

# GEO Member Story



OREGON ARTS  
COMMISSION

## *How the Oregon Arts Commission developed a small operating grants pilot program to diversify its grantmaking and offer more equitable and inclusive funding to organizations it wouldn't normally reach*

While developing its strategic plan for 2015 – 2020, the Oregon Arts Commission convened nonprofits and community stakeholders on a 14 city listening tour to find out more about the needs and challenges throughout Oregon. The meetings took place in both rural and urban areas over about six months. A direct outcome of the listening sessions is the Oregon Arts Commission's small operating grants pilot program.

OAC used the information it collected during the listening sessions to shift its programming and resources to move closer to its goals of stimulating opportunities to pursue learning in and through the arts, as well as improving its own efficiency and effectiveness to better serve artists, arts organizations and client agencies. OAC established its two-year pilot program in 2015 to provide operating support for locally-based arts organizations with an annual operating budget of less than \$150,000. One of the program's goals is to make it easier and less time consuming for organizations to access and apply for operating support. The impetus for the small operating grants pilot program came about through listening to nonprofits, a commitment to provide the types of support nonprofits need most and a desire to reduce the burden on grantees.

### **Listening to nonprofits**

The Oregon Arts Commission engaged grantees in conversations and dialogue about the challenges nonprofits face and about how certain grantmaking practices may or may not be supporting nonprofit success. The listening tour gave OAC multiple opportunities to hear firsthand from its community, which inspired it to reflect and think strategically about ways to improve its practices to provide the support its grantees need to create real results. Brian Wagner, OAC's community development coordinator says "our culture of providing support to larger organizations ran contrary to the needs that we were hearing primarily but not solely in rural communities. We wanted to make sure we were implementing a program that would provide support to many of the communities that have not been served by OAC in the past."

Already offering operating support to grantees, OAC's existing funding offerings were validated during interactions with current and potential grantees. Wagner says, "A consistent message that we heard from leaders of arts organizations is that operating support is one of the most important things that we can do to support their organizations. It's a difficult kind of funding to find and receive and we are one of the few partners focused solely on the arts that provide funding for their basic operations. It's a significant thing to them and we're not having to guess at that. We're being told that very clearly by leaders in the arts community in both rural and urban populations."

## Providing the types of support nonprofits need most

Listening to nonprofits is helping OAC provide the types of support nonprofits need most – more equitable and inclusive funding. Many of Oregon’s arts nonprofits have budgets well under the Oregon Arts Commission’s original \$150,000 threshold for operating support. Recognizing that this limitation made the OAC’s most significant funding stream unavailable to a large percentage of the state’s arts providers, the commission implemented the small operating grants program to extend meaningful support to these organizations and the populations they serve. Wagner says, “There certainly are risks associated with the small operating grants program but the risk taking helps us to understand where the needs are. We don’t know who we don’t know, so part of this is getting to know the field better and the cost associated with the risk is worth it for that reason. Looking at the way our guidelines are written and the way we operate allows us to address and identify systemic blocks to funding.”

## Reducing the burden on grantees

By moving to the noncompetitive operating support pilot program, OAC was essentially able to triple the level of support it could give small organizations through a grant that could provide support every year. The program has also streamlined and simplified the grant application and review process with the goal of making it easier and less time consuming for organizations to apply for operating support. “Many of the smaller, often volunteer run organizations have capacity issues around fundraising. We wanted to streamline and simplify the grantmaking process as much as possible. The application is designed so that a volunteer run organization would be able to complete it in a couple of hours.” says Wagner.

The two year pilot program has now gone through one full year of the grantmaking cycle – application, award and completion. Wagner says “It is at this point that we will start working on some of the evaluative pieces related to the grant program so if it’s not hitting the target we can retool it so that it gets closer to achieving the goals we have for it.” As a part of the evaluation process, the Oregon Arts Commission will be going back to the field to ask questions about what Oregonians were impacted by the program’s funds to determine if it effectively increased its reach and relationship to Oregon’s arts providers. In the meantime, OAC will continue to streamline its grants programs to the extent it can while still making sure to remain mindful that the grants it provides have the impact that the public intended.

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To learn more about the Oregon Arts Commission, visit: <http://www.oregonartscommission.org/>

**GEO resources related to this member story:**

### ***General Operating Support: Action Guide***



### ***The Smarter Grantmaking Playbook***



### ***On The Money***

