

***VALLEY NONPROFIT RESOURCES***

Building Stronger Nonprofits in the San Fernando Valley

Feasibility Study:  
Valley Young Nonprofit Professionals Network

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## **Feasibility Study Objective**

Between January and July, 2008, a small-scale feasibility study was conducted to better understand the needs and interests of under-30 staff working for nonprofit organizations in the San Fernando Valley region of Los Angeles. Results will be used to help shape the Valley Young Nonprofit Professionals Network (hereafter called the Valley Network), a project currently being developed Valley Nonprofit Resources.

## **Overview of VNR's Valley Network**

Valley Nonprofit Resources (VNR) provides capacity-building information, networking, training and technical assistance to the more than 4,000 nonprofits in the San Fernando Valley. One of its goals is to provide a platform for learning and career development to nonprofit staff in the Valley who are under the age of 30 – the Millennials who will increasingly define the future of the sector.

The Valley Network will help young nonprofit staff grow into leadership positions and stay in the sector. This is a critical need, considering all the baby boomer leaders who will be retiring in the next few years. It will also provide them with a personal network for professional and social use, focused on the geography of the Valley where they work, and where many of them also live.

## **Overview of Feasibility Study Activities**

The feasibility study was conducted following the model by which VNR itself was created (with a 2005 feasibility study funded by The California Endowment). An initial brainstorming meeting to shape the feasibility study was held in July 2007, with participants such as Florence Green of the California Association of Nonprofits and Jesus Romero of the Executive Services Corps of Southern California.

The feasibility study included the following activities:

- \* input provided by a small-scale e-mail survey of under-30 staff of Community Partners and Coro Southern California
- \* informal discussions with key young leaders in the Valley nonprofit sector, such as John Bwarie, a co-founder of the Valley Jaycees and staffer for Los Angeles City Councilmember Greig Smith
- \* a review of regional and national social networks for young nonprofit workers, such as the national Young Nonprofit Professionals Network (which has yet to establish a solid presence in Los Angeles but has successful chapters in other cities), and the Emerging Nonprofit Professionals group of the California Association of Nonprofits
- \* an analysis of social networking websites that might serve as a platform for the VNR Network - pilot activities to set up a site were conducted for Facebook, MySpace, LinkIn and YouTube.

\* focus groups of young nonprofit workers were conducted at MEND, the Volunteer Center of Los Angeles and The California Endowment for its resident nonprofits (plus a group convened at Oakwood School to get input from high school students) to provide a “market assessment” of needs for information and service, social networking needs, needs for education, etc.

The five focus groups were held on June 7, June 10, June 19, June 26, and July 2, 2008. The focus groups were facilitated by Charles Leone, a recent graduate of the Coro Fellowship in Public Affairs and Brendan Brown, a student at Georgetown University, working on assignment for Community Partners and VNR.

Some of the focus groups were convened in the San Fernando Valley, the target region for the Valley Network’s activities. The organizations were MEND (Meet Each Need with Dignity) in Pacoima and VCLA (Volunteer Center of Los Angeles) in Panorama City. One group was held at Oakwood High School, a private school in North Hollywood. Focus groups also were held at several non-Valley organizations: United Way of Greater Los Angeles and at The California Endowment (drawing on the several nonprofits housed there). A total of 43 individuals below the age of 30 participated.

Questions were prepared for guiding the focus groups, including a separate set of questions for the Oakwood School. In the latter group, fifteen high school seniors who had completed service learning of 50 hours (required to graduate) were the subjects. They provided input about possible consideration of the nonprofit sector as a later career choice.

### **Questions Asked in Focus Groups**

The questions asked of the main focus groups were as follows:

- What influenced your decision to seek employment in the non-profit sector?
- What would you like to be doing in the sector 5 to 10 years from now?
- What skills, knowledge, and talents will you need to be prepared for these opportunities?
- How do you maintain connections to other young professionals, especially those working in the non-profit sector?
- How do you currently stay informed of what’s worth knowing in your field?
- What sorts of settings are most attractive for you in which to learn (examples such as small group discussions, peer-to-peer presentations, larger conferences, web-based activities, casually over dinner, etc.)?
- Do you have any problems/qualms with working in the non-profit sector?
- Do you see yourself moving in a different direction in the future?
- What sort of resources could a network/organization such as VNR provide to address these problems and fill the Valley’s resource deficit?
- What would an opportunity look like that may pull you away from the non-profit sector?

The questions asked of the group of Oakwood students were as follows:

- In terms of career opportunities, what direction do you think you are planning to take?
- How do you think your choice compares with your peers?

- If there was more awareness about summer internship opportunities, do you think you would be interested in interning at a non-profit to both help the community and gain experiences in the non-profit sector?
- Do you have a family member, family friend, etc. who works in the non-profit sector?
- Do you know what a job in the non-profit sector entails (e.g. type/nature of work, pay, organization size, etc.)?
- Where do you learn about possible job opportunities (this can be anything from career employment, to summer internships, to academic programs, to volunteer programs, etc.)?
- If there was something such as an advisor at your school, a guest speaker, or a special career workshop day/week, would you be interested in attending to hear about new and alternative careers that are different from your current plans and goals?
- If a peer completed a summer internship and then did a brief presentation on his or her experience to other interested students, do you think this would be effective in increasing the number of students who intern?
- When did you (or when do you think you will) start thinking about a career?
- What is the biggest factor motivating your career choice?
- How important do you think it is for students to learn about the variety of career opportunities during high school?
- What stereotypes or generalization have you heard about the non-profit sector and its employees?

### **Overall Summary of Findings from Feasibility Study**

Results from the five focus groups and other data gathered in this feasibility study indicate significant need for a resource to support young professionals in the nonprofit sector of the San Fernando Valley. Participants agreed that sharing their thoughts and experiences would be helpful in their jobs and careers, as would opportunities for active networking and training.

Following are summaries and conclusions based on findings from the focus groups. At the end of the paper are roles for VNR to address some of the problems that were identified for young non-profit staff members currently working in the sector.

Findings from other data sources are integrated with the summary of findings and recommendations from the focus groups, since the latter were by far the most important source of insights from this study.

The following main themes emerged, each of which will be discussed further below:

\* **Breaking the Silo** - Young staff members within nonprofit organizations and across organizations do not interact with each other enough.

\* **“We Don’t”** - Leadership of nonprofits does not facilitate dialogue among their young staff on a regular basis.

\* **Mentoring** - There is a lack of mentoring for young staff members of nonprofit organizations.

\* **Networking** - There is no reliable and consistent network for young staff of nonprofit organizations to help them stay in touch with one another and build relationships.

- \* **Planting the Seed** - Most young nonprofit staff do not have access to networking opportunities, or to the skills for taking advantage of them.
- \* **Perceptions** - There are perceptions about the nonprofit sector - its low pay and limited upward mobility opportunities, for instance - that deter young professionals from entering the sector and thinking of it as a career.
- \* **Creative Control vs. Freedom** - Young nonprofit staff are more likely to stay in the sector if they have some degree of creative control and freedom with their work.
- \* **Direct Service vs. Administrative Work** - Staff who are doing direct service are more likely to stay in the nonprofit sector longer than those doing administrative tasks because of the nature of the work (direct service tends to allow one to see an immediate result).
- \* **Background** - Most people who have seriously considered nonprofit as a career were exposed to community service at a young age.
- \* **Contacting and Keeping Up** - Information about the sector young staff get comes mostly from the organizations at which they work.

## **Breaking the Silo**

The focus groups at each organization provided a unique opportunity for staff members to socialize and discuss a topic they had not before in the workplace. At the end of each focus group meeting, it was common for participants to say “we should do this more often” and “we do not do these things enough.” Young staff at nonprofits are so consumed with their work that they seemed to operate in isolation. There was no mechanism, system, or program initiated at any of the organizations to serve as a tool to help young staff with support for their work and to reassess their place and role in the sector.

At the California Endowment, staff of nonprofits housed at the facility did not know each other even though they worked down the hall. Young staff members at United Way of Greater Los Angeles enjoyed getting together and it was evident that there was a sense of comfort among staff when they discovered that many of their peers feel the same way about some of the challenges that were discussed with regard to working in the sector.

## **“We Don’t”**

The question was asked of these young professionals: How do you stay in touch with other young nonprofit professionals? For the most part they said “they don’t.” A summary one can make is that they do not stay in touch because there is no mechanism for doing so. Other than relationships that are built with colleagues at the workplace there is no organized networking tool for young professionals to have support and to nurture their growth and development in the sector.

## **Mentoring**

Several of the participants expressed an interest in getting mentoring in the nonprofit world. Much like the question of how they stay in touch; this was another void that existed in the non-profit sector. Mentorships, whether organic or initiated by a third party, would still not address the fact that there is a void and more can be done for young nonprofit professionals. Participants at United Way and the California Endowment expressed the importance of having mentors. Participants told of supervisors not knowing how to effectively utilize and engage staff below them. Ideally a mentor would be a supervisor. However, most of the time this is not the case.

## **Networking**

For the most part young professionals in the sector are not incorporated enough into networking opportunities. If these opportunities were given they might be able to find a mentor or at least a staffer from another organization who has dealt with similar problems (such as trying to find volunteers, corporate partnerships for programs, monetary and non-monetary donations etc.) to help them with advice, guidance, and counsel.

## **Planting the Seed**

Whether a high school student or young staffer with an organization, when asked: Where do they want to be five to ten years from now? a common answer is: where they believe they can make a good living. There are a number of people making a good living in the sector and doing rewarding work, but they are not well-known or visible to the public. The sector can be doing more to promote a positive image, and having young people entertain the idea of working in the sector at a younger age.

## **Perceptions**

There are a lot of negative perceptions people have about working in the sector such as the fact that the pay is low. The sector can do more collectively by addressing these negative perceptions. Communicating positive stories would compel more individuals to pursue a career in the field. One of the participants believed that being young is great for nonprofit work because one's expenses are low (young people usually have less responsibilities as opposed to when one get older and gets a family). There is a belief that the sector needs to take advantage of this.

## **Creative Control vs. Freedom**

The young professionals who seemed to be most content with their jobs seemed to be those with a good deal of creative control over their projects. For example, the staff at MEND for the most part ran their own projects and in many ways were their own boss. They set their working hours, decided what new ideas to bring to their program, decided their own day-to-day activities, and were not forced to constantly run new initiatives by supervisors. A few individuals also had this freedom at the Endowment and VCLA. Those who didn't have this

freedom often cited it as one of their main goals when asked where they want to be in 5-10 years.

### **Direct Service vs. Administrative Work**

One of the biggest complaints of the high school focus group was that all their experiences with nonprofits were negative due to the large amount of administrative and busywork they were forced to do while interning. Those mainly in charge of administrative tasks at the Endowment did not seem that happy with their current position. This was in contrast to those at MEND or VCLA who were working directly with the community and were thus able to immediately and directly see who they were helping.

Obviously, administrative work needs to be done for nonprofits, but this work is more typical of a traditional job and is not as satisfying or fulfilling. Thus, those who are doing direct service are more likely to stay in the nonprofit sector longer than those doing administrative tasks. One exception to this was one woman from VCLA who was working with youth who have had constant legal troubles. She found constantly being around difficult kids extremely straining.

### **Background**

When asked whether they see themselves in the nonprofit sector in the future, the majority of those who responded positively were people who had a history of community service starting at a young age. Many of the MEND staff had been involved with MEND or similar organizations as teenagers. Many at Oakwood and VCLA had either a family history of community service or were involved in it at school, or both. Many of them came from low-income families and felt a need to give to their community what they didn't have. This served as motivation enough to join a nonprofit.

However, others from low-income families ended up working for nonprofit jobs somewhat unintentionally and view their current job as a temporary position. They have aspirations to move on to a job with better compensation and a more traditional, for-profit structure.

### **Contact and Keeping Up**

None of the participants had any real connection to other young professionals outside of their own organization. They all mentioned that the only way they receive news about events, new information, contacts, etc., is through their superiors or staff meetings. Emails and mailing lists were mentioned as the primary way that they keep in contact with those outside of their organization, but these connections seemed to be only somewhat effective and worthwhile.

There is definitely a resource deficit and need for some sort of medium like VNR Network to help bring together people and resources to help the younger staff better function in the nonprofit sector. Additionally, those at the Endowment stressed how valuable a mentor would be to the younger staff, both to show them the ropes and engage them.

## **Problems**

Aside from the problems already mentioned, there are the expected complaints about lack of pay and the restrictions of relying on funding. Those who had problems with the nonprofit sector felt they could still give back in other ways outside of the sector. A large number mentioned teaching or psychology as a possibility. Also, because many of the participants are younger, many are still in school and worry about how to pay their student debts and loans. Obviously, the low nonprofit salary does not help this problem nor work as an incentive for students.

## **Feasibility Study Conclusions**

There are a number of ways VNR and its planned Valley Network can address problems identified by young professionals working in the sector. While problems of low pay and too much administrative work cannot not be addressed directly, there are ways in which VNR can make a lasting impact on the sector and the young professionals working in it. All of the focus groups expressed a need to “provide a platform for learning and career development to nonprofit staff (in the Valley) that are under the age of 30.”

Following are some specific suggestions for what VNR might do as part of developing the Valley Network:

**1) VNR can create social networking opportunities for young nonprofit staff.** VNR’s events would be a place where young staff could feel comfortable to open up and learn about the sector and about opportunities they could share with each other. These networking events could be breakfasts, coffees, happy hours, panel discussions, lunches etc. They also could be online events through listservs, social networks such as Facebook, and so forth.

**2) The Valley Network can initiate guided conversations for young nonprofit staff on the issues of working in the sector.** In addition to interactions initiated by the Valley Network members among themselves, VNR can take a leadership role in creating some events that will provide a more formal platform for discussion and action-taking (e.g., on creating opportunities for upward mobility in the sector).

**3) Valley Network members can keep in touch through various media.** Even in this internet age there is a still a role for telephone connections (e.g., conference calls) and in-person meetings as part of a network’s activities.

**4) VNR can organize special learning events to help people to learn to be successful networkers.** These workshops would teach people the simple skills of how to introduce themselves, how to get a business card, follow up, and help make relationships happen.

**5) VNR can establish a mentoring program for young professionals in the sector.** This takes place the business world, which should provide some useful models. For example, when someone new is hired at Toyota, they are put in touch with a senior staff member to help them



with learning on the job, accommodating to the culture of Toyota, and preparing for future growth and opportunity.

**6) VNR can organize events where there are guest speakers to speak with young staff, offer them advice and prompt staff to think long term.** Using Toyota again as an example, this company has regular luncheon meetings to introduce young staff to new ways of thinking in the business and management worlds. For instance, a group of female employees has monthly meetings at which they invite a female speaker who currently holds a leadership role with the company to speak with and take questions from the audience.

**7) Valley Network members can speak to high school and college classes about careers and opportunities in the sector.** Students in the Oakwood focus group were clear that for the nonprofit sector to draw more young workers, the sector needs to be introduced to them at a young age.

**8) VNR can create paid internship opportunities for college students at a nonprofit organization.** The Valley Network can seek funding for such a program either through the nonprofits hosting the student, or through a third party funder.

**9) VNR can work with top leaders of nonprofits in the Valley to encourage more leadership development for young staff members.** Young staff and the nonprofits they work for would benefit from more such leadership opportunities being available.

**10) VNR can organize events for young staff to see the big picture of the nonprofit sector and how it relates to the community overall.** Participants can learn more about how the roles of the nonprofit sector, government and business overlap, and what kinds of partnerships might be possible.

**11) VNR can create an online presence that will give staff a sounding board to address problems they face at work.** The Oakwood focus group pointed out that it would need to be something more than a social networking site like Facebook. Members of the Valley Network can be engaged to help design such an online presence.

## **APPENDIX: SUMMARIES OF FOCUS GROUPS**

### **1 - MEND (Meet Each Need with Dignity) on June 7, 2008**

#### ***Motivation***

Five young Latina participants on staff with MEND in Pacoima were interviewed. Their motivation for working in the non-profit sector included this answer: started as a volunteer with the organization. When volunteering, they were able to get a good sense of the atmosphere and environment. This encouraged the move and created the participants' interest to be placed into a full-time staff position.

Another respondent felt it was "hot to be a non-prof" and believed these jobs were becoming more attractive. Another participant "didn't exactly know the nature of the job" however when they took the position they too also liked the atmosphere and environment of MEND and enjoyed the flexibility and freedom of the position. An additional answer given to the question was that she was raised in a church, developed a sense of helping out and was brought up to give back to the community.

A few of the participants had a connection with the organization before gaining employment. For example, one staff member provided clothing to the organization's clients and recalled at one time being a client with her family when growing up and getting assistance from MEND. Staff not only had help from MEND growing up, they now continue to help family and friends with their current positions, such as the dental hygienist who is currently helping her sister with oral care.

Support the staff had for each other also seemed to be attractive for these participants to stay engaged with their work and sector. One participant was talking about the recent MENDING Poverty conference and some of the roles and responsibilities they had with the event. One of her colleagues turned to her toward the end the meeting and said "you are going to do great."

#### ***Future career goals***

Future career goals of these participants included wanting to start their own non-profit and wanting to improve their existing job by expanding quality and capacity. Skills they believed were needed to reach these ends included "a need to be more versed and trained in policy."

Additional answers given included this one from the dental hygienist who as the manager of the clinic "offers general dentistry but eventually wants to be able to provide orthodontics, periodontics, crowns, etc." The manger of the medical clinic "wants to have a full time doctor who can provide all services, not just specialized ones and is available on weekends and off hours when people are still sick." One problem she encounters with this need is that the doctors are volunteering their time and it is hard to get their help for some of these needs. The clothing department manager wants to be able to offer new clothes by getting deals with department stores. She tried getting help from retailers but was turned down and told to "try again next year."

### ***Connections***

Connections that were made for the participants varied and included ones made at work, college, and church. In addition, the Volunteer Director of the organization has been a big help to maintain connections. When people come in and are grateful for the help they receive from the organization, staff try to show that these people that they can give back to the organization by volunteering their time, getting a job, receiving training, and helping the community.

Most of the staff at this meeting did not know other young professionals outside of MEND. There are currently no resources for them to participate in such engagement. These resources would be helpful with their work. For example, if the clothing department manager had a network of people outside of MEND, she might have been able to get help expediting the paper work, and bureaucracy. This network of connections could explore other options in order to get the new clothes she wanted for the clients she helps.

### ***Staying informed***

DOVIA (Directors of Volunteers in Agencies) is a group of volunteers who gather together on a monthly basis and exchange information, updates, and ideas. Other avenues that help these staff stay informed include: mailing lists, conferences, and all staff meetings. Because staff spends a large part of their day in front of the computer, the face-to-face interaction and networking opportunities really help. Unfortunately these interactions do not take place as often as they would like- the conferences take place once or twice a year.

### ***Problems***

Problems the staff encounter with their jobs include funding. The organization is heavily dependent on donations, as a result limiting them with much of their work. They need qualified people who help train staff and help retain workforce by offering incentives and making known the possibilities and potential that exist with the sector. Currently there is no staff at the organization who are trained in this. They need qualified people that can help with specialized areas such as professional writings, grant writing, etc.

Most of the staff feel they will stay in the non-profit sector. They enjoy their job, feel comfortable, love the flexibility, and enjoy giving back to the community. One respondent said “the enjoyment of their job outweighs the low pay.” A majority of the participants felt the opportunity to work at MEND was “different than a rigid business job, there is flexibility and chance for creativity. There is the chance to do what you want and run your program according to your interests, goals, and needs.”

### ***Group analysis***

Five young women all seemed to enter the non-profit sector due to a background in volunteer-based activities. Upon volunteering and seeing the atmosphere at MEND, they loved the people, the flexibility, and the comfort of working at this organization.

All the participants see themselves working for MEND or for nonprofits in the future, except one who is working on becoming an elementary school teacher. Their future goals are focused on improving and expanding their current programs at MEND. They seem to not keep up

contact with other young professionals, mainly because they do not know how or where to do so. Their main connections to others come from MEND itself, which connects them to other staff or volunteer members or contacts that the Volunteer Director knows.

Mailing lists seem to be the only real outside connections. Because MEND relies heavily on volunteers and donations, they would benefit greatly from a networking resource that could connect them with people who are trained and skilled in recruiting volunteers and soliciting donations.

## **2 - Oakwood High School on June 10, 2008**

### ***Background***

The participants consisted of 15 high school seniors from Oakwood High School, a private school in North Hollywood. The group was put together by the school's Community Service Director Diana Kano (who was also present during the discussion). She chose the students whom she felt were most involved in community service.

Every student at the discussion was extremely bright and eloquent, and all are planning to attend universities next year (Brown, Berkeley, Columbia, Deep Springs, Colorado College, and others). Oakwood seems to emphasize community service and the arts in their curriculum, giving rise to a unique type of student that one would be hard-pressed to find at more traditional schools. The Oakwood student seems to be interested in the arts/liberal arts, is very socially conscious, has extensive community service experience, wishes to give back to the community, and has a liberal outlook on most issues.

### ***Motivations***

Responses to the questions about motivations and source of community work included some respondents having a family history of community service and environmental conservation. Some of the participants started at a young age and a couple had family members work in the non-profit sector; one parent writes grants for a living and another runs Big Sunday. Some started community service in elementary school and the respondents believed it was important to get young kids to feel the joy and excitement of helping others without it having to be "artificially imposed" later.

A majority started getting seriously involved in community service because of Diana Kano and Oakwood High School's service learning requirements. The school is where they learn about a vast majority of community service programs and opportunities. The school might collaborate with a non-profit however, it is primarily volunteer-centered in their opportunities.

### ***Career thoughts***

When it comes to career choice, about 3-4 spoke of an interest in teaching. Another 3-4 had "no idea" about what they want to do. Another group of 3-4 had a fairly specific idea of what they want to study. Such ideas included being an architect and designing environmentally

sound buildings, doing social services, and being a lawyer. Most of the respondents had a social issue they felt strongly about and were considering a career in the area.

The issues shared at the meeting were: education, immigration, world hunger, water shortage, environmental problems, and health care. These students felt it would be helpful for an experienced professional who had worked specifically on one of these issues to come in and share the practical ways to solve these issues and tell them what a career working on behalf of these causes would be like.

### ***Experience with the sector***

Most of the students had worked at non-profits and had negative experiences and impressions. One student worked three internships and was completely turned off. Another student had a negative experience in Washington D.C., and another one had a bad experience with the “River Revitalization project” in Los Angeles.

The biggest complaints were that the work was not hands on enough and was a step removed from seeing the benefits of the work they were doing. Answers given by students included the work being boring (filing, data, deskwork, etc.), frustrating, bureaucratic, and political. In addition respondents felt there was poor management and organization at the workplace and poor fund allocation.

### ***Staying connected***

The students believed that social networking sites like Facebook have limited use for non-profit work. One student tried to use Facebook to gather old soccer jerseys for disadvantaged children, sending 50 messages and getting no responses. One student said that Facebook has too much information coming at one person all at once and that it is difficult to make ideas/messages stick.

Two students did find Facebook to be helpful when a specific volunteer group based in New Mexico used the site to communicate to people. One respondent felt a website like Craig’s List would be helpful for non-profit jobs, volunteering, and other opportunities. The information may be sorted by nature of work and location.

The aspects the students enjoyed about community service were: experiencing different parts of the community, meeting new people and working with them. The students believe the opportunity to explore makes them socially aware of the issues that exist in the civic arena and their “privilege.”

The students and the Community Service Director valued the opportunity to come together and have a discussion about these issues. Some of the students gave answers reflecting a belief that most high school students do not discuss what they want their future to look like and are not nearly as frank and honest about their idealistic goals or their cynical views of certain matters. They need a comfortable atmosphere where they are prompted and encouraged to share. Students said they wished they had done this earlier because they learn about opportunities from other students and hear how much other students also get out of these experiences.

### ***Group analysis***

While these students are definitely not the typical Los Angeles student, they do highlight the important fact that young people are turned off by what they view to be “boring” and bureaucratic work because they cannot see the immediate effects of their work. They much prefer the more enjoyable and personal experiences of hands-on volunteering. The majority of the students who had experience in this other, “office-like” realm that is associated with nonprofits had negative experiences. If nonprofit internships could mix the two fields, the opportunities would be more attractive for younger students.

Other careers were mentioned that lie outside the nonprofit realm, such as teacher, psychologist, environmental architect, etc. The students don’t view the nonprofit sector as the only place to make a difference. These students had a remarkable amount of community service experience (and almost all had been outside the country to do volunteer work). Much of this came from working with the school’s Community Service Director.

Oakwood’s Director is very well qualified, young, and easy to engage. The students obviously like her personally and rely on her for opportunities and advice. This type of resource would be extremely useful for every school to have. It definitely helps to have someone who can relate to the students (and conversely someone with whom the students can relate). It must be added that many of the students come from a background (private school, middle-upper class, white, liberal) that often leads to community service work, and this background is not the norm for Los Angeles high school students. Thus this may limit the findings of this focus group to a small portion of the student population.

## **3 - California Endowment on June 19, 2008**

### ***Methodology***

Participants were six female staff members who work at nonprofit organizations housed at the California Endowment. When they were asked about their motivations for working in the sector responses were: began with an internship, did related work in college such as social justice, public health policy, etc., transferred from the public sector, and wanted to do mission driven work and be part of a good cause. One respondent said “they didn’t need to think twice about it.” A couple of the staff members enjoyed the variety of assignments they were given, the collaboration that exists, and working with other people who are on the same page.

### ***Future goals***

When asked about future opportunities and skills they need to advance a couple of the respondents said they would like transferable skills. They want to have an opportunity and skills to be able to work for a number of organizations and see a clear pathway up.

One respondent sees the private sector, something like private marketing, communications, etc., as a way to learn skills that can later be transferred to philanthropy. However she does not see it working the other way around (non-profit skills transferring to private sector). Some of the participants identified the common answer of all of the focus groups: that money is a necessity. According to one participant: “many young professionals are still in school and

have to be able to pay off student loans and debt.” Most of the participants in this session said they want authority to create programs.

### ***Staying connected***

When these participants were asked about the level of interaction had with other young professionals most of the participants believed there were not many opportunities to meet people outside their organizations. Responses supporting such statements included: “there is not a lot of public knowledge about places and groups to meet and stay in contact with other young professionals in the sector.” In addition another answer given was that “there does not seem to be a place one belongs outside their organization.”

The participants believe that relationship building is important in the sector, and that one needs to be comfortable with others and able to ask for favors. There is a strong sense that leaders and bosses need to promote the desire to be able to collaborate and work together. Responses celebrating this idea included: “the need for top-down clearance to have the independence to leave the office and meet others.” In addition, a participant believes “these jobs are the first for most, and they are unsure about their freedoms to go out and network” (for now it seems to be on their own time). Some of the people being interviewed felt too young to network and are uncomfortable in such environments and are worried about coming across as overly eager and opportunistic.

### ***Learning***

The ways individuals in this session learned were: through mentors, guided conversations, Fellowship (one of the participants is a graduate of the Public Allies program), and means that are more practiced such as emails, word-of-mouth, conversations with co-workers, meetings, and projects and events conducted by their organization. Fellowship opportunities are a very good way to learn about how to function in the non-profit sector. Programs mentioned were Coro and Public Allies.

Participants liked the guided conversation with the focus group session. They believe there should be more similar opportunities to get to know co-workers and talk about issues that are rarely discussed and to learn about others’ experiences. All participants believe that they would benefit from mentoring opportunities. They would like to have an upper-level, established staff person showing them how to network, collaborate, and best take advantage of benefits in the sector. In addition participants believed that upper-level leaders should make efforts to talk with the younger staff and invest some time to keep them engaged, feeling noticed, validated and useful.

### ***Problems***

Problems that were identified by these staff members who worked at the Endowment were that there was limited room to grow. Thoughts expressed included: “there are a variety of projects, however for the most part one just ends up doing their job and going home at night.” There does not seem to be room for much exploration and discovery for young staff members in the sector.

Some of the staff are upset at the fact that they see too many outside hires and not enough promotions within. A majority of participants believed that administrative staff are around for about two years so there are few incentives for them to stay. Leaders should do more to retain these staff members. Some mentioned that other offers are very enticing; any opportunity where they can move up looks appealing and do not see themselves staying with their current jobs for an extended period of time. They believe that the size and nature of the nonprofit also makes a big difference with the experience young staff members have at their work place.

### ***Group analysis***

It seems that most who participated could benefit from a mentor, guide, or resource that would help give them a better understanding of how to effectively operate in the nonprofit sector. There was much discussion about the need for upper-level, established staff helping guide the younger staff and engage them.

Many thought that by entering the nonprofit sector they would be serving a good cause, but in terms of day to day activities it seems like a normal job with poor pay. They don't see opportunities to move up in their current organizations, and don't have the creative control or flexibility that is one of the most attractive attributes of the nonprofit sector. This makes other job offers enticing. Many wish to learn skills that can be used at a number of organizations to increase their job flexibility and opportunities.

There is little contact with other nonprofit professionals, and it would be helpful to have a resource that could connect people working on similar issues. There is a desire for collaboration but most don't know where to look or how to start, mainly because they are young and haven't established themselves or made reliable contacts.

The most enthusiastic person in the group discussion was actually an upper-level person (who happened to be much older than she looked, and thus was invited to the focus group). She had the flexibility, collaboration, and creative control the young staff want to have. It seems that few of the people came into the nonprofit sector with a strong history of community service, which may influence their willingness to leave the nonprofit sector for other opportunities.

## **4 - Volunteer Center of Los Angeles on June 26, 2008**

### ***Motivation***

The participants were eight young females, seven of whom were Latina who worked at VCLA as Program Directors and all of whom had Bachelor's Degrees. Only two of the participants from VCLA joined the non-profit sector intentionally to fulfill the objectives of non-profit work. The responses they gave indicating their background and interest included "family working in the nonprofit sector." Another said they "learned about VCLA from a college colleague."

Responses from a majority of participants were that they applied with VCLA because they were in need of a job. Such responses included: "Didn't know what I was applying for" and



“Needed a job and ended up enjoying working with the community.” Individuals who felt this way gave responses such as “came from a low income area and wanted to give back.”

### ***Future goals***

This group of individuals were particularly entrepreneurial and either are currently advancing in their education or plan to in the future. Half of the participants want to start their own business or program. One lady wants to start a bowling league to serve as a place where kids can go after school. This same individual already runs her own daycare business and in her words: “enjoys being my own boss.”

Other people with this same kind of spirit gave answers such as: “I want to run my own basketball program” (for kids) and “I want to own my own scrapbook business.” Another lady patented a device that prevents Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. The other half that were not as entrepreneurial want to go back to academia and get a Masters degree or PhD. Over half of the participants were directly working on or about to start working to get their advanced degrees.

A couple of the participants want to leave the sector and go into teaching. One wants to teach developmental psychology and the other wants to teach about immigration. One of the focus group members was unsure what she wanted to do however no one in the meeting was enthusiastic about staying in the non-profit sector.

### ***Staying connected***

To stay connected and informed in their field the individuals work with other non-profits as part of their programs and constantly stay in contact via email. The interactions they said they have with their colleagues in the workplace is mostly personal and not professional. Most learn everything within their field and scope of work with the VCLA and meetings hosted by the Director. For the most part there is no other outlet to keep them informed about resources, opportunities and training, etc.

### ***Problems***

Problems identified by these staff members were politics of the sector. They believe there are too many rules and regulations such as “having to fill out a form to get a pencil.” The lack of funding for programs and low pay for employees was also identified. Another answer was the fact that there were too many responsibilities with minimal pay.

According to one of the answers given, “in the for-profit world there is a set job and when new responsibilities are added one is compensated more and promoted. However in the non-profit sector it is sort of expected that one will continue to take on more and more responsibilities and programs without additional pay.”

Except for one person, most of the participants were young Latinas and believed the organization was funded by rich white women. There is a concern that these people funding the organization do not come from the same background and do not understand the environment that their staff is working in. Yet they make the big calls and decisions without realizing the impact these actions can have on the programs being run.

### ***Group analysis***

The majority of the participants came from low-income background but all went to college and have plans for furthering their education with a Masters or PHD. Few had a history of community service and most took their jobs at VCLA because they simply needed one. While most enjoy the direct, hands-on efforts that give back to the community, they aspire to have their own business and more control of their lives rather than permanently work in the nonprofit sector. They all mentioned continuing to give back, whether that comes through their own business or through other fields such as teaching or psychology.

Most of the participants have been with VCLA for no more than a year or two. Their outlook on their current job is definitely that it is a temporary position. Those who worked directly with the youth in some of the youth programs found it emotionally draining to constantly be working with difficult kids. No one seriously complained about a lack of resources or specified a resource that would help their programs; instead it seems that they are happy to be giving back but are definitely planning to take their career in a different direction.

## **5 - United Way of Greater Los Angeles on July 2, 2008**

### ***Motivation***

Seven women and two men from United Way of Greater Los Angeles participated, all of whom received their Bachelor's Degree from strong Southern California schools: UCLA, LMU, USC, UC Irvine etc. Motivations for working in the sector included these responses: unsatisfied with the private sector, "accidental", experience working in the sector in college, and one respondent said they were brought into the sector via a family connection.

One respondent felt "non-profit was a better place to apply them self, to be valued, and help the community, as well as have more freedom and creativity." Another respondent had never given back to the community before and previously sold real estate. One person needed a job and knew someone in the sector, however has gained skills transferable between most nonprofits.

Those who obtained experience did it working in non-profits while in college at such opportunities as interning at Make-A-Wish, placed at a non-profit for a college course, and another participant did service work while in high school and college. The respondent that

was introduced to the sector via family connection has a mother who works at a nonprofit and ultimately studied related subjects in college.

One of the participants at the meeting is responsible for tech support for the organization and gave this response for his motivation and reasoning for wanting to stay in the sector for the time being: "Non-profits get discounts on and access to new technology and software which allows him to get an edge over other for-profit workers."

### ***Future plans***

Future plans for participants include an interest in transferring to the private sector. One person wants to work for an organization (in the sector) where they are able to do more hands-on work (such as returning to Make-A-Wish). Another staff member wants to stay at United Way for a few more years to see the results of their work, then transfer out for monetary reasons. One person wants to go to the public sector after completing their graduate degree in Public Administration and possibly do consulting. One person said they would stay in the non-profit and being fresh out of college are still in the “honeymoon” stage of working in the sector.

### ***Staying connected***

Young professionals of United Way of Greater Los Angeles keep connections and learn through their work at the organization, email, and the United Way list serve. Through their work at United Way they interact with organizations in the Los Angeles area such as groups assisting the homeless, and are put in contact with other young professionals in the sector.

One staff member is working to utilize Facebook and My Space to make contacts and spread the news of the organization. Another respondent said that with their work at United Way they observe a huge array of organizations who apply for funding. He/she learns about organizations and meets new people through this process.

Emails are a source for people at the organization to stay in touch. Email blasts of articles from publications like the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* also help. According to a couple of other respondents, sometimes they stay in contact with people they went to school with via email and social networking sites.

### ***Problems***

Problems the young professionals of United Way said they face were similar to that of other young professionals in the focus groups. These answers included: being over worked and underpaid, limited room for growth, ineffective supervisors, negative stigma with non-profit work, restrictions on and competitiveness of funding. A couple of respondents who felt overworked and underpaid said they were “neck deep in projects” and “feel overworked for their salary.”

The respondents who felt there was limited room for growth believed for-profits have a set career path where more responsibilities lead to higher pay and promotions. They believe that a high level person needs to leave or more funding needs to be provided so that opportunities to grow are created within the sector. One respondent believed that high turnover of staff leads to limited upward mobility and the constant need to train new faces.

A couple of people expressed the idea that the end point of nonprofit work is to be an Executive Director. However, not everyone wants that. One staff member believed that a lack of training in management and leadership makes people feel undervalued.

Another complaint shared at the meeting was the micromanaging that takes place in the work environment. Participants saw a need for supervisors who are proactive and help with career

growth. Negative perceptions people have about the nonprofit sector affect the ability to attract and retain a high quality work force. These are perceptions that were heard from other focus group meetings such as: low pay, poor functionality, and the sector being a women's field. As a result, upward mobility for female staff is affected. As one participant shared, males get the promotions because of the belief that a male face needs to be highlighted in the sector. However, a couple of the female participants thought it was great that so many women had leadership roles at United Way of Greater Los Angeles.

One participant sent an additional response to the final question in a later email. In the email she wrote that she did not think there is a lot of information given to middle school and high school about nonprofits being a career option. (She learned about careers in the medical, legal, corporate industries and doesn't recall ever being told that she could make a career in marketing etc... in the nonprofit sector.)

In addition, she writes: nonprofits tend to be thought of as volunteer opportunities. Although many, if not most, nonprofits rely heavily on volunteer support, many people fail to see that there is a professional side to nonprofit management and that you could get paid working for a nonprofit. There are many misconceptions about what a nonprofit is: a lot of people think of soup kitchens, food drives and hand outs when they think of nonprofits. She has had many friends think that she is making a bad decision working in nonprofit because the money is not there.

She has heard so many people say, "oh you work for a nonprofit... you'd better marry rich then...". In her opinion, many people think of nonprofits as unorganized charities and not professional organizations run by qualified individuals. "It is this kind of thinking that limits the exposure of youth to nonprofits and/or discourages people my age from entering the field."

In all, she thinks it is the idea that there is no money in nonprofits and the view that real professionals don't work in nonprofits that keep many of her peers away from the field. According to her, a social network might be able to fill this void by exposing young people to the field and allowing them to see other young people involved and making careers for themselves. The exposure could lend some credibility to nonprofits as well as provide information as to how to get into the field.

### ***Group analysis***

Monetary concerns seemed to be the main issue of this group. Because they all attended fairly prestigious universities, they have the opportunities and skills to make a much better salary. While they enjoy the "giving back" aspect of nonprofits, they are not driven by specific issues or causes, and are more concerned about their personal well-being as they get older and begin to settle down and provide for a family. This was the main reason cited for leaving the nonprofit sector and moving to a better paying, private sector job.

This group seemed to have many more connections and ways to stay informed than other groups we spoke with. This is most likely due to the size and professional nature of the United Way organization.