



THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

GIFTS & GRANTS

From the issue dated September 17, 2009

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INNOVATIONS

Expert Advice for Donors

By Caroline Preston

The idea: As a program analyst at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Howard Bornstein wondered how to respond to a friend who came to him seeking advice on an education charity to support. Sitting down the hall from Mr. Bornstein were dozens of people with vast knowledge of the question, yet there was no easy way to tap into their expertise — much less the knowledge of their counterparts at foundations, universities, and charities around the globe.

That fall, 2007, Mr. Bornstein enrolled at Stanford University's business school, where he met Deyan Vitanov, who was also interested in helping donors make more-informed decisions. Together they and two other students started Philanthropedia, a group that works to provide donors with access to expert opinion on charities.

"Experts have a lot of knowledge which is unfortunately locked away from the general public," says Mr. Vitanov, who serves as the group's chief executive. "This is about extracting knowledge from experts about nonprofit performance and then presenting it to people."

How it works: Philanthropedia identifies foundation employees, university professors, think-tank experts, and others who are knowledgeable about specific causes. The group then surveys those experts to gather their opinions on which charities they find to be the most effective. So far, Philanthropedia has conducted research on three causes: climate change, education, and homelessness in the San Francisco Bay Area.

What's next: Supported now by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and housed in its Menlo Park, Calif., headquarters, Philanthropedia is seeking to expand its research and trying to get additional donor support. The group, which has three full-time employees and relies heavily on volunteers from Stanford, where Mr. Bornstein is completing his studies, intends to conduct research on at least eight national causes and also explore issues at the local level. Its Web site, which is still in test form, will enable users to set up portfolios — Mr. Vitanov describes them as "nonprofit mutual funds" — for their giving and compare their allocations to how experts in various fields would choose to distribute their support.

Where to find out more: <http://www.myphilanthropedia.org>

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