

THE FULCRUM POINT

THE ENGAGEMENT CRISIS

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The Fulcrum Point – An Opinion Series

WE DON'T HAVE A DONOR CRISIS – WE HAVE AN ENGAGEMENT CRISIS

By Chris Looney

In recent years, headlines and industry reports have declared that America is facing a “donor crisis.” Philanthropy data show fewer donors giving to nonprofit causes, and fundraising professionals lament shrinking donor pools. But this narrative misses the larger, more fundamental challenge beneath the surface: what we are truly facing is not a donor crisis — it is an engagement crisis in civic America.

The sharp decline in donors, particularly to religious institutions, is well documented. Churches and faith-based organizations historically have been the backbone of American philanthropy and volunteerism. For centuries, these institutions educated generations on the importance of giving, volunteering, and civic engagement. They instilled values of generosity, stewardship, and community responsibility, creating a culture that nurtured not only financial donors but active volunteers who gave their time, talent, and voice to causes greater than themselves.

Today, church attendance is down dramatically, and fewer individuals give to religious organizations. This shift has reverberated across the entire nonprofit sector. The absence of this foundational “giving education” and community engagement is leaving a void in how Americans connect to philanthropy and volunteerism. Without these traditional civic institutions serving as a conduit for engagement, many people simply lack the socialization and motivation to step into meaningful roles within nonprofit organizations.

The consequences are stark. While the number of donors is shrinking, the more concerning trend is the erosion of active volunteerism, especially in roles critical to nonprofit sustainability: fundraising and governance. Boards are increasingly filled with individuals who volunteer “in name only,” attending meetings sporadically and contributing minimal time or energy. Fundraising committees struggle to find



enthusiastic champions willing to invest the consistent effort fundraising demands. Without these engaged volunteers, nonprofits face weaker leadership, diminished fundraising capacity, and ultimately, reduced impact on the communities they serve.

This engagement crisis compromises the very fabric of our civil society. Nonprofits — from social service agencies to arts organizations — rely on committed volunteers who not only give money but also contribute strategic guidance, community connections, and hands-on support. When those commitments wane, organizations become fragile, unable to meet increasing demands for their services or innovate to address emerging challenges.

Reversing this trend requires a renewed societal commitment to engagement and civic responsibility. We must rebuild pathways that connect individuals to meaningful volunteer roles, reimagine how we educate about philanthropy beyond traditional religious settings, and cultivate a culture where giving and service are valued and expected.

Here are some practical directions we can pursue:

Renew Civic Education: Schools and community organizations should incorporate philanthropy and volunteerism into curricula, teaching young people not just about charity, but about stewardship, leadership, and the power of collective action.

Create Accessible Engagement Opportunities: Nonprofits must design volunteer roles that are flexible, meaningful, and clearly connected to impact, lowering barriers and increasing incentives for participation.

Model Engagement Across Sectors: Business, government, and civic leaders should visibly prioritize and reward community engagement, signaling that volunteerism is a vital measure of responsible citizenship.



Strengthen Board and Fundraising Accountability: Nonprofits should set clear expectations for volunteer roles, including active participation, and cultivate leadership development that prepares individuals to contribute beyond just their names on a roster.

Ultimately, more donors will follow increased engagement. When people understand a cause deeply and see their time and talents making a difference, financial support naturally grows. By reigniting engagement, we not only expand philanthropy but also fortify the social capital that sustains a vibrant, resilient society.

The challenge is urgent. Nonprofits cannot thrive, nor can communities flourish, without a renewed culture of engagement. This is not a donor crisis — it is a civic crisis. The future of our social sector and our society depends on reversing it.

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