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Study Finds that Collaborative Model is Necessary for Family Foundations That Wish to Achieve Generational Continuity

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The National Center for Family Philanthropy (NCFP), together with Lansberg Gersick Advisors (LGA), has released the findings of their multi-year research *Philanthropy in Complex, Multi-Generational Families: Balancing Individual Preference with Collective Purpose*. Among the main findings of the research are: families that have aspirations of continuity for their family foundation must adopt a collaborative model; individuated family foundations have limited life spans; and families can work together in their philanthropy despite ideological differences.

Conducted by Ashley Blanchard and Wendy Ulaszek of Lansberg Gersick Advisors (LGA), the research included surveys and interviews with members from twenty US-based family philanthropy systems and was designed to investigate how families work together in their philanthropy over time.

In particular, the research considers how the family foundation’s design and operation is informed by—and informs—the family’s philanthropic activities that take place *outside* of it. The purpose of this study is to help families understand how they can design their family philanthropy to best meet their goals.

The study’s standout finding was that the creation of a robust family philanthropy “system” was vital to providing outlets for families’ increasingly diverse philanthropic interests. The families that most successfully perpetuated a collective family foundation over generations established different vehicles for different purposes: they had firm boundaries around collaborative and individual “pots.”

“Clarity around the purpose of the family foundation and the extent to which it is or is not a space to pursue individual giving interests is critical to reducing tension over time,” says study co-author Wendy Ulaszek.

Similarly, the findings show that intentional design and management can help families work together in their philanthropy despite ideological differences. Growing ideological divisions that have been felt throughout society were experienced by the families in the sample. The research suggests seeking out areas of common ground and relying on venues outside of the family foundation to address giving that is likely to be divisive.

“Many participants noted that ideological divisions within their families have become more pronounced in recent years. Yet, with thoughtful design, ideologically diverse families can create foundations that enable productive engagement and be equally satisfying as those for families with ideological homogeneity,” notes study co-author Ashley Blanchard.

In sum, the report highlights several findings related to family foundations:

- Participants in collaborative family philanthropy systems report less family tension and greater perceived impact.
- Individuated family foundations have limited life spans.
- Families that successfully continue a collective family foundation establish *different philanthropic vehicles for different purposes*.
- Satisfaction with the family foundation is not dependent on it reflecting personal interests or geography.
- Significant discretionary giving *undermines* collaboration.
- Families can work together in their philanthropy despite ideological differences.
- Later generations desire connection—avoid creating architecture that impedes future collaboration.
- Strong “ambidextrous leadership” is necessary to transition to collaborative models; families must develop successors to achieve continuity.

“This research provides a deep look into the ways families work together and how they can leverage a robust philanthropic system to ensure continuity over time. With intentional structure, it is possible for families to be effective and maintain a family foundation vehicle,” remarked NCFP President and CEO Nick Tedesco. “I’m grateful to LGA and study participants for helping to develop research that the field so desperately needs,” he added.

A note on study design:

The research included surveys and interviews with members from twenty US-based family philanthropy systems. Each system included a legacy foundation and at least two other philanthropic vehicles and was in the second generation of leadership or later. In total, researchers conducted 82 interviews from 2018-2022, and 58 respondents completed the survey. A collaborative composite score was assigned to each of the participating family systems and used in the data analysis.

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NCFP is a network of philanthropic families committed to a world that is vibrant, equitable, and resilient. We share proven practices, work through common challenges, and learn together to strengthen our ability to effect meaningful change. Our range of programs and services support family philanthropy at its many points of inflection and help families embrace proven practices and advance momentum. Explore our resources, all rooted in a Family Giving Lifecycle, by visiting www.ncfp.org.

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