

On Giving Without Strings

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We sent this letter to our community panel members as part of the preparation for this year's grantmaking meeting.

Dear Community Panel Members,

Right now you might be feeling the heaviness and stress of the decisions you're going to be making this weekend. How can we know if a group is really doing a good job by just discussing a simple application? How can we be sure they are doing what they say they are doing? Or ensure that they will live up to what they promise? How can we be sure that, in the end, we've made the best decisions possible? And what does it mean to be a responsible gatekeeper for these resources, especially when this is some of the only money available for trans justice work out there right now. Each of you struggles every day to make this movement happen—you know all too well about the scarcity of resources for trans justice. You feel it in your

"We also are working to become more engaged with larger-scale donors. Although we're only a year old, we want to become less dependent on foundations."

—2015 Grantee

bones! What could be more painful than imagining that the money we give away this weekend might not be used well? What can we do to prevent that from happening?

Traditional philanthropy's answer to these kinds of questions is to require More, More, More: long, detailed grant applications, extensive documentation, in-person visits, and lots of reporting. On the surface, it seems simple enough: more information and more regulation will lead to better decisions and more accountable use of the funds.

But all of us who have ever been grantees know that the power dynamics behind More, More, More are not that simple. This is because philanthropy regulates its grantees in the same way that other institutions regulate people in need of services. For example, think about government institutions that offer public assistance. The welfare office may provide needed resources, but their policing and regulating also serves another purpose: to make it clear who really has the power and so enforce the status quo. Philanthropy may fund social justice, but as an institution, it also serves that same purpose: to make it clear who really has the power (the donors) and to enforce the status quo.

So how can we do it differently? TJFP says that we are about "trusting and supporting trans leadership." But what does that really mean? For us, to trust and support trans leadership means to give this money without strings, without requiring More, More, More. To think of the money not as belonging to TJFP or to the donors who gave it to us, but as always already belonging to the movement itself.

Opposite page: Gabriel's mom and TJFP donor Consuela Foster with Mara Keisling, celebrating TJFP's Community Builder Award from National Center for Transgender Equality.