What makes a philanthropist? The attributes are many, a new study shows.

Gordon Gund, whose investment firm has owned several sports teams, was blind by age 30. Now 78, Mr. Gund has spent the last four decades raising money for research to stop or reverse degenerative forms of blindness. And he finally seems to be close to fulfilling his dream.

Judy Jordan, 56, created a well-known California winemaker, J Vineyards & Winery. After selling it to a large wine producer a few years ago, she started a new winery, but this time, she is using the business to help the agricultural families that worked to make her successful.

Sapphira Goradia, 34, is the executive director and sole employee of her parents’ charitable entity, the Vijay and Marie Goradia Foundation. She is focused on making grants to educational and health organizations in India and determined to measure their impact.

The three are as different in interests as they are in age, but all are philanthropists. Which raises the question: Is there a way to gauge the choices, motivations and influences of a philanthropist?
The Philanthropy Workshop, an educational and networking organization, undertook a yearlong study to determine what a high-net-worth philanthropist looks like. Its report, to be released on Tuesday, is called “Going Beyond Giving: Perspectives on the Philanthropic Practices of High and Ultra-High Net Worth Donors.” The data the group collected is robust, but what it really revealed was how hard it is to put such a diverse group into easily understandable boxes.

“There is a tendency to see if we can segment out philanthropists based on age, gender, level of experience, and see that they might behave differently,” said Tracy Mack Parker, a senior adviser at the Philanthropy Workshop. “Our learning from this survey is that in many ways, no, you can’t necessarily put them into distinct buckets: This is the next generation and this is how they operate, or this is inherited wealth and this is how they operate, or this is entrepreneurs and this is how they operate.”

Nearly 80 percent of the survey respondents had a net worth greater than $10 million, and a quarter had more than $100 million. Rachel Cardone, a philanthropic consultant and one of the report’s authors, said one common thread in people’s philanthropic approaches was how they thought about what they were doing before they became philanthropists.

“It was more your mind-set going into philanthropy,” Ms. Cardone said. “If you had a view of philanthropy like, ‘Oh, this is similar to what I do in my regular day job, and I’m going to apply it to social impact,’ there was a more natural fit and comfort to talk about it.”

But most philanthropists struggle to identify themselves as wealthy.

“You think of a philanthropist as the Rockefellers or the Carnegies,” Ms. Goradia said. “I don’t actually think of myself as a philanthropist, because it’s not my capital I’m deploying. And I don’t really think of my parents as philanthropists, either. It’s paying it forward.”

Ms. Goradia’s family foundation, whose assets come from her father’s plastics and petrochemical business, gave out $2 million last year.
“Let’s be clear: It’s downright strange,” said William Perrin, who is a trustee of several foundations and whose wife is an heiress to the Sainsbury supermarket fortune in Britain. “There is nothing normal about being a philanthropist. It’s not a conversation you can have down at the pub with your friends.”

His wife, Fran Perrin, whose family is one of the most philanthropic in Britain, said she grew up in a philanthropic family, so she felt comfortable around the term. But comfort did not equate to competency when she received her inheritance outright at age 18.

“I never had a clue how to do it,” said Ms. Perrin, 39. “I stumbled around for a few years, not knowing how to tackle it.”

She had the infrastructure of her family’s foundations, now totaling 18, but it wasn’t until she was 31 that she took a course offered by the Philanthropy Workshop, which helped her think differently about giving.

“I stopped making all grants for a year and said I wasn’t going to do any more until I know what I’m doing,” she said.

That feeling of unease around giving is fairly common. Ms. Jordan, who bought her first vineyard at age 27 with the help of her father, the winemaker Tom Jordan, said she had been focused on running her business and raising her children until she sold J Vineyards to E. & J. Gallo in 2015.

Ms. Jordan said her early mistakes had been those of omission. “When I was running J, I gave to all sorts of programs,” she said. “But I didn’t know the right questions to ask.”

This lack of guidance has lent itself to another common thread: More than two-thirds of people in the report said they sought out philanthropic education, through formal programs, peer networks or conferences.

They were not always confident on the how, but these wealthy donors knew the why of their large-scale giving: They were motivated by a cause close to them but also one they felt could make a difference.
Larry Leibowitz, a former chief operating officer of NYSE Euronext, gives to animal welfare and women’s rights organizations, but his Wall Street background led him to ask how he could supply better information to other philanthropists.

“I figured if I could make that space an inch more efficient, I could make a difference,” Mr. Leibowitz said.

After working on the issue alone, he teamed up with Jeff Raikes, the former chief executive of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and backed Giving Compass, which aims to be a clearinghouse for information on various causes.

“A lot of this is, how do you fit your personal preferences to charity like the rest of your life?” he said. Philanthropy is “just a very murky area because it’s inefficient, there isn’t good information and people are embarrassed to ask questions.”

Philanthropists like to talk about the “impact” of their giving and how to measure it. But unless you’re delivering something quantifiable — like vaccines or bed nets — measuring impact can be difficult without the staff of a large foundation.

Matthew Bowcock, who made his fortune with technology focused on security, said he gave specifically to achieve impact through grants to arts organizations, including those working in disadvantaged neighborhoods and prisons. But he defines that word in his own way.

“You take a local group that you can support, say, a disability support group that needs $10,000 a year,” Mr. Bowcock said. “It’s going to have an impact on quality of life, but it’s not going to be sustainable. But from a compassionate point of view, it’s important to do.”

Not every philanthropist focuses on impact, though. Ms. Perrin said she shied away from asking grant recipients in the developing world for too much information, preferring to spend time listening to them.

“Everyone is obsessed with impact,” she said. “Charities are struggling to get this information. It’s about caring how the charity is doing it.”
And impact can take a long time to appear. Mr. Gund has been waiting 46 years for his initial philanthropic grants to find treatments for genetic blindness to pay off. In 1971, he helped create what is now the Foundation Fighting Blindness, helping to hire a board of experts and raise $725 million over the years.

Now, Spark Therapeutics, which the foundation has backed, is on the verge of winning approval for Luxturna, the first gene therapy treatment for inherited blindness.

“Of the things that motivate me the most or make me the most proud, it’s the investment of my time,” Mr. Gund said. “My money, I’m happy about that and pleased that I’ve had the ability to do that. But it’s really having worked with a lot of dedicated people to bring it to this point.”