

GEO Member Spotlight



Christine Elbel,
executive director
of the Fleishhacker
Foundation

Supporting effective organizations can be described as both an art and a science, and the GEO community of grantmakers is comprised of many organizations that are skilled artists in the medium of grantmaking. This month we're highlighting the Fleishhacker Foundation, a grantmaker focused on the arts and pre-collegiate education that has embraced grantmaking practices that both prove effective and foster artistic creativity.

The Fleishhacker Foundation was founded in 1947 by its namesake, Mortimer Fleishhacker, Sr., who also was a founder of the Community Chest (a forerunner of the United Way). The foundation was instrumental in bringing the American Conservatory Theater to San Francisco and helping it to thrive. Today, the third and fourth generations of the descendants of Mortimer Fleishhacker, Sr. are the foundation's trustees.

When it comes to funding the arts, Fleishhacker Foundation Executive Director Christine Elbel said the foundation is focused on funding that enables artists to feel supported in their ability to push the envelope and develop new forms of expression.

“One of the things that arts funders can model is that making a grant is not a sure thing. Certainly an arts grant is not a sure thing if you are funding the development of an artistic work, where the process can be more important than ‘the product,’” Elbel said.

Elbel, who is the foundation's only full-time staff member, added that funders wanting to support artistic creativity can embrace the same practices as funders who seek greater innovation in other focus areas — namely with general operating support for grantees.

She described how artists' creativity can be stifled when they are expected to describe in detail an artistic project far in advance of the outcome, especially when the project requires an extended amount of time to complete and funders aren't open to changes that would fall outside of the original description.

The majority of the foundation's grants go to smaller and mid-sized organizations, providing important, timely support that can go a long way towards furthering artistic development.

Since the foundation seeks to foster innovation and experimentation in not only arts organizations but through the larger field as well, much of the grantmaking focus is on the process of developing and presenting new work.

“We're looking at how a project could be important — at the factors and people who are coming together in a certain project. That's what we're supporting,” Elbel said. “We support the process and the potential, and we're completely comfortable with that.”

The foundation also makes unrestricted grants to visual artists through the Eureka Fellowship Program. Grantees are additionally offered career-building opportunities through the Creative Capacity Fund of the Center for Cultural Innovation and United States Artists.

The Fleishhacker Foundation’s work in education, which is currently focused on a K-5 Literacy Initiative, also provides good examples of effective grantmaking practices.

Having such a specific focus on K-5 literacy programs for disadvantaged public school students has allowed the foundation to delve deeper into a core educational need and learn from both grantees and other funders in this arena.

The foundation has encouraged opportunities for grantees and the foundation’s board and staff to discuss key issues, and it plans to create more opportunities involving convening and shared learning to further this initiative.

For more information about the Fleishhacker Foundation, visit www.fleishhackerfoundation.org

During our interview, Christine Elbel mentioned that GEO publications have been particularly helpful in her work with the foundation.

“GEO’s guides are focused, well-presented, helpful and specific. They can particularly provide leadership and new ideas to foundations like ours — which don’t have a budget to go to all of the sector’s convenings, briefings and conferences where field wide topics are discussed,” Elbel said.

Elbel mentioned the following GEO publications as being particularly helpful in her work with the Fleishhacker Foundation:

[On The Money](#)



[Due Diligence Done Well](#)



[Is Grantmaking Getting Smarter?](#)



Examples of organizations supported by the Fleishhacker Foundation

- [American Conservatory Theater](#)
- [Joe Goode Performance Group](#) (pictured below)
- [The Marsh](#)
- [The Luggage Store](#)
- [Southern Exposure](#)

