Philanthropist John Altman:
How I Give and Why It Matters

Dr. John W. Altman is a distinguished entrepreneur and philanthropist as well as a member of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni’s Board of Directors. He was a professor of entrepreneurship at his alma mater, Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, and served on its board of trustees. Last year, Miami University became the 69th school to endorse the Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression.

Below, Dr. Altman shares some of his journey and insights from his philanthropy.

Giving Smarter: Our philanthropy goes through the John W. Altman Charitable Foundation, and each iteration gets a little smarter.

The key, that I have found at least, in effectively leveraging a gift to an institution might surprise you. I don’t always work with development offices, and I never work with the administration. I talk to the leading faculty members in areas I’m interested in to see how I can support their work. I look at giving to higher education through the lens of team, resources, and opportunity. If I recognize an opportunity and the right team is in place, then we can talk about the resources. Those three things together can make real changes in higher education.

The Rules of the Game: I am a big believer in higher education. It is not the only place my foundation practices philanthropy, but it is the principal place. At our foundation’s last board meeting, we updated our bylaws with the following requirements for our university gifts:

- They must use a “skin-in-the-game” approach—if the university does not want to match our gift, then it is not committed to what it is asking for.
- They must adopt the Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression, as outlined by the Foundation for Individuals Rights in Education.
- They must earn at least a “B” grade in ACTA’s What Will They Learn? report.
- They must agree to an annual and perpetual outside audit that ensures compliance with the above three requirements.

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A top priority for me is free speech on campus. I have seen free speech get shut down on many a university campus. As a U.S. citizen and veteran, that’s disturbing to me. The day that freedom of speech disappears on a college campus, one must really question whether you can justifiably continue to give.

Starting Early: My own journey of philanthropy started in Chicago. I was head doorman at a country club in high school. The president of the club, Mr. Winski, wanted me to stay on and become a manager eventually. When he found out I couldn’t afford the tuition for college, he put 10 $100 bills in my tuxedo uniform. I vowed that night that if I ever had the resources, I’d do the same for someone else.

The hardest gift my wife and I ever gave was $100, our first gift in 1961. We talked about that gift for three nights before sending the check because that was grocery money. But I believe that it’s important to start early. Despite what people have paid for their education and student debt, you have a moral obligation to give back to the institutions that formed you. We never missed a year in all these years, but that first one was a killer.

Entrepreneurial Giving: The largest major gift that we have granted to date was endowing the entrepreneurship program that I started. Back then, most people thought entrepreneurship was unteachable. I can teach people everything they need to start a business except one thing, fire in the belly.

At a morning keynote, advisor Thomas Rogerson shared recommendations for structuring family meetings and discussed how philanthropy can create a sense of shared purpose for family wealth.

Charitable giving and retirement benefits: To make retirement plans more available to American workers, Congress passed the SECURE Act in the final weeks of 2019. Legal expert Natalie Choate discussed how the new law will impact Americans’ retirement savings and went over several underutilized charitable giving strategies.

Thanks to support from the Diana Davis Spencer Foundation, the Fund for Academic Renewal offers free legal consultation from the DC-based law firm of Arnold & Porter LLC. If you have any questions about giving to a college through your will, please contact FAR at info@AcademicRenewal.org.

Dr. and Mrs. Altman after cutting the ribbon outside the newly named John W. Altman Institute for Entrepreneurship at Miami University in Ohio. Photo by Jay Murdock.
FROM THE BOOKSHELF...  

Giving Done Right: Effective Philanthropy and Making Every Dollar Count by Phil Buchanan was published last year as a practical guide to philanthropy. Although the primary audience of the book is high-net-worth individuals or foundations, Mr. Buchanan connects his advice to smaller-level donors. Pushing back against the idea that philanthropy should be approached as a business, Mr. Buchanan argues that giving is very distinct from earning. Success metrics, strategy, and the skills needed for effective philanthropy are considerably different from those required in business.

While written before the Sackler controversies garnered public attention, Mr. Buchanan acknowledges the growing cultural criticisms of philanthropy. A significant part of the book shows how much good philanthropy has accomplished in improving quality of life through initiatives in health, education, and public parks. Although he champions all the ways that the philanthropic sector benefits society, he does not shy away from exploring why philanthropic endeavors fail. He attributes much of this failure to misunderstanding the nature of philanthropy and to how funders engage with nonprofits or other recipients of their gifts. When funders require grantees to implement business-based strategies in a field that operates much differently from a business, failure is imminent, if not inevitable.

Because of the magnitude of the issues at stake, it can take years to know whether a specific philanthropic approach is effective. The author writes, “Givers are often seeking to address the most entrenched problems—the very ones that have defied market or government solutions.” Poverty, inadequate education, and medical issues have eluded solutions in other sectors. Philanthropy uniquely allows for collaboration and innovation in solving social issues. If philanthropy is engaged in as its own discipline, Mr. Buchanan is optimistic that giving done right will change society for the better.

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I taught a paradigm of entrepreneurship that begins with creating opportunity at one end and giving back at the other end. Entrepreneurs are guests in their community. They must share their resources with those who helped them build the business.

Now, the entrepreneurship program is ranked number five in the United States, not because of me, but because of those who came after me, each one taking it further.

Philanthropy is important to me because I had some great mentors who bet on me personally. I remember what the days of not having resources were like. I feel a moral obligation that those who are blessed with the resources need to share them. Thoughtful philanthropy is complicated, though. I like to say, “If I had as much trouble making money as giving it away, I would have been on food stamps 30 years ago.” Giving wisely is difficult, but increasingly necessary.

To see our video interview with John Altman, visit academicrenewal.org/blog/intelligent-college-giving-john-altman.
At this year’s Heckerling Institute on Estate Planning, a surprising number of discussions revolved around the question of purpose. Understanding their clients’ goals—and translating those goals into a workable plan—proved a far greater challenge for the attorneys in attendance than the intricacies of tax law.

For higher education donors, too, the question of purpose should be paramount. For some donors, the “Why?” behind their gift proves much more difficult to answer than “When?” or “How much?” If you know where you are going, it is much easier to get there.

A clear and concise statement of purpose—just a sentence or two about why you are making your gift and what you hope to accomplish—can both sharpen your thinking and ensure your intent is honored for years to come.

If considering a long-term gift, such as an endowed lecture series or chair, your statement of purpose should be broad enough to adapt to potential changes over time, but not so broad that your gift is easily fungible for other purposes. Finding the right balance will help ensure that your gift has a lasting impact.

When philanthropist Wiley Vaughan endowed a named lecture series at Harvard Law School, he stipulated that a statement outlining his reasons for funding the lecture must be read before every program. Through this mechanism, Mr. Vaughan ensured that the recipients of his gift will honor his intent. This approach also has the added benefit of framing each lecture with gratitude.

If you are considering a gift to higher education and would like help crafting your statement of purpose, please contact FAR to begin the conversation.

Define Your Statement of Purpose