and/or from organized sports teams.


Mary explained, in regards to group selection, “We look for like-minded leaders and people who understand that in order for society to thrive and especially youth to thrive, we have to empower them and give them a voice and help them find ways to connect with opportunities to share their gifts for the common good.” The groups SGN selects for GiveBacks possess some level of openness and desire to interact with people who are not part of their group.

GiveBacks take place in shared spaces like public schools, public fields, or indoor facilities such as field houses at universities or private schools, and are semi-structured. While SGN selects groups of young people to participate in events, they rely on team-leads, who either self-select into the role or are identified by their coaches, to help design the day-of activities. The two groups work on the philanthropic component with minimal input from adults. In order to make decisions, the young people work towards a shared, or common, goal and identity. As Mary explained, participants’ responses and takeaways from the interactions “are to not necessarily the sport but to having a near-peer believe in them, encourage them, and teach them.”

SGN, Mary noted, works to “engage student athletes to become public speakers [and do] event planning and equipment drives. So, it’s a voluntary way of distributing the work. We also ask for input from the youth serving organizations as well as asking youth from those organizations to be some type of a leader on the day.” Further, because these are multi-year partnerships, there is the opportunity for progressive leadership roles as the older student athletes train and mentor the younger student athletes to take on increasing responsibility.

For Mary, a multi-year partnership is critical to create lasting impact and change. She explained, “The longer-term partnership is essential in making lasting changes in the mindsets of young people. And also making bridges that stick in communities. I think once, twice, three times, just wouldn’t be enough...I think you really have to ask for four in order for them to make it a life-long tradition.” The young people who participate in GiveBacks also need the multi-year partnership to better understand what it means to be a philanthropic athlete. Mary noted, “Over time, we hope that they hear the word philanthropy the first year and they connect some of the dots. And then they start to identify as philanthropic...They might say, yes I played for that team and yes I’m a philanthropic athlete and yes, I know how to do things in my community because of my time in that program.”

As Mary concluded, a successful GiveBack is “one where the lives of those who attend the GiveBack are transformed. Where they all see themselves as more responsible in shaping the communities that they have and that they represent. That they’re more responsible for facing challenges collectively and they understand that they have that power.”



Endnotes:

1. We use youth philanthropy and youth grantmaking interchangeably throughout this executive summary.
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4. Wright, S. C., & Bougie, É. 2007. "Intergroup contact and minority-language education: Reducing language-based discrimination and its negative impact." *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 26(2), 157-181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X07300078>
5. Tropp, Linda R., Fiona White, Christina L. Rucinski, and Colin Tredoux. 2022. "Intergroup Contact and Prejudice Reduction: Prospects and Challenges in Changing Youth Attitudes." *Review of General Psychology* 26, no. 3: 342-60. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10892680211046517>.
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11. powell, john a. 2024. *The Power of Bridging: How to Build a World Where We All Belong*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True Inc.
12. Gelderblom, Derik. 2018. "The Limits to Bridging Social Capital: Power, Social Context and the Theory of Robert Putnam." *The Sociological Review* 66, no. 6: 1309-24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026118765360>.
13. Wiepking, Pamala, Dana Doan, and Elizabeth Dale, et al. 2025. "Democratizing Philanthropy Research Initiative: A research-practice network to democratize philanthropy – draft position paper." Democratizing Philanthropy Research Initiative.



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The Sillerman Center at Brandeis University informs and advances social justice philanthropy through educational opportunities, publications and creative programming for grantmakers, philanthropy-related organizations and individual donors across the United States.

<https://heller.brandeis.edu/sillerman/>