

# Baylor philanthropy expert suggests five factors to consider in choosing charities

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WACO—At Christmas, Americans exchange gifts, bake holiday treats and volunteer time. It also is the season when Americans give more financially to the 1.5 million charitable organizations registered in the United States.

Charitable giving is concentrated in December for many reasons—the holiday spirit of generosity, the allure of charitable deductions before impending tax deadlines or, perhaps most often, because December is when many charitable organizations do their asking.

“Whatever our motivations, many of us will make philanthropic gifts this month, and devoting a little bit of reflection to the process might help us discover the immeasurable joy that can come from giving,” said Andy Hogue, director of the philanthropy and public service program at Baylor University. “We might realize, in fact, what it means to become the benevolent and hospitable human beings we are meant to be.”

Hogue said givers should consider five key areas as they look “within and without” to assess who they are, what they have been given and the needs and opportunities around them:

- **Gratitude**

Generosity occurs best when it is downstream of gratitude, a “product of our reflection on the things we have been given,” Hogue said.

Despite some prevailing cultural narratives, people are not solely the

products of their own talents or hard work. Someone assisted them along the way, Hogue noted. “Determining how we’ve been the beneficiary of someone else’s generosity can very much inform how we are generous ourselves,” he said.

For example, a person might have received a scholarship to help with education, training to land a first job, received food assistance or were inspired by a work of art.

“Taking stock of these things is a great first step, and ‘paying forward’ the things we’ve been given is an admirable form of philanthropy,” Hogue said.

- **Passion**

Givers also should look within at their passions and the issues they care about. It might be education and opportunity, health care or research to cure an intractable disease, human trafficking, a religious cause, the environment or the arts.

“Whatever your passions, chances are, there is a tax-exempt organization that would gratefully benefit from your generosity,” Hogue said.

- **Need**

As important as it is for givers to look within to assess what they have and what they care about, they also must remember giving is not solely about them, Hogue stressed.

“It’s important to think attentively about those who might be enriched by our gifts,” he said. “One place to start is to consider where there is need, whether it’s the direst needs of the world’s poorest, where children starve, lack potable water and succumb to curable infectious diseases—places where our dollar can make a tremendous impact—or the need at home, perhaps even across the street, where our generosity can work immediately

to improve our own communities.”

Need also might look as simple as a budget shortfall for a beloved social service agency, church or educational institution, where a gift can keep the lights on or help sustain essential services, Hogue added.

- **Impact**

A contribution’s impact might be another important external concern to givers, Hogue said. For example, in addition to supporting traditional canned food drives, givers also can consider financial donations that can maximize efficiency and provide charities with more options to assist families.

“If we donate \$10 directly to a local food pantry, it can go much further, because many emergency assistance providers form partnerships with food manufacturers, who donate enough product to turn our \$10—almost magically—into enough food to feed a family of four for more than a week,” Hogue said. “A little bit of research can turn up all sorts of efficiencies like this, which can greatly amplify our impact.”

- **Resources**

If givers don’t have time, especially during the busy holiday season, to research specific organizations, Hogue suggests they seek out a charitable community foundation making grants to local organizations.

“Most foundations employ a stringent due diligence process, and they are governed by boards of directors who set out to ensure that the foundation’s funds are being maximized for the greatest community benefit,” Hogue said. “Give them a call. Tell them what types of things you are interested in giving toward, and ask for their advice.”

Hogue also suggests givers consider setting up a fund with a community

foundation where, with the help of a knowledgeable professional, they can pool their charitable donations with others. Most community foundations also allow givers to set up funds that enable as little or as much involvement as they would like in directing dollars to their final destinations.

“With 18 percent of our charitable giving occurring in December alone, we would do well to give our charitable gifts the same level of consideration as our holiday shopping lists,” Hogue said. “Attending to these few key considerations can go a long way. Our communities, and likely our very selves, will be enriched as a result.”