

What the 100 nonprofits that raised the most money in 2020 indicate about charity today

Shariq Siddiqui
David Campbell
Mirae Kim

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The Chronicle of Philanthropy has released a list of the nation's 100 nonprofits that garnered the most funding through charitable donations in 2020. These organizations received about US\$1 out of every \$11 donated over the course of the year. Shariq Siddiqui, David Campbell and Mirae Kim, three scholars of philanthropy and nonprofits, weigh in on this ranking, what it indicates about donations during the COVID-19 pandemic and where they see charitable giving headed.

What trends stand out?

Campbell: The \$515 million that Feeding America – a national network of food banks and other agencies that help people get enough to eat – received in 2020 marked a 354% increase from 2019 levels. That gain, the largest for any nonprofit, was no doubt due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic distress it caused.

But what most stands out to me across the board is brand loyalty. Many of the nonprofits that raised the most money in a year when so much changed are among the nation's most prominent institutions in education, health care and international development.

For example, Johns Hopkins, Stanford and Harvard universities amassed \$1.52 billion, \$1.28 billion and \$1.22 billion, respectively – landing them in fourth, fifth and sixth place. That money usually flows from wealthy alumni.

In recent years, only around 2% of all United States giving went to international development charities, so it is somewhat surprising to see that several nonprofits in that sector are big enough to have made the cut. The largest among the top 100 are Compassion International, World Vision and Save the Children. All three invite donors to make monthly payments to “sponsor” children in developing countries, a process that often includes sending letters and exchanging photos.

Kim: Many private colleges and universities, including several prominent schools, saw steep declines in donations. For example, gifts to Yale fell by 15.4%, to \$550 million. Despite those reductions, nearly half of the 100 nonprofits drawing the most money through donations in 2020 were higher education institutions and hospitals. Nine of the top 20 were universities.

Siddiqui: Poverty relief and health care were clearly big priorities for U.S. donors in 2020, a year that included the start of a historic pandemic, which has so far cost 5 million lives, and a recession.

I was surprised by the steep declines that many top-tier universities experienced because these schools employ sophisticated and large fundraising teams that help them attract and keep donors in good times and in downturns alike.



What concerns do you have?

Siddiqui: Planned Parenthood donations fell 13.8% to \$510 million. That decline in support could potentially make it harder for women to access health care. Similarly, there was a decline of 29% to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which obtained \$234.5 million in donations in 2020. That reduction in funding speaks to a larger challenge faced by arts organizations, which are critical to democracy in the U.S.

Kim: It is somewhat disappointing to see only a few organizations that primarily fund communities of color on this list despite an increase in support for causes related to racial inequality.

I am also troubled to see so few nonprofits led by people of color on this list. Some notable exceptions include the United Way, Planned Parenthood and Feeding America. But the vast majority are led by white people.

Many of these organizations, however, such as the Mayo Clinic, the Nature Conservancy and the American Cancer Society, have launched or expanded the scope of their racial equity initiatives.

Campbell: When the Chronicle of Philanthropy released its list of the top 50 donations of 2020, racial justice and social equity were clear themes. Yet despite a surge in gifts to historically Black colleges and universities, none of the 44 higher education institutions that made this list is an HBCU.

What do you expect to see for 2021 and beyond?

Siddiqui: As life in the U.S. and the rest of the world continues to get closer to normal, with lower levels of COVID-19 and a healthier economy, I believe that the changes in giving that occurred during the pandemic are likely to recede. As a result, I predict that colleges and universities, hospitals and other institutions that employ large, experienced fundraising teams will raise more money, and minority-led institutions will continue to be left out.

Kim: A recent Urban Institute report I worked on found that charitable giving to nonprofits led by whites was more likely to rise than for groups led by people of color from 2015 to 2019. That distinction vanished in 2020, when about 46% of all nonprofits, regardless of whether or not they were led by people of color, received less money through donations. We believe this change probably reflects a stronger focus by donors and nonprofit leaders on organizations led by people of color due the public outcry that followed the death of George Floyd.

Campbell: It can be hard to spot fundraising trends based on data derived from a single year because one-time gifts can distort the picture. One example is the Foundation for the Carolinas, a community foundation based in Charlotte, North Carolina. Giving to this foundation shot up by 236% in 2020, the second-highest pace on this list. This abrupt change appears to be largely due to the support of a single donor, Jay Faison – an entrepreneur who made a fortune in the video surveillance equipment industry.

Likewise, the nation's economic circumstances are changing. So I don't know whether or not Feeding America will continue getting the increased level of support it saw in 2020.

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David Campbell is vice chair of the board of the Conrad and Virginia Klee Foundation.

Mirae Kim previously received research grants from the Generosity Commission, a project of the Giving Institute and Giving USA Foundation and Charles Koch Foundation. One of her current research projects is funded by the National Science Foundation Human Networks and Data Science – Infrastructure Program. Mirae Kim is affiliated with Independent Sector as a Visiting Scholar 2021-2022. She is also a non-paid, elected board member of the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA).

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