



6114 LaSalle Avenue, No. 636

Oakland, CA 94611

510.339.7078 *tel*

510.339.7978 *fax*

[putnamcic.com](http://putnamcic.com)

# **NEW CONNECTIONS FUND GRANTSEEKER FEEDBACK STUDY**

PREPARED FOR THE JAMES IRVINE FOUNDATION

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Kristen Putnam, MSW, Principal  
Caroline Krauskopf, PhD, Senior Advisor

Putnam Community Investment Consulting  
[www.putnamcic.com](http://www.putnamcic.com)

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## Background

In 2004-05, the James Irvine Foundation conducted a pilot year of the New Connections Fund (NCF), designed to be an open, competitive funding process for “unsolicited” grants. The NCF considers applications from any California-based nonprofit organization for discrete projects within Arts, California Perspectives, and Youth program areas. Three rounds of funding were solicited during the NCF pilot year with over \$3 million awarded to over 106 organizations (90% of which were new to the Foundation) during the first two rounds.

## Objectives and Methodology

In July 2005, the NCF Feedback Study was conducted to help staff assess whether and how the NCF should continue. Objectives of this study were to:

1. Determine grantseekers’ and grantees’ perceptions of NCF goals, NCF application process, and NCF accessibility, competitiveness, and fairness.
2. Assess grantseekers’ and grantees’ expectations for and satisfaction with interaction and support.
3. Solicit suggestions for improvements and outreach.
4. Understand external perspectives of the Irvine Foundation.

Irvine retained Putnam Community Investment Consulting to conduct the NCF Feedback Study to assure objective, unbiased information and preserve respondent confidentiality. This Executive Summary summarizes findings from that study, and is accompanied by a PowerPoint document, New Connections Fund Grantseeker Feedback Project: Key Findings (August 14, 2005), which provides additional data and findings.

Online survey. Grantees and grantseekers from Rounds 1, 2, and 3 were invited to participate in an online survey in July 2005. Three hundred and fourteen organizations responded for a response rate of 55% (59 funded, 41 denied, and 214 not yet determined<sup>1</sup>). Table 1 below presents the characteristics of online survey participants by program area.

**Table 1.**

	Number	Percent
Arts/Artistic Creativity	102	33%
Arts/Cultural Participation	90	29%
Youth/College Knowledge	64	20%
Youth/Academic Engagement	14	5%
California Perspectives	44	14%

<sup>1</sup> The third round of funding had closed at the time of this study, but funding decisions had not yet been made.

Organizations throughout California responded, including Los Angeles area (31%), San Francisco Bay Area (24%), Central Valley (13%), Inland Empire (5%), and from the rest of the State (28%).

Telephone survey. Round 2 grantseekers and grantees were randomly selected to participate in the telephone survey. Twelve organizations were interviewed in July 2005: four each represented Arts/Artistic Creativity, Arts/Cultural Participation, and Youth/College Knowledge. One-half of the respondents were grantees, and one-half were declined grantseekers (all declined grantseekers were declined for reasons of “merit” and not because they did not meet funding guidelines). Respondents from throughout the State were interviewed, including four from San Francisco Bay Area, two from Los Angeles, two from the Central Valley, and four from other regions.

## Results

Purpose of the NCF. Respondents had positive and accurate views of NCF goals: 52 percent said the goal was to fund organizations that have not previously received Irvine funding; 46 percent said to find nonprofit organizations doing excellent work; 39 percent said to identify nonprofits that are not known to Irvine; and 34 percent said to offer open and competitive funding. There were no significant differences in responses among geographic, program area, or other subgroups.

NCF application process. Overall, most respondents had favorable perceptions of applying to the NCF, stating there was sufficient information and the process was straightforward. Almost all respondents were experienced grantseekers who had previous experience with online applications. They reported that the NCF template and web resources compared very favorably with other online experiences: stating it was “a very solid process,” “worked well,” and was “easy to follow.” Web resources were widely used and rated significantly higher by Round 3 applicants. Grantees rated the web resources more positively than denied grantseekers. Table 2 presents participants’ perceptions of the helpfulness of each component of the NCF website and applications process.

**Table 2:**

	Extremely/Very Helpful	Somewhat Helpful	Not very/Not at all Helpful
Online Grants Database	35%	29%	7%
List of NCF Grants	53%	32%	5%
Guidelines for NCF	82%	15%	2%
Program Area Guidelines	77%	17%	2%
Tips for Grantseekers	58%	29%	4%
Grantseeker FAQs	59%	25%	6%
NCF Application Template	75%	17%	6%

Most respondents reported having questions during the application process (41% were programmatic, 28% technical, and 21% eligibility), and were neutral to moderately satisfied with their ability to get their questions answered. Predictably, success in receiving grant funding importantly predicted opinions, with awarded grantees having much more positive feedback than denied organizations. Denied organizations were more likely to have questions and were less satisfied with the information and answers provided.

NCF accessibility, competitiveness and fairness. Respondents had highly favorable opinions of the NCF overall: 83 percent stated it was an “important” funding source, and 67 percent said it was “unique.” Almost half (45%) stated the NCF was “extremely” or “very” open and accessible to all types of nonprofit organizations. The NCF was perceived to be a highly competitive process, even by denied grantseekers. Overall, awarded grantees were significantly more likely to have positive opinions than denied grantseekers. Respondents from arts organizations had more favorable opinions than those from other program areas. Respondents from Central Valley and Inland Empire organizations were more likely to perceive the NCF as unique.

Many respondents felt the online process enhanced fairness, stating the “clarity of guidelines” and “explicitness” helped small organizations. Access to and problems with technology, however, were seen as barriers by some. The low level of interaction with Irvine staff was perceived negatively, particularly by organizations serving diverse communities: “if you’re not going to talk, you’re not really open.”

Interaction and support. NCF’s limits for communication with applicants were clear to most respondents: 64 percent expected little to no interaction. However, many respondents were frustrated by the low level of communication with the Foundation. Expectations for communication and actual interaction decreased over time. Overall, 46 percent of respondents did interact with Irvine staff during the application process, and 64 percent described that interaction as extremely or very helpful. Some respondents serving multi-cultural or low-income communities expressed particular dissatisfaction with the limits on interaction asserting that the Foundation “can’t understand diverse communities without dialogue.”

Grantees were predominately thrilled with the NCF and attributed significant positive impact to having an Irvine grant: 71 percent said it had helped attract other funders. In particular, arts organizations described the “Irvine stamp of approval,” and said the award had “increased the perception of artistic seriousness of the organization.” Almost all grantees intend to apply for another grant, but most were cautious about whether having been awarded one Irvine grant would help them get another.

Sixty-three percent of denied grantseekers (46% denied for lack of merit, 54% denied because they were out-of-guidelines) attributed their rejection to competitiveness, although many expressed a lot of frustration with the “form letter” rejection. Most, however, would look for future funding opportunities with the Irvine Foundation.

Suggestions for improvements and outreach. The most frequently suggested improvement to the NCF involved increasing interaction and communication. Respondents wanted e-mails, meetings, feedback, and technical support. In addition, some suggested changes to the online template to allow attachments, additional space to respond to application questions, or more information provided on the website. Key suggestions for outreach involved use of ethnic and trade media, and networking with community foundations.

External perspectives of the Irvine Foundation. Overall, respondents hold the Foundation in very high regard. Arts organizations, in particular, were extremely favorable about the Foundation's reputation for funding excellence and innovation. Sixty-four percent of respondents overall stated Irvine treated them "extremely" or "very" fairly, with awarded grantees being even more positive. Some respondents from organizations serving diverse or low-income communities, however, had less favorable opinions. Among this group, there were some perceptions that Irvine "doesn't know how to work with non-mainstream organizations."

### Summary of Key Findings

1. Overall respondents had positive and fairly accurate view of NCF goals.
2. Applicants had generally favorable views of the NCF application process. They were most pleased with Web resources and the majority found the online template to be user-friendly.
3. Expectations for interaction with Irvine Foundation staff were low, but dissatisfaction about the lack of communication persists among some grantseekers. Desired improvements commonly involved increased communication.
4. Success of grant request importantly drives opinions. Organizations that were denied a grant were more negative about everything, but the vast majority would recommend NCF to colleagues. Grantees were hopeful for future Irvine funding, but not counting on it.
5. Most grantseekers see NCF as fair and accessible. The limits on interaction were seen by some to hamper openness, especially among groups serving diverse communities. Technological skills were perceived as a real barrier for some respondents.
6. Respondents overall hold very favorable opinions of the Irvine Foundation.

## **Conclusions**

These data suggest the NCF is perceived to be a genuinely competitive process by both grantees and rejected grantseekers. Respondents reported very favorable opinions of both the NCF and the Irvine Foundation as accessible and fair. The NCF is perceived to be a unique and important funding opportunity, particularly in the arts and in the Central Valley and Inland Empire. Most organizations understand the limits on interaction, although many would prefer more communication. The low level of interaction was seen as particularly onerous by some organizations serving diverse or low-income populations/neighborhoods, where several suggested it served as a real barrier. Increased outreach to these communities via ethnic media and community foundations may alleviate some of these concerns. In general, however, this Feedback Study indicates the NCF is meeting Foundation goals of being open and attracting new organizations to Irvine.