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## Mr. Smithson's Was the First

By Lawrence M. Small  
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As a nation, our lives are enriched by the generosity of others. It is difficult to imagine a United States of America without the great private gifts that have helped create distinguished universities, museums and libraries. We live in an era, however, in which some regard these donations with a curious mixture of indifference and skepticism.

Today, for example, there is a simmering debate over "naming opportunities," the process by which a building or a room is named for a donor. Some argue that naming opportunities can warp an institution's mission. But history proves that this notion is incorrect. Simply accepting a gift does not create a conflict. Indeed, many great public institutions date their excellence to such a donation.

The Smithsonian is one example. It takes its name from its benefactor, British scientist James Smithson. For those who object to "conditions" placed on donations, consider the little-known fact that Smithson imposed three conditions. He specified the name (Smithsonian Institution), the location (Washington) and the purpose ("the increase and diffusion of knowledge").

Today four Smithsonian museums carry the name of individual donors -- the Freer, Sackler, Hirshhorn and Cooper-Hewitt museums. The building that will house the new National Air and Space Museum at Dulles Airport has been named for philanthropist Steven F. Udvar-Hazy, who donated \$65 million toward its construction. More recently, the lion's share of a \$100 million commitment by philanthropist Kenneth E. Behring will help to transform and modernize the National Museum of American History.

At other institutions, naming opportunities for donors are a common practice. The New York Public Library and the American Museum of Natural History, Lincoln Center and many other institutions have named spaces for generous donors. Yale got its name in 1718 when Elihu Yale gave the Collegiate College in New Haven several bales of goods, some books and a portrait of George I. My alma mater used to be known as the Rhode Island College. You know it as Brown University, renamed in 1804 to honor Providence merchant Nicholas Brown, who donated \$5,000.

Though we might think so, these issues are not unique to our times. Consequently, the 155-year-old Smithsonian has thought long and hard about its policies, and has developed practices that guide its fund-raising efforts. Like scores of public universities, museums, libraries, medical centers and other entities, the Smithsonian Institution starts from the proposition that government funding cannot do it all. We make no apologies for seeking private support to develop programs or facilities that the public wants and benefits from.

In all cases, we retain intellectual control while demonstrating to donors that their

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money can be spent productively and prudently. Does that mean we don't consult them? Of course we do. But the Smithsonian regents and staff control, without limitation or question, the Smithsonian activity. They dictate the content of the exhibit and program, and they retain authority over research. That has always been the case.



Although we live in an era of great cynicism, there is ample proof today that private philanthropy is a vehicle for good work -- and that it has a crucially important role to play in supplementing public monies. There is also ample proof that philanthropy and institutional integrity can coexist quite successfully. We should embrace those whose generosity enriches our lives, not reject them.

*The writer is secretary of the Smithsonian Institution.*

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