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Funding Justice: A Comparative Study of Student Versus Foundation Grantmaking

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Research Paper

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Abstract

Student-led philanthropy has emerged as a promising yet understudied model for redistributing philanthropic decision-making authority. While foundations often claim to advance social change, their grantmaking continues to favor large, professionalized nonprofits over grassroots organizations that directly confront structural injustice. This study asks: *Can shifting decision-making power in philanthropy result in more justice-oriented funding?* Using automated text analysis and a custom-built justice dictionary, we analyze the missions of over 2,200 nonprofits funded between 2011 and 2019 by two groups that draw from the same philanthropic entity: college and university students through *The Philanthropy Lab* and professional staff at *The Once Upon a Time Foundation.* Guided by Young's (2011, *Justice and the politics of difference.* Princeton University Press) theory of structural injustice, we assess grantees on four dimensions of justice: equity focus, systemic framing, rights-based language, and participatory ethos. Our findings reveal that student-led grantmakers are significantly more likely to support nonprofits with explicit commitments to justice. These results suggest that student-led philanthropy, while often framed as merely an educational tool, can also serve as a practical model for foundations seeking to reimagine grantmaking in more equitable, justice-oriented ways.

Introduction

Scholars have long raised concerns about philanthropy's tendency to reinforce, rather than disrupt, existing hierarchies within the nonprofit sector. Rather than redistributing power and resources, philanthropic institutions often privilege established organizations with strong professional infrastructures, leaving grassroots and movement-oriented groups with fewer resources (Ashley et al., 2015; Frumkin, 2006; Ostrander, 2007). These patterns reflect broader institutional dynamics in which philanthropic decision-making authority is concentrated among elite donors and professional foundation staff, whose funding priorities may not always align with the needs or perspectives of marginalized communities (Ray, 2019; Reich, 2018).

These dynamics are particularly evident in the distribution of funding for social justice causes. Justice-oriented organizations (especially those focused on structural inequality, grassroots organizing, and community empowerment) have historically received a relatively small share of philanthropic dollars (Ranghelli, 2016). Recent estimates suggest that only about 13–15 percent of foundation funding supports social justice work, well below the 25 percent benchmark recommended by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (Jagpal & Laskowski, 2016; NCRP, 2015a). This persistent funding gap has led scholars and practitioners to question whether traditional philanthropic structures are well suited to support organizations working to address systemic inequality.

In response to these concerns, scholars and practitioners have increasingly explored alternative philanthropic models that seek to redistribute decision-making authority and democratize grantmaking. Examples include participatory grantmaking initiatives, giving circles, and other collaborative funding models that involve community members more directly in philanthropic decision-making (Gibson et al., 2023; Walker, 2019). These approaches challenge traditional philanthropic hierarchies by shifting influence away from elite donors and professional foundation staff toward broader and more diverse groups of decision-makers.

One such model is student-led philanthropy, in which college students are entrusted with real philanthropic funds and empowered to make grantmaking decisions through coursework. Although these initiatives are typically framed as pedagogical tools designed to teach students about nonprofit organizations and civic engagement, they may also offer a unique opportunity to examine how redistributing philanthropic decision-making authority influences funding outcomes.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. We begin with a review of the relevant literature on justice philanthropy. We then describe our data and empirical approach, followed by a presentation of the findings. The article closes with a discussion of the results in light of the existing literature, a conclusion, and directions for future research.

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Literature review

Traditional foundation-led grantmaking

Philanthropy has long been critiqued for reinforcing existing hierarchies within the nonprofit sector (Giridharadas, 2018; Kohl-Arenas, 2016; Moody, 2021; Reich, 2018). Grantmaking professionals typically operate within environments that emphasize measurable outcomes, risk management, and strategic alignment, favoring larger, established nonprofits with the administrative capacity to meet these expectations (Frumkin, 2006; Ostrander, 2007).

Although initially positioned as society's "risk capital" intended to fund bold, justice-focused initiatives (Brest & Harvey, 2008; Letts et al., 1997), many foundations have grown increasingly conservative, with philanthropic dollars disproportionately flowing to nonprofits that align with elite donor preferences (Frumkin, 2006; Ostrander, 2007; Silver, 2007). As a result, smaller, grassroots, and justice-oriented organizations (e.g., organizations serving communities of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, immigrants, and low-income populations) are routinely underfunded (Ashley et al., 2015; Jenkins & Halcli, 1999; Lecy et al., 2012; Ramirez et al., 2022; Reich, 2018; Villanueva, 2018), and funding practices often reproduce the very systems of exclusion they claim to address (Beer et al., 2021; NCRP, 2015a).

Decision-making power remains concentrated in the hands of wealthy donors and foundation executives, privileging elite perspectives and excluding those with lived experience (Giridharadas, 2018; McGoey, 2015; NCRP, 2018; Reich, 2018; Villanueva, 2018). In essence, it reflects that philanthropic priorities are often shaped behind closed doors without meaningful input from the communities they aim to serve (Jenkins, 2011). Even participatory approaches intended to democratize philanthropic decision-making may result in only symbolic inclusion rather than true power-sharing (Gibson et al., 2023).[1]

These debates have largely focused on reforming foundations themselves, with far less attention paid to alternative models that may operate differently. Within this broader conversation, scholars and practitioners have advocated for *justice philanthropy*—a funding approach that emphasizes equity, structural accountability, and shared power (Paarlberg et al., 2022; Walker, 2019). Importantly, this perspective highlights that *how* funding decisions are made (and *who* gets to make them) matters just as much as where the money goes (NCRP, 2015a; Villanueva, 2018).

Justice-oriented philanthropy and alternative grantmaking

Against this backdrop of professionalized foundation grantmaking, scholars have begun to explore alternative models that redistribute decision-making authority in philanthropy. Scholarship has used several related terms, including *experiential philanthropy*, *student philanthropy*, and *youth philanthropy* (Campbell, 2014; McDougle et al., 2017; Olberding, 2009; Xu et al., 2018). Experiential philanthropy is often used as a broad umbrella term describing educational initiatives in which students engage directly in philanthropic decision-making as part of coursework (Li et al., 2019; McDougle & Li, 2023). In this study, we use the term student-led philanthropy to refer specifically to programs in which college or university students are entrusted with real philanthropic funds and empowered to make grantmaking decisions. This distinction emphasizes the role of students not simply as learners observing philanthropy, but as active decision-makers participating in the allocation of philanthropic resources. Student-led philanthropy differs from other youth philanthropy models occurring in community foundations or nonprofit-sponsored programs, where young participants may advise on grantmaking but do not typically control fund allocation.

Student-led philanthropy

Student-led philanthropy has been developed primarily as a pedagogical strategy. Studies suggest that participation in philanthropic decision-making can increase students' understanding of nonprofits, strengthen civic attitudes, and foster greater interest in community engagement and social responsibility (Campbell, 2014; McDougle et al., 2017; Olberding, 2009; Olberding, 2012). This literature has primarily focused on educational and civic outcomes for students, examining how participation in grantmaking activities shapes students' knowledge, attitudes, and civic identities. Programs such as *The Philanthropy Lab* provide philanthropic capital to colleges and universities so that students can engage directly with nonprofits and determine how to allocate grant dollars. Within higher education, these initiatives have largely been understood as experiential learning opportunities rather than as interventions into philanthropic practice itself. However, far less attention has been paid to how student decision-makers influence philanthropic outcomes, including the types of nonprofits that ultimately receive funding.

In this study, we suggest that student-led philanthropy also holds underexamined strategic significance. These initiatives shift decision-making authority from foundation professionals to students—often a potentially more diverse and less institutionally entrenched group—creating space to experiment with more participatory and equity-centered approaches to funding. By decentering elite expertise and elevating new voices, these models challenge the assumption that justice-oriented funding must remain peripheral to mainstream grantmaking practices.

Why students?

Insights from civic learning and youth development research suggest that young adults may approach social problems differently than established institutional actors (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Youniss & Yates, 1997). Several factors suggest that students may be well positioned to advance a more justice-centered approach to philanthropy.

First, student grantmakers may be more attuned to values of equity, inclusion, and grassroots engagement than elite gatekeepers, particularly when reinforced through coursework and campus environments that encourage critical reflection on social inequality. This reflects broader trends in higher education, where many undergraduate programs—particularly in public affairs, social work, education, and the humanities—have increasingly emphasized social justice, equity, and civic engagement as core learning outcomes (Battistoni, 2006; Colby et al., 2007; Hurtado, 2007; Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration [NASPAA], 2024). At the same time, students are not a monolithic group, and attitudes toward equity may vary across institutions, disciplines, and regional contexts.

Second, many student philanthropy programs are housed at public or urban-serving institutions, where students may share greater demographic or geographic proximity to marginalized communities (Gonzalez & Epstein, 2021; NCRP, 2015b). This proximity can foster deeper accountability and increase the likelihood that students recognize and support grassroots, justice-

[1]Though our study focuses on the U.S. context, these critiques of centralized control and elite-driven grantmaking resonate with debates in philanthropic practice globally (Sulek, 2010).

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oriented organizations. At the same time, students at elite, predominantly White institutions located in affluent or suburban areas may not share the same demographic or geographic alignment with grantee communities, and their funding decisions may reflect different priorities.

Finally, student-led philanthropy stands out for how funding decisions are made. These initiatives are intentionally designed to foster civic responsibility, equity-minded leadership, and critical reflection (Colby et al., 2007; McDougle et al., 2017). By embedding grantmaking within a college or university course, these initiatives bridge the gap between learning and practice and shape students' identities as justice-oriented givers.

Yet important questions remain. Do these initiatives meaningfully challenge dominant philanthropic norms, or do they merely simulate equity without altering underlying structures? As this study explores, student-led philanthropy provides a unique opportunity to observe how redistributing philanthropic decision-making authority shapes the types of nonprofit organizations that receive funding and whether different decision-making environments produce different patterns of justice-oriented funding.

Critiques and limits of student-led philanthropy

Student-led philanthropy is not without limitations, and a growing body of scholarship cautions against treating it as a straightforward corrective to traditional foundation practice. These concerns center less on the intentions of individual participants than on the structural features of the model itself.

First, bounded by the academic calendar, these programs may encourage a short-term, "warm glow" orientation toward giving rather than sustained engagement with grantees (Stacey et al., 2021), making it difficult to support the ongoing, relationship-based accountability that justice-oriented philanthropy scholars argue is necessary for meaningful structural change (Walker, 2019). Second, the apparent justice orientation of student grantmakers may reflect particular pedagogical choices rather than an inherent disposition. Campbell et al. (2023) show that the texts and frameworks instructors assign in experiential philanthropy courses vary considerably across institutions and shape how students understand equity, power, and community needs. Third, and perhaps most importantly, recipient organizations sometimes describe the experience as extractive, with nonprofits asked to accommodate site visits, interviews, and due-diligence processes designed primarily to serve students' learning objectives instead of grantee needs (Weber et al., 2025).

These critiques suggest that student-led philanthropy should not be read uncritically as a more democratic or justice-aligned alternative to traditional grantmaking. A recent systematic review (Mao, 2021) confirms that empirical research has focused overwhelmingly on outcomes for student participants while leaving the experiences and outcomes of recipient organizations comparatively unexamined. The present study's reliance on mission-level outcomes, rather than recipient-reported experience, should therefore be understood as a limitation rather than a full account of justice in practice.

Evaluating justice in grantmaking: A comparative framework

Most existing scholarship emphasizes what students *learn* from the experience (e.g., civic engagement, leadership, or ethical reflection) rather than what kinds of nonprofits they choose to fund (Li et al., 2020; McDougle et al., 2017; Olberding, 2009), while critiques of traditional philanthropy have focused on its failure to disrupt elite power structures or support systemic change (Frumkin, 2006; Ostrander, 2007; Suárez & Marshall, 2014; Villanueva, 2018). Yet little empirical research has compared the grantmaking decisions of students and professional foundation staff to assess whether student-led initiatives offer more justice-oriented outcomes.

To fill this gap, our study draws on Iris Marion Young's (2011) theory of structural injustice, which argues that inequality is often reproduced through "normal" institutional processes that appear neutral but reinforce entrenched hierarchies. Applied to philanthropy, this reveals how conventional funding practices rooted in elite norms, centralized authority, and managerial metrics can unintentionally perpetuate the injustices they aim to address.

To evaluate whether students and professional foundation staff differ in the justice orientation of their grantees, we focus on a standardized, widely available artifact: nonprofit mission statements. While imperfect proxies for organizational behavior (Levine Daniel & Eckerd, 2019), mission statements offer a consistent lens into how nonprofits frame their work, articulate values, and signal alignment to funders (Frumkin, 2006; Suárez & Hwang, 2008). Drawing from Young's theory and critical philanthropy literature (e.g., Giridharadas, 2018; Moody, 2021; Reich, 2018), we assess justice orientation in mission statements across four dimensions. First, equity focus, meaning an explicit commitment to marginalized populations and redistributive resources (NCRP, 2015a; Villanueva, 2018). Second, systemic framing, in which social problems are understood as products of institutional and structural inequalities (Walker, 2019; Young, 2011). Third, rights-based language, grounding social change in claims about dignity, human rights, and justice rather than charity (Moody, 2021; Reich, 2018). Finally, participatory ethos, which emphasizes shared power, grassroots leadership, and community inclusion (Gibson et al., 2023; Paarlberg et al., 2022). These dimensions provide a conceptual framework for identifying justice orientations in nonprofit mission statements.

In addition, Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations offers a complementary lens. Ray argues that organizations are not race-neutral but embed racial meanings into their structure and operations. This perspective invites us to consider whether foundations are racialized in ways that shape who holds decision-making power, what nonprofits are seen as "fundable," and how equity is conceptualized. While Young's framework helps conceptualize the forms justice-oriented work may take, Ray's theory helps explain why such orientations may be unevenly recognized within philanthropic institutions and how organizational power structures may shape which of these organizations receive funding.[2]

Methods and data

In this study, we examine whether student-led funders are more likely than traditional foundations to support nonprofits whose missions reflect the principles of justice philanthropy—namely, equity, structural change, rights-based framing, and participatory values. We compare grants awarded by undergraduate students participating in *The Philanthropy Lab* to those made directly by *The Once Upon a Time Foundation* between 2011 and 2019. Both funding streams originate from the same philanthropic source,

[2]We do not directly measure race or racial composition in either decision-making body or recipient organizations; rather, Ray's framework serves as an interpretive lens for situating our findings, and we return to this in the Limitations section as a direction for future research.

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but one represents decentralized, student-driven decision-making while the other reflects conventional, foundation-led practices.[3]

About The Philanthropy Lab

The educational context of these programs may create space for the explicit discussion of race, equity, and structural inequality, influencing how students approach philanthropic decision-making. *The Philanthropy Lab* is often embedded in diverse public institutions and encourages students to engage directly with social problems in their communities. This educational environment creates space for the acknowledgment of racialization through coursework, peer dialogue, or personal experience. In this way, student-led philanthropy not only shifts who makes funding decisions but also how those decisions are made and whose lived experiences are centered in the process.

The Philanthropy Lab is a national initiative that supports experiential philanthropy courses at more than 30 colleges and universities across the United States. Experiential philanthropy refers to pedagogical models in which students engage directly in philanthropic decision-making such as reviewing nonprofit proposals, conducting due diligence, interacting with nonprofit leaders, and collectively allocating grant funds (Campbell, 2014; McDougle et al., 2017; Olberding, 2009). Each participating institution receives a grant from *The Once Upon a Time Foundation* that is distributed by students enrolled in a designated course, typically over one academic semester. Students work in small groups or as a class to identify nonprofit organizations, research their missions, conduct site visits or interviews, and deliberate funding decisions before allocating grant dollars. Grant decisions occur at varying points throughout the academic year, depending on the institution's calendar, and because *The Philanthropy Lab* does not operate with a standardized national application process, the set of organizations considered by students varies across institutions and courses.

Foundation-led grantmaking similarly does not rely on a single open application pool. Instead, foundation staff identify potential grantees through direct outreach, prior relationships, partner recommendations, and proposal review. While both funding streams originate from the same philanthropic source, the mechanisms through which potential grantees enter the decision set differ. Student grantmakers typically identify organizations through localized research, community engagement, and course-based exploration, whereas foundation staff draw on broader professional networks and strategic priorities. Geographic scope may also differ, as student-led grantmaking tends to focus on organizations in communities surrounding participating colleges and universities, while foundation-led grants, by contrast, may support organizations operating at local, regional, or national levels, depending on the foundation's broader strategic priorities.

Data collection

We constructed a dataset of nonprofit grant recipients funded by each group. For each grantee, we collected the organization's mission statement (sourced from nonprofit websites and GuideStar) and the most recent available IRS Form 990, using a one-year lag to reflect information students likely had access to at the time of decision-making. For example, for a student-led grant awarded in Fall 2017, we used a nonprofit's 990 with a fiscal year ending in 2016. If that version was not available, we used the next most recent Form 990. The dataset includes financial, descriptive, and mission-level data of 2,291 nonprofit organizations funded by both students and the foundation.

Justice-oriented nonprofit mission scoring

To assess the justice orientation of funded organizations, we analyzed their mission statements, which serve as concise public articulations of organizational identity, purpose, and values. Mission statements are widely used in nonprofit research as indicators of how organizations position themselves within the sector (Frumkin, 2006; Fyall et al., 2018; Suárez & Hwang, 2008) and as outward expressions of organizational identity that actively shape how nonprofits signal legitimacy to funders and stakeholders (Levine Daniel & Eckerd, 2019).

By analyzing the language used in these mission statements, we aimed to capture whether an organization signals a commitment to justice-oriented values. While mission statements do not fully capture organizational behavior or impact, they offer a standardized and comparable form of expression across nonprofits, making them a useful tool for large-scale content analysis. In this study, we operationalized "justice orientation" by identifying terms related to equity, systemic framing, rights-based language, and participatory ethos within each mission statement.

To systematically assess justice orientation, we developed a custom "justice dictionary" informed by Iris Marion Young's (2011) theory of structural injustice and prior literature in critical philanthropy. This approach draws on a growing tradition of dictionary-based and computational methods in nonprofit and organizational research. Scholars have used computational social science (CSS) methods and supervised learning to classify nonprofit missions and organizational identities across a range of substantive domains, including nonprofit roles (LePere-Schloop, 2022), mission statement (Li, 2017), organizational type (Fyall et al., 2018), religious identity (Ressler et al., 2024), gender stereotypes (Cryan et al., 2020), and sustainability (Cerquetti et al., 2024), and have discussed the broader potential of these methods for nonprofit studies (Litofcenko et al., 2020; Ma et al., 2023). Related nonprofit scholarship also combines dictionary-based content analysis with theory-driven constructs to examine language change over time, such as the adoption of managerial, medicalized, and criminal-legal framings in violence-against-women organizations (Lee et al, 2024). Following this tradition, we adopt a rule-based, dictionary-driven approach and operationalize justice-oriented language directly from theory. Consistent with prior mission dictionary studies, we complement automated coding with iterative human review to address contextual ambiguity and potential misclassification.

Table 1 presents the four dimensions of justice orientation, each defined by specific indicators and illustrated with example mission language. The dictionary terms were derived through an iterative process that combined theoretical constructs from justice philanthropy scholarship with inductive review of nonprofit mission language in the dataset. The dictionary includes over 100 terms and phrases associated with four dimensions of justice: equity focus, systemic framing, rights-based language, and participatory ethos. Table A1 in Appendix A shows the twenty commonly used justice-oriented words in organizational missions.

[3]Both *The Philanthropy Lab* and the foundation's direct grants are funded by *The Once Upon a Time Foundation.* This comparison therefore captures two different approaches to giving (student-directed versus foundation-directed) within the same philanthropic ecosystem.

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Table 1. Justice-oriented language in nonprofit mission statements

1. Equity focus	Explicit commitment to serving marginalized or underrepresented populations	Mentions of race, class, disability, gender, geographic exclusion, etc.	"…*empowering women and girls in rural communities*…"
2. Systemic framing	Addresses structural causes of social problems	Terms like "systemic inequality," "policy reform," institutional change,"	"…*advocating for criminal justice reform to dismantle mass incarceration*…"
3. Rights-based language	Emphasizes rights and dignity, not charity or pity	Language like "justice," "human rights," "solidarity," vs. "helping the needy"	"…*defending the human rights of immigrants*…"
4. Participatory ethos	Highlights community involvement or shared power	Phrases like "community-led," "grassroots," "co-designed," "amplifying local voices"	"…*supporting grassroots organizations led by LGBTQ youth*…"

Each mission statement was analyzed using an automated R-based script that searched for dictionary terms and assigned a value for each dimension based on the presence and emphasis of relevant language:

- 0 = Not present
- 1 = Implicit or vague reference
- 2 = Explicit or strongly emphasized reference

For example, the nonprofit *Bikes Not Bombs* mission statement is "uses the bicycle to achieve racial equity and empower marginalized youth." This nonprofit received a score of 2 for *equity focus* ("racial equity," "marginalized") and 2 for *participatory ethos* ("empower," which is a strong action word), yielding a total justice score of 4. Rights-based language and systemic framing were not present and thus scored 0. The organization's total justice-orientation score is, therefore, 4.

The distinction between *implicit* and *explicit* was based on the directness and specificity of justice-oriented terms. For example:

- A statement like "supporting underserved communities" might be scored as *implicit* for equity.
- A statement like "advancing racial and economic justice" would be scored as *explicit*.

To ensure coding consistency, a subset of mission statements (n = 80) was manually reviewed by multiple researchers, allowing iterative refinement of dictionary definitions. While formal inter-coder reliability statistics were not calculated for the full dataset, this process ensured consistency in dictionary construction. A detailed description of the justice scoring process is presented in Appendix B.

Each organization received a composite *justice-orientation score* ranging from 0 to 8, based on the sum of scores across the four dimensions, allowing for quantitative comparison of grantees funded by students versus foundation professionals. The relatively low overall justice scores reflect the intentionally narrow operationalization used in this study. The justice dictionary prioritizes explicit references to structural inequality, rights, and participatory governance rather than general service-oriented language. As a result, nonprofits that frame their work primarily in terms of service delivery may receive low justice scores even when doing important work.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for all variables. The four justice dimensions each have a range of 0 to 2, with mean scores of 0.38 (equity), 0.11 (rights), 0.22 (systemic), and 0.23 (participation). The total justice score ranges from 0 to 8, with a mean of 0.94 (SD = 0.98) and a median of 1. Organizational characteristics vary considerably. The average number of board members is 23.75 (SD = 23.52), and financial variables are log-transformed to address skewness, with mean logged contributions of 15.03 (SD = 3.10), logged compensation of 13.62 (SD = 5.29), and logged expenses of 15.69 (SD = 3.17). Missing data is most prevalent for board size (n = 516).

Table 3 disaggregates key organizational characteristics by donor type. Student-funded nonprofits are consistently smaller and less resourced. They have fewer board members (mean = 13.57, SD = 8.69) than foundation-funded organizations (mean = 30.72, SD = 27.59) and exhibit lower financial indicators across all three measures. These differences confirm that student grantmakers tend to support smaller, less-resourced organizations than their foundation counterparts.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of variables

Variable	*N*	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max	Median	N/A
Equity	2291	0.38	0.50	0	2	0	0
Rights	2291	0.11	0.33	0	2	0	0
Systemic	2291	0.22	0.42	0	2	0	0
Participation	2291	0.23	0.43	0	2	0	0
Total score	2291	0.94	0.98	0	8	1	0
Board members	1775	23.75	23.52	0	187[4]	18	516
(log) Contributions	1919	15.03	3.10	0	21.67	14.85	372
(log) Compensation	1925	13.62	5.29	0	22.07	14.28	366
(log) Expenses	1919	15.69	3.17	0	22.65	15.30	372

[4]The maximum board size of 187 (Van Cliburn Foundation) was verified against the organization's Form 990s and retained in the analysis.

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Table 3. Descriptive statistics by donor type

Donor Type	Statistic	*N*	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max	Median
Student	Board members	721	13.57	8.69	0	103	12
	(log) Contributions	801	14.03	2.12	0.00	21.34	14.01
	(log) Compensation	801	12.52	4.13	0.00	21.43	13.40
	(log) Expenses	801	14.20	2.18	0.00	22.25	14.18
Foundation	Board Members	1,054	30.72	27.59	0	187	23
	(log) Contributions	1,118	15.75	3.46	0.00	21.67	15.56
	(log) Compensation	1,124	14.40	5.86	0.00	22.07	15.17
	(log) Expenses	1,118	16.77	3.33	0.00	22.65	16.44

Table 4. Wilcoxon rank-sum test results: comparison of donor type and justice scores

Score dimensions	Donor type	*N*	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max	Median	W	*p* value	Effect size (*r*)
Equity	Student	881	0.58	0.52	0	2	1	815002	< 2.2e-16	0.313
	Foundation	1410	0.26	0.44	0	2	0			
Rights	Student	881	0.18	0.40	0	2	0	688976	3.04e-16	0.171
	Foundation	1410	0.07	0.26	0	2	0			
Systemic	Student	881	0.29	0.47	0	2	0	694514	1.98e-11	0.140
	Foundation	1410	0.17	0.38	0	2	0			
Participation	Student	881	0.36	0.50	0	2	0	741808	< 2.2e-16	0.225
	Foundation	1410	0.16	0.37	0	2	0			
Total	Student	881	1.41	1.09	0	8	1	880500	< 2.2e-16	0.374
	Foundation	1410	0.65	0.78	0	6	0			

Because justice score variables are discrete and deviate significantly from normality (Shapiro–Wilk test, $p < 0.001$), we used the Wilcoxon rank-sum test to compare distributions between groups. Table 4 presents results for each dimension and the total justice score. Across all measures, student-funded nonprofits scored significantly higher than foundation-funded nonprofits ($p < 0.001$). Effect sizes ranged from small to moderate, with the largest observed for the total justice score ($r = 0.374$) and equity score ($r = 0.313$). Student-funded nonprofits had mean scores of 0.58, 0.18, 0.29, and 0.36 across the four dimensions, compared to 0.26, 0.07, 0.17, and 0.16 for foundation-funded nonprofits. The average total justice score was more than twice as high for student-funded organizations (mean = 1.41) as for foundation-funded ones (mean = 0.65). Figure 1 visualizes these differences across all dimensions.

Regression analysis of justice score dimensions

Each justice score dimension is an ordinal variable with three possible values (0, 1, and 2), reflecting a sequential rather than continuous relationship. We use ordered logistic regression and report average marginal effects (AMEs) of donor type on the probability of each outcome category. Models M1, M3, M5, and M7 in Table 5 include only donor type (student = 1, foundation = 0) as the independent variable; Models M2, M4, M6, and M8 add organizational controls (board size, log-transformed contributions and grants, log-transformed salaries and other compensation, employee benefits, and log-transformed total expenses).

Across all four justice score dimensions, donor type is a significant predictor of justice orientation. In the bivariate models, student-funded nonprofits show significantly lower probabilities of receiving a score of 0 and higher probabilities of receiving scores of 1 or 2 ($p < 0.001$ for all dimensions). These effects remain significant with controls, though reduced in magnitude. In the equity model without controls (M1), student-funded organizations show a 31.0 percentage point lower probability of receiving a score of 0 (AME = −0.310, SE = 0.020, $p < 0.001$) and a 30.2 percentage point higher probability of receiving a score of 1 (AME = 0.302, SE = 0.020, $p < 0.001$). After adding controls (M2), these margins narrow but remain highly significant (score = 0: AME = −0.131, SE = 0.026, $p < 0.001$; score = 1: AME = 0.126, SE = 0.026, $p < 0.001$). These results demonstrate that student-led philanthropy is consistently associated with stronger justice orientations, even after accounting for organizational size, resources, and staffing.

Regression analysis of total justice score

Table 6 reports results for the effect of donor type on total justice scores. Models M1 and M2 estimate ordered logistic regressions. M1 includes only donor type, while M2 adds organizational controls. In M1, student-funded organizations show a 32.2 percentage point lower probability of receiving a total justice score of 0 (AME = −0.322, SE = 0.016, $p < 0.001$), with higher probabilities of receiving scores of 1 through 4 (all $p < 0.001$). In M2, the AME on score = 0 is −0.202 (SE = 0.020, $p < 0.001$), and positive marginal effects on higher score categories remain statistically significant.

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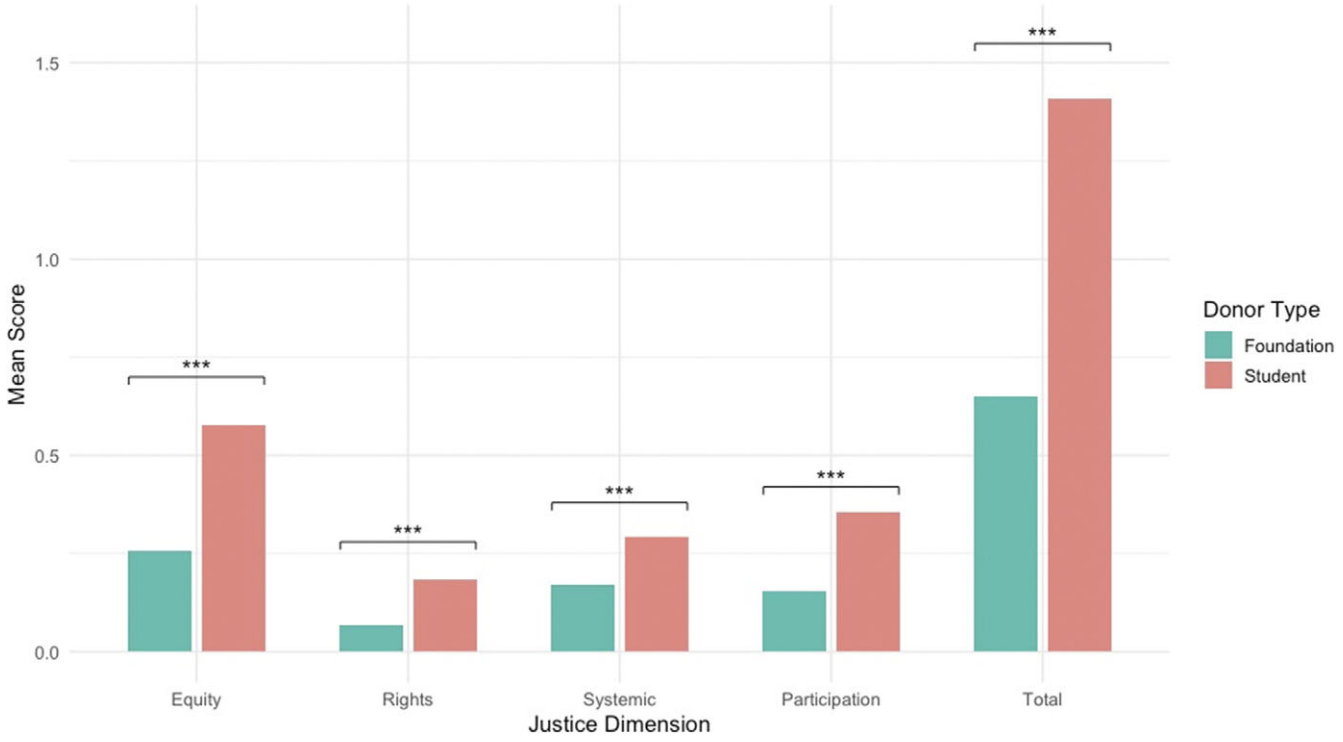


Fig. 1. Mean justice scores by donor type.
Note: *** $p < 0.001$.

Models M3 and M4 re-estimate the relationship using ordinary least squares (OLS) as robustness checks. The donor type coefficient remains positive and significant in both, with effect sizes somewhat reduced when organizational controls are included.

Robustness checks

We conducted two additional robustness checks. First, we re-estimated models for each justice dimension using OLS regression (Table 7). Across all four dimensions, the coefficient for donor type is positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) with and without controls. We further implemented weighted ordered logit models using entropy balancing to address potential covariate imbalance, while also removing outliers (Table 8). Donor type remains a strong and significant predictor across all dimensions and the total justice score. Taken together, these results suggest that differences in decision-making authority are associated not only with the types of organizations funded but also with the justice-oriented framing of nonprofit missions.

Discussion

This study set out to explore whether redistributing philanthropic decision-making power (from elite professionals to undergraduate students) might be associated with more justice-oriented grantmaking. Drawing on Young's (2011) theory of structural injustice, we analyzed the mission statements of over 2,200 nonprofit organizations funded either by professional staff or by college and university students through *The Philanthropy Lab*. Across all four dimensions of justice orientation (equity, systemic framing, rights-based language, and participatory ethos), student-led grantmakers were significantly more likely to support organizations with explicitly justice-oriented missions. These findings offer compelling evidence that *who* makes philanthropic decisions matters. Importantly, they do not suggest that individual foundation professionals are less committed to justice. Rather, they highlight how institutional decision-making structures shape which organizations ultimately receive funding (Frumkin, 2006; Ostrander, 2007; Reich, 2018). In the sections that follow, we organize our discussion around four interrelated stages of the grantmaking process: who decides, how decisions are made, what outcomes result, and how power operates throughout, highlighting at each stage where student-led philanthropy offers a potential corrective to traditional grantmaking, as well as where it risks reproducing, or introducing new versions of, the very dynamics it appears to disrupt.

Who decides: Shifting authority, relocating power

Student-led philanthropy, often framed as merely an educational exercise, may also function in practice as an unanticipated intervention in the philanthropic sector—redirecting resources toward organizations that traditional foundations tend to overlook. For foundations seeking to advance equity meaningfully, these programs can be read as informal pilot spaces for more participatory and community-rooted approaches.

At the same time, these results raise important, perhaps uncomfortable, questions about where decision-making authority actually lands. Although authority shifts away from foundation professionals, it is relocated to colleges and universities—institutions that themselves hold significant economic, cultural, and symbolic power within surrounding communities. Nonprofit partners may still experience these relationships through familiar "town–gown" dynamics, where access to university-affiliated

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Table 5. Ordered logit regression results for four justice score dimensions

Variables	Equity (M1)	Equity (M2)	Rights (M3)	Rights (M4)	Systemic (M5)	Systemic (M6)	Participation (M7)	Participation (M8)
Donor type—AME (score = 0)	−0.310***	−0.131***	−0.111***	−0.084***	−0.117***	−0.134***	−0.194***	−0.116***
	(0.020)	(0.026)	(0.015)	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.025)	(0.019)	(0.025)
Donor type—AME (score = 1)	0.302***	0.126***	0.107***	0.082***	0.115***	0.131***	0.189***	0.113***
	(0.020)	(0.026)	(0.014)	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.024)	(0.018)	(0.024)
Donor type—AME (score = 2)	0.008***	0.04***	0.004***	0.003*	0.002*	0.003*	0.005**	0.004**
	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.001)
Board Members		−0.017***		−0.011*		0.011***		−0.006*
		(0.004)		(0.006)		(0.002)		(0.003)
(log) Contribution		0.026		−0.036		−0.039		0.021
		(0.033)		(0.043)		(0.033)		(0.037)
(log) Compensation		0.168***		0.039		0.005		0.095***
		(0.024)		(0.028)		(0.018)		(0.025)
(log) Expenses		−0.355***		−0.074		0.007		−0.147***
		(0.046)		(0.058)		(0.042)		(0.048)
Cut 1	1.074	−2.500	2.639	1.111	1.596	1.376	1.706	0.645
	(0.061)	(0.384)	(0.107)	(0.537)	(0.071)	(0.399)	(0.074)	(0.393)
Cut 2	5.821	2.185	6.221	4.797	6.108	5.757	5.985	4.749
	(0.274)	(0.457)	(0.365)	(0.670)	(0.383)	(0.548)	(0.323)	(0.501)
N	2291	1775	2291	1775	2291	1775	2291	1775
Log-likelihood	−1473.749	−1103.320	−790.557	−624.638	−1203.777	−977.017	−1223.402	−992.467
AIC	2953.497	2220.641	1587.113	1263.275	2413.553	1968.033	2452.805	1998.933
Pseudo R^2	0.071	0.304	0.039	0.241	0.018	0.203	0.044	0.225

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001. Models M1, M3, M5, M7 include only donor type; Models M2, M4, M6, M8 include donor type and controls (BD_A, log_CON, log_COMP_B, log_EXP_B).

resources carries asymmetries of legitimacy, expertise, and agenda-setting. Student-led philanthropy, therefore, does not dissolve power hierarchies so much as re-situate them within a different institutional setting. Recognizing this dynamic complicates any straightforward narrative of democratization while also illuminating why these programs can function as revealing test cases for how authority operates in philanthropic practice.

Viewed through Ray's (2019) lens of racialized organizations, these dynamics take on additional significance. If traditional foundations operate as racialized institutions, then the patterns observed here may reflect the degree to which racialized organizational norms shape which nonprofits are seen as legitimate funding recipients. Student-led philanthropy, by relocating decision-making to a different institutional context, may introduce different racialized perspectives into the grantmaking process. Yet colleges and universities are themselves racialized institutions, and whether student decision-makers meaningfully represent the communities they fund remains an open empirical question.

This raises a pointed question for the field: are foundations genuinely using student philanthropy to reimagine justice in their own grantmaking, or are they, in effect, delegating justice-oriented experimentation to educational settings where the work can proceed without requiring foundations themselves to change?

How decisions are made: Deliberation, autonomy, and curricular contingency

Beyond who holds decision-making authority, student-led and foundation-led grantmaking differ in how decisions are reached. One possible explanation for the patterns we observe lies in how students interpret "impact." Unlike professional grantmakers who evaluate success through scale, measurable outcomes, or strategic alignment, students may approach grantmaking with a more immediate and relational understanding of making a difference. Aware that their grants are modest in size, students may prioritize organizations where funds are perceived to matter most—often smaller, community-based nonprofits more likely to articulate justice-oriented missions (Ashley et al., 2015; Villanueva, 2018).

This pattern may also reflect deeper structural differences in decision-making itself. Foundation professionals operate as agents of an institution, constrained by organizational missions, board oversight, strategic plans, and internal accountability structures (Frumkin, 2006). By contrast, students may exercise greater individual autonomy, even when operating within a classroom setting. Research in decision-making theory suggests that organizational decision-making tends to be more risk-averse, bureaucratic, and consensus-driven, whereas individual decision-making (especially in pedagogical or values-driven environments) may reflect more aspirational or justice-oriented goals (Kahneman, 2011; March, 1994).

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Table 6. Ordered logit and OLS results for total justice score

Variables	Ordered logit (M1)	Ordered logit (M2)	OLS (M3)	OLS (M4)
Score = 0	−0.322***	−0.202***		
	(0.016)	(0.020)		
Score = 1	0.043***	0.016*		
	(0.009)	(0.007)		
Score = 2	0.181***	0.120***		
	(0.012)	(0.014)		
Score = 3	0.082***	0.055***		
	(0.008)	(0.007)		
Score = 4	0.014***	0.009***		
	(0.003)	(0.002)		
Score = 6	0.003*	0.002*		
	(0.001)	(0.001)		
Score = 8	0.001	0.001		
	(0.001)	(0.001)		
Donor type *(Student = 1)*			0.760***	0.538***
			(0.039)	(0.051)
Board Members		−0.001		−0.002
		(0.002)		(0.001)
(log) Contributions		0.003		0.000
		(0.027)		(0.013)
(log) Compensation		0.118***		0.037***
		(0.016)		(0.006)
(log) Expenses		−0.266***		−0.087***
		(0.036)		(0.016)
Cut 1	0.058	−2.932		
	(0.052)	(0.317)		
Cut 2	1.823	−0.895		
	(0.067)	(0.310)		
Cut 3	3.383	0.676		
	(0.098)	(0.319)		
Cut 4	5.271	2.565		
	(0.202)	(0.374)		
Cut 5	6.791	3.880		
	(0.413)	(0.511)		
Cut 6	7.893	4.983		
	(0.710)	(0.771)		
N	2291	1775	2291	1775
Log-likelihood	−2732.754	−2088.287		
AIC	5479.508	4198.573		
Pseudo R^2	0.058	0.280		
R^2			0.142	0.164
Adjusted R^2			0.141	0.162

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses for Ordered Logit; standard errors in parentheses for OLS *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$. M1 and M2 are Ordered Logit models with and without controls; M3 and M4 are OLS models with and without controls. Score categories 5 and 7 are omitted as no organizations in the sample received these scores. Categories 6 and 8 contain very few observations ($n = 4$ and $n = 2$, respectively), so estimates for these categories should be interpreted with caution.

Table 7. OLS models for justice dimensions

Variables	Equity	Rights	Systemic	Participation
Donor type *(student = 1)*	0.171***	0.097***	0.140***	0.131***
	(0.026)	(0.019)	(0.024)	(0.025)
Board members	−0.002***	−0.001	0.002***	−0.001
	(0.001)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
(log) Contributions	0.006	−0.003	−0.007	0.004
	(0.007)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.006)
(log) Compensation	0.023***	0.003	0.001	0.011***
	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.003)
(log) Expenses	−0.060***	−0.006	0.000	−0.021**
	(0.008)	(0.006)	(0.008)	(0.008)
N	1775	1775	1775	1775
R^2	0.155	0.039	0.027	0.045
Adjusted R^2	0.152	0.036	0.025	0.042

Notes: Standard errors are in parentheses. *$p<0.05$, **$p<0.01$, ***$p<0.001$. The dependent variable is the justice sub-score (equity, rights, systemic, or participation).

However, this autonomy is not necessarily evidence of a more rigorous or democratic deliberative process. Student giving may encourage a short-term, "warm glow" orientation rather than sustained engagement with grantees (Stacey et al., 2021). Relatedly, the apparent justice orientation of student grantmakers may be shaped substantially by curricular design (the texts, frameworks, and instructor priorities embedded in a given course) rather than reflecting an inherent student disposition (Campbell et al., 2023). If so, the "who decides" effect we document may be less stable and less generalizable than it first appears.

Funding outcomes: Who benefits, and at what cost

Differences between student and foundation grantmaking may reflect not only decision-making preferences but also how program design shapes the universe of organizations that students consider. Some courses invite nonprofit applications, while others issue effectively unsolicited or "surprise" grants to organizations students encounter through community engagement or local research. The scale of the grants, the semester-based timeline, and localized search processes may channel attention toward organizations that are more visible or accessible within those constraints.

A further distinction lies in how these grants are situated within broader decision-making structures. For students, philanthropy courses involve allocating a single, time-bound grant, experienced as a discrete act of giving. Foundations, by contrast, make grants as part of an ongoing portfolio shaped by institutional mission, long-term strategy, and sequencing across multiple initiatives (Frumkin, 2006). Our analysis does not evaluate *The Once Upon a Time*

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Table 8. Weighted ordered logit models (entropy balancing, outlier removed)

Outcome	*b* (Student)	SE	*t*-value	*N*	AIC	Pseudo R^2
Equity score	0.986	0.103	9.524	1774	2306.629	0.089
Rights score	1.155	0.149	7.754	1774	1337.352	0.070
Systemic score	0.494	0.117	4.227	1774	1881.536	0.038
Participation score	0.823	0.112	7.337	1774	1992.883	0.043
Total justice score	1.291	0.096	13.467	1774	4259.849	0.069

Foundation's overarching mission. Rather, it uses this shared funding context to compare how episodic, pedagogical decision-making differs from strategic, institutional grantmaking in the types of organizations that receive support.

Importantly, more justice-oriented funding outcomes do not necessarily translate into a better experience for recipient organizations. Recipient organizations sometimes describe these arrangements as extractive—accommodating site visits, interviews, and due-diligence processes designed primarily to serve students' coursework rather than grantees' needs (Weber et al., 2025). The higher justice scores observed among student-funded nonprofits therefore do not indicate that student-led philanthropy resolves the structural problems of traditional grantmaking. Rather, they raise the question of whether episodic, course-bound giving can translate into the sustained, accountable relationships that justice-oriented philanthropy requires (Walker, 2019).

Power dynamics: Democratization or delegation of moral labor

Seen in this light, student philanthropy is less a wholesale solution than a revealing institutional experiment. If student decision-makers consistently fund more justice-oriented nonprofits, then why aren't foundations applying the same lens themselves? Foundations may benefit reputationally from these programs while outsourcing not only the decision-making but also the moral labor of equity involved—delegating justice-oriented experimentation to educational settings without requiring institutional change. This concern is amplified by the asymmetry Mao's (2021) systematic review identifies: research has focused disproportionately on what students gain from these courses, mirroring at the level of scholarship the funder-centered dynamic we describe at the level of practice.

At the same time, these programs may serve an important civic function. They may help build a pipeline of future philanthropic leaders who are more equity-conscious and community-grounded than their predecessors (Benenson & Moldow, 2017). The results of this study suggest that experiential philanthropy courses influence not only student learning but real philanthropic outcomes by shaping how emerging decision-makers interpret and prioritize justice-oriented missions. In this sense, experiential philanthropy should not be understood solely as a classroom exercise, but as a meaningful mechanism through which philanthropic values and practices are transmitted to future donors, nonprofit leaders, and public decision-makers.

These tensions suggest that experiential philanthropy's potential to democratize grantmaking is conditional on how courses are designed and taught. Instructors who want their courses to meaningfully challenge traditional grantmaking norms should deliberately foreground structural inequality and critical philanthropy scholarship (Campbell et al., 2023); build in structured follow-up with grantees beyond the semester's end (Stacey et al., 2021); and treat reciprocity with recipient organizations as a course design priority—for example, limiting burdensome due-diligence requests, compensating organizations for their time where possible, and soliciting grantee feedback on the process (Weber et al., 2025).

Conclusion

This study offers empirical evidence that redistributing philanthropic decision-making authority is associated with meaningfully different funding outcomes. When college and university students serve as grantmakers, the nonprofits they choose to fund are significantly more likely to articulate explicit commitments to equity, systemic change, rights-based advocacy, and community participation. These findings contribute to both the critical philanthropy literature and the scholarship on experiential philanthropy. They provide empirical support for the theoretical claim that decision-making structures shape justice outcomes, not only who gets funded, but what kinds of missions are recognized as worthy of investment. Also, they suggest that student philanthropy programs carry consequences beyond the classroom, functioning as de facto interventions in how philanthropic resources are distributed.

Several limitations worth noting. First, this study relies on nonprofit mission statements as a proxy for justice orientation, publicly visible but imperfect indicators that do not capture programming, impact, or recipient experience. Like much of the experiential philanthropy literature (Mao, 2021), this approach centers an outcome that is observable from the funder's side rather than capturing how grantee organizations themselves understand or are shaped by student-led versus foundation-led support. Future work incorporating recipient perspectives (e.g., Weber et al., 2025) would help address this asymmetry. Second, the dataset does not include demographic or attitudinal information about decision-makers themselves (e.g., diversity, political ideology, professional training, or deliberative processes used during grantmaking), limiting our ability to directly assess how individual characteristics or group dynamics may influence the funding pattern. This is particularly relevant to Ray's (2019) racialized-organizations framework: without data on the racial composition of decision-making bodies or recipient organizations, we cannot empirically test whether racialized institutional dynamics shape observed funding patterns. Third, differences in how organizations enter the decision set, whether through localized student searches or foundation networks, may influence the types of nonprofits available for selection. Finally, this study reflects a unique institutional context in which both student and foundation grants originate from the same philanthropic entity (the *Once Upon a Time Foundation*) through its support of *The Philanthropy Lab*, which, while analytically useful, limits the generalizability to other philanthropic contexts.

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Methodological constraints also warrant acknowledgment. The ordered logit models assume proportional odds, an assumption that may not hold uniformly across dimensions and that could be tested further in future work; OLS models are retained as robustness checks. Because detailed institutional identifiers were unavailable for all cases, we were unable to cluster standard errors by university, and some organizational variables were excluded from the models due to high correlations with other predictors, meaning the models control for a reduced but essential set of organizational characteristics.

This study opens several important avenues for future inquiry. Most pressingly, future research would examine whether student-led grants produce sustained benefits for recipient organizations, for instance through longitudinal analysis of IRS Form 990 data to assess whether student-funded nonprofits demonstrate improved financial health or struggle in the years following the grant. Is this funding transformative, or a one-time infusion that fails to produce lasting change for the organization or the communities it serves? Future studies might also explore how to make student-led philanthropy more community-accountable, examining alternative modeling strategies such as generalized ordered logit models or multilevel models to account for potential clustering by institution, and comparative case studies of different experiential philanthropy models. Ethnographic or participatory methods could further illuminate how nonprofit recipients perceive and experience student-led funding. Taken together, these directions are essential to understanding not only the educational value of student philanthropy, but its real-world impact on nonprofit capacity and community wellbeing.

Ultimately, the value of experiential philanthropy lies not just in what students learn, but in what these programs do (or fail to do) for the communities they aim to serve. Are student-led philanthropy programs a bold step toward justice, or a quiet concession to the inertia of traditional philanthropy? The answer is likely not binary. But the question itself is one we must continue to ask.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Top 20 justice-related words in organizational missions

Total	Counts	Student	Counts	Foundation	Counts
women	161	women	106	educate	140
educate	150	access	95	women	55
poverty	112	poverty	84	child	40
child	108	advocacy	75	poverty	28
access	106	child	68	homeless	27
advocacy	93	homeless	63	empower	24
homeless	90	justice	55	engage	22
justice	74	empower	44	inclusive	22
empower	68	rights	40	justice	19
rights	41	at-risk	34	advocacy	18
underserved	41	dignity	31	compassion	14
engage	40	partnership	31	social change	13
dignity	40	underserved	29	compassionate	13
at-risk	39	empowerment	25	underserved	12
partnership	35	immigrant	22	holistic	12
holistic	32	protect	20	access	11
empowerment	28	holistic	20	equity	10
inclusive	27	engage	18	dignity	9
compassion	23	volunteer	18	strength-based	8
protect	22	human rights	17	social justice	7

Table A1 presents the top 20 most commonly used justice-oriented words in funded nonprofit organizations' missions. Both student-funded and foundation-funded organizations tend to focus on issues like women (161), education (150), poverty (112), child (108), and access (106). However, there are significant differences between student-funded and foundation-funded organizations. For example, student-funded organizations mention more women (106) than foundation-funded ones (55). Interestingly, education-related language appears frequently among foundation-funded nonprofits but does not appear among the most common justice-related terms in student-funded organizations. The following analysis also shows the detailed differences in justice scores between student-funded and foundation-funded nonprofits.

Appendix B

B.1. A Detailed Process of Constructing and Calculating the Justice Scores

Based on Iris Marion Young (2011)'s theory of justice, we defined justice in four dimensions: 1. Equity Focus, 2. Systemic Framing, 3. Rights-Based Language, and 4. Participatory Ethos (See Table 1). To prepare for a rule-based approach to measure the extent to which a nonprofit is justice oriented, we first developed an initial "justice score" dictionary based on Young (2011)'s theory.

```
justice_dictionary <− list(.
    equity = c("equity," "equality," "inclusion," "marginalized," "underserved,"
        "disadvantaged," "access,"),
    rights = c("rights," "human rights," "justice," "liberty," "dignity," "freedom,"
        "solidarity"),
    systemic = c("systemic," "structural," "reform," "transformation,"
        "dismantle," "oppression," "advocacy"),
    participation = c("community-led," "grassroots," "empower," "co-create,"
        "collaborate," "amplify voices," "participatory").
)
```

We then manually examine a subset of our data (randomly selected 80 nonprofit missions) to further develop and refine our "justice score" dictionary. The review of 80 nonprofits' mission allows for the refinement of the dictionary. For example, we added terms like "at-risk," "generation poverty," and "homeless" from missions (e.g., Presbyterian Night Shelter, Justin's Place) to the Equity dimension; added "compassion," "healing," and "transform lives" from missions like Mercy Clinic and Project Kinship to the Rights dimension; added "violence reduction" (Gideon's Army), "restorative justice," and "community deterioration" (Servolution Network) to the Systemic dimension; and added "strength-based" (ACH Child Services), "surround students" (Communities in Schools), and "mentor" (HOPE Farm) to the Participation dimension.

We did not include certain religious items to make the dictionary more applicable for secular nonprofits. For example, we excluded "Christian service" from the "Equity" dimension and excluded "redemptive" from "Rights" dimension.

The refined dictionary is as follows:

```
justice_dictionary <− list(.
    equity = c("equity," "equality," "inclusion," "marginalized," "underserved,"
        "disadvantaged," "access," "women," "gender," "black," "indigenous,"
        "minority," "lgbtq," "immigrant," "refugee," "child," "disability," "low
        income," "diversity," "racial equity," "fairness," "anti-racism," "at-risk,"
        "underprivileged," "close the gap," "reduce disparities," "level the play-
        ing field," "inclusive," "belonging," "gender equality," "poverty,"
        "homeless," "generation poverty," "economic justice"),
    rights = c("rights," "human rights," "justice," "liberty," "dignity," "freedom,"
        "solidarity," "civil rights," "social justice," "gender rights," "indigenous
        rights," "advocacy," "protect," "safeguard," "fight for equality," "defend
        freedoms," "uphold dignity," "compassion," "compassionate," "transform
        lives"),
```

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```
    systemic = c("systemic," "structural," "reform," "transformation," "dismantle,"
      "oppression," "institutional," "power dynamics," "accountability," "policy
      change," "inequities," "decolonize," "root causes," "challenge norms," "shift
      paradigms," "inclusive policies," "social change," "community deterioration,"
      "violence reduction," "restorative justice," "heal," "holistic," "empowerment,"
      "redesign"),
    participation = c("community-led," "grassroots," "empower," "co-create,"
      "collaborate," "amplify voices," "participatory," "community-driven,"
      "local leadership," "mutual aid," "self-determination," "engage,"
      "mobilize," "by and for," "nothing about us without us," "shared
      decision-making," "partnership," "strength-based," "surround
      students," "support families," "volunteer," "train," "educate," "mentor,"
      "cultivate leaders," "build community").
)
```

We did not apply stemming or lemmatization to the mission text. Two features of our design make formal stemming largely unnecessary while preserving precision. First, term matching is performed on unanchored substrings, which already captures common inflectional variants of a root term (for example, empower matches empowers, empowered, empowering, and empowerment; reform matches reforms, reformed, and reforming). Second, where meaning depends on a specific form, we curated morphological and lexical variants directly into the dictionary (for example, compassion and compassionate; inclusion and inclusive). Because the dictionary is theory-driven and includes domain-specific multiword expressions (for example, racial equity, restorative justice, and nothing about us without us), aggressive stemming or lemmatization risks over-collapsing conceptually distinct terms and fragmenting multiword phrases, which would reduce both precision and interpretability. For these reasons we retained full word forms and curated variants. We expect the impact of stemming on the justice scores to be modest, given that the most frequent inflectional variants are already captured by substring matching.

We then rate each mission statement on a 0–2 scale per dimension based on the following criteria:

0 = Not present.
1 = Implicit or vague (only one match and no strong action words including "defend, dismantle, empower, fight, transform").
2 = Clearly stated or strongly emphasized (match more than 1 items or strong action words).

For each dimension, the script assigns a score of 0, 1, or 2. A dimension is scored 0 when no dictionary term for that dimension appears in the mission. It is scored 1 (implicit or vague) when exactly one dictionary term appears and no strong action word is present. It is scored 2 (explicit or strongly emphasized) when more than one dictionary term appears, or when a strong action word is present. In this way, the implicit/explicit distinction is driven by two observable features of the text—the number of distinct dictionary terms matched and the presence of a strong action word—rather than by subjective judgment. We also updated the list of strong action words that include "fight, defend, dismantle, transform, and empower."

After that, we use a rule-based approach to calculate the scores for each dimension and sum the scores of each dimension to create an overall "Justice Score" of a nonprofit.

For example, Bikes Not Bombs's mission is "uses the bicycle to achieve racial equity and empower marginalized youth." The operation of the calculation runs as follows:

equity_score: 2 (multiple terms: "racial equity," "marginalized").
rights_score: 0.
systemic_score: 0.
participation_score: 2 ("empower" is a strong action word).
Then the total_justice_score of Bikes Not Bombs is 4.

As you mentioned, "it is plausible that 'engage' can be used in a mission statement without a justice-oriented framing. "However, we did not use a binary approach (whether or not), instead, we took a four-dimension approach. In particular, "engage" was included in the "Participation" dimension, which has to be combined with other three dimensions to calculate the "justice" scores. The above mentioned Bikes Not Bombs's example illustrates the calculation process.

We also attached the R codes and data for your reference.

Data can be downloaded from https://drive.google.com/file/d/1zO9vyyQHux92BTxJfBG9ELk68Q1u7yIW/view

The version we used in the study is dated as funding justice scores 20250508.csv.

```
# Load your data.
nonprofits <- read.csv("funding justice scores 20250508.csv").

# Apply justice dictionary.
justice_dict <- list(.
    equity = c("equity," "equality," "inclusion," "marginalized," "underserved,"
      "disadvantaged," "access," "women," "gender," "black," "indigenous,"
      "minority," "lgbtq," "immigrant," "refugee," "child," "disability," "low
      income," "diversity," "racial equity," "fairness," "anti-racism," "at-risk,"
      "underprivileged," "close the gap," "reduce disparities," "level the play-
      ing field," "inclusive," "belonging," "gender equality," "poverty,"
      "homeless," "generation poverty," "economic justice"),
    rights = c("rights," "human rights," "justice," "liberty," "dignity," "freedom,"
      "solidarity," "civil rights," "social justice," "gender rights," "indigenous
      rights," "advocacy," "protect," "safeguard," "fight for equality," "defend
      freedoms," "uphold dignity," "compassion," "compassionate," "transform
      lives"),
    systemic = c("systemic," "structural," "reform," "transformation,"
      "dismantle," "oppression," "institutional," "power dynamics,"
      "accountability," "policy change," "inequities," "decolonize," "root
      causes," "challenge norms," "shift paradigms," "inclusive policies,"
      "social change," "community deterioration," "violence reduction,"
      "restorative justice," "heal," "holistic," "empowerment," "redesign"),
    participation = c("community-led," "grassroots," "empower," "co-create,"
      "collaborate," "amplify voices," "participatory," "community-driven,"
      "local leadership," "mutual aid," "self-determination," "engage,"
      "mobilize," "by and for," "nothing about us without us," "shared
      decision-making," "partnership," "strength-based," "surround
      students," "support families," "volunteer," "train," "educate," "mentor,"
      "cultivate leaders," "build community").
)

# Function to score a mission statement (0–2 per dimension).
score_justice <- function(mission, dict) {.
  mission_lower <- tolower(mission).
    scores <- sapply(names(dict), function(dim) {.
      terms <- dict[[dim]].
      matches <- sum(str_detect(mission_lower, regex(paste(terms, col-
      lapse = "||")))).
      if (matches == 0) {.
        0 # Not present.
      } else if (matches == 1 &&!any(str_detect(mission_lower, "\\b(fight|
      defend|dismantle|transform)\\b"))) {.
        1 # Implicit/vague (adjust logic as needed).
      } else {.
        2 # Clearly stated/emphasized.
      }
    })
  return(scores).
}

# Function to apply scoring to a dataframe.
calculate_justice_scores <- function(data, mission_col = "Mission," dict = jus-
tice_dict) {.
   data % > %.
    rowwise() % > %.
    mutate(.
      justice_scores = list(score_justice(get(mission_col), dict)),
      equity_score = justice_scores["equity"],
      rights_score = justice_scores["rights"],
      systemic_score = justice_scores["systemic"],
```

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```
      participation_score = justice_scores["participation"],
      total_justice_score = sum(justice_scores).
    ) % > %.
    select(−justice_scores) % > %.
    ungroup().
}

# Calculate scores.
scored_data <− calculate_justice_scores(nonprofits).

# View results.
scored_data % > %.
  select(Grantee.Name, Mission, equity_score:total_justice_score) % > %.
  arrange(desc(total_justice_score)).
# Note: please select "Grantee.Name" and "Mission" from funding justice scores 20250508.csv for replication.
```

To further strengthen validation, we conducted an additional targeted manual review of 40 borderline cases characterized by single-dimension justice signals (i.e., missions exhibiting equity-only, rights-only, systemic-only, or participation-only patterns). Approximately ten mission statements from each category were randomly selected and independently using the four-dimension rubric. This verification addresses cases most susceptible to ambiguity and potential misclassification.

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