VOICES FROM THE FIELD:

GRANTEE FEEDBACK ON THE WEINGART FOUNDATION’S REGULAR GRANT PROGRAM

Weingart Foundation
Surveys of Regular Grant Applicants and Recipients
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I. Introduction

The Weingart Foundation’s Regular Grant Program provides valuable fuel for southern California’s nonprofits. In contrast to many foundations that make grants by invitation only, or carve out a funding niche so narrow that relatively few nonprofits are able to fit through the eye of the needle, the Weingart Foundation invites applications from nonprofits working in a broad tier of fields – the arts, education, health, and social services.

Adding to the value of a Weingart Foundation grant, nonprofits are able to apply to the Foundation for what they need most. They first submit a Letter of Inquiry (LOI). Applicants whose LOIs are invited can then submit proposals requesting grants for unrestricted core support, capital projects, capacity building, or programmatic support. WF staff encourages applicants to apply for what will strategically advance their missions and strengthen their organizations, and are often helpful in identifying that focus. This again contrasts with a reigning trend in philanthropy in which many foundations make grants to nonprofits on the basis that the nonprofits are advancing the programmatic goals of the foundation. The WF revised its RGP in 2009 to make it even more responsive to the needs of the nonprofits in the communities and counties it funds.

Consonant with its commitment to ongoing performance improvement for all its work, the Weingart Foundation contracted with Learning Partnerships to survey successful and unsuccessful applicants to its Regular Grant Program to ask about their experiences with the Foundation. The RGP surveys that are the focus of this report are similar to surveys conducted in fall 2010 of successful and unsuccessful applicants to the Small Grant Program that differs from the RGP in not requiring an LOI, having three public deadlines, and making smaller grants – $25,000 or below. For purposes of comparison, some of the findings from the earlier report on the Small Grant Program (SGP) are also included in the pages that follow.
II. Research Approach

To learn about the experiences of successful and unsuccessful applicants to the Regular Grant Program, Learning Partnerships conducted two surveys of the nonprofits that had submitted applications to the revised Regular Grant Program in its first grantmaking cycle. One version of the survey was directed to the 34 organizations that received grants and one to the 7 applicants whose proposals had been declined. Protocols for both surveys were designed by Learning Partnerships in collaboration with Weingart Foundation staff. All survey responses are anonymous to the Foundation. The surveys were sent to nonprofits on January 28, 2011 for a February 18th response deadline. Grantee surveys were designed to take approximately 20 minutes to complete, and surveys of unsuccessful applicants about 10 minutes. The survey was timed to reach RGP applicants and grantees approximately three months after awards had been made, at a time when their experience with the Foundation was still fresh in their minds, but the positive excitement or strong disappointment that come with receiving a grant or a denial may have dimmed.

Responses to Surveys

Surveys were sent to thirty-four grantees and seven unsuccessful applicants. Twenty-nine grantees and three unsuccessful applicants completed them, resulting in response rates of 85% for grantees and 43% for applicants with declined proposals. A 60% response rate is considered successful for this type of survey, making the response rate for grantees unusually high. This high response rate itself can be considered a reflection of respondents’ high regard for the Weingart Foundation and their motivation to help the Foundation by providing feedback. Among the respondents, fifty-eight percent were either CEOs or in the number two positions in their organizations; a third were development professionals; and two surveys were filled out by people in “other” positions, a research and contracts manager and an operations manager.

The pool of seven unsuccessful applicants was very small to begin with. The even smaller number of responses, three, makes it impossible to interpret results from unsuccessful applicants with confidence. Accordingly, we treat responses from denied applicants as suggestive rather than definitive. Since they do not have the same credibility as the numbers from the larger sample sizes and higher response rates, we have not included them in the tables of results, but have added a separate section (on page 10) where the findings from these three surveys are presented.

1 The declined applicant survey was sent to applicants who were invited to submit a full proposal and declined at the proposal stage (versus those declined at the LOI stage).
2 This reflects informal industry knowledge as there is no published industry standard.
III. Profile of Respondents

Key characteristics of grant recipients to the Regular Grant Program – their budget sizes, areas of service, and geographic areas are described below. Some charts include information that places them in context with SGP applicants and grant recipients.

**Budget Size**

The largest group of RGP recipients falls in the $2 million to $4.9 million dollar budget size range. Approximately one-third of RGP grantees have budgets that are smaller than $2 million; one-third have annual operating budgets between $2 million and $4.9 million; and another one-third have budgets $5 million or larger. At the high end of the spectrum, 17% have budgets that are $10 million or more; at the low end, 14% have budgets between $500,000 and $1 million. There are no RGP grantees with annual budgets under $500,000.

The chart to the right makes the point that there is a general correspondence between an organization’s budget size and the type of grant they receive from the Weingart Foundation. Most RGP grantees are clustered at the far right with budgets over $2 million. Most unsuccessful SGP applicants are clustered at the far left with budgets under $500,000. There is some overlap among all three groups of RGP grantees, SGP grantees, and SGP denied applicants, especially in the $500,000-$2,000,000 annual budget size range.
**Age of Applicant Organizations**

Most grantees of the Regular Grant Program are mature organizations founded over 25 years ago – there are just a few RGP recipients under ten years old. Small Grant Program applicants and grantees are much more likely to have been founded within the past ten years. Just under one-third of all three groups are in the 10-24 year old range.

**Counties Served**

Approximately two-thirds of RGP and SGP grantees provide services in Los Angeles County. More RGP than SGP grantees serve multiple counties, indicated by the larger proportion of RGP grantees in all counties served. Their service in more counties is consistent with the overall larger budget sizes of RGP grantees.

**Fields of Work**

Similar to applicants to the Small Grant Program, the largest number of Regular Grant Program grantees classified their work as human services. While nearly half of SGP grantees and applicants work in education, only one-third of RGP grantees do so.

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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%.
Prior Experience with the Weingart Foundation

The Small Grant Program is intended to serve as an entry to the Weingart Foundation, enabling the Foundation to get to know organizations and vice versa. This intention is borne out in reality, as 40% of applicants to the SGP reported being first-time applicants compared to only 17% of the RGP. It is important to note the significance of these new applicants. Due to limited grant dollars over the past couple of years, many funders have decided to maintain their funding to current or existing grantees. A first time grantee pool of 17% indicates that an organization with no prior history with Weingart still has an opportunity to get a significant grant. Of the 23 RGP grantees with at least one prior application to the WF, twenty (72%) had applied to the Regular Grant Program, two to the Small Grant Program, and one had applied to both the RGP and SGP.

Most RGP grantees have received prior grants from the Weingart Foundation. Of the 23 RGP grant recipients that had applied to the Foundation prior to their current grant and remembered their funding history with the Foundation, all but one had received grants within the past five years. Over half (13) received two grants, four received three grants or one grant, and one received four or more grants. RGP recipients are more likely than SGP grantees to have received two or more grants within the past five years.
IV. Experiences Applying to the Regular Grant Program and Comparisons to the Small Grant Program

In this section we look at questions that probed applicants’ experiences applying to the Regular Grant Program and their suggestions to the Foundation for improving it.

How applicants learned about the Regular Grant Program and Small Grant Program

The Foundation website is the most common method for learning about the Regular Grant Program, as it is for the Small Grant Program. Also important are word of mouth and learning about the program from WF staff members. Although there are small differences, grantees and declined applicants are more similar than different in the ways they learn about the Small Grant Program or Regular Grant Program.

Clarity of LOI and full application guidelines and reporting requirements

The chart below and to the right provides RGP grantee perceptions of the clarity of the LOI and proposal application processes and reporting requirements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Where Applicants First Learned about the Small Grant Program/Regular Grant Program</th>
<th>Small Grant Program Grantees</th>
<th>Small Grant Program Declined Applicants</th>
<th>Regular Grant Program Grantees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From the WF website</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From a WF staff member</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meet the Grantmaker event</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another Foundation</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word of mouth</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant search database</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LOI Application Process

One hundred percent of RGP grantees reported that the LOI process was either very clear (79%) or clear (21%). In space provided for open-ended feedback about the LOI application process, one applicant expressed a concern that page limitations made writing the LOI difficult. Another found the request amount was unclear. They were uncertain whether they could apply for unrestricted core support for $150,000 per year or $150,000 total.

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5 Respondents were instructed to check as many different methods of learning about the Regular Grant Program or Small Grant Program as appropriate, resulting in columns totaling more than 100%.
Full Application Process

Nearly 60% of RGP grantees reported that the WF application process is “very clear.” Another 40% perceive it to be “clear.” Several grantees added narrative comments. Reflecting the overall positive nature of the responses, one grantee stated, “Nothing could be changed to make it more helpful. The process was very clear and staff was very helpful.”

Several grantees offered constructive thoughts. One pointed to an area of preparing a proposal that they found ambiguous, “Sometimes it is not clear how much detail, (or how many) statistics, or quantitative data is required for the grant.” Another reported that Questions M (Current Administrative, Programmatic, and Financial Needs) and O (Importance of an Unrestricted Core Support Grant and Goals) were not totally clear about what the Foundation was looking for, especially for a core support grant. A third said, “Sometimes the assigned program officer would contact our agency to keep adding certain elements to the proposal that weren’t spelled out in the application process.”

Still another grantee reported that it would be useful to be kept more apprised of shifts within the Foundation. This grantee stated, “As internal discussions happen related to foundation priorities, it would be great to have those added to the website, even if they are temporary.” One grantee asked to be allowed more space in the proposal to make their case for funding, and still another pointed out that, “There is a fine line between capacity building and core operation support, and the appropriate rationale for each did not seem mutually exclusive.”

Reporting Requirements

RGP grantees reported that the reporting requirements are either very clear or clear. No comments were added about possible improvements. It is important to note that these grants were relatively new and the grantees had not yet had to submit progress or final reports. They may have more to say about reporting requirements once they have submitted reports.

Timing -- Amount of Time to Write Proposal

Applicants have three months to write a proposal between the time they receive a letter encouraging a proposal and when they have to submit it. Twenty-three of the twenty-eight respondents reported that this was just the right amount of time. Five grantees felt that it was too long.
**Timeliness of the Weingart Foundation’s Responses to LOIs and Proposals**

RGP grantees overwhelmingly reported that they felt that the Weingart Foundation was timely in its responses to their inquiries for funding. Both at the LOI stage and once they had submitted full applications, 27 of 28 grantees reported that they felt the Foundation’s response was timely. The one agency that did not feel the Foundation’s response was timely reported “a long delay in response.” Another indicated that the Foundation’s email response had not reached them, probably because it went into a spam folder. This grantee suggested that the Foundation might want to follow-up their email responses with hard copy letters to avoid this problem. Once the problem had been detected, though, they reported the Foundation was generous in extending its deadline so the agency was not penalized for this technological glitch. One grantee provided the concrete information that they had submitted their request in March and received a response four months later in July. Although they reported that they wished it could have been faster, they also realized that it was about par for the course.

**Time Allocated to Writing the Proposal—100% Reported it was Appropriate**

As the chart on the left indicates, applicants appropriately spend more time on proposals for the higher stakes RGP than for the SGP. At the right end of the graph, over 70% of RGP grantees spend over 16 hours on their proposals. Within that column almost 40% of RGP grantees spend over 24 hours on their proposals; 18% spend between 21 and 24 hours, and 18% spend 16-20 hours.

Grantees were also asked whether the amount of effort that they and their staff put into the grant proposal process was appropriate for the size of the grant they received. One hundred percent of grantees felt that it was appropriate.
Responding to the time it took to prepare proposals, some grantee comments indicated that the application process itself had been a useful and productive one for their organizations. These comments include:

- This represented a major effort on our part to come to terms with how our organization had changed and grown over a recent time period. While the process was challenging, it also afforded us the opportunity to redefine our strengths.
- I felt that it was an appropriate amount of time given the specific questions that were asked and the limited amount of space to answer. The process required the grant team to be focused and succinct in their responses.
- We were requesting a significant amount to replace funding which we had lost due to the Governor’s budget cuts. As such, we wanted to ensure that we put in the time it took to properly describe our organization and our needs in a way that most clearly meshed with the Weingart Foundation’s guidelines.

**Experiences with Weingart Foundation Staff**

RGP grantees were very favorable about their experiences with WF staff. As the accompanying chart indicates, survey respondents were likely to strongly agree or agree that program officers spent an adequate amount of time getting to know the applicant and their proposal, that questions were appropriate, and that the program officer developed a solid understanding about their requests. No applicant felt that the proposal review process was superficial.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RGP Grantees: Based on the review process of your proposal, how much do you agree with the following statements on the following scale?</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I felt the program officer spent an adequate amount of time getting to know our organization and our needs.</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The review was superficial.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt the program officer's questions were appropriate.</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt the program officer developed a solid understanding about our request.</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following include grantees’ additional comments made about Foundation staff:

- The Program Officer was meticulous, thorough, and extremely helpful throughout the process.
- I found the Program Officer to be incredibly engaged and knowledgeable, especially as compared to other foundations we’ve interacted with.
- The Weingart Foundation personnel who did our site visit were first rate all the way. They were responsive and professional in all of our interactions. They do a fantastic job representing the Weingart Foundation, in my opinion.
• We really appreciate the in-person meeting with the program officer, allowing us to explain and clarify our organization and the contents of the application.

Comparison to Prior Application Experiences with the Weingart Foundation

Twenty-three of the twenty-eight RGP respondents had prior experience with the Weingart Foundation and were able to make comparisons between their most recent application to the revised grant program and their prior applications. Clarity of guidelines, responsiveness of staff, and response time were predominantly the same, whereas a majority of respondents (52%) perceived that the guidance they received from staff was better than before. One respondent indicated that the clarity of guidelines had declined, but provided no additional detail about how or in what way the clarity had declined. Another commented that, “My impression is that the grant guidelines have been tightened up and therefore staff could be more responsive.”

Experiences of the Three Denied Applicants

The small number of denied applicants means that results cannot be considered representative of all denied applicants. They are simply three responses. With this caveat about not over-interpreting these results, the three responses do mirror those of grantees in terms of perceiving that grant guidelines and processes are clear, that the Foundation generally responds within a satisfactory period of time, and even that the time and effort that denied applicants put into the grant application process was appropriate. Significantly, all three applicants reported that the application process was either very respectful or respectful to them. On the negative side of the equation, one denied applicant reported that it took eight months to receive a response and another that they felt the program officer did not understand their proposal – they had previously worked with different staff and felt that their request suffered with the transition to new staff.
Over half of the grants awarded were between $101,000 and $150,000. At the tails of the distribution, one grant was over $250,000 and two were $50,000 or less.

Most RGP grants (19 grantees or 68% of survey respondents) were used for unrestricted core support with four each for program development or capacity building (14% each). Three grants (11%) were allocated for capital expenditures. Overall, RGP and SGP grantees use their grants for similar purposes, with SGP grantees somewhat more likely to use funds for program development purposes.

A separate question asked respondents to describe what their current organizational needs are. As the chart at the left indicates, the need for funds closely tracks the reported use of WF RGP dollars reported above. This close correspondence between need for and use of philanthropic dollars speaks to the strategic deployment of Weingart Foundation funds to address nonprofits’ most fundamental needs.
V. Optional Questions about Grantees’ Fiscal Condition and Outlook

In addition to soliciting feedback about its own performance, the Weingart Foundation used the opportunity of this survey to learn how the economic crisis and subsequent recession have affected RGP grant recipients, the amount of buffer they have to withstand economic hardships, and to understand how they are viewing their economic futures.

RGP grant recipients hold relatively upbeat perceptions about how the financial crisis and subsequent recession have affected their ability to fulfill their missions. As the chart indicates, 20% report that their capacity has been strengthened, 60% that their organizational capacity has remained the same, and 16% that it has been weakened.

Grantees rounded out the numerical ratings with comments about their experiences weathering the economic crisis:

- We have become more focused and our individual donors have grown.
- It (our organization) has strengthened, but not without sacrifices and hard choices being made. Our organization is still observing work furlough days, and we were able to stabilize our budget.
- Our capacity to serve has been relatively stable. However, due to the economic downturn, we have had to serve more clients with the same resources. Also, client outcomes related to self-sufficiency, e.g., housing, employment, have been impacted.
- After a period of diminished capacity, we are returning to pre-crisis capacity.
- We have been challenged to do more with less and address the increasing needs of homeless youth resulting from other agencies reducing services.

On a more sobering note:

- The current budget crisis for FY 2011-2012 looks like it could be devastating.
There is good news and bad news about RGP grantees’ perceptions about fiscal challenges in 2011. On the bright side of the coin, only 20% see 2011 as more economically challenging than 2010. For most, the prospect is that 2011 will be equally challenging (63%), and three respondents (11%) foresee that it will be less challenging. The financial outlook for RGP grantees is slightly more positive than it is for SGP grantees and unsuccessful applicants. This may reflect the fact that the economy looked brighter when RGP grantees were surveyed in January 2011 than it did when SGP grantees were contacted in the summer of 2010. Perhaps most realistically, one RGP grantee commented, “(Our outlook) will depend on the budget that is passed … as it could change our need tremendously.”

Approximately half the RGP grantees report three or fewer months of reserves to weather hard times. Another half reported that they maintain more than three months of operating reserves. Overall, it is somewhat surprising that the larger and older organizations in the RGP do not appear to have more months of reserves than the SGP grantees or applicants.

V. Optional Question about Capacity Building Report

The survey took the opportunity to query grantees about whether they had read the recent report published by the Weingart Foundation entitled, “Fortifying L.A.’s Nonprofit Organizations: Capacity-Building Needs and Services in Los Angeles County.” Twelve of the 27 respondents (44%) to that question had read the report, and one commented that, “The results were interesting in allowing us to compare our results to those of the community.” Of the twelve that had read the report, fifty-five percent either strongly agreed or agreed with the report’s findings and the rest simply checked the box that said, “Not Applicable.”
VI. Conclusion

This assessment of applicant and grantees’ experiences with the revised Regular Grant Program has provided the Foundation with much to be proud about. Their own voices provide an excellent summary of grantees’ overall positive responses to the program and their experiences working with the Foundation in the process of obtaining a grant.

We welcome any additional comments or feedback that you may wish to add here.

THANK YOU SOOO VERY MUCH

We would like to thank Weingart for its support. We would not have been able to increase our fund development capacity without it.

Thank you for your interest and support.

1) The application was clear but the page limitations based on the amount of information requested was a bit challenging. 2) It is helpful that their reporting is streamlined and is not overly staff intensive.

We really appreciate the in-person meeting with the program officer, allowing us to explain and clarify our organization and the contents of the application.

The process was straightforward and thoughtful; we really felt that Weingart was sincerely invested in the success of our organization and the population we serve.

We appreciate the Weingart Foundation's ongoing commitment to the community and are so grateful for their areas of support, their professionalism and attention to detail through the proposal process. Their support helps us attract other funders to our mission.

We were pleased to have the support of the Foundation and appreciate the communications that have taken place before and since the award.

I have written grants to Weingart for various organizations over the past 15 years. It has always been an organized and effective process. Support from the foundation has made a critical difference for each of the organizations I have represented. It is a pleasure working with your staff.

It is always a pleasure to work with the Weingart Foundation -- one of the most forward thinking and professional organizations around.

We are grateful to the foundation for all they do to help us and other in the nonprofit world. thank you

This funding has allowed us to maintain and continue our services. Your funding for core support has been critical.

We have been very pleased with the application and award process. Having Weingart as a supporter has improved our funding prospects, because other funders are more receptive to learning more about a project that has substantial support from a major private foundation.

Thank you!

In addition to this positive feedback, the information survey respondents have provided will allow Foundation staff to reflect on this program, who it reaches, and some of their grantees’ thoughtful comments and observations to decide whether the program fully addresses the Foundation’s own goals and values or whether there are changes that the staff will wish to make.