Trump Era Prompts Foundation CEOs to Get Their Bullhorns Out

By Alex Daniels

Don Howard, head of the James Irvine Foundation, doesn’t usually talk about federal policy. His foundation focuses solely on California and has long been nonpartisan.

But when President Trump announced he was ending a program that allows the so-called dreamers — people who came to America with their parents as young kids — to stay in America even though they are not citizens, he says he couldn’t keep quiet anymore. He posted an article on his foundation’s website saying he was troubled by the "divisive, detrimental policies and rhetoric coming out of Washington."

Political statements, he says, can alienate people. But he felt compelled to speak out because the dreamers announcement was a "broken promise."

Mass deportations, he wrote, "would jeopardize the fundamental values of our country and violate the spirit of America’s promise of opportunity for those who work hard to create a better life for themselves and their families."

Mr. Howard is one of a growing number of foundation leaders who are speaking out on public policy in news articles, newspaper ads, tweets, and email blasts. Grant makers that support causes under attack during the Trump presidency are increasingly using the media as a bullhorn to inform policy makers, sway public opinion, and send a clear message to grantees: We’ve got your backs.

No-Holds-Barred Language

It’s not just the frequency of the public statements that is noticeable but the bluntness of the language. Max King, president of the Pittsburgh Foundation, took to the pages of the Philadelphia Inquirer to say in an opinion article that he believed President Trump was inspiring fascism. (The Chronicle published an adapted version of that article.)
While individual foundation leaders have increasingly taken to the public stage, grant makers are also gathering together to make their voices heard. In January, 50 philanthropy leaders signed a letter blasting Mr. Trump’s ban on travel from six majority Muslim countries.

Yet other foundation presidents are taking steps to help their grantees speak out forcefully — and using their own speeches and commentaries to set an example for the role nonprofit leaders can play in swaying public opinion.

Still, some foundation leaders — as well as people who watch foundations — say too many grant makers continue to believe they should speak largely through the money they award to advocacy and other groups. Judy Belk, president of the California Wellness Foundation, who had been an outspoken leader even before the Trump era, worries that most foundations "are not using their voice as an asset."

Aaron Dorfman, president of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, agrees. While more foundation leaders are speaking out against racism and injustice, too many remain timid, he says. "Neutrality is not an asset, and I hope to see more philanthropic leaders using their voices and their reputational capital to stand up for vulnerable communities attacked by President Trump and his allies," he wrote in an email.

An About-Face

Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation, embodies philanthropy’s newly public face, his peers say.

Mr. Walker called for "moral courage" following the gathering of white supremacists and the killing of a counterprotester in Charlottesville, Va. He used his annual letter this month to rally for an examination of American racism, something he called "the next battle for the soul of this country."

At conferences, on social media, and in the nation’s largest newspapers, he has connected his own origins, growing up as a poor, gay African-American in Texas, with the foundation’s broader mission of ending inequality.

It’s a huge about-face from Mr. Walker’s tenure at the Rockefeller Foundation earlier in his career. A louder voice is necessary, he says, because American politics are in a state of crisis, and the internet has unleashed huge competition for the attention of the American public.

"When I came into philanthropy, the idea at Rockefeller was we didn’t really communicate beyond our annual report, because our work spoke for itself," he says. "That paradigm is no longer relevant in a world of social media where if we don’t manage our narrative, others will manage it for us."

Talking in Grocery Aisles

At every turn during Mr. Trump’s young presidency, foundation executives have written direct, and often critical, responses to policies and statements coming out of the White House.

Rather than emanating from faceless institutions, those messages often have a personal touch.

Ms. Belk, of the California Wellness Foundation, wishes other leaders would take cues from Mr. Walker and from Robert Ross, president of the California Endowment, who draws upon the early challenges he faced as a pediatrician working in a Philadelphia clinic.
People who hear their stories, she says, are more moved than they would be by a discussion of the vicissitudes of grantee evaluation and strategic impact.

It’s a point of view Ms. Belk brought to her own foundation. Early in her tenure on the job, shooters in San Bernardino attacked and killed 14 people. Ms. Belk, who lost her sister to gun violence in the late 1970s, told her story in op-eds, at conferences, in essays, and on her blog to persuade people that guns present a serious public-health threat.

Beyond those formal approaches, Ms. Belk, who considers herself a storyteller first and foremost, goes even further to put a face on philanthropy. She’ll stop people in the produce section at the grocery store to talk about her foundation. On a crowded flight, seatmates be warned: She’ll chat you up for hours about her most recent grants.

Philanthropy has been timid about telling its story, Ms. Belk says, and when it does, it often tells it in a "bubble" of other grant makers and nonprofits. She’d like to connect with a bigger audience.

On her mission to "demystify" philanthropy, Ms. Belk gets her point across on her personal blog, on Twitter, in front of audiences across the state, and in the pages of the Los Angeles Times, USA Today and Huffington Post.

"I’m not naïve," she says. "I know that one reason people pay attention to us is that we’re sitting on assets of billions of dollars."

Ms. Belk said last year’s election and the policies emanating from the White House have pushed her to ruminate on the passion that drives her work in philanthropy. One main motivation: the belief that health care is a human right.

"When things get really crazy, I step back and say, ‘OK, Judy, what do you stand for?’ " she says. "I’m looking for any type of credible platform to reach a wide audience" for that message.

**Augmenting Grants Budgets**

To be sure, many foundation leaders who are speaking out are also taking significant actions to retool their grant making to help groups affected by Trump policies.

And that was the first kind of action Mr. Howard of Irvine took.

In the weeks following last November’s election, for instance, the foundation provided $1.7 million from its discretionary budget to grantees working to strengthen immigrants’ political voice and economic heft. Since the beginning of the year, the foundation has set aside an additional $5.6 million for the same purpose.

While he has spoken out more than he did before Mr. Trump was elected, he says he still thinks it’s most important that grant makers focus on strengthening nonprofits. "Our primary means of making a difference in the world is allocating dollars to the strongest leaders and the best ideas," he says. "Our core business is grant making."

**Helping Employees Use Their Voice**

How foundation chiefs interact with the broader public often depends on the type of institution they run.
Bill and Melinda Gates, for instance, are philanthropy superstars. They can hold conference calls and events to discuss their work, and journalists, politicians, and nonprofit and business leaders clamor to attend.

Foundation leaders at institutions created in previous generations, however, don’t draw that much attention.

Stephen Heintz, president of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, says he believes philanthropy leaders need to speak up more loudly when things they cherish, like human equality and democracy, are threatened. While he has been speaking at professional forums more frequently, his personal approach hasn’t changed much during the Trump presidency.

Members of the Rockefeller family, who hold about half of the fund’s board seats, have a history of both being restrained in the public sphere and speaking out. He says he doesn’t want to get out in front of the family.

"They set the tone for us," he says. "It’s a nuanced balance between humility and leadership. I try to maintain that balance because it’s part of the character of the institution."

That said, the fund sees a need for immediate action, faced with a set of policies Mr. Trump has articulated that are "at odds" with the Rockefeller Brothers’ outlook, Mr. Heintz says.

The foundation has increased its grant making by $3 million. Half of the money was directed to the foundation’s programs designed to make sure no one is shut out of the democratic process. The other portion went to direct advocacy efforts, including a march in Washington, D.C., to support the creation of science-based policy and emergency support for groups like the Vera Institute for Justice that provide legal help to immigrants.

Those grants, which came from a newly established urgent-opportunities fund, were made outside of Rockefeller’s established grant making.

Anybody at the foundation could recommend where to make grants, giving all of the fund’s staff members an opportunity to channel some of the emotions they felt following the election into immediate assistance rather than longer-term strategic grant making.

**Encouraging Nonprofits to Speak Out**

Even if foundations don’t reach a broad audience, there are others hanging on their every word.

After Mr. Trump announced his plan to end protections for the dreamers, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s president, Richard Besser, sent a note to its grantees, most of whom are focused on health matters. He urged them to inform program officers if the uncertain policy environment might impede their work. And he pledged to use the foundation’s website and social-media channels to call attention to the health impact of an uncertain immigration status.

Grant Oliphant, president of the Heinz Endowments, spoke out, too. He wrote a personal essay about racial hatred and the violence in Charlottesville and followed up with a blog post on the effect the Trump immigration announcement had on immigrants in Pittsburgh.

Next week Heinz will host a communitywide meeting for grantees and community leaders to discuss moral leadership in a time when they believe equality and civil discourse, as well as other values fundamental to the nonprofit world, are under attack. The organizations Heinz supports, he says, need to be assured others are on
"Many of them feel muzzled," he says. "Many feel they can’t or shouldn’t speak up."

Mr. Oliphant also wants a national audience for his foundation’s work. While he says he’s realistic that a leader of a foundation won’t necessarily command as much attention as a political leader or a celebrity, philanthropy can still have an impact.

"Our grantees are watching us," he says. "Folks in our communities are watching us. They’re looking to see what we’re willing to say and not willing to say."

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