

# Key Findings and Recommendations from the Thornburg Foundation

## 2017 Grantee Perception Report

Prepared by The Center For Effective Philanthropy

---

*In September and October of 2017, The Center for Effective Philanthropy (“CEP”) conducted a survey of Thornburg Foundation’s (“the Foundation”) grantees, achieving a 74% response rate. The brief summary below outlines the key findings and recommendations from the Foundation’s Grantee Perception Report (“GPR”). Thornburg grantee perceptions should be interpreted in light of the Foundation’s goals, strategy, and context.*

*This memo accompanies the comprehensive survey results found in the Foundation’s interactive online report at <https://cep.surveymethods.org> and in the downloadable online materials. The Foundation’s full report also contains more information about survey analysis and methodology.*

---

Assessing funder performance is challenging, and a range of data sources is required. The GPR provides one set of perspectives at a moment in time that can be useful in understanding a funder’s strengths and opportunities to improve. Thornburg Foundation should place emphasis on measures in this report that align with its specific priorities. Low ratings in areas that are not core to the Foundation’s strategy may not be concerning.

Overall, Thornburg Foundation receives exceptionally positive grantee ratings compared to CEP’s dataset of more than 40,000 grantees from nearly 300 other funders. Thornburg Foundation is rated higher than the typical funder in CEP’s dataset for most measures throughout this report, and grantee ratings place the Foundation in the top 10 percent of funders for perceptions of impact on their fields, strength of relationships with the Foundation, and understanding of their organizations and contexts.

### Strong Perceptions of Impact on Grantees’ Fields and Communities

- Thornburg Foundation grantees rate more positively than typical for the Foundation’s understanding of and impact on their fields and communities.
  - Grantee ratings place the Foundation in the top 10 percent of CEP’s dataset for its impact on and advancement of knowledge in their fields, as well as its effect on public policy.
- The Foundation also receives some of the highest ratings in CEP’s dataset for the extent to which it understands the needs of grantees’ intended beneficiaries and the social, cultural, or socioeconomic factors that affect grantees’ work.
- In open-ended comments, grantees highlight the Foundation’s leadership and policy work across their fields, with a number of grantees also referencing the Foundation’s deep understanding of needs in New Mexico.



*“The Thornburg Foundation has taken a leadership role in addressing early childhood health and well-being in the state. The enthusiasm for working in this area and focus on collaborations and working toward a common goal has made substantial impact.”*



*“The Foundation is playing an important role in convening stakeholders, such as the support of NM First. It is also becoming an important network hub for groups and individuals working on food systems and food policy....”*

---

## Positive Perceptions of Organizational Impact with an Opportunity to Build on Non-Monetary Assistance

- Thornburg Foundation is rated in the top quarter of CEP’s dataset for perceptions of its impact on grantees’ organizations and ability to sustain the funded work, understanding of their strategies and goals, and awareness of their organizational challenges.
- Grantees’ ratings and comments suggest opportunities to continue to build on the Foundation’s strong organizational impact through its non-monetary assistance.
  - Thirty-five percent of Thornburg grantees, a larger proportion compared to the typical funder in CEP’s dataset, report receiving the most intensive patterns of “field-focused” or “comprehensive” non-monetary assistance from the Foundation.
    - Grantees who receive these forms of assistance rate statistically significantly higher for several measures, including the Foundation’s impact on their fields, organizations, and strength of relationships with grantees.
  - In their written suggestions, four grantees (the largest proportion) request even more assistance beyond the grant through collaboration, convening, capacity building, and funding assistance.



*“For our small organization, the Foundation has been impactful in helping us be sustainable for our first few years of existence and getting us to where we are today, poised for further growth and impact on the NPO community.”*



*“The Foundation is having a profound impact on our organization...[its] substantial level of commitment on a multi-year basis, combined with a willingness to support us in a long-term strategic approach, has enabled us to develop the expertise, reputation and staff capacity to begin making real impacts at the state, regional and national scale....”*

## Strong Relationships with Grantees

- CEP’s research finds that the funder-grantee relationship – defined by high quality interactions and clear, consistent communications – is one of the strongest predictors of grantees’ perceptions of impact on their fields, communities, and organizations.
- Grantees’ ratings place Thornburg Foundation in the top 5 percent of CEP’s dataset for a summary measure of their relationships with the Foundation.
  - Grantee ratings are consistently strong for all aspects of the Foundation’s interactions, communications, and overall transparency with grantees.
- The Foundation’s patterns of more frequent and reciprocal contact with grantees tends to be associated with more positive perceptions of relationships across funders.
- Just under half of grantees report receiving a site visit from the Foundation.
  - Grantees who report receiving a site visit rate statistically significantly higher for most measures throughout the survey, including perceptions of impact and strength of relationships.



*“We have had an extremely positive relationship with this foundation. Their team has provided an ideal mix of engagement, guidance and flexibility. We enjoy our interactions with them immensely and view them as a great partner and collaborator. Their process has been straightforward and given us the opportunity to grow and significantly increase our impact. We could not be more appreciative. The Foundation also is funding an area of work that is very meaningful and filling a funding niche that is otherwise largely vacant. The only suggestion I might offer at this time is that it would be helpful if we had more information about their work with other grantees in our program area so we could collaborate/coordinate more.”*

---

## Helpful Selection and Reporting Processes

- Overall, grantees find the Foundation’s selection process to be more helpful than typical in strengthening their organizations or funded programs.
  - The number of grantee hours spent on the selection process is similar to the number of hours for grantees of the typical funder.
- Thornburg Foundation is rated more positively than typical across all aspects of the reporting process, including the extent to which the process was straightforward, relevant, adaptable, aligned appropriately to timing of the work, and a helpful opportunity to reflect and learn.



*“The Foundation’s processes, interactions, and communications have been supportive of not only the work of our program but of the needs of the field of early learning on both local and state levels.”*



*“Thornburg Foundation is extremely easy to work with due to the personal interaction and communications of the staff. There is clarity in the processes and steps. I have worked with several foundations and find Thornburg at the top. I appreciate the flexibility and willingness to help and support.”*

## CEP Recommendations

CEP recommends the Foundation consider the following in order to build on its exceptionally positive grantee perceptions and address potential opportunities:

- Discuss the approaches that have contributed to strong grantee perceptions of impact, relationships, and processes in order to institutionalize those practices and build on them as the Foundation evolves.
- Consider opportunities to increase the Foundation's current level of assistance beyond the grant through additional collaboration, convening, and other forms of support mentioned in grantees' suggestions.
- Continue to reinforce the Foundation's strong interactions and communications with grantees through site visits and other meaningful engagement with Foundation staff.

## Contact Information

**Austin Long, Director**  
(415) 391-3070 ext. 127  
austinl@cep.org

**Hayden Couvillion, Analyst**  
(617) 492-0800 ext. 160  
haydenc@cep.org