Boston College center for study of wealth will close

Retirements end decades of oft-cited research on philanthropy and its roots

By Sacha Pfeiffer | GLOBE STAFF | FEBRUARY 02, 2015

For nearly a half-century, Boston College’s Center on Wealth and Philanthropy has taken an unusual approach to studying the charitable giving of the very rich, examining not just how much they give but why they do it and asking whether great wealth comes with an ethical obligation to be financially generous.

Now, as Boston is enjoying one of the most affluent periods in its history, the center is preparing to close, an irony not lost on Phil Buchanan.
“People are coming into unimaginable wealth much earlier in their lives, and therefore dedicating a much bigger portion of their lives to philanthropy,” said Buchanan, president of the Center for Effective Philanthropy in Cambridge. “So we need more academic centers studying philanthropy, not fewer, and it’s a shame in that sense.”

Founded in 1970, the BC center has been led for the past three decades by Paul Schervish, 68, a former Jesuit priest who has become one of the country’s leading experts on philanthropy, along with associate director John Havens, 73. Both are planning to retire and neither is interested in continuing to do the grant-writing and fund-raising that’s necessary to keep the center open.

In addition, both say their distinctive blend of expertise — Schervish’s background is in literature, sociology, and theology, while Havens’s training is in economics, mathematics, and physics — has created an academic partnership that would be difficult to replicate.

“We have a special chemistry, and that’s led to a unique working relationship,” Havens said.

Taking those factors into account, Schervish and Havens say they have decided, in agreement with Boston College administrators, that the Center on Wealth and Philanthropy will come to an end once they wrap up their current research, perhaps as early as this summer.

“The center emerged and became a national force because of Paul Schervish’s leadership and his commitment to the study of philanthropy, and there are different approaches to what happens when a center with that kind of strong director decides to move on,” said David Quigley, Boston College’s provost. “In this case, it makes sense that as Paul retires, the center will slowly sunset its work.”

Schervish is on sabbatical until June and was recently appointed a visiting research fellow at Duke University. He said he continues to do some research for the center but will give up his professor position at Boston College at the end of the year.
“I did not want it to become something different” under new leadership, Schervish added, noting that the center’s body of work includes not just sophisticated statistical analysis of charitable giving trends, but research into what he calls “the softer side” of philanthropy, including the ethical dimensions of wealth and privilege.

Indeed, the center’s work has ranged from producing widely cited estimates of how much money will be transferred from US estates to heirs and charities in the coming decades to publishing research papers on the psychological motivations behind charitable giving.

In a statement, the editor of Philanthropy magazine, Caitrin Nicol Keiper, said:

“For many years, Paul Schervish has brought valuable empirical data to public discussions about philanthropy in America . . . [and] has sharply questioned the stereotypes about how, when, and why people give.”

In 2006, the center published a paper refuting the long-held belief that the main reason wealthy people leave money to charity is to avoid estate taxes, and that charitable bequests would plummet if estate taxes were eliminated.

On the contrary, Schervish and Havens found, the wealthiest Americans tend to give to charity for more altruistic reasons once they reach financial security.

“We always focused on spiritual context,” Schervish said, “and our statistical work was always the foundation for a moral question: How can you use your wealth for deeper purposes when you no longer need to achieve a higher standard of living?”

“There are no barriers to entry to philanthropy,” he added, “and the needs are infinite.”

Schervish said there is a remote possibility the center could get a renewed lease on life.

“If somebody comes along and tempts us with a grant in the next few months, we would ask permission to keep the center going for as long as it would take to complete that research,” he explained, although he noted that the bar for a research project that captures their interest would be high.
“It would need to be really up our alley and a thrill to do,” he said, “but we don’t anticipate anything like that happening because we’re not searching for it.”

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