

Taking Note: The Demographics of Grant Dollars

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Last week, after my presentation to the National Council on the Arts, newly appointed member Aaron Dworkin raised his hand. What did I think of a report just issued by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP)? I mumbled something about my high regard for its author Holly Sidford. I also referred to a recent blog entry by Diane Ragsdale. But later I realized that, apart from a few concessions to the report's theme—a perceived lack of “cultural equity” in the arts ecosystem, as reflected by funding and programming priorities—I hadn't answered Aaron's question. Not really.

Here, then, are one researcher's musings on the NCRP report. My remarks are far from comprehensive; rather, I've chosen to highlight additional questions which, if answered, may complicate its conclusions.

According to NCRP's analysis of data from the Foundation Center, the vast majority of foundations fail to show that their arts-and-cultural grant dollars directly benefit at least one of 11 vulnerable populations identified by NCRP. Of 836 foundations that made funding “with a primary or secondary purpose of arts and culture” in 2007-2009, only 10 percent were classified as benefiting one of the 11 population groups. Eighteen percent gave at least 20 percent of their arts funding explicitly to “marginalized” communities, and only 5 percent gave 25 percent or more to “arts and social justice” programs.

The report also found that funders with lower proportional giving to arts and culture are more, rather than less, likely to award arts/cultural grant dollars explicitly to benefit marginalized groups. Between 2007 and 2009, “grant dollars donated by funders who committed just 5 percent to the arts were almost twice as likely to be classified as benefitting marginalized groups as the grants given by funders who donated more than 25 percent of their grants to the arts,” the report states.

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