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American philanthropic exceptionalism?

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Quad 136

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American Philanthropic Exceptionalism?



The end of the calendar year is obviously an important time for giving to charitable causes. Colleges and universities depend heavily on the generosity of their alumni and friends, both for their annual budgets and for their long-term endowments. What is particularly worth noting is the relationship between American philanthropy and academic quality.

Among American colleges and universities, there is a high correlation between academic quality and size of endowment, with the latter being directly related to long-term alumni generosity. Furthermore, the philanthropic impulse in America also has created what is indisputably the best higher education system in the world. Rankings should be taken with a grain of salt, but

every international ranking I have ever seen has been dominated by American institutions. [This site](#) of academic rankings is typical in having 17 American institutions in the top 20 universities in the world.

This leads to the bigger question of what generates the philanthropic ethos that is unusually strong in America. An article I read awhile ago from [Philanthropy magazine](#) linked philanthropy in the United States to American exceptionalism in other traits. (In the mid-19th century, Alexis de Tocqueville was the first writer to describe the United States as “exceptional.”)

The authors write:

We believe that these distinctive qualities – freedom, religiosity, entrepreneurship, and generosity – are mutually reinforcing in America, and that the unusual combination explains why philanthropy is perhaps the most exceptional thing about this exceptional land.

Regardless of the exact source of the philanthropic spirit of Americans, I and the leaders of many other non-profits are deeply appreciative of this generosity. Without it, we would find it impossible to fulfill our missions, be that education or some other deserving cause. Philanthropy makes the non-profit world possible.

Best wishes for a prosperous and generous New Year.

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).