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journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/socecA field experiment on directed giving at a public university[☆]Catherine C. Eckel^a, David H. Herberich^{b,1}, Jonathan Meer^{a,c,*}^a Department of Economics, Texas A&M University, United States^b Marqeta, Inc., United States^c NBER, United States

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ABSTRACT

The use of directed giving – allowing donors to target their gifts to specific organizations or functions – is pervasive in fundraising, yet little is known about its effectiveness. We conduct a field experiment at a public university in which prospective donors are presented with either an opportunity to donate to the unrestricted Annual Fund, or an opportunity of donating to the Annual Fund and directing some or all of their donation towards the academic college from which they graduated. While there is no effect on the probability of giving, donations are significantly larger when there is the option of directing. However, the value of the option does not come directly from use, as very few donors choose to direct their gift.

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1. Introduction

The use of directed giving – allowing donors to target their gifts to specific organizations or functions – is pervasive in fundraising. As early as 1994, United Way responded to a drop in contribution levels by introducing donor choice, for the first time allowing donors to select the organization to receive their donation (Barman, 2002). Targeting proved popular, and grew to 18.4% of donations by 1999. United Way's 2012 annual report notes that 47% of assets are unrestricted, reflecting the overall pattern of giving nationwide.² However, surprisingly little is known about its effectiveness for increasing donations, nor the potential costs and other ramifications. In particular, if a large proportion of giving is re-

stricted in its use, charities' flexibility in allocating their resources would be reduced.³

While directed giving clearly plays an important role in fundraising, there are no previous controlled studies designed to directly assess its impact in the field. We conduct a field experiment in conjunction with the Association of Former Students (AFS) at Texas A&M University in which prospective donors can either donate to the Annual Fund (the standard way in which AFS raises money), or have the option of directing some or all of their gift to an Academic Fund benefiting the academic college housing the department from which they graduated. We randomly assign former students to one of these two treatments and find no effect on the probability of giving, yet much larger donations from those who did give. Surprisingly, very few donors choose to direct any part of their gift. Altogether, our results suggest that donors who would have given regardless respond to being offered a choice by

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¹ The views presented here are solely those of the authors and do not represent those of Marqeta, Inc.

² The United Way national organization does not report donations by restricted status. The regional organizations vary considerably, but average around half of giving as unrestricted.

³ One recent news report argued that “directed giving will sting” nonprofits (Bailey, 2010) by restricting the ability of umbrella organizations to allocate funds. Another noted that despite exceeding its 2014 fundraising goal, a regional United Way organization had seen a twentyfold increase in directed gifts and that the restrictions inherent in this trend would be “much harder on smaller agencies that don't have the benefit of marketing or communication staffs.” (Lippmann, 2015) No less an authority than the online humor magazine Cracked discussed this problem in an article entitled “5 Popular Forms of Charity (That Aren't Helping),” giving a number of examples in which earmarked donations caused a “massive imbalance in funding that [led] to some serious bureaucratic absurdities.” (Hill, 2012).

giving more, but do not take up the option; at least in our context, concerns about earmarking are unfounded.

Several experimental studies explore topics related to directed giving. Li et al. (2013) provide the first lab-experimental evidence (to our knowledge) measuring the impact of targeted giving. In a “real charity” lab experiment, where subjects make donations from their earnings to charitable organizations, they show that targeting has a positive impact on donations. The study compares directed giving to two specific causes – disaster relief and cancer research – with donations to the United Way general fund. A similar comparison is made for government organizations, with the “Gifts to the United States” fund, which feeds into federal revenue, as the general fund. They find that targeting specific causes more than doubles the likelihood of giving and the size of contributions, relative to the general funds. The impact of targeting is significantly greater for government organizations, most likely due to the broader portfolio of functions under the government umbrella.

Two additional types of experimental studies provide insight into the potential value of directed giving. Small and Loewenstein (2003) use lab and field experiments to explore the “identifiable victim” phenomenon: people will often give substantially more to an identifiable than a statistical victim. For example, in 1987, one child, “Baby Jessica,” became a media sensation when she fell into a well near her home in Texas, and she received over \$700,000 in donations from the public. Small and Loewenstein (2003) find that a recipient who has already been selected from a list of possible targets receives larger donations than one who has not yet been selected from the list: the difference was 62% in a lab experiment and 26% in a field experiment. This suggests that allowing donors to target a specific victim may substantially increase giving. It is this impulse that is exploited in fundraising campaigns such as World Vision, Compassion International, or Children International, which ask donors to sponsor a specific child through regular donations. In a complementary paper in this special issue, Al-Ubaydli and Yeomans (forthcoming) use a field experiment on volunteer tax preparers and their clients to examine the identifiability effect. They find that the volunteers are more likely to make an additional donation with a single recipient, but the clients are less likely to do so. Their study suggests that this effect is context-specific and perhaps more fragile than previously thought.

A second type of study examines “paternalistic” donor restrictions. For example, a donor might be willing to contribute more if they can control how a recipient is allowed to spend the money. Batista et al. (2014) report the result of lab-in-the-field experiments in Tanzania where the recipient is the closest person to the donor outside their family. They show that donors are willing to give about 14% more when they have the option to give goods rather than in cash. The magnitude of the effect is larger than other experimental manipulations such as the price of giving or the endowment to the donors. In a related study, Jones (2014) shows that even when such paternalistic restrictions are costly, about 60 percent of subjects are willing to pay to restrict the use of a donation so that it cannot be spent on cigarettes, alcohol or drugs. These studies illustrate the responsiveness of giving when donors have the ability to target the use of the funds.

One charitable giving study outside of the directed giving space provides evidence on increased donor agency leading to increased donations, even when those donors do not act upon their option. Kamdar et al. (2013) present the results of a large scale field experiment that included a “once and done” treatment in a charitable giving campaign conducted through the mail. The “once and done” treatment offers perspective donors the option of never being contacted again by the charity, if they donate. This treatment leads to almost twice as many donations and a ten percent increase in the average gift amount. However, the decision to not be contacted again was only utilized by 38% of the donors leading

(Kamdar et al., 2013) to suggest reciprocity as the main underlying cause of the increase in donations. This result is in line with our findings, and both studies suggest a large potential impact on charitable giving by increasing agency of the donor. The result of increased donations without the action being taken is especially important for directed giving in which restricting funds are of primary concern.

2. Experimental design

In order to isolate the impact of directed giving, we designed a natural field experiment centered around creating exogenous variation in the option to direct a donor’s gift. The experimental design consisted of two subject groups: standard (Annual Fund Only) and directed (Annual or Academic Funds). Both groups received an e-mail describing the values of Texas A&M University and asking for support in the form of a donation. The e-mails received are identical, including the subject line, with one exception: the directed group was also provided an option of directing a gift to the donor’s academic college. The control group did not receive any option, as is standard for the AFS Annual Fund. All other aspects of the request for a donation were the same as AFS’s normal solicitations.

Subjects were contacted via nearly identical e-mails, with the only difference in solicitation consisting of one additional sentence for the directed group. For the control group, the e-mail appeal only gave the Annual Fund as the possible recipient: “Your gift to The Association of Former Students’ Annual Fund supports scholarships, academic excellence, and student organizations across the university.” The e-mail to the directed group included a sentence presenting an option of directing a donation (addition in italics): “Your gift to The Association of Former Students’ Annual Fund supports scholarships, academic excellence, and student organizations across the university. *You can also choose to direct some or all of your gift specifically to support programs at your academic college.*”

Each e-mail contained a hyperlink to a web page for the donor to make a donation. Two web pages were designed, one for each group, in order to provide the directed group an entry option for donations to the academic college from which the donor graduated. The option to donate to the academic college was in addition to the standard entry option for the Annual Fund which was included in both the directed and control web pages.⁴

The control and directed groups were created from a list of donors that had given in 2012, but had not yet given in 2013. Subjects were randomly assigned, stratifying the sample on college, year of graduation and gender, into two groups, with 5303 control recipients and 5302 directed recipients. Table 1 shows *p*-values for balance between the two samples; it is clear that the randomization was successful. The two lists of potential donors were provided to the AFS to administer the appeal. The AFS handled the lists separately to ensure the correct e-mail body was sent but otherwise the appeal operated in the standard fashion.⁵

The first round of e-mails was sent on December 19, 2013. A second e-mail for non-respondents was sent on December 27, 2013. Donations were received through the two websites administered by the AFS.⁶ Donations stopped being recorded for our data on December 31, 2013. The results which follow utilize all donations received by the control and directed groups during this time

⁴ The full e-mails for the control and directed groups, as well as the web pages used to facilitate donations, can be found in the Appendix. Due to adjustments by AFS staff, there are some minor differences in the layout of the web pages; it seems unlikely, however, that these differences would drive our pattern of results.

⁵ Five subjects were mistakenly allocated to the incorrect group; we remove these individuals from the sample, leaving 5300 subjects in each treatment. Including them does not affect the results.

⁶ Nine gifts were received by mail; five from the control group and four from the treatment group.

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