

Another Foundation Goes All In on Equity— Not Only the What and Why, But the How

By Ruth McCambridge | August 17, 2016

Yesterday, the Los Angeles area Weingart Foundation declared itself all-in on equity, setting this as its exclusive focus. In this, they join the Ford Foundation, which made a similar commitment to address inequality a little more than a year ago. The statement made by Ford Foundation President Darren Walker at the time talked about not only the “what and why” of this intensive focus but also about the question of “with whom” priorities were to be set and “how” grants were to be made. In this, the two statements have some of the same elements: unrestricted operating grants over project grants, for instance, along with listening more carefully to marginalized voices, and reflection on their position with their grantee partners. The statements do have some major differences, of course, but the similarities are striking, and in Weingart’s case the move has deep roots. From the Weingart statement:

To advance equity requires an examination of privilege, including the power dynamics between funders and nonprofits. Our full commitment to equity will also require the Foundation to constantly examine our own internal policies, practices, and culture with regard to equity and inclusion.

This is not the first time *NPQ* has reported on Weingart’s progressive grantmaking practices. In May of this year, we recognized them for actually making grants to help organizations build reserves. Last November, Weingart took the risk of criticizing, with two colleague foundations, the Broad Foundation for throwing its weight around in L.A.’s hotly embattled school reform agenda. It also helped back the campaign to raise the minimum wage in L.A. this past year, funding the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy for its campaign by providing core support.

As Roxana Tynan wrote on the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy blog on the occasion of the win, “Foundations are increasingly looking at how multi-year, general operating support creates opportunities for organizations to work on long-term planning that results in advocacy and organizing wins. [...] Multi-year, core support allows us to respond nimbly and quickly jump into campaign work as new opportunities to build power for low-wage workers arise.”

In its 2017 program plan that accompanies the statement, Weingart goes further, writing that the commitment will be realized through:

- A robust network of nonprofits across Southern California that builds the personal and collective community power required to sustain long-term prosperity;
- Stronger and more effective nonprofits led and staffed by people who are representative of the communities they serve;
- More opportunities for nonprofit partners to leverage resources and increase partnerships with other funders, government entities, and other institutions; and
- Meaningful policy and systems change that lifts the communities who currently face the most obstacles to opportunity.

Because Weingart has already been walking this path, this declaration comes across as intensification rather than the faddish embrace of a new direction, as we have seen with other foundation pivots. Among other commitments, it promises to “increase...engagement with grantees around the importance of diversity and cultural competence as important indicators of organizational effectiveness” and extend its commitment to multi-year grants.

The Weingart statement can be found on the front page of the Foundation’s website and is signed by Fred Ali, President & CEO, and Monica C. Lozano, Chairman of the Board. We have reprinted it in full below.

A Full Commitment to Equity

Throughout our careers, we have been struck by the fact that life in our society is simply not fair. We do not all have the same access to the resources necessary to meet our basic needs or to opportunities to realize our dreams.

Southern California is a place practically built on hopes and dreams. Our region has long offered the promise of education, jobs, homes, and healthy lifestyles. Like our founder, Ben Weingart, people seeking opportunity have journeyed here—from across the country and around the world—full of hope for something better for their families and their future.

But far too many who saw Southern California as a place of opportunity have been disappointed. Across the region, people are struggling daily for the things some take for granted—safe streets, good jobs, access to health care, affordable housing, and a quality education for our families.

For 65 years, the Weingart Foundation has focused on serving the underserved by supporting nonprofit organizations fighting poverty and expanding opportunity for the Southern California communities that face the most obstacles. Our core values of listening to, and learning from, grantees and communities have always guided us—leading the Foundation, for example, to make a significant shift to focus on unrestricted grantmaking nearly 10 years ago.

But despite our best efforts, and the good work of others, the reality is that conditions in much of our region, and for so many people, are getting worse.

In our listening sessions, we hear from nonprofits and community members who daily experience disparities that are deepening and widening. We are told that our safety net is eroding, and that

Southern California is increasingly divided into separate and unequal places. A child in Newport Beach will likely live 10 years longer than a child in Watts.

We are also hearing from grantees that lasting change will require a collective and long-term focus that addresses the underlying circumstances that create and perpetuate inequity, the root of so many of our most intractable problems.

This is why the Weingart Foundation is making a full commitment to equity—a long-term commitment to base all of our policy and program decisions on achieving the goal to advance fairness, inclusion, and opportunity for all Southern Californians—especially those communities hit hardest by persistent poverty.

We are not alone in this commitment, and we are encouraged by our colleagues and peers who have been leading a conversation to advance equity in philanthropy. We respectfully add our voice, leadership, and resources to one of the most critical issues of our time.

We recognize that inequity stems from the historic, long-term barriers to rights and opportunities endured by low-income communities, including those Southern Californians whose skin color, ethnicity, gender, immigration status, disability, age, sexual orientation, or zip code has prevented them from realizing the dignities and liberties all people deserve. We have a responsibility to invest in the communities that have been excluded and under-resourced, so they can realize their full potential. It's a matter of justice.

For us, equity means expanding opportunity by correcting the imbalances we see across racial, ethnic, and socio-economic lines in our education, health, human service, economic, and criminal justice systems.

To advance equity requires an examination of privilege, including the power dynamics between funders and nonprofits. Our full commitment to equity will also require the Foundation to constantly examine our own internal policies, practices, and culture with regard to equity and inclusion.

This is complex work, and the Weingart Foundation does not have all the answers. Nor are these issues going to be solved overnight. But we have a plan for how to begin and are committed to learning from, and partnering with, nonprofits and the people who experience inequity first-hand. We are also committed to challenging ourselves to work with a sense of urgency and to take risks.

So what does this mean for our grantmaking?

Our commitment to equity is a logical extension of our history, as we've always prioritized supporting organizations that serve those in need. Now, we will deepen our efforts by identifying opportunities to make greater investments in those people and communities up against the most entrenched challenges. This will mean working with our nonprofit partners in new ways and experimenting with different strategies.

In FY 2017, we will focus all of our resources on organizations serving those low-income people and communities most impacted by inequity. We will make some significantly larger unrestricted grants in these communities; maintain and introduce new targeted initiatives; support systems and policy change; use program related investments to put more of our resources to work; and use our voice and convening power to lift the issue of equity and support collaboration.

It should be emphasized, however, that the Foundation remains as committed as ever to responsive grantmaking and to providing multi-year Unrestricted Operating Support grants. We continue to believe that effective nonprofits rooted in the communities they serve are the best agents for lasting change, and should lead the way in fighting inequity. By strengthening the nonprofit infrastructure within the communities we aim to uplift, we can change the dynamics of inequity and expand opportunities for generations to come.

This year's Program Plan outlines our initial approach in detail. However, this is really the start of a long-term process. Our strategies will evolve over time as we engage in dialogue with grantees and communities.

As we begin this process, FY 2017 will be focused on learning. Over the course of the year, the Foundation will hold listening sessions with grantees and the people they serve so that we can hear directly what is needed most. We will work in concert with our nonprofit partners to determine the most meaningful indicators for change. We will culminate this year of listening with a convening to bring together grantees and their communities with some of the region's leading thinkers so that we can all work together to advance a collective vision of equity.

While the challenges are great, we also think there is reason to be optimistic. In addition to social justice advocates, there is a growing number of civic and business leaders who recognize the scales of justice are tipped too far in one direction, creating the opportunity for effective and broadly supported action in which we can both lead and join with others. Our shared hopes for Southern California—and our shared future—rest on our ability to work together to create a region of inclusion and opportunity.

As the Ford's Foundation's Walker did, Lozano and Ali invite feedback.