



Process Improvement Report: 2019-20 Grantmaking

Executive Summary

In advance of its 2019-20 grantmaking process, PCL made many changes to increase equity and transparency in response to recommendations from a Portland State University study examining PCL's past grantmaking processes. PCL collected feedback from reviewers (n=54/63) and applicants (n=44/131) after their participation in the 2019-20 grantmaking process.

Overall, reviewers' high satisfaction with the process. This finding coupled with with strong past public input that PCL increase community involvement in its funding process points toward continuing community-based review of applications. Yet, both reviewers and applicants noted needed improvements. Applicant feedback suggests PCL should do a better job helping applicants understand the review process—recruitment, qualifications, training of reviewers. Similarly, reviewers' comments on content of the review process—equity, diversity, inclusion focus in the application, application questions & score criteria/form, and reviewer training— raise questions about how best to involve and prepare volunteers for the review process.

Applicants noted high satisfaction with PCL staff's frequent, supportive communication throughout the application and granting process, and with flexible options to provide testimony to the Allocation Committee. This feedback suggests PCL should continue its communication and transparency practices.

Applicants indicated the least satisfaction with the features of decision-making process. They expressed some dissatisfaction with the Allocation Committee's approach to decision-making- process used to facilitate decisions, the Committee's rationale for its decisions, and staff's explanation of funding recommendations. It raises questions for how to revamp the Committee's process for funding decisions, including the order and approach for deciding which applicants to fund, whether staff should continue making funding recommendations and how to support applicants through the decision-making process.

Introduction

This report summarizes feedback from samples of application reviewers and applicants in PCL's 2019-20 grantmaking process. Last fall, PCL staff provided a preliminary report focused on funding results and providing some preliminary analysis on feedback gathered through reviewer and applicant surveys. This report focuses exclusively on reviewer and applicant survey feedback, including implications for improving PCL's grantmaking process in the future.

Background: PCL's Two-Year Planning Process

In advance of PCL's 2019-20 grantmaking process PCL conducted a nearly two-year planning process. In the summer of 2018, Portland Children's Levy staff prepared a report, [Portland's Children: Overview of Key Local Data](#), summarizing data from various local and state sources on population characteristics and outcomes. These data helped inform funding priorities. PCL hired Empress Rules Equity Consulting to conduct a 9-month community engagement process. Empress Rules surveyed 400 community members and 100 service providers and hosted 8 focus groups reaching 85 people. The [Portland Children's Levy Community Engagement Report](#) outlines findings and equity priorities for PCL grantmaking, Levy-wide in each of PCL's six program areas. Community Engagement results were incorporated into PCL's [Program Area Strategies for 2020-2025](#).

Grantmaking Process Improvement: PCL also contracted with Portland State University's Center for Improvement of Child & Family Services to review the 2014 Levy grantmaking process and recommend improvements. PSU's qualitative evaluation assessed strengths and challenges, particularly focused on equity and transparency. Their extensive review resulted in a final report, [The Portland Children's Levy: Review of the Grantmaking Process](#) with 30 recommendations focused on improving transparency and equity practices in the process.

Outline of PCL's 2019-20 Funding Process

In response to community engagement and the grantmaking improvement recommendations, PCL implemented several changes to its grantmaking process, such as:

- **Redesigning the Request for Investment application and scoring criteria** to focus more on applicant organizations' commitment and practices **for racial equity, diversity, and inclusion** and in alignment with results from Community Engagement
- **Providing more transparent, ongoing support to applicants** through an FAQ; a weekly email digest to applicants of all questions they submitted and PCL staff's responses; using PCL website to provide access to application materials and supports; and frequent email and social media updates from PCL to applicants about process timeline and steps
- **Recruiting, screening, training, and involving a large group of community volunteer reviewers**, with experience in PCL program areas and with organizational practices focused on racial equity, diversity, and inclusion; providing individual check-ins with PCL staff and stipends to reviewers (see Appendix for details the review process including reviewer recruitment, screening, and training of reviewers)
- **Providing applicants with staff's funding recommendations and with reviewers scores sheets** prior to applicant testimony and Allocation Committee funding decision meetings; options for **written & video public testimony to the Allocation Committee**.

FINDINGS: 2019-20 Funding Process Feedback

REVIEWER FEEDBACK

After the review period closed, PCL staff conducted an on-line, anonymous survey using Survey Monkey. Of the 63 community volunteer reviewers, 54 responded (86% response rate). Among respondents, 26 of 53 (48%) identified as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) while 4 did not answer the question and 24 identified as white. See appendix for survey methods and additional survey data details.

STRENGTHS of the Review Process

Reviewers expressed satisfaction with their involvement and the application framework.

Being a Reviewer: All reviewers “strongly agree (40)/agree (14)” that being a grant reviewer for PCL was a positive experience. 25 reviewers wrote positive comments in the survey’s open-ended questions, expressing appreciation for being involved, enjoying learning about the Levy, and feeling generally well supported as reviewers. *“Loved the opportunity to be involved and really appreciate the detailed staff work. So apparent how much thought the staff put into the review process: the training sessions, the scoring, the bias awareness piece, etc. Thank you!”*

Understanding Applicants’ commitment to Equity, Diversity and Inclusion: 53 out of 54 respondents “strongly agree/agreed” the application questions focused on racial equity, diversity & inclusion (Section I) helped them understand the applicant’s commitment to racial equity, diversity & inclusion.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT according to Reviewers

The reviewers’ individual comments highlighted improvements needed. Out of 54 respondents, 38 gave comments to open-ended questions seeking suggestions on 6 features of the review process. Some comments contained multiple suggestions for improvements to different features of the process. Some themes emerged, yet some comments coalesced around suggestions that contradict each other. Topics below are ordered by most to least comments provided and call out themes per topic. See the appendix for more detail on types of suggestions offered.

Application Focus on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion: (race/ethnicity of respondents: 11 BIPOC, 4 white, 1 not given). Respondents mentioned wanting more specific structure in this section of the application (9 mentions), others said it needs more flexibility and culturally responsive structure (5 mentions), and some noted reviewer skills in equity, diversity, inclusion were important for quality review (3 mentions). In addition to the comments, Likert question data indicate that that 7 respondents weren’t sure if the “criteria in the score form were effective to assess the level of organizational commitment to racial equity, diversity & inclusion.”

This reviewer’s comment acknowledges the tension between more standardized questions and a responsive structure to the application, *“I appreciate trying to be objective with race - and this form was great in most ways! - but there are many communities doing this work who don't fit*

into the categories. ie, not collecting immigrant/refugee status in Latino communities; language counts not often lining up for many communities that speak many languages. I am not sure how to accommodate that tension of wanting to have standardized questions and understanding that a lot of the standardized questions come from a white starting point. Maybe even just something like, "if you were not able to fill out any of these sections (etc), please explain why."

Application Questions: (race/ethnicity of respondents: 7 BIPOC, 6 white, 1 not given). Respondents generally commented on wanting to reduce burdens for applicants (8 mentions) such as simplification of the application, clarity in its instructions and expectations of applicants, and additional support provided to applicants to complete it. This reviewer's comment highlights the tenor of comments reviewers had about the application questions, *"Application questions - I understand wanting to have a rigorous application process when so much money is available to be given away, but this application was very arduous and surely cost organizations MANY dollars of staff time to complete. Are there ways to simplify? Shorten?"*

Score Form: (race/ethnicity of respondents: 9 BIPOC, 5 white). Respondents suggested options for improving: the mechanics of the form (6 mentions) such as embedding an Excel tool to calculate scores or making it a fillable PDF, and the form's scoring guidance (4 mentions).

PCL Support of Reviewers: (race/ethnicity of respondents: 5 BIPOC, 3 white). Respondents suggested improvements to the reviewer training, including more practice scoring for reviewers (5 mentions), and suggested PCL convene reviewer panels next time to discuss the applications they read and scored (2 mentions).

Time review and Score Applications: (3 mentions; 2 BIPOC, 1 white): Respondents suggested modifying the reviewer workload, such as more time or fewer applications to review.

Stipends for Reviewers (3 mentions; 2 BIPOC, 1 white): Respondents suggested increasing the stipend amount provided to reviewers.

APPLICANT FEEDBACK

After the conclusion of PCL's 2020 grantmaking, PCL staff sent an anonymous survey to 131 people (2 individuals listed on each PCL application) to elicit applicant's feedback on the entire funding process. Of the 131 recipients, 44 responded (less than 35% receiving the survey) to all Likert questions and 22 offered comments. Because the survey was anonymous, we do not know how many applicants are represented by these 44 respondents. PCL advises caution interpreting these results due to small sample size and uncertainty of how representative it is of the applicant pool's perspective. See appendix for survey methods and additional data details.

STRENGTHS of the Application Process

Applicant survey responses indicate 3 key strengths in the application process.

PCL Communication/Transparency: Over 85% of respondents "strongly agreed/agreed" that PCL communicated clearly about the entire funding process and timeline; that the weekly Q/A

updates from staff provided transparent support to applicants; and that they found it useful that PCL provided funding recommendations well before the deadline for applicant testimony. Moreover, in responses to open-ended questions, 8 of 22 respondents provided positive feedback; five mentioned PCL's clear and transparent communication during the process, and three mentioned keeping the entire process moving during the pandemic. This respondent's comment reflects this positive feedback, *"The communication was amazing! Above and beyond what I expected, especially given the circumstances of COVID-19, but also prior to the pandemic. Thank you for the thorough information and support."*

Testimony Changes: 89% of survey respondents "strongly agree/agree" that the options to submit written and/or recorded oral testimony were better than the option to provide oral testimony during a public meeting.

Reviewer Score forms to All Applicants: All survey respondents "strongly agree/agree" that they found it helpful that PCL provided them with the *reviewers' score forms* for their application before the deadline to submit testimony in April.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT according to Applicants

Applicants feedback points to 2 areas for improvement.

Allocation Committee Decision-Making Process: Survey respondents expressed the most dissatisfaction with the Allocation Committee's approach to decision making. In their Likert question responses 27% of respondents "strongly disagree/disagree" that they understood the process used to facilitate the meetings; 20% "strongly disagree/disagree" that they understood the rationale the committee members used in their decisions; and 14% "strongly disagree/disagree" that they understood the information staff provided to explain funding recommendations. Among the 14 open-ended survey responses offering feedback for improvement, 5 comments mentioned improving the Committee's approach to the process. Suggestions did not coalesce around a theme. Ideas included: members should explain their rationale better if they propose to fund a lower scoring application; consider getting recommendations not from staff since the Committee tends to follow staff recommendations; follow RFI guidelines and don't propose to fund something the applicant didn't propose; consider not having elected officials on the committee.

Review Process: Reviewers and Scoring Criteria: 20 of 44 (45%) of survey respondents were "neutral" (not satisfied or dissatisfied) with the process PCL used to recruit volunteer reviewers, and 3 were dissatisfied. Likewise, 8 respondents were "neutral" and 6 dissatisfied with the scoring criteria used to evaluate applications. Among 14 open-ended responses offering feedback for improvement, 3 comments mentioned the review process, but no themes emerged. Concerns included: interrater reliability; reviewers' understanding of equity, diversity and inclusion; and reviewers' understanding of a specific evidence-based program proposed by an applicant.

Conclusion and Implications

Taken together, these findings suggest that some shifts PCL made in its grant making process worked well while other features need additional improvement.

Overall, reviewers' high satisfaction with being involved in the process points toward continuing community-based review of applications. Yet, reviewers' and applicants' feedback notes needed improvements. Applicant feedback suggests PCL should do a better job helping applicants understand the review process—recruitment, qualifications, training of reviewers. Similarly, reviewers' comments on content of the review process—equity, diversity, inclusion focus in the application, application questions & score criteria/form, and reviewer training—raise questions about how best to involve and prepare volunteers for the review process. For example, PCL could involve reviewers earlier in the process and over a longer period of time, and reviewers could help design application questions, scoring criteria, and reviewer training.

Applicants noted high satisfaction with PCL staff's frequent, supportive communication throughout the application and granting process, and with flexible options to provide testimony to the Allocation Committee. This feedback suggests PCL should continue its communication and transparency practices.

Applicants indicated the least satisfaction with the features of decision-making process. They expressed some dissatisfaction with the Allocation Committee's approach to decision-making—process used to facilitate decisions, the Committee's rationale for its decisions, and staff's explanation of funding recommendations. It raises questions for how to revamp the Committee's process for funding decisions, including the order and approach for deciding which applicants to fund, whether staff should continue making funding recommendations, and how support applicants through the decision-making process.

APPENDIX: REVIEWER SURVEY DATA

Methods

The survey was emailed to reviewers and open for response over 2 weeks in mid-late February 2020. Respondents received a \$15 gift card for completing the survey. The survey asked 8 questions, including 5 Likert scale and some open-ended questions, seeking feedback on the review process, and it collected some reviewer demographics

Demographics of Reviewer Survey Respondents

Reviewers answered an open-ended question asking to identify their race/ethnicity. PCL staff categorized responses and the table below shows the results. Among reviewer survey respondents, 48% identified as a person of color. Respondents also indicated their age range.

Race/Ethnicity	No. Reviewers	% of Reviewers
African American/Black	7	13.0%
Asian, Pacific Is.	5	9.3%
Latinx	8	14.8%
Middle Eastern	1	1.9%
Multiracial	5	9.3%
White	24	44.4%
Not Given	4	7.4%
Total survey respondents	54	

Age Range	No. Reviewers	% of Reviewers
18-24	2	4%
25-34	16	30%
35-44	13	24%
45-54	11	20%
55-64	8	15%
65+	4	7%
Total respondents	54	

Reviewer Perspective on Review Process: Likert Scale Survey Responses¹

Reviewers responded to 5 Likert-scale questions about the application focus and scoring criteria.

Survey Statements with Number of Responses	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree
The application questions focused on racial equity, diversity & inclusion (Section I) helped me understand the applicant's commitment to racial equity, diversity & inclusion.	21	32	1	0
The criteria in the score form were effective to assess the level of organizational commitment to racial equity, diversity & inclusion.	15	31	7	1
The application questions about program design (Section II) provided a clear framework for understanding proposed programs.	18	33	3	0
The criteria in the score form were effective for evaluating proposed program design.	16	34	2	2
Overall, being a grant reviewer for PCL was a positive experience.	40	14	0	0

Among all 54 reviewers, 16 answered a question indicating the entire process needed “no improvement” while the other 38 respondents identified improvements in 6 specific features of the

¹ No respondents answered “strongly disagree” to any of the Likert scale questions shown in the table.

process (as asked on the survey). More reviewers identifying as BIPOC (n=21) responded that the process needs improvements compared to white reviewers (n=15, and not given =2). In addition, 23 of those 38 provided comments of appreciation for their experience and being part of the process, even alongside providing suggestions for improvement.

Application focus on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion: (race/ethnicity of respondents: 11 BIPOC, 4 W, 1 not given)

- More Structure (9 mentions): 2 mentioned asking applicants about EDI initiatives already done or doing (not plans), 2 mentioned including other forms of equity not just racial; weight Q's about who staff is and relationship to community; clarify definition; ask more specific questions; streamline questions asked; clearer eligibility criteria for applicants (e.g. priority populations)
- Flexible, culturally responsive Structure (4 mentions): 2 mentioned rework application questions so they're not from white dominant perspective, more flexible criteria; if applicant can't answer a Q provide "please explain why" option
- Reviewers skills (3 mentions): 2 mentioned the importance of reviewers' own EDI experience, calibrating reviewers' understanding of EDI, give reviewers examples of high/low scoring responses,

Application questions: (race/ethnicity of respondents: 7 BIPOC, 6 W, 1 not given)

- Reducing burdens on applicants (7 mentions): Support for applicants (3 mentions), or (2) simplify/shorten the RFI, especially if PCL wants new orgs w/ less grant writer experience to apply, clarity in expectations or directions for applicants (2 mentions)
- Better program descriptions from applicants
- Ask questions different ways in RFI
- Assure RFI aligns w/ score form

Score form: (race/ethnicity of respondents: 9 BIPOC, 5 W)

- Mechanics of the form (6 mentions): 2 mentioned embedding a spreadsheet or other calculating tool into the score form; use a fillable PDF; shorten/condense the form; make sure form and app align so it's easier to score each section, including table numbering
- Scoring Instructions (4 mentions): 2 mentioned providing more detail for scoring instructions, add a rubric of points per Q, score app on what's in each section not information provided elsewhere in app

PCL Support of Reviewers: (race/ethnicity of respondents: 5 BIPOC, 3 W)

- Training: 5 mentioned needing/wanting more practice with scoring before doing it w/ applicants (e.g. get practice app to score before training, practice score at least 2 apps, more practice questions to score, during training explicitly walk through questions and tables to explain how to score, would like more assistance scoring); 2 mentioned making the reviewer training more about how to score
- Review panels: 2 mentioned liking a process where people meet/discuss the applications they reviewed

Stipends for Reviewers (2 BIPOC, 1 W): 3 mentioned increasing the stipend for reviewers: at least min wage, \$30 per app b/c close to min wage, extra \$ to help compensate

Time review and Score Applications: (2 BIPOC, 2 W): 2 mentioned wanting more time; one said fewer apps, one said it needed improving but offered no input

APPENDIX: OVERVIEW of PCL GRANT REVIEW PROCESS, 2019-20

Recruitment. From summer through fall of 2019, PCL recruited volunteer grant reviewers. Extensive outreach was done including direct emails, PCL Newsletters, PCL website, social media posts, meeting announcements and community partner communications. People interested in reviewing grants completed an on-line application. They answered basic eligibility questions and were asked to briefly describe their experience and content knowledge related to racial equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) experience and PCL's program areas. Over 100 people applied to serve as volunteer grant reviewers.

Screening, Selection, and Review Teams. PCL staff reviewed each volunteer's application. After screening for basic qualifications (i.e. live, work, play, go to school, and/or worship in the City of Portland; available to complete review process within specified timeframe; and no apparent conflict of interest with applicant organization), and reviewing experience and knowledge questions, staff selected 65 applicants to serve as volunteer reviewers. Staff assigned 5 reviewers to each application and most reviewers were given 9 or 10 applications to score (range 6-11 applications per reviewer). Review teams were balanced to include at least two reviewers with considerable racial equity, diversity and inclusion experience/knowledge. Nearly all reviewers had substantial program area knowledge and experience.

Reviewer Training and Support. In early December 2019, PCL provided two 2.5-hour reviewer training sessions and individual training for those unable to attend a group session. Training included an orientation to the RFIs, funding applications and scoring criteria, the City's conflict of interest rules, bias awareness training and practice scoring part of a sample application. Reviewers received packets of applications to review and checked the applications assigned for any conflicts of interest. Reviewers with conflicts were assigned different applications to review. Staff checked in with each reviewer half-way through the 7-week review process to assess progress and answer questions. Reviewers were encouraged to contact PCL staff anytime they had questions.

A few reviewers were unable to complete the review process due to unforeseen circumstances, resulting in some applications scored by fewer than 5 reviewers: 10 Afterschool applications scored by 4 reviewers; 1 Afterschool application scored by 3 reviewers; 6 Child Abuse Prevention and Intervention applications scored by 4 reviewers; and 6 Hunger Relief applications scored by 4 reviewers.

Reviewer Scores. Volunteers completed their review of proposals by January 31, 2020 using the score form included in the RFI. Each section of the application was scored for a total of 100 points per application (Section I for 36 points, Section II for 54 points, Section III for 10 points). Staff checked math on reviewers' scores in-person using Excel spreadsheets, and reviewers made corrections where necessary on the scoresheets. PCL staff averaged the section scores of all reviewers then added these averaged section scores to get a total score for the application. For organizations that submitted multiple applications, PCL staff averaged Section I scores from all reviewers who scored an application from that organization. For example, if an organization submitted 4 applications, up to 20 reviewers' scores were averaged for the Section I score.

In some cases, there is significant variation in scores for the same application. The average variation in Section I scores was 11.7 points (across 62 organizations), and 12.3 points for Section II scores (across 116 applications). Averaging the scores for each section helps lessen the effects of score variation among reviewers, but staff acknowledges this is imperfect. Due to large variations between high and low scores on some applications, staff decided not to eliminate any applications from consideration for failing to meet minimum score requirements set in the RFI.

APPENDIX: APPLICANT SURVEY DATA

Methods: PCL staff sent an anonymous survey to 131 people (2 individuals listed on each PCL application) to elicit applicant’s feedback on the entire funding process. The survey was online via Survey Monkey and open for over 4 weeks, May-June 2020. The survey did not ask respondents any demographic questions to avoid respondents’ fear that their responses could somehow be identified to their organization. The survey asked 12 Likert scale questions and 1 open-ended. Of the 131 recipients, 44 responded (less than 35%) to all Likert questions and 22 offered comments. From the 22, 14 offered comments focused on improving features of the grantmaking process. Because the survey was anonymous, we do not know how many applicants are represented by these 44 respondents. Some organizations submitted multiple applications and the same individuals were listed as contacts across those applications. In addition, multiple people from an applicant agency may have responded (recipients could have forwarded the link to colleagues). PCL advises caution when interpreting these results due to small sample size.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The Request for Investment document helped me prepare my application.	23	17	2	2	0
I found the weekly question/answer updates a transparent way to assure applicants had access to the same information about the application and funding process.	23	15	5	0	1
I am satisfied with the process PCL used to recruit volunteer application reviewers.	5	16	20	2	1
I am satisfied with the scoring criteria used by volunteer reviewers to evaluate applications.	7	23	8	5	1
I found it useful that PCL staff provided their funding recommendations on March 17 before the deadline to submit testimony in April.	25	16	1	1	1
I understood the information staff provided to explain their funding recommendations on March 17.	15	19	4	6	0
I found it helpful that PCL provided me with the reviewers’ score forms for my application before the deadline to submit testimony in April.	28	16	0	0	0
The options to submit written and/or recorded oral testimony were better than the option to provide oral testimony during a public meeting.	28	11	2	3	0
I understood the process used to facilitate the Allocation Committee’s decision-making during public meetings.	9	22	1	10	2
I understood the rationale that the Allocation Committee members used to make funding decisions during public meetings.	7	17	10	8	2
In general, PCL communicated clearly with me about the entire funding process and timeline.	24	18	2	0	0
Overall, PCL’s funding process reflected a commitment to racial equity, diversity, and inclusion.	17	18	7	0	2