

DURFEE STANTON FELLOWSHIP – FINAL REPORT
Cora Mirikitani, 2008-2009

The Problem

My Stanton Fellowship provided an opportunity to explore the possibility of developing an online fundraising tool for individual artists, an idea that brought together of my past experience as a foundation grantmaker in the arts, with my current work as the leader of a nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening the support system for working artists in California. Benchmark research on the needs of individual artists in the United States had shown that artists in this country are severely undercapitalized, both in their ability to sustain a livelihood as working artists and to support the actual costs of making artistic work. Traditional philanthropy had created a system of donor patronage to artists that rewards a select few. Could the power of the Internet to organize and aggregate smaller virtual communities lend itself to the creation of a website – a “virtual foundation” - that could connect artists and their work to grassroots donor circles?

My Process of Discovery

I began my investigation by researching key individuals and companies who were creating innovative donor websites, and thought leaders from the arts, philanthropy and the commercial sector who were thinking about new individual donor strategies. This led to a series of in-person meetings and interviews that provided critical information and feedback, and ultimately shifted my idea. What started as “online fundraising for artists” eventually grew to become an even more exciting and robust idea – the creation of a “citizen philanthropy” portal designed to link individual donors to a wide range of community innovators who could be working in health care, education, social justice or the environment, as well as in the arts.

The evolution from a narrow artist-focused concept to a multi-channel concept that could link many small donors to networks of innovators in their communities was a giant leap. In practical terms, it resulted in mid-course changes in my Fellowship work plan which had originally called for the creation and focus group testing of a functional light prototype to creating, instead, a “storyboard” prototype that sketched out the new imagined website. This most recent version of the online giving concept has been vetted by an experienced group of advisors with diverse expertise in technology, legal issues, internet start ups, venture philanthropy and the arts, and their positive feedback has affirmed that this could be a powerful new idea at just the right time.

What Comes Next

By the end of my Fellowship, I felt ready to test the waters for additional funding support to take the idea forward to its next phase of development. I presented my concept to a national funder, who has since provided me with a planning grant to allow me to develop a formal business plan for the Citizen Philanthropy website.

Passion for the cause of artists and curiosity about a potential solution to their funding needs was what motivated me to pursue my Stanton Fellowship. In hindsight, perhaps the greatest benefit of my fellowship was that it allowed me to do the most basic and beneficial things: having the time to read, think expansively, engage in inspiring conversations with experts outside of my own domains of expertise, and imagine the structure and design of an exciting and promising new idea. I hope to look back on my Fellowship as the reason it happened.