

Nonprofit Partner Voices: Perceptions of the Weingart Foundation

Key Findings from the 2017-18 Listening Sessions

The Weingart Foundation regularly conducts listening tours with nonprofit leaders across Southern California to better understand the communities it serves. This information helps guide the Foundation as its Board of Directors and staff develop grantmaking priorities for the upcoming fiscal year.

In 2017 and 2018, the Foundation asked Harder+Company Community Research to facilitate listening sessions with its nonprofit partners. Harder+Company convened four meetings in October 2017 and two in March 2018 with leaders and development staff from 31 nonprofit organizations¹. Participants represented a mix of longtime grantees, newer grantees, and potential applicants (only the March 2018 participants had undergone Weingart's updated application process). This document presents key findings from those six sessions.

Summary of Findings

These listening sessions revealed that the Foundation's grantees hold it in high regard, praising its commitment to social change and its willingness to take strong positions on sometimes difficult issues. Participants value the Foundation staff's deep knowledge of the sector and the realities of nonprofit work. Weingart's use of multi-year unrestricted operating support allows grantees to use the funds to address a wide range of organizational needs, including an increasingly severe nonprofit staff shortage in the region. This funding mechanism is one of the most valuable aspects of their relationship with the Foundation. There were also areas in which participants offered suggestions for improvement: they would like to see greater clarity on Foundation priorities, more visual and succinct communications, and a more consistent balance between directing applicants and stepping back. Grantees and potential applicants were pleased to note that the Foundation's recent decision to build its funding programs around an equity framework was consistent with their own priorities. They were grateful that the Foundation was catching up with them. For them, this is part of the process of building trust and lasting partnerships.

Key Findings

Grantees view the Weingart Foundation as a partner. Participants talked about the value of their relationship with the Foundation. They view the Foundation as a valued partner, not just a funder. This perception is based on the observation that the Foundation shares its nonprofit partners' values of social justice, equity, engagement, and community empowerment. They see that the Foundation promotes those values broadly through its work, and is not afraid to take sometimes difficult positions. Grantees believe that Foundation staff understand their organizations and how they work, given the staff's own nonprofit background. Weingart's focus on unrestricted operating support allows grantees to make their own decisions about how to use grant funds. Grantees recognize that this is an uncommon funding strategy and see Weingart's commitment to it as evidence that the Foundation understands the challenges they face and respects their decision-making. The Foundation is credible to them, standing up for what it

"They are one of a very few foundations where I feel like I have a partner with the program officer...and they are advocates for us."

—Nonprofit partner

¹ See Page 4 for the participant roster.

believes and acknowledging that its job is to support organizations that are doing essential work across the region. This credibility and trust allow the Foundation to engage in honest dialogue with grantees about the Foundation’s expectations.

Grantees and potential applicants would like further clarification on Weingart’s priorities and strategies. For the past two years, the Foundation has been developing a grantmaking approach based on promoting equity and reducing disparities. The Foundation released its equity framework in the Fall of 2017, followed by grant guidelines to assist with preparing applications. Listening session participants recognized that the framework aligned with their own missions, priorities, and strategies but still expressed some uncertainty about how to translate the concepts into proposal and strategy development. While nonprofit partners applaud the equity framework, some are concerned that there is not enough clarity about what the Foundation is seeking and what it is willing to fund. There is also uncertainty about the Foundation’s list of preferred strategies identified in the 2018 program plan². Some recent applicants were unsure if they needed to address all the strategies and, if not, whether the Foundation prioritizes some over others. This perceived lack of transparency made some of the recent applicants feel that they had to guess what the Foundation really values. For them, this is inconsistent with Weingart’s commitment to openness.

Participants stressed the importance of clear, accessible, and consistent communications. As the Foundation continues to build its networks of grantees, partners, community members, policy makers, and funders, the importance of a comprehensive communications strategy has grown. Currently, the Foundation relies on emails, webinars, its website, and written documents to convey its priorities and the accomplishments of itself and its grantees. While these channels have been sufficient to reach the Foundation’s audiences in the past, many nonprofit partners reported a need for the Foundation to create communications that are more visual, more succinct, and less “academic.” They value hearing from the Foundation and pay particular attention to any communication from Fred Ali, given his role as a field leader. However, other communications generally do not stand out or retain readers’ attention unless they are a business communication. The Foundation’s communications plan would benefit from an upgrade, incorporating more social media, visual elements, and other contemporary tools (e.g., videos, podcasts).

In general, grantees characterized program officers’ feedback during the application process as supportive and insightful. Weingart staff, as noted above, know their grantees and applicants well and sometimes advise them on how to increase alignment between the applicant’s intentions and the Foundation’s expectations. This can improve the likelihood of a favorable funding decision. Most applicants feel supported in this process, understanding that Weingart staff were advising them on such issues as strategy, organizational capacity and budget. However, a few recent applicants recalled being “steered” in a direction that they may not have intended. Given the generally high level of trust between the Foundation and its grantees, this tricky trade-off between guidance and self-determination is an area to pay close attention to moving forward.

Attracting and retaining talented staff is a challenge for many nonprofit partners. Highly skilled, technology-savvy, diverse staff with a strong commitment to change are essential to advance social justice. The shortage of that type of staff as some nonprofits shift away from an exclusive focus on direct services—coupled with the high cost of living—has created a deepening staffing problem for many nonprofits. Many of them cannot get the staff they need with

“There is an ease to the Weingart Foundation’s unrestricted funding, and the [annual program plan] does not communicate that ease— it communicates the exact opposite.”

–Nonprofit partner

“When you raise the bar on equity, you also raise the bar on your staff.”

–Nonprofit partner

² These include strategies such as engaging in coalitions, networks and/or movements; promoting and developing leaders from under-resourced communities; strengthening civic engagement; and engaging in system or policy change.

the money they have. Those same talented professionals are also being recruited by the private sector at much higher compensation, leaving nonprofits across the region at a real disadvantage. This situation demonstrates the value of the Foundation’s unrestricted operating support, which gives grantees the flexibility to address this issue. However, these funds alone are often not sufficient to strengthen staffing and meet other organizational needs as well. Listening session participants appealed to the Foundation for its continued help in understanding and responding to this crisis. In addition to general field leadership, specific suggestions for how Weingart can support grantees in this area included funding in-person trainings or coaching on organizational development and leadership development, including finance, budgeting, and grantwriting; supporting technical assistance beyond trainings and workshops, particularly in the areas of technology, communications, and marketing; and offering low-interest loans and lines of credit to smaller nonprofits so they can build reserves and maintain sufficient cash flow.

Grantees value Weingart’s field leadership. The Weingart Foundation has a reputation for outspoken leadership on key issues facing the social sector. The Foundation has actively promoted its commitment to issues such as unrestricted support, full-cost funding, equity as a lens for philanthropy, and the value of organizational capacity building. The Foundation’s positions on these issues are not exclusively for the benefit of the Foundation or its grantees but are intended to inform others in the field, both funders and nonprofits. Grantees appreciate how the Foundation uses its voice to advance the issues they care about and encourage the Foundation to be even more active in promoting progressive leadership. They are proud to be associated with this type of leadership.

Weingart’s regional presence is important to grantees. The Weingart funding area spans Southern California from Santa Barbara to the Inland Empire. Outside of Los Angeles, however, few funders embrace an equity framework and recognize the value of providing unrestricted operating support. For grantees outside of Los Angeles, the voice of the Foundation is an important and effective advocate for more inclusive, community-oriented grantmaking. These organizations encourage Foundation staff and leadership to strengthen their presence in the regions it serves outside of Los Angeles County, to be more vocal in promoting new approaches to philanthropy, and to encourage nonprofits to focus on equity issues. Grantees that serve these regions would like Weingart to use its knowledge and credibility to help other funders become more responsive to emerging community needs and understand the value of adopting new strategies.

“Weingart is at the forefront...and nonprofits need to know this is the direction the sector is going.”

–Weingart grantee

| Listening Session Participants | | |
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| Jonathan Zeichner | Executive Director | A Place Called Home |
| Jack Lorenz | Director of Development and Communications | Alliance for Housing and Healing |
| Mitch Gariador | Executive Director | Anthesis |
| Stephanie Campbell | Executive Director | Bright Prospects |
| Mark Loranger | President & CEO | Chrysalis |
| Mary Jane Stevenson | Executive Director | City Year Los Angeles |
| Angela LoBue | Chief Operating Officer | Coalition for Responsible Community Development (CRCD) |
| Pharaoh Mitchell | Co-Founder | Community Action League |
| Maisie Chin | Co-Founder & Executive Director | Community Asset Development Redefining Education (CADRE) |
| Laura Nachison | Senior Grantwriter | Desert AIDS Project |
| Angela James | Board Member | Dignity and Power Now |
| Isela Gracian | President | East LA Community Corporation |
| Chanel Boutakidis | Chief Executive Officer | Five Acres |
| Patti Larson | Executive Director | Food Finders |
| Claudia Castorena | Chief Financial Officer and Co-Founder | Galilee Center |
| Cathy Chu | Southern California Regional Manager | Genders and Sexualities Alliance Network |
| Pat Bell | Director of Development | House of Ruth |
| Judith Rose | Chief Program Officer | Human Options |
| Lou Calanche | Founder & Executive Director | Legacy LA |
| Eric Ares | Deputy Director, Finance and Communications | Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN) |
| Larry Hynes | Executive Director | Mercy Housing Living Centers |
| Mary Anne Foo | Executive Director | Orange County Asian and Pacific Islander Community Alliance (OCAPICA) |
| Miguel Hernandez | Executive Director | Orange County Congregation Community Organization |
| Drew Furedi | President & CEO | Para Los Niños |
| Bill Przulucki | Executive Director | People Organized for Westside Renewal |
| Sue Dunlap | President & CEO | Planned Parenthood Los Angeles |
| Diana Fox | Executive Director | Reach Out |
| Melissa Denton | Executive Director | Unusual Suspects Theatre Company |
| Christine Mirasy-Glasco | Executive Director | Upward Bound House |
| Lynn Warshafsky | Founder & Executive Director | Venice Arts |
| Erika Lee | Associate Development Director | Venice Community Housing |