WHAT APPLICANTS HAVE TO SAY:
Feedback to the Weingart Foundation on
Revisions to the Small Grant Program

Weingart Foundation
Survey of Small Grant Program Applicants
October 2010
I. Introduction

The Weingart Foundation’s Small Grant Program provides an important resource to southern California nonprofits by making philanthropic dollars available to organizations that may be too new or too small to qualify for the Weingart Foundation’s Regular Grants Program or meet threshold requirements of other foundations. Through these grants that average between $10,000 and $15,000 and are capped at $25,000, these modest-sized grants can be “stepping stone” grants to build nonprofit capacity to secure other, larger sources of funding. The also provide important dollars to fuel innovation and fill gaps for nonprofits with no-strings-attached dollars that are increasingly difficult for nonprofits to access.

Seeking to streamline the application process to its Small Grant Program, in 2009 the Weingart Foundation made two important changes to the application process for this program that comprises approximately 5% of its annual grant budget. One was to waive the requirement of submitting a Letter of Inquiry as a first step in the application process and, instead, move to a one-step process of accepting full proposals from all nonprofits wishing to be considered for a small grant. At the same time, the Foundation changed its process of accepting applications on a rolling basis throughout the year to establish three annual deadlines for proposal submissions.

In line with the Weingart Foundation’s practice of learning about its own processes for the purpose of performance improvement, the Weingart Foundation contracted with Learning Partnerships in June 2010 to survey its Small Grant Program applicants. This report provides feedback to the Foundation on the experience of applicants – both successful applicants who became grantees as well as unsuccessful applicants that received denial letters – that applied during the first year in which the new processes were implemented.
II. Research Approach

To address these questions, Learning Partnerships conducted two surveys of nonprofits that had submitted applications to the revised Small Grant Program in its first year of operation. One version of the survey was directed to the 126 organizations that received grants and one to the 105 applicants whose applications had been declined. Protocols for both surveys were designed by Learning Partnerships in collaboration with Weingart Foundation staff and are included in Appendix 1.

The surveys were sent to nonprofits on July 28, 2010 and the nonprofits were given until August 16 to respond. Grantee surveys took approximately 20 minutes to complete, and unsuccessful applicant surveys about 10 minutes. Executive Directors filled out approximately 90% of surveys, with the remaining completed by development directors, Board members, and people in other staff positions. All survey recipients were promised that their responses would be anonymous to the Foundation.

Response rates

100 grantees and 62 unsuccessful applicants returned completed surveys, resulting in a response rate of 84% for grantees and 67% for applicants with declined proposals.1 A 60% response rate is considered successful for this type of survey2, making these response rates unusually high. This high response rate itself can be considered a reflection on respondents’ high regard for the Weingart Foundation and their motivation to help the Foundation by providing feedback. This was expressed directly by many respondents who welcomed this opportunity to provide input and feedback. As one applicant whose proposal had been declined – and who might be expected to be negative because of that – noted, “Your efforts to put time and resources behind this survey are a respectful and conscious action. It suggests a level of caring beyond most foundations. Thank you.”

III. Profile of Respondents to the Two Surveys

To understand the characteristics of organizations responding to the surveys as well as to compare characteristics of applicants who were successful compared to those who where not, the surveys posed questions about these organizations – their budget sizes, areas of service, geographic areas served, and how they first heard about the Small Grant Program. Responses to these questions are reported below.

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1 Although 126 grants and 105 declinations were made under the Small Grant Program, this survey reflects a pool of 120 grants and 92 applicants. The difference reflects emails that were undeliverable or those who had opted out of the survey.

2 This reflects informal industry knowledge as there is no published industry standard.
Budget Size

The Small Grant Program targets nonprofits with relatively small budget sizes. According to the Weingart Foundation website, “The primary purpose of the Small Grant Program is to increase access to funding and strengthen the capacity of small, community based, and developing organizations. Therefore, priority is given to organizations with operating budgets under $1.5 million.” Chart 1 describes the budget sizes of grantees and unsuccessful applicants to the Small Grant Program. Approximately 80% (79% of grantees and 84% of unsuccessful applicants) have budgets under $1 million. Many of the declined applicants – almost half – have budgets under $250,000, compared to only 17% of grantees, suggesting that many nonprofits that are very small are comfortable applying for the Small Grant Program, even though they may not have developed to the point that they are competitive for these funds.

Age of Applicant Organizations

The accompanying table indicates that most applicants to the Weingart Foundation Small Grant Program, successful and unsuccessful, were founded more than 10 years ago. Over a third are 25 years or older. The closely matched column sizes of the two applicant groups indicates that organizational age is not an important factor that distinguishes organizations that received grants from those that did not.
**Counties Served**

The table at the right displays the counties served by successful and unsuccessful applicants to the Small Grant program. For all applicants to the Weingart Foundation’s Small Grant Program, approximately two-thirds are providing services in Los Angeles County. Within the overall context of similarity in the proportion of applicants that did and did not receive grants, applicants working in Orange, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties were more likely to be declined than to receive a grant by at least ten percentage, suggesting that proposals for those areas were often not as competitive as those from Los Angeles and Santa Barbara counties.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County Served</th>
<th>Grantees</th>
<th>Declined Applicants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riverside</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Barbara</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Bernardino</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ventura</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Fields of Work**

Most applicants to the Small Grant Program classified their work as human services and/or education. The accompanying chart indicates that the percentages of applicants approved for grants and those declined are quite consistent across all the fields of service funded by the Weingart Foundation. This reflects that it is neither an advantage nor a disadvantage to be working in any particular field among those included in WF funding priorities.

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3 Because some nonprofits work in multiple counties, the columns sum to greater than 100%.
4 Respondents were permitted to check all that apply, so the columns sum to greater than 100%.
IV. Experiences Applying to the Small Grant Program

In this section we look at questions that probed applicants’ experiences applying to the Small Grant Program – how they learned about it, how clear the guidelines were to them, how much time and effort they put into the application process and whether they felt it was worth it, and how they compare the old and the new application processes.

How applicants learned about the Small Grant Program

In terms of advertising the availability of funds through the Small Grant Program, it appears that the Weingart Foundation is its own best information vehicle, with the Foundation website serving as the most common method for learning about the Small Grant Program and Foundation staff the second most common method for both successful and unsuccessful applicants. Although the major story of this chart is that grantees and declined applicants are more similar than different in their means of learning about the Small Grant Program, declined applicants were more likely to learn about the Program from the WF website, meet the grant maker events, word of mouth, and from grant search databases. Successful applicants were more likely to have learned about the program from a WF staff member or from another foundation.

Clarity of guidelines for the application process

One of the most central questions for feedback on the new application process is a question that asked respondents how clear the application process for the Small Grant Program was to them. The accompanying chart indicates that the application process was perceived to be either “quite clear” or “very clear” to applicants whether or not their applications were successful. Within this overall picture of clear guidelines, grantees were more likely to experience the guidelines as “very clear” and applicants with declined proposals to describe the application process as “quite clear.”

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5 Respondents were instructed to check as many different methods of learning about the Small Grant Program as appropriate, resulting in columns totaling more than 100%. Declined applicants were especially likely to mention more than one method of learning about the Small Grant Program.
Respondents were given the opportunity to provide narrative information about what was clear or not clear in their funding proposals. The following comment is representative of the many applicants that were pleased with the process:

- “We were very happy with the application. It was concise yet complete.”
- “Instructions were easy to follow and clearly explained.”

A declined applicant reported,
- “We did not feel we were asked anything we should not have been asked and we had the opportunity to explain who we were, what we do and why we were seeking a grant. We realize there’s lots of competition for limited resources available.”

Respondents also offered constructive criticism and noted challenges. These include:

- “It was difficult picking what grant opportunity to pursue in the beginning. We finally decided on Small Grant Program.”
- “The grant application process changed, our initial request was routed to another grant category.”
- One grantee noted specific challenges with the online application process for Catholic schools, “Catholic school applicants do not have available online tax Id numbers (we are under the umbrella of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles) so it was not feasible to apply online. Therefore, we had to do paper application. Perhaps there is a way to account for Catholic Schools to permit online application?”
- Another applicant noted, “The application was relatively clear, however, the request for financials was rather confusing and we had to call for clarification. The differences between the types of financial reports as defined in the application created a bit of confusion as to what type of financial report was required. A call to the Foundation cleared that up.”

*Time and effort spent on the application – and whether it was worth it*

Most nonprofits by necessity commit a great deal of time and energy to fundraising and it is a frequent complaint that they have to put in as much time and effort for small grants as they do very large grants, creating an imbalance in the equation of “energy in” to “effect achieved.” Sensitive to this dynamic, the Weingart Foundation wanted to learn how much time nonprofits dedicated to their grant proposals for the Small Grant Program and whether or not, from their point of view, they felt that the effort expended was appropriate for the size of grant that they were applying for.

A very significant finding is that whether or not their proposals were funded, an extremely large percentage of applicants to the Small Grant Program believed that the amount of effort that they put into the grant proposal was appropriate for the grant they received. 95% of successful applicants believed that the effort was appropriate and, in an even stronger endorsement because unsuccessful applicants could easily feel that an application that did not result in funds was a waste of time, fully 92% of denied applicants believed the amount of effort they put into their grant proposal was appropriate for the amount of funds they were applying for.
In terms of how much time applicants committed to the application process, approximately 50% in of both grantees and unsuccessful applicants spent between six and ten hours on their grant applications. Slightly more unsuccessful applicants committed only a few hours (0-5 hours) to their applications than successful applicants (21% and 26% respectively). Conversely, slightly more successful grantees committed more than 16 hours to the proposal than unsuccessful applicants (11% and 6% respectively).

*Working with Weingart Foundation staff*

Foundation staff plays a critical role shaping the experience of nonprofits in the application process. An important measure of a Foundation’s responsiveness to its grant seeking constituency is whether it responds to applications in a timely manner. Both successful and unsuccessful applicants gave WF staff extremely positive ratings for the timeliness of the Foundation’s response to their proposals. 99% of grantees and 92% of unsuccessful applicants said that they felt the Foundation had responded to their application in a timely manner. An additional 7% of unsuccessful applicants indicated that they did not know whether the response had been timely, leaving only one applicant believing that the Foundation’s response was not timely.

Both surveys asked a number of questions about nonprofits’ experience with staff with questions tailored to the different experiences of the two groups.

*The experience of successful applicants*

Questions to grantees focused on their experiences with Foundation staff in the review process.

Over 90% of grantees either agreed or strongly agreed that:

- Program officers spent an adequate amount of time getting to know applicants’ organizations and their needs (98%),
- Program officers developed a solid understanding about the request (96%)
- Programs officers’ questions were appropriate (96%); and
- Foundation staff responded to questions in a timely manner (95%).

Only 3 respondents thought the review process was superficial.

When invited in an open-ended question to provide additional feedback, one grantee exemplary of many others with positive remarks made a point to commend the staff, “Our grant officer was so kind and helpful. She took extra time with me, both during the interview process and post-award.” Other grantee responses echoed this positive feedback.

*The experience of unsuccessful applicants*

Questions to unsuccessful applicants focused on their perceptions about how respectfully they were treated and the fairness of the process. Despite receiving a denial to their funding requests, most applicants felt

Despite being denied funding, 75% of denied applicants felt that the application process was very respectful and 92% believe that it was very or somewhat fair
that the process was both respectful and fair. Three-quarters of respondents felt that the process was very respectful; 22 percent thought it was somewhat respectful, and only one person thought that the process was “not so respectful” and one that it was “not respectful”. Slightly fewer people responded that the process was fair with 46% responding that the application process was “very fair,” and 46% responding that it was “somewhat fair.” Seven percent (4 people) reported that the process was “not so fair” and one that it was, “not fair.” One respondent in an open ended question pointed out that without knowing the applicant pool, it was impossible for her to determine whether the decision was fair or not.

A reason that denied applicants may have felt positive despite the outcome is that they felt Weingart staff listened and understood their concerns. Compared to many foundations, and especially small grants programs that are sometimes referred to as “drive by grant programs,” applicants reported significant contact with the Foundation. Two-thirds of applicants had contact with a Weingart Foundation staff member about the application. Of these, over 40% had contact that lasted over 15 minutes. After they had received a turn-down, over half of respondents followed up with the Foundation to learn why their application had been denied and all but three individuals reported that the reason behind the decision was clear. Significantly, only four applicants do not anticipate that they will be reapplying to the Foundation.

For a few applicants, filling out the survey itself was educational about working with the Weingart Foundation. An applicant that didn’t follow up their request with a call to the Foundation when they learned that they were not being funded noted, “We didn't realize that we could follow-up or that a follow-up as to why we were denied a request would be welcome. Our previous experience with foundations is, ‘Don't call us, we'll call you.’ Perhaps we generalized that too widely.”

In summary, Foundation staff and the Foundation were perceived in a positively by successful and unsuccessful applicants to the Small Grant Program. With only a few exceptions, even denied applicants perceived the process to be somewhat or very fair and that they were treated respectfully.

V. Comparisons to previous experiences with the Weingart Foundation

A central question to the Foundation is whether the new application process was perceived by applicants to be an improvement over the previous process. On the following page two tables describe the ratings of applicants, successful grantees (top) and unsuccessful applicants (bottom), about whether different aspects of the one-step application process with fixed deadlines for proposal submission was considered to be the same, better, or worse. This question was answered by 43 unsuccessful applicants and 57 grantees that had also submitted applications to the Small Grant Program before the revision.

Overall (as indicated by the blue lines), most people within both groups reported that many features of the new application process had not changed their experience with the Foundation.
Both reported that there was no difference in the responsiveness of staff, the guidance they received from staff, and the response time to their application.
Applicants did report differences in their assessments of three aspects of the application process. These are:

1) Clarity of guidelines: Grantees perceived the guidelines in the revised application process to be clearer than in two-step process by a small margin – 27 respondents who reported it was better compared to 25 who saw it is the same. Unsuccessful applicants were much more likely to report the clarity to be the same between the old and the revised application guidelines.

2) One-step application process. A very important piece of feedback to the Foundation is that both groups of respondents reported that the one-step process was better than the two-step. The percentage of respondents reporting that it was better was higher for grantees than for unsuccessful applicants – 72% of grantees compared to 44% of unsuccessful applicants – but, the major findings is that both groups reported that the one-stop application was an improvement over the two-step process. One respondent explained, “The one step process definitely makes the application process more efficient. Thanks!”

3) Hard deadlines. The use of hard deadlines was not seen as much as an improvement as the one-step process. By a small margin more grantees reported that having hard deadlines instead of rolling deadlines was an improvement (44% reported this) than reported that it was the same (37%). Applicants on the other hand were slightly more likely to report it was “the same” than that it was an improvement (35% compared to 26%). One applicant in favor of hard deadlines reported, “The deadlines help with planning.”

4) “First, do no harm.” An important evaluative question for the Weingart Foundation is whether there are a significant number of applicants who perceive the revised Small Grant Program application procedures as being worse than they originally were. It is important to keep this in context because we have seen that by far and away, for both successful and unsuccessful applicants, most reported that all aspects of the application process were the same or better. In a very small exception to this overall trend, there were a few unsuccessful applicants – between 1 and 3 respondents – who reported for each aspect of the proposal process that the revised process was worse. The only aspect of the revised process that any successful grantees reported as being worse was the hard deadlines, and six respondents felt this way (compared to 21 who felt it was the same and 25 who felt it was better).

Although it is important to note the exceptions to the overall picture, the positive spirit with the Small Grant Program and the revised guidelines were experienced by applicants is captured in the statement made by one applicant, “The Small Grants Program process was very clear, efficient and effective in meeting varying Thanks for an unusually good experience with funding.
-Comment from Grantee
organizational needs that often do not get met with other foundations. Program staff is accessible and engaged in the organization and the small grant program merges with the changing needs within the non-profit culture and community.”

Perceptions of current and future economic viability

To help Foundation staff understand how the continuing economic difficulties impact grantees, organizations were asked a few optional questions about their current organizational needs and fiscal prospects for the coming year. These analyses did not show significant differences between grantees and unsuccessful applicants, so their results were combined and the findings below reflect the sample as a whole.

Ninety-five percent of survey respondents anticipate that fiscal year 2011 will be equally or more financially demanding for them than the current 2010 fiscal year, with forty-three percent of survey respondents believing that it will be more challenging and 52% equally challenging. Despite this challenge, 87% of respondents anticipate having at least a break-even budget for Fiscal Year 2011. They survey did not ask if returning a break-even budget will require cutbacks and lay-offs, but it is also important to note that fiscal prudence is a necessity for most of these organizations as they do not have deep cash reserves. While the industry standard promotes having at least six months of operating reserve, nearly half of the responding organizations (49%) had three months or less that could be used for operating reserves. Of these organizations, six percent had no operating reserves whatsoever.

The Foundation also asked applicants what their current needs for their organizations are. Nearly 80 percent ranked general operating support as the most important. Program development, capacity building and capital improvements followed (ranked in that order). One grantee made the interesting observation that their needs may shift as the economy recovers, “We need general operating support to hire the staff we need to develop our full capacity,” she explained, “and as the economy recovers we will need additional capital and PRI loans to build our programs.”

It is important to note that the types of funding that grantees report needing correspond directly to the way in which grantees spend their Small Grant Program grant funds. In a question that asked how they have used SGP funds, 63% reported spending their grant dollars to cover general operating support, 28% for program development, 19% to build organizational capacity and 7% for capital improvements. This alignment of needs against actual use of Small Grant Program dollars speaks to the importance of allowing the flexibility for grantees to use these funds as they see fit currently permitted in the program guidelines.

“IT IS VITALLY IMPORTANT TO BE ABLE TO FUND OPERATIONS, PARTICULARLY DURING THIS PARTICULAR ECONOMIC CLIMATE. DONORS HAVE BEEN VERY GENEROUS BUT THE SUPPORT FOR ‘RUNNING THE BUSINESS’ IS GREATLY APPRECIATED AND RELIEVES SOME OF THE STRESS.”

– Comment from Grantee

Nearly 75 percent of applicant organizations identified general operating support as their most important organizational need.

Grantees were allowed to check “all that apply” so the total adds up to more than 100%.
Conclusion

Grantees were overwhelmingly positive in their feedback about the Small Grant Program and the application process. Overall, changes to the Small Grant Program were well received, with many feeling that the new procedures were an improvement over the previous process. Grantees were also enthusiastic in their praise for the respectfulness, attentiveness and kindness of Weingart Foundation staff.