



American Foundations: Roles and Contributions

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Foundations play an essential part in the philanthropic activity that defines so much of American life. No other nation provides its foundations with so much autonomy and freedom of action as does the United States. Liberated both from the daily discipline of the market and from direct control by government, American foundations understandably attract great attention. As David Hammack and Helmut Anheier note in this volume, "Americans have criticized foundations for... their alleged conservatism, liberalism, elitism, radicalism, devotion to religious tradition, hostility to religion—in short, for commitments to causes whose significance can be measured, in part, by the controversies they provoke. Americans have also criticized foundations for ineffectiveness and even foolishness."

Their size alone conveys some sense of the significance of American foundations, whose assets amounted to over \$530 billion in 2008 despite a dramatic decline of almost 22 percent in the previous year. And in 2008 foundation grants totaled over \$45 billion. But what roles have foundations actually played over time, and what distinctive roles do they fill today? How have they shaped American society, how much difference do they make? What roles are foundations likely to play in the future?

This comprehensive volume, the product of a three-year project supported by the Aspen Institute's program on the Nonprofit Sector and Philanthropy, provides the most thorough effort ever to assess the impact and significance of the nation's large foundations. In it, leading researchers explore how foundations have shaped—or failed to shape—each of the key fields of foundation work.

American Foundations takes the reader on a wide-ranging tour, evaluating foundation efforts in education, scientific and medical research, health care, social welfare, international relations, arts and culture, religion, and social change.

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