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## Latinos and Philanthropy: An Interview with Luis Ubiñas, Former President, The Ford Foundation

The NiLP Network for Latino Issues (September 7, 2014)

Luis Ubiñas served as the ninth President of The Ford Foundation from 2007 to 2011. He was the first Puerto Rican and Latino to hold this prestigious position in the world of philanthropy. We thought it would be useful to get a debriefing from Mr. Ubiñas after his being away from Ford for some time, particularly his thoughts on the role of philanthropy with the Latino community.



Luis Ubiñas

What has he been up to since leaving Ford? Mr. Ubiñas is an advisor and board member to corporations, governments and nonprofit organizations, and is an investor and philanthropist. He currently serves as a Trustee of the Pan American Development Fund of the Organization of American States; a member of the Multi-Stakeholder Advisory Council of the United Nations Economic and Social Council; Advisory Board member of the United Nations Fund for International Partnerships; Advisory Committee member of the Export-Import Bank of the United States; Advisory Committee member for Trade Policy and Negotiation; member of the Board of Directors of Electronic Arts; Chair of the Nominating and Governance Committee of the WISE Prize for Education Selection Committee; member of the World Innovation Summit for Education; Advisory Committee member of the One Hundred Thousand Strong Initiative; Trustee of the New York Public Library; member of the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees of the Collegiate School; and member of the Finance Committee of Valassis Communications.

**The Interview**

*NiLP: We have said many times in this space that philanthropy underinvests in the Latino community. You have unique insight into this question as someone who led the second largest Foundation in the United States. Is my view correct?*

**Luis Ubiñas:** The Foundation Center conducted a detailed analysis of foundation-sector giving a few years ago that showed that foundations in the United States invest fewer than 2% of their resources in the Latino Community. That obviously reflects a deep, longstanding underinvestment and supports your view.

One of the fundamental changes we made at Ford was to vastly expand our work

with the Latino community to better reflect the issues facing a changed America. But every philanthropic dollar that shifts to match the new demographics and new needs of our country means a philanthropic dollar that isn't available for or is moved from some other priority. Every one of those legacy priorities has an established voice arguing against change, on staff, on Boards, in the community. It is simply the case that introducing new grant making strategies and new grantees, even in the face of overwhelming facts, is hard under those circumstances.

Given the barriers to change, prospective Latino grantees need to be consistent, persistent and patient.

***NiLP:** We have heard you discuss the under-representation of Latinos in governmental appointed positions. How substantive is that issue and how do we address it?*

**Luis Ubiñas:** Well, this is a completely different topic, but the data on Latino elected and appointed officials are dismal at every level -- local, state and national. It is going to require real work to fix: Pressure on elected officials to make appointments, organization on the part of the Latino community to put together lists of qualified individuals and to advocate for them, and a willingness on the part of qualified candidates to accept positions.

Many of us have passed up amazing opportunities. I deferred government service last year when I left Ford. My reasons were good: My youngest son is just finishing high school in New York City and I couldn't bring myself to leave him for DC, I had just led the Foundation for six years through both the Great Recession and a major restructuring and needed a break to catch my breath, I wanted to take advantage of some time-limited investment opportunities in the technology space. All good reasons, but the reality is I should probably have stepped up -- our country simply can't function effectively with 17% of its population profoundly underrepresented in government. I need to do more. We all need to do more.

***NiLP:** There has been enormous turnover among Foundation leaders over the last year. What happened?*

**Luis Ubiñas:** It's interesting you mention that. I was on a flight back to the US from the Middle East earlier this summer and saw yet another announcement of a major foundation president stepping down and began to tick them all off: Atlantic, Kellogg, Ford, MacArthur, Gates, the list goes on. Guiding a foundation through the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression takes a willingness to make hard, controversial decisions, the courage to reset an organization and its grantee ecosystems, and an understanding that doing those things takes a toll both on the leader and the organization. Those circumstances don't make for excessive longevity.

At one point at Ford in the late winter of 2009, the endowment fell to below \$8 billion from a high of nearly \$14 billion just 18 months earlier. When you do the work required to steer an endowment-dependent public organization through that kind of external dislocation and, in our case, engineer a simultaneous strategic and operational restructuring, you feel like your work is done when you get to the other side of the crisis and the waters are calm and the sailing easy.

It's also important to understand that times have changed. Among Fortune 500 CEOs the average tenure in job is now under 5 years. I was recently told that among heads of Washington, DC area nonprofits the average tenure in job is now below 4 years. I think we are dealing with a generation of leaders for whom driving change and

leading is more important than simply holding a position.

The cohort of Foundation leaders who arrived when I did and have all moved on helped steer the sector through one of its hardest times. They deserve our collective respect and appreciation.

***NiLP:** A lot changed during your tenure at Ford, can you describe what you see as most important?*

**Luis Ubiñas:** The most important thing we did was the work to reset the Foundation's strategy. We designed a strategy around 34 initiatives, still too many, but down from the over 200 when I was asked to serve as president there back in 2007. The new initiatives were anchored explicitly in social justice issues affecting low-income communities. As part of that, we grew funding for Latino-focused organizations to roughly 20% of total giving to better match the current issues facing our country. We also changed the nature of grants, moving to larger grants, more work with teams of grantees working together rather than competing with each other, more campaigns around specific issues, like voter suppression laws. We shifted funding from 55% international to 55% domestic, reflecting the profound issues facing our own country now.

That strategic reset and the resulting broad-based shift in grantees was far more fundamental than I had expected before arriving, but also had far larger impact. We launched national campaigns, like More and Better Learning Time; we did the same internationally, with efforts like Girls not Brides; we created new national organizations, like ArtPlace. Importantly, we moved over \$25 million to become the largest funder of digital social justice efforts in the world. We also protected the Foundation's legacy, ensuring, for example, that civil rights organizations with longstanding relationships with the Foundation grew rather than shrank during the economic crisis.

I am also proud of the work we did on the operating side of the Foundation. Ford is a big, global institution. The strategic work it does around the world rides on powerful operating chassis. A lot was done: We reset the balance between spending on overhead and grant making, moving tens of millions from internal overhead into the external grant budget. We renovated the Foundation's global office network and rebuilt the technology and telecommunications systems. We reinvested over 80% of the endowment, this year it was a top quartile performer on a 1, 3 and 5-year basis.

It is a testament to the quality and dedication of the outstanding staff at the Ford Foundation that we could achieve that level of fundamental strategic, operational and economic change in just over half a decade. If anyone ever tells you that foundation staffs don't work hard, that they are sleepy and slow moving, don't believe them. The staff at Ford worked as hard as any team of people I have ever worked with. My friend Rip Rapson says all the time that the Foundation staff was tired after all that work. He is right, leading that kind of change in both operations and strategy in the midst of a profound global economic dislocation requires personal sacrifice in addition to skill and dedication. I am lucky to have worked with such fine people.

***NiLP:** When you hired Darren Walker in 2011 you said you hoped he would succeed you, how do you think he is doing?*

**Luis Ubiñas:** I love Darren. He is the right leader for the Foundation at this point. He

has a deep commitment to social justice issues, he believes in the need to ensure the Foundation evolves as our society evolves, and he understands that institutional focus and at scale deployment of resources -- economic, intellectual and reputational - will drive impact.

I recently saw an amusing video from the Foundation showing him literally dancing around his office, he is clearly ready for the big stage and the bright lights!

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