



Applicant and Grantee Survey Results 2015

Learning from the opinions that matter most to us.



At Great Lakes we do many things to be effective in our work, but perhaps nothing is more important than self-reflection.

And as we enter the fourth year of a renewed grantmaking strategy launched in 2011, we feel the time is right to report on how both grant applicants and grantees think we're doing.

This data not only summarizes those opinions, it benchmarks our performance against a database of responses from more than 40,000 grantees of nearly 300 funders we respect, compiled by the nonprofit Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP).

Simply, we've learned how we stack up against the best.

By understanding—and sharing—what we do well and where we can improve, we look to shape future strategies and processes in informed and transparent ways that will benefit future applicants and grantees, as well as the educational priorities we share with them.



Richard D. George

President and Chief Executive Officer
Great Lakes Higher Education Corporation & Affiliates

SURVEY PROCESS

The findings reported here are based on two confidential surveys sent at our request by the CEP on September 2, 2014.

- **One was sent to 179 individuals who applied for a 2013-2014 grant, but were declined funding.**
- **The other went to 99 individuals who applied for and received funding during the 2013-2014 grant year.**

Survey recipients were asked approximately 50 questions. Some required a yes/no response and others were answered on a scale of 1 to 7. Additionally, there were opportunities for respondents to provide specific feedback. CEP presented results to us on a percentile scale with the 50th percentile representing the median or typical funder. A score above 50% indicated we out-performed a typical funder, while a score below 50% told us we lagged behind.

NOTED STRENGTHS

An evaluation of survey results identified **three broad categories** where Great Lakes was **rated more positively** than peers.

1 Impact on grantee/applicant's field

Respondents overwhelmingly agree that Great Lakes is making a significant difference in getting more low-income students, students of color and first-generation students to and through college. On this measure, applicants rated us in the **87th percentile** and grantees rated us in the **79th percentile**.

“Great Lakes staff are knowledgeable and personable. I am especially impressed that they have used the results of past projects they have funded to determine what does and does not work. They know low-income students of color and have shaped RFPs that reflect that.”

— Survey Respondent

2 Reporting and evaluation process

Because we are committed to learning from the experiences of grant recipients to inform future grant opportunities, our reporting requirements are more thorough and exacting than many others. We believe that helps grantees be more successful **and helps us understand what specific interventions are most effective** in getting students to and through college.

While grantees confirmed that they spend more time than average completing our reports, they say they're happy to do so. They ranked us in the **83rd percentile** for helping them strengthen their programs through our reporting requirements.

“By asking tough questions, by expecting thorough reports, consistently working toward the goal of more low-income students earning college degrees, Great Lakes has made our organization better. We are focused on continuous improvement, and Great Lakes is the only funding organization I know of that I would put in that category. They are not always ‘easy’ to work with—the expectations are very high—but it’s always a pleasure.”

— Survey Respondent

3 Impact on grantee organizations

Given that we're still relative "newcomers" to the world of educational philanthropy, we are very pleased that grantees rate Great Lakes **on par with fellow grantmakers** for our ability to positively affect their organizations.

Furthermore, grantees rate us in the **78th percentile** for median grant size—meaning that our financial commitments provide grantees with significant resources to advance their goals.

"Great Lakes knows the need for all students to be college and career ready. It demonstrates this knowledge by supporting a range of community projects and educational initiatives that serve to strengthen the preparation of students for tomorrow. It acknowledges a range of needs to increase quality of life for all."

— Survey Respondent

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH

As much as we enjoy positive feedback, we value candid assessments of **what we could be doing differently and better.**

CEP identified three areas for improvement. We're happy to share them here—along with **our plans** for addressing them.

1 Explanations for declined applications

Applicants told us they wanted **more clarification** on why they were not selected for funding. Fair enough. In the past we did not provide specific feedback on denied applications; instead we offered general reasons why others were selected. **We understand that was inadequate.** After all, we want applicants to be successful in obtaining funds—whether from us or others—and we now better appreciate our obligation to help them write effective applications.

We have recently initiated these new practices, and they are already generating positive feedback:

- Providing specific reasons in declination letters about why an application was not selected for funding.
- Making Program Managers available to declined applicants to offer them one-on-one feedback on their applications.

2 Program Manager relationships

Grantees told us they'd like our Program Managers to be more **meaningfully connected to their communities**, so we can better appreciate the unique challenges grant recipients are facing and how our funds are being used to address them.

Understanding the role local context provides in creating—and solving—problems is **valuable information we should not be overlooking** because it can help us make sure that when we replicate and scale a program we do so in an informed way.

To this end we will start:

- Reaching out to grantees periodically during the grant year—to learn how programs are working, and also to have the opportunity to learn more about our grantees, their students and their communities.
- Providing feedback on how a grantee's program performs in comparison to other programs—sharing successful strategies.
- Facilitating interaction between grantees to share best practices and other strategies designed to promote success for everyone.

3 Impact on grantee organizations

Both applicants and grantees shared frustration over the perception that Great Lakes routinely changes the focus of its grants.

While we have always adhered to a disciplined grantmaking strategy, it's apparent we have **not been clear or consistent in explaining it**, so the concerns reported to us are understandable—and we apologize.

Our strategy is, and will always be, defined as follows:

We offer competitive limited-duration learning grants—to learn as much as possible about finding solutions to a specific issue. Our goal is not to sustain local programs for an extended period. Rather, we want to identify specific strategies that may be implemented at scale.

Bottom line:

We want to promote institutionalized change that others can learn about and adopt on their campuses or in their communities. It's about the continuation of successful ideas and not simply the execution of projects—and, ultimately, the creation of a legacy of greater opportunity for generations of students.

OUR PHILANTHROPY TEAM



Amy Kerwin
Vice President—
Community Investments



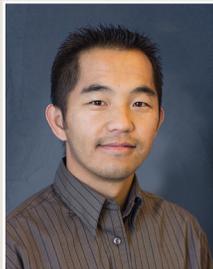
Ben Dobner
Director—
Education Grantmaking



Alex Gagnon
Program Manager



Ellen Keller
Program Manager



Tou Ya Khang
Program Manager



Nikki Wachter
Program Manager

For more information
community.mygreatlakes.org

