

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

Connecting the nonprofit world with news, jobs, and ideas

Ideas & Advice

[Home](#) [Fundraising](#) [Ideas & Advice](#)

April 7, 2013

Charities Get Chance to Test Innovations and Win Prizes in Scholarly Experiment

By Brennen Jensen

Charities that want to test a new fundraising idea often must do so with little evidence to support their hunches about what might work.

Now the University of Chicago's new philanthropy research unit is trying to fill the void by explaining not just what works in solicitations but why it does, and offering as much as \$5,000 to nonprofits that devise the best innovation to test.

"We are very interested in learning from charities to see how their offices work, and we are offering money for it," says Edith Dobrez, executive director of the university's new Science of Philanthropy Initiative. "We know development offices are very busy places and it's a little bit unnerving to try new ideas."

The Science of Philanthropy Initiative is a three-year research project that began last October with a \$4.8-million grant from the John Templeton Foundation.

The Initiative's Idea Contest, which runs until June 14, will award \$5,000 for the first prize idea, \$1,500 for second place, and \$500 for third and includes the possibility that researchers will help test the winning nonprofit's strategy. Fundraisers from any size or type of charity are encouraged to enter.

Possible Benefits

Among the ideas for fundraising that nonprofits could suggest for testing in the contest: exploring different approaches to announcing big gifts, testing what works best in offering matching gifts, and evaluating how providing information on previous donors might encourage others to give.

Ms. Dobrez offers another example of an idea that might interest the judges: "A charity could have a cold list of people that are really not active givers and have an idea of what might trigger them to suddenly give."

The contest could have long-term benefits for both her group and

the charities that enter, she says: The experiment can add to the scholars' knowledge of fundraising, and the idea could help a charity raise far more than the prize money.

John List, chairman of the University of Chicago's department of economics, who has done extensive research on charitable giving, is leading the institute's studies. He's working with a dozen other social scientists from Brown and Georgia State universities, as well as the University of Minnesota and the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

"Our research is focused on these questions: Why do people give, how do people give across their life spans and in different cultures, and how do we increase charitable giving?" Ms. Dobrez says.

While academic study of charitable giving is not new, Ms. Dobrez says her effort is unusual because it is a multidisciplinary effort that works directly with charities to test ideas.

The group's first annual conference will be held in Chicago this fall. It has started Webinars on its research findings, and published its first study, about an experiment conducted with preschoolers to determine the origins of altruism. It expects to issue papers on its findings at least once a month.

Charities that win the prizes in the SPI contest will find differences in working with scholars compared with paid consultants, Ms. Dobrez says. But, she adds: "Our vested interest is in helping them raise more money, by helping them find the most effective fundraising strategy."

To enter the Science of Philanthropy Initiative Idea Contest, go to: spihub.org/contest.

Comments 
Powered by DISCUS

Add a comment

Log in to post
with your Philanthropy account: Don't have an account? [Create one now.](#)
Or log in using one of these alternatives:



Showing 0 comments

Sort by Follow comments: [✉ by e-mail](#) [📡 by RSS](#)

Real-time updating is **paused**. ([Resume](#))